

## Episode 1 TRANSCRIPTION (Part 2. Shelby/Emma Interview)

Title: Back to Where it All Began: BRAVE and the Inspiration Story

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01 Transcript Emma Whitmore and Shelby Mehmet

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**MD:** Alright, y'all ready? Emma and Shelby to jump in? Okay. Alright, so the first one, the first characteristics that's listed is the recognition of trauma and engagement and healing practice. And so liberatory spaces, really, it is critical for all participants to be able to be recognized and to be able to actually just be their entire whole self and their authentic self, and that includes their wellness, right? And so this is really, I think, unique. And it's something that happens more in some spaces and environments and contexts than in others. But in order for a space to truly be liberatory, we have to be thinking about how are we recognizing people's full humanity, how are we recognizing trauma, how are we recognizing healing practice. And I think that this connects to something that bell hooks talks a lot about in her work, teaching to transgress. But it is this painful process of unlearning and then relearning. Right. So it's not just about learning new things, but sometimes it's about unlearning things that we've known or held or believed in for a really long time and how that connects a lot to healing and recognizing trauma. So I'll just kind of open it up. Emma, I don't know if you have anything that you want to share or connect to on this. And then Shelby can jump in as well.

**EW:** Yeah, I'm just thinking about I think it's got a couple of our break meetings, at least one. I definitely remember where we all sat in a circle and I don't remember the exact question, but it's asking about something tough going on in our life, or I don't know if you remember what the question was.

**MD:** Yeah, I know exactly. I think it was something about like we did stories because it started as a journal. You all remember the journals we used to do. And it was like tell a story about a time in your life where you felt like you were on top of the world. And then the other one was about telling a story about a time in your life where someone really hurt you or you were experiencing pain or you felt really small. And then we shared those stories in the circle, I think is the activity you're thinking of.

**EW:** Yeah. So I think it's interesting, like multiple things, like the way that the space was set up for us to be sitting down, like facing each other, created this space to be able to share

something that's difficult going on in our lives. And then also creating that as a shared experience. Like we all shared something that brought pain to us, which created a vulnerable and safe space. So I feel like that's maybe another piece of this puzzle. Like the fact that we all shared this together.

**MD:** Absolutely. I remember thinking about the timing of that too. Right. Where it wasn't right at the very beginning. So people had time and space to build relationships and build trust, right, in other ways before we jumped right into these really challenging conversations. And I know that many really brave folks who are veterans who maybe been in the program for a couple of years to go first, to kind of really model that this is space where you can show up as your full self and that you'll be honored in that **full right. Authentic self.** I think that was really powerful for some of the newer folks who joined us. But, yeah, I also agree about the physical space of us being sitting together. Everyone could see everyone, and your kind of full embodiment in the space was really powerful, for sure. All right, should we head to the next one? Right.

**MD:** The second characteristic of liberatory space is the development and fostering of relationships so that all human beings who are part of a space or part of a group or community feel like they matter. And there's this incredible scholar, her name is Bettina Love, and she talks about this idea of mattering. And that all folks need to feel like they matter in space in order for it to be liberatory, and that all participants have to be known in order for them to matter. Right. And that can be something as simple as knowing people's names even deeper than that. Right. But being known is so important and is the entry point to mattering, as Bettina Love calls it. So, Shelby, why don't we go to you this time? And Emma, feel free to jump in as well, but are there any connections or things that you all can lift up that connect to this characteristic?

**SM:** The first thing that really comes to mind is like the first thing that comes to my mind is how we would always share our MOGs, Moment of Glory. So something positive that happened since we had last met or in your life, and I think I know that is a way that I continue to relate and connect with the folks that I work with in any capacity, as well as, like, my friends and my family as well. **But I also feel like creating relationships can really foster different ways for people to be vulnerable, to be themselves, and that also allows them to allow actually, I think both people in the relationship, not just that one person it's not one-sided, right? It's two-sided.** So I feel like allowing spaces between one another and to have that rapport to be heard and recognized and shown that they matter and that they have value. And then also to feel that from someone else, too, is so worrying, because you can be who you are and you don't have to feel pressure to be someone else or to be someone who you feel that person would accept. If that makes sense.

**EW:** I can relate to that as well.

**MD:** All right, let's get into the next one. So, characteristic number three is the mutual engagement of all participants. Right? So in order for a space to be liberatory, it can't be one where I think especially when we think of context, like in higher education or education in general, where there's kind of like a teacher-student dynamic and the engagement of a teacher and a student might be really different. That is not one that is conducive, right. To truly being liberatory, there has to be mutual engagement and mutual or shared responsibility for the space. Right. So this idea of ongoing action and reflection and vulnerability and listening of whoever it is, maybe that's leading the space, whether they are a student or a faculty member or a teacher or administrator or whomever, right? They are that there has to be that kind of shared responsibility to engage in self-actualization. It's not just something that we're asking students to do, but that we are doing that ourselves as professionals in the space. And that there has to be kind of collective participation. We are all participating in this in order for us to really co-create a liberatory space. I always kind of come back to that, right? One person can't create it. It can only exist when it's co-created. So this is a really big one.

**MD:** I think about this all the time, especially from the perspective of an administrator or a faculty member in higher education, of like that. I think a lot of times we are asking students to do things and challenging them to do things that we are not willing to do or that somehow we feel like we've done them, we've finished. We've kind of come to the end of our road of learning. And I think that's a really big misconception that exists that there is a place where we are done with this work. And I think that in some ways, the self-actualization journey of the person who is leading or co-leading a liberatory space might be one of the most critical components. Right. Because if that person isn't engaged in that work, then how can any of the other things take place? Emma, do you have thoughts on this one? And then Shelby can jump in as well.

**EW:** I'm just thinking about my work with youth and how when I am leading things or even just as an adult in this space with youth and somebody else is leading something and then I'm participating in it with them as well, you're able to create that relationship with these youth a lot easier. And I feel like it helps create that brave space, like that more vulnerable open space where you're able to connect with people on a deeper level first when you are sharing this characteristic. It sparked something for me that you have always said to me, Meaghan.

10-20

**SM:** Or just not to me, but like, in general, was to be a lifelong learner. And that's something that really stuck with me because we're all still learning. And that, I feel like, was in a way freeing for me as well, because that kind of took the pressure off of trying to for

feeling like I needed to know all the things I had permission to not know. And that was amazing. When I work with people, I really try to really engage with anyone, really try to let that be a thing that is okay, and to support that or foster that with others as well.

**SM:** To be lifelong learners and to keep asking questions and be curious. But also something that Emma was talking about reminded me of my Capstone project for grad school, which was to bring kids outdoors in a therapeutic setting. Part of it was to incorporate nature and outdoors and adventure in different ways to help create change in our lives. I had never gone backpacking before and I was asking, I believe there were eight teenagers to go on a backpacking trip. I was in it with them. I didn't know what to expect. I was like, alright, let's try. So being able to be in that space as leader or facilitator without having experience doing it yourself, like, I've gone camping before and stuff like that, but never backpacking. So having that shared vulnerability and shared experience with the students that I was working with, it was really amazing to share that and for it to be my first time and their first time, and it still be okay.

**MD:** Well, thank you both for sharing those stories from your experiences. All right, let's go to the next characteristic, which is Liberatory Spaces have a presence of excitement and celebration and emotion that to outsiders looking in, that there is a presence of joy and laughter and fun, and that there is not always serious all the time. Right. That there are these other things and that joy can coexist with hard work. I think that is just such a tremendous thing that also comes from bell hooks.

**EW:** Well, I'm just kind of thinking the fact that having emotions in this space is kind of like a revolutionary idea. I feel like a lot of the time in academics, it's like very serious. Like your teacher, professor, whoever, can kind of be intimidating and not show emotions, which can be intimidating. So bringing emotions into a learning space is something I just think that's really cool. Like a really cool idea that I hadn't thought about.

**MD:** Yeah. And I think it's so normalized, as you said, that we don't even recognize it when it's not there because it just feels like it's not supposed to be. But then I think it's like we're splintering our humanity when we have to leave certain things at the door. Right. We can't be authentic if we can't bring our emotion with us. That's a powerful observation and one that also similarly impacted me to really think about what those environments look like and feel like in a different way.

**EW:** Yeah, you're right. And I was just like, Wait, I didn't notice that until right now. So I'm like you're so right. It's kind of like, how do you balance professionalism with emotion?

**MD:** And what's the appropriate way to do that in different settings, even little ways, right? Like trying to celebrate folks' birthdays or doing rock stars. I don't know if you all

remember Rockstars, right? But that was a way to celebrate one another and to just create space for us to be taking care of one another and celebrate small and big achievements, whether they were part of our collaborative work or part of something separate in our lives outside of our shared space. And I think that finding ways to weave that in are really important. And even, like, having Countdowns for different things and even think about the work that you all did through BRAVE with the little kiddos, I mean, even more so there, right there, there was room for excitement and fun and emotion, and then we kind of lose some of that as we get older. And so it's like, what are the little ways that we can kind of weave that in or create space for it? And I think, Emma, your question about that balance, especially as we get older, is really a good one. **One thing that I've tried to do is the question you ask is a really good one.** And I think that's like a grappling journey, I think, for each of us, depending on the context that you're in, is important.

**SM:** Yeah. Honestly, Meg, too, like the thing you were saying with checking back in with someone after a meeting or after a class or something like that, that's a great way because of what someone wrote, but that's a great way to foster those relationships and to start creating different meaningful connections with one another as well.

**MD:** Yeah. Circling back on that mattering, right, that we talked about earlier 100%. **And it's so that question, Emma,** is really sticking with me now because it's something I talk a lot about with students. And it's this idea that we don't lose ourselves in our professionalism. Right. Somehow professionalism means compromising your authenticity, and that's something that can be really dangerous sometimes. And so it is such a precarious thing to sort out what that is and that it can also professionalism doesn't have to look the same for everybody. But I just think about even, like, in my own experience, grappling with professionalism and what that looks like. And I think in a lot of ways, my existence is in conflict with what a lot of people think is professional. And so it's like, how do you kind of figure that out for yourself? But that's something I always try to remind students, is that if your idea of professionalism or someone else's ideas of professionalism are imposing on your authenticity, then that's not professionalism. That's something else. Right? Because those two things can absolutely coexist. So I love that question. Thank you for bringing that to the surface. **I think maybe that's a way to frame it, right? Is that if professionalism is holding you, if you are captive to professionalism, if professionalism is a performance right, then it is not. Right.**

**MD:** I think we should be able to be professional and free at the same time. And I think that's been a blurred line, maybe, historically. And like, not being professionally free, being a free professional. Love that. Love that discernment as well. Yeah. Certainly, something to think about. And I think now more than ever, there is this huge focus spotlight on career, going back to the Catalyst story, I think there is so much pressure in higher education on students to be career-focused and have clarity and to be a professional. Right? And so I

think these are really important conversations when we're thinking about liberatory space and how critical that is to have a higher education for students as they explore all of these things for themselves and their future.

**MD:** Next characteristic is the co-creation of Brave Space and community among participants. And the idea of Brave Space actually was posited by two scholars, Arao and Clemens, in their 2013 publication, which I'll put the citation in the show notes. But the idea of Brave Space is really this idea that participants of the space will struggle together and support one another. So when the space is not serving everyone, it must be named. And then there must be like a cumulative effort to try to adjust the space so that the situation changes. Right? So there's kind of like a few different parts that are really important here, right? So when we're talking about struggle, this can manifest in a lot of different ways. It can be a personal struggle that's really individualized. It can be systemic, right? That there is a presence of systemic racism right in the space. So first we have to name it, right? This is happening. This is an example of oppression or racism or this is an example of discrimination. Whatever it is, we have to name it. And then we have to collectively be engaged in healing and adjusting and changing that and struggling through that messy human process together in order for the space to be better for all people than it was before that struggle began. And I think

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**MD:** Is such a huge part of really what we need to do in regard to decolonizing space in creating co-creating equity and justice for one another and really or co-creating spaces that are safe for all people, right? For whoever you are. And I will have to also just make a note here, too that Dr. Lee Patel, who had an incredible publication called Study and Struggle that just came out in 2021 kind of adds to this idea of brave space that Arao and Clemmons posited years earlier. And she really focuses on the role of colonization and identities in this work when we talk about struggle. And she really talks about the kind of difficulty and adversity right when it comes to things related to racism and sexism and Queer Phobia and colonialism and that these things are everywhere and that in order for a space to be liberatory is that we can't assume that the space doesn't have all of that in it. We have to name those things and work right through them together in order to improve them. So her work has changed my life in so many ways and I continue to learn from it. But this is a really big one, this idea of naming struggle and working together to reject these things and kind of reimagine and decolonize our space which is really hard and connects back to that self-actualization we talked about earlier. But what are your thoughts on this one?

**SM:** We never know what someone is going through unless we ask for experience unless we ask or name it or throw it out there for it to be okay for someone to acknowledge. **I**

don't want to say be okay for someone to be experiencing these things because it's not always okay. But having it accepted that this is a struggle that someone is experiencing and that being okay. I don't know.

**MD:** I think even that, right, correct me if I'm wrong, but it feels like what you're grappling with is this idea of we have to recognize things that are really hard and work through them in order to make them okay. But that doesn't make it actually okay. In order for things to become okay, we have to jump into what's not okay. It's the only way. The only way is true. Yeah. And I think, too, it's like a big piece of this, is that we have to descend to the comfort of those with privilege based on the context, based on the situation. Right. So whoever it is that holds the privilege in whichever particular situation, those folks need to be decentered. Their comfort needs to be decentered. And kind of going back to what we mentioned earlier, right, about bell hooks talking about just because there is a presence of pain or discomfort, in this case, doesn't mean that that's harmful. And in a lot of ways, that's the work, right. To get free for ourselves and for others and also kind of jumping back to the unlearning and relearning or learning new things, recognizing and where your privilege lies and recognizing it, I think, too, without judgment. Because once you recognize it, then you can do something about it, right? Absolutely. And that's the first step. It's naming to name the struggle. There's another thing that Dr. Patel contributes to this too, and this kind of goes back to that mutual engagement that we spoke of earlier, is that this type of naming struggle and working through struggle cannot be the sole responsibility of one person or two people in a space. It reminds me of a quote by Maya Angelou. But it's like you do the best you can with what you know, what you have at the time and then when you know better, you can do better.

**MD:** So the next characteristic is that liberatory space must allow all participants to challenge dominant power. And there's two kind of main things I want to mention here. One is that when we say dominant power, this can kind of manifest in two different ways when we're thinking about liberatory space. So one is if we're thinking about it in a higher education institution, is we have to allow participants and students on our campuses to hold protests, right? And we have to allow them to express themselves and to challenge whether it's government, right, local federal government, policy, procedure, things that are going on; contemporary issues. They have to be able to engage in those things and challenge dominant power in that way. And that can also manifest in more local ways, right? So, like, we have to, students have to be able to challenge dominant power within the institution, like the administration of the institution and other ways in which dominant power manifests, whether that's faculty members or administrators and so on. But then also even in our own little liberatory spaces, maybe that we're co-creating together and whether this is in an institution of higher education or not, right, is that if you are one of or the kind of leader or organizer or facilitator of a liberatory space, you have to create space for your dominant power to be challenged. You have to be open to feedback, you



have to be open, right? To hearing the voices of others. Like that is so critical. I think a lot of times there's almost like this misnomer that if you are creating or co-creating a liberatory space, that you're like exempt from that, that you don't need to be collecting right feedback or being open or creating space to be challenged. And I think that that's really critical in both ways for there to be opportunities to challenge dominant power. So I think it kind of comes back or circles back to this idea of practicing critical thought and critical consciousness. Participants need to be engaging in both of those in order to become informed decision makers and that this can be really uncomfortable and really unsettling. Nobody likes to get hard feedback and nobody likes necessarily like when the boat gets rocked, right is the kind of phrase. But that is like essential right to liberation and emancipation. Because if we just keep doing what we've always done, nothing is going to change. And in order for anything to be liberatory, it has to be transformative. It has to be about something that didn't exist before. And I think that's such an important thing to remember, that it's supposed to be uncomfortable and it will be. But in order to honor this idea of cocreating a liberatory space, we have to invite and welcome and engage in that challenge of dominant power. Any thoughts on this one?

**MD:** I think that's a really good question. I think that there were a few different ways that I tried to do it. I think the first thing that comes to my mind is that when we did our mid-semester and end-of-semester evaluation meetings, I always try to create space for you all to share with me how I can improve as an individual or how we can improve our programming or our organization at large. I know that we did end-of-semester surveys every year. So at the end of every semester, I collected survey feedback from every student who participated, whether they were little kiddos or interns. And then we wrote a report, an annual report every year. And I tried to be really intentional about leveraging that feedback to actually create an informed change that would improve the overall experience for people at BRAVE. I mean, even thinking about our name change. We started out as a BRAVE Girls Leadership and we went through a whole name change not shortly after. Or not long after. I should say. **We became a legal organization because it really wasn't inclusive of gender** in a way that was not something that felt like represented us or represented what I wanted or it made people feel left out in a way that I thought was in conflict with what we were trying to do. And so those are two kind of more formal ways, I think, where it was written and recorded feedback. But then the third thing I would say is I hope that I co-created spaces just like in the day-to-day, where people felt like they could just say they could shoot me an email, they could chat with me, or even in our own spaces, kind of ask questions or share their honest opinions with things. So as I kind of move through my career now, I think I have gotten smarter about how to do that and even kind of what language to use when I ask students. Because a lot of times it's like, oh, do you have any feedback? And people either feel like on the spot or they can't think of anything, or they're not sure, and then they just say, oh no, I think everything's great. And that doesn't mean that it's great.



**MD:** So I think that is I've tried to kind of get smarter about that, about how do you really do it with intention, give people time and space to really come prepared to share that information. And I think also I have now started to do more than just kind of talking with students, but even like talking to other people and putting more mirrors up, right? Like who's missing from the table, who are we not even talking to, trying to just find different ways for different perspectives to find and identify the ways in which can do better and I can do better. So I'm hoping I've gotten smarter about that. I'm sure there's more to learn there. But yeah, I kind of think there's a lot of work behind the scenes in the back end leading up to receiving and people feeling comfortable give feedback. Like with all these other things we're talking about, which makes being able to engage in challenging this dominant power, there has to be these other things kind of set up first. That's such an important point, right? Like the relationships part, I think is such a critical piece. And I truly think that I have gotten better feedback and more critical feedback and more valuable feedback from people with whom I've had a better relationship. Because I agree, I think it takes people a long time to really believe, I think especially when you're co-creating a liberatory space. What I'm learning is that the space will inevitably be really different from other spaces and it takes people a long time to really believe. You have to show them, you can't just tell them that you'll be loved unconditionally and that you could miss meetings and come late and not answer my emails and I'm still going to love you just as much, right? And you can tell me the ways in which you think I need to do better and be better. And the program is maybe leaving you out or decentering you, or that this space feels unsafe and that it will never be a thing where your worth will change your value or your loveability is going to change because of choices that you'll make. And it takes a long time, I'm learning, for people to really believe that in their bones in a way that allows them to. It's almost like you have to become more free in order to challenge dominant power in the first place. And it's actually there's four outcomes.

**MD:** So these are the 10 characteristics and then there's four outcomes of participating in liberatory space. And they're almost like steps. So it's like you start here and then you can kind of the longer you're in spaces like this and that's kind of part of the stepping stones. The challenge of dominant power and how that manifests even like I was talking about earlier. It's like folks who maybe spent time in the space for one semester versus folks who were there maybe for three years. You're just kind of in different places in your journey. And I think that kind of also impacts the ways in which you might show up. Thank you again for that question.

**SM:** That was a cool conversation. I have, like, one practical application. Yeah. Like, another idea, something that I have done with people, is to ask, like, what should we start

doing? What should we stop doing? What should we continue to do? I think that came from you, Meg, and, like, asking periodically throughout whatever the experience is. So if it's a semester, ask the beginning, middle, and end to kind of open up a door where it's continuous feedback is allowed or wanted. And then also another way that I try to incorporate feedback and to kind of challenge the dominant power too, I guess, would be, like, if I'm helping young people to learn about facilitation or learning about different learning about something, whatever, and we're collaborating together, about to do something, is like asking for their feedback. Like, hey, what do you think went well? What didn't go well? What could we do differently next time? Or whatever it may be, and genuinely, like, asking how we could do better.

**EW:** Absolutely. Right. Like, opening the door to smaller feedback can make it more comfortable to get bigger feedback down the road and being consistent. Right. It's not like I asked you once, and **and it's like, oh, you missed your chance. It's like anytime or any day or anychat is the right time** to share something.

**MD:** Definitely. Well, thank you for that, both of you. The next characteristic is the active discovery of and sharing of one's voice. bell hooks calls this coming to voice. So there must be value placed on the knowledge anchored in lived experience. I think especially in education, especially in higher education, we have this way that we value, like scholarship, right. And like, written literature and journal write articles that are peer-reviewed and all of that. We have this kind of value on certain types of knowledge, and then we kind of devalue other types of knowledge. Right. Especially things anchored in lived experience, especially when those lived experiences don't have privilege when there is an absence of privilege or a kind of farther proximity to power in those lived experiences. And so there has to be an active discovery and sharing of one's voice. And that comes with sharing your lived experience, right. Talking about your own life and your own experiences and identities. This is something that Sara Ahmed also, and her publication on being included from 2018 talked about. We have to honor knowledge based on folks' lived experiences, and that this leads to people sharing more of their voices and speaking up more because they feel honored and valued. Right. And that they have something to offer and contribute even though their experiences are maybe occurred outside of or independent from formal academic experience. And that those are just as important and valid and needed in the world as other types of knowledge. So I think that this value kind of shifts who we hear from and how often we hear from and helps folks develop and share their voice in really powerful and meaningful ways. And I think that it's not about like, how much somebody shares, right? Like it's okay to be someone who is not the loudest person in the room or the person who talks the most, but that, you know, going back to that mattering, that you matter in that space. And that if and when you wanted to share your voice, it would be valued and legitimized and justified and honored and held in the space. And that is really what is most important. And I think in particular, again, we have to think about how are we

centering BIPOC voices, queer voices, otherly abled voices, how are we kind of shifting, who is at the center, what voices and lived experiences are at the center of knowledge that we validate. And that that's really, really important to think about, how we can challenge what lived experiences have historically been discredited and silenced and bring those voices to the center in our liberatory spaces. Does anything come to mind for either of you here?

**SM:** Well, I truly feel that I was able to discover voice and discover my voice and have it be important or matter while in BRAVE, being a part of BRAVE. And that kind of led to do you remember a project we did, it was my junior year saying that our voices matter. And I interviewed KP. So you asked us to do a project. And I wanted to really connect with one of the things that BRAVE has given me or shown me throughout my experiences. And I wanted to highlight the importance of our voices mattering and having important and meaningful things to say regardless of your age. Because oftentimes I felt when I was younger that my voice didn't matter and that it didn't hold any weight or I couldn't say anything that was important or had value. And I wanted to show others and particularly the young people that I was working with in a middle school as a mentoring intern to show them that their voices matter, their stories matter. So one of the ways that I was hopefully able to incorporate their voice was to actually interview several young people and incorporate their voices literally in my project by having their voices recorded. And we talked about very different topics too. It was like big topics, like what is it like to be a girl in today's society? Or what is your life like? Or what do you think about this topic that have you.

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**SM:** Bigger ideas that I was asking them to share their thoughts about. And, like, I genuinely wanted to hear what they had to say. I was really trying to listen to understand where they were coming from rather than just trying to respond or just move to the next question. Like, I genuinely wanted to know what their thoughts were and what they believed. What do you think of Emma?

**EW:** Yeah, I mean, I agree with Shelby where my voice mattered when we were in our BRAVE spaces. Like, every time I think this is another thing where it can't just be, like, once a while, like, every single time you share something, it's validated and shown that way.

**MD:** That consistency is so important. The next characteristic is the development and implementation of individual and collective. Goals must be a consistent practice. Goals allow learners to grow, to reimagine, and co-create something new. And bell hooks talks about goals being a healing practice. And Dr. Patel also talked about goals in her work and that this can really aid in decolonization. Right? And that it allows participants of

Liberatory space to change how they envision or imagine what justice looks like, what liberation looks like for themselves and for others. Goals have always been an important practice of mine as an educator and as an individual. But what do you all recall about goal practices? And do you still use goals in your own life?

**EW:** I think we had different levels of goals. We did the BRAVE Conference, which was like a big collective goal to be able to do this thing. We all had our own tasks to meet this goal, but we also did, like, when we had what was it called? When we were like, the lead mentor for elementary, the middle school. We would create goals with that person, or we'd create goals for you. So there's like, many different levels of goals that are all leading towards this one big goal that is in Bring. Didn't we have, like, individual goals and, like, organization goals?

**MD:** Yes, each of you had them that we would do at the beginning of every semester. And then in your mid-semester evaluation, we would talk about your goals and, like, how's it going, you feel like you made progress, you want to change anything so you can kind of track them. Right? Because I always used to say it's like, we can set goals and then we forget them. So it's like, nice to kind of check in on them every few weeks. And then that one semester, you all had goal buddies on the intern team. And every week we would do a little check-in on how you're doing as a human. Right? But also, like, how is your progress? And a lot of the personal goals were connected to things like confidence and voice and unlearning and becoming, and they weren't necessarily about managing my time better. I want to get an A in biology. Right. It was more about becoming as a person, I don't know, like an entry point into doing deeper work. And it was also one of those things where it was kind of what you make of it. Right. Some people really got into it and were ready to be vulnerable and be open, and other people weren't as ready. And so you make different progress and goals look different. And I think that was kind of cool because it really met people where they were and allowed the journey to be unique to each of you, which is really cool to see. That's still something I do with students to this day. They set goals at the start of every semester. We do check-ins three times a semester, and they have folks that they check in with on their goals as well. And they do an individual goal and then, like, a program goal, and we do the strategies as well. What strategies will you use? But I think the point you made about it kind of all connects back to this larger collective goal or mission or purpose that we have or project that we have that we're all working on together is really important for people to see themselves in that work. Right. What role do they play? How are they contributing? And how are they valued right? In those spaces?

**SM:** Kind of circling back a little bit. I don't remember where I was circling back to, but I wanted to just say about our BRAVE statements that we've had, like, saying that our voices matter and kind of, like, relates to our goals, too, and then it's so cool.

**MD:** Yeah, we still do those, too. I do them with students. Every semester, they have a BRAVE statement: I can. I am. I will. We do power poses still as well. So for the listeners out there, that was something we did where each of us would have like we call them BRAVE statements, and it would start like an affirmation, almost start with an I CAN. I AM. I WILL. And connected usually to a personal goal. And then everyone would take turns standing in a power pose of their choice and yelling their BRAVE statement. And regularly in our spaces, we would do that. And then we would shower each other and love and clapping. And that was really special and really brave and vulnerable. Kind of embodied physical space to be in, which was really powerful. The energy was really something that you have to kind of be there to feel to really understand what the space feels like with that activity was really cool.

**EW:** Yeah. I still think about mine sometimes. I'll do things and I'm like, how does this relate to my braids? I love that. Yes, I will do everything with love. And then it was your power, Shelby, do you remember yours? I will be free. Remember that.

I know.

What was your power pose?

I don't remember. That I don't remember. Oh, goodness. I feel like my power pose is just staying up.

**MD:** Hey, that's fair. And that's another important thing of it. Right. It looks different for everybody. And what's hard is different for everybody. Yeah. That's so powerful that you both still hold yours. That's such a cool thing. All right, we got two more left. The second to last characteristic is liberatory spaces honor a commitment to learning about one's individual and collective history, context, and perspective. So I think for this, I think we have scholarship coming from bell hooks and from Leigh Patel as well. But that we have to unearth the truth and that the truth can be transformative. Whether it is about ourselves and our individual, like, personal history and perspective and experience or our kind of shared collective history and perspective and experience depending on our identities or depending on our histories and our stories. And that we really have to think about the ways in which we can decolonize our minds, right? Through learning about these truths and these histories that we all have and that this education can be emancipatory and really involves a process of releasing what we already know in order to learn something new. But that this release of what we already think we know about ourselves and about the world is really, like, the first step in releasing all of that in order to really figure out how to reinvent ourselves in a way that is independent from dominant power. Right. So I think that has been something that has really, for me personally, been really powerful. Right. It's like a lot of times I think about my identity as a part of the LGBTQ+ community, and I think about that, oh, well, this is really, like, unusual or odd or this thing that doesn't feel good or doesn't feel right. And it's all of that is because it's like, in comparison to what dominant power says that it should be. And that if I was just existing independent of that

comparison, it wouldn't be. It would just be that this is just how I am. Right. It wouldn't be a bad thing or a yucky thing or shameful thing or a guilty thing. It would just be the truth. And that first I need to release all of these ideas that I have about who I am and what that means that the world has taught me, and then I can kind of reimagine myself independent of all of that. Right. Kind of like releasing yourself from that supposed-to-be box.

**EW:** Absolutely. This is kind of what you're doing in this whole thing, unlearning the way spaces are currently to make them into a new way.

**MD:** Yeah. We have to release what we thought it should look like or what is right. And I think that's part of the hardest thing in this work or shouldn't say the hardest thing. But a lot of pushback that I experience around these ideas is I think people have not released those ideas yet and so especially some of these

**Last**

**MD:** Feels like a lot of work, and that can be frightening or, like, take time, money, whatever. And it doesn't happen overnight either. Right. It takes time, and it's imperfect and messy. It would be impossible to get it exactly right all the time. Part of being human.

**MD:** All right, we're at the last one. So the final characteristic is that liberatory spaces engage in the iterative practice of reflection and feedback. And I was thinking about this when we were talking about feedback earlier, and you asked me, Emma, about some of the ways in which I tried to create space for challenging dominant power. And, Shelby, you were talking about the start, stop, continue, and some of the practices that you've used with students. It's time-consuming, and it's challenging to create space for this and can be really demanding, but is incredibly beneficial. Right. So the practice of reflection, of feedback has to be creative, and they have to be consistent, I think. Emma, you lifted this up earlier, right? Like, we can't just do it once. We have to kind of have to be a consistent practice, and it's something that we have to do. As you said, I think Shelby bought up, right? We have to do it at the beginning, middle, and end and over and over again. I think the piece about trying to engage and create time for reflection and engage folks in different conversations regarding feedback and reflection, like, allowing doing that in different creative ways, too. It could be something that you all do as a group. It could be something you do individually. It could do in many groups, I feel like, where can you create that time or that space within this space? I think that there's a lot of ways for it to look, and it can be small conversations, big conversations. It could be individual. It could be, like, in an education context, like a pair-and-share kind of thing. It could be in small groups. It doesn't have to be formal or written. It can be something where you just have a discussion and ask folks how they're doing, how they feeling, how are things going, say, even with working with you thumbs-down, or, like, what would show how you feel about this activity,

or, like, little things. And that's consistent, right? Like, how do we thread it in all the time, right, with you all? We did journaling, right? And had spaces where you could kind of share thoughts there. And even the mid-semester and end of semester self-evaluation, where you got to think through, like, how do I feel like I'm doing? And reflect on your goals. Right. And trying to create as much diversity of strategy around reflection and feedback as possible because everyone will kind of show up differently in different spaces. Some people vibe with certain things better than others.

**MD:** Well, we have, as we always do forever and ever, had a very long but very beautiful and powerful conversation. And this was so much fun to kind of reminisce a little bit on some of the awesome work that we were able to collaborate on back during our time together in Connecticut through BRAVE. It was so cool to hear from you all just based on your own experiences as students in BRAVE, but also as professionals and in your work with youth and the different careers that you've pursued since you graduated. And this just means so much to me to kickstart this podcast series with both of you as key participants in maybe what was my first run of trying to co-create a Liberatory space, even though I didn't know it yet, I learned so much from our work together. And it was really cool to kind of go back, I think, to the Catalyst story. Or kind of the beginning for me in my journey of thinking about and trying to bring to life this idea of Liberatory spaces and seeing and be able to draw connections between the work that we did and the work we are doing to these characteristics that are showing up in the literature from some incredible scholars that are studying this work and have been studying these work for a long time. So this was awesome. I appreciate you both immensely.

**MD:** Through our conversation today, we talk a lot about different strategies that relate back to the characteristics of Liberatory spaces. So we want to challenge all of you to really think about how can you try one of these or two. How can we begin to create change right from where we are and co-create more Liberatory spaces for everyone? So I will create kind of a list of all the strategies we discussed, from MOGs to affirmation circles to journaling to start, stop, continue, and more. And that will also be linked up in the show notes. Emma or Shelby, any last words of wisdom or love you'd like to leave our audience today before we part?

**EW:** Do everything with love.

**MD:** I love that.

**SM:** And you will be free.

**MD:** I love it. Yes.



Full circle back to the BRAVE statements and power poses.

**MD:** All right, you heard it from them. Do everything with love. We will be free. And on a closing note, we'll hear from the one and only bell hooks who said, "the moment we choose to love, we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love, we begin to move toward freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others." So here and now, let's take our next step towards freedom. See you soon. Thank you.