

[musical intro]

Tirzah Khan: Welcome to Retriever Tales, a podcast from the Center for Democracy and Civic Life at UMBC, featuring conversations with members of our campus community.

Candace Dodson-Reed: I am Candace Dodson-Reed. I use she/her/hers pronouns.

Rehman Liaqat: My name is Rehman Liaqat.

Kate Drabinski: Hey, everybody. I'm Dr. Kate Drabinski. Most people at UMBC call me Dr. Kate.

Rees Draminski: My name is Rees Draminski. I use he/him pronouns.

Tirzah Khan: At the Center for Democracy and Civic Life, we believe that stories are everything. The act of telling and listening to each other's stories can bring us together as a community and enable us to work collectively in ways that help us all thrive. I'm your host, Tirzah Khan, she/her pronouns. I'm a senior Information Systems major here at UMBC.

[intro music fades]

Tirzah Khan: Today we're speaking with Candace Dodson-Reed, the Chief of Staff at UMBC. Candace, go ahead and introduce yourself.

Candace Dodson-Reed: All right, thank you. First of all, I need to say: I love this and I'm excited to be on the podcast. I'm a massive podcast fan, I have a podcast, and so this is exciting! I am Candace Dodson-Reed. I use she/her/hers pronouns. And as you mentioned, I am the Chief of Staff to the President, and Executive Director of our new Office of Equity and Inclusion.

Tirzah Khan: So what part of your role do you enjoy the most?

Candace Dodson-Reed: Hmm, I love that question, actually. And I get that question quite a bit. Because I, I think I lean into this work a little bit differently from a Chief of Staff perspective in that I love meeting with students—love, love, love. I get a ton of energy from students. I think I said last year at one of our public forums that I am a parent of a college student. And as much as I think I know about college students, the experience that I have at UMBC, with interacting with students on our campus, just gives me—first, it gives me such energy, because our students are so thoughtful and engaged and really, you know, wanting to do what's right. And that gives me a ton of good energy. And then also hope, because, you know, our students are

working on big challenges on our campus community, in the city, and in our, our UMBC community and beyond. And, and it gives me such hope to see students doing such magnificent work all across the board, all disciplines, all races and cultures, religions, identities, so. Love, love, love working with students. And then of course I have to say, you know, I have a great boss with Dr. Freeman Hrabowski. I have learned so much from Dr. Hrabowski—and the whole leadership team, frankly—but I've learned a ton from Dr. Hrabowski, and he has empowered me and given me strength and courage to lead in the way that I do at the university, and so I would be remiss without saying I love that part, too. I learn something new every day.

Tirzah Khan: Yeah, that's amazing. So can you tell me a little bit about how you got to UMBC in the first place?

Candace Dodson-Reed: Sure. So I have two stories about how I got to UMBC, because I'm an undergrad—I graduated from UMBC, so I was an undergraduate student here. And I actually transferred from Hampton University. And I transferred because I did not have—this is nothing against Hampton, but I didn't have a great experience at the university. I was looking for a university that I felt—where I could, where I sort of would fit in, where I would belong. And I found that—I did a little bit of research before I came back to Maryland and found that at UMBC. And of course, we had—you know, Doc was my President as well. And, you know, the University had an amazing reputation because of his leadership, and because of the senior leaders at the University at the time, and even the ones who were—who are currently there, currently here now. And so, so I came as a 20 year old many years ago, and then I returned in 2016. Is that right? Yeah, 2016—it'll almost be five years. And I returned to be the AVP [Assistant Vice President] of Communications and Public Affairs—kind of stumbled upon the job. I was in a job that did not exactly line up with my values, and UMBC—I knew the values of the university, the culture of the university, and felt like it would be a wonderful place to return to, and applied for a job. Lisa Akchin, in the Communications and Marketing department, actually—I was actually in a meeting with her unrelated to any of the job opportunities at UMBC. We were actually meeting because I think I was going to present at, like, an alumni event or something like that. And, and she mentioned the job. And then, by the time I got home that night, the information was in my email from the recruiting firm that was hiring for the position. And I feel I—like, the rest is history, you know. I, I interviewed and came on board as AVP. And then two years later Freeman tapped me to be his Chief of Staff, and that was in 2018. I like to say, I came back home.

Tirzah Khan: Yeah! So you mentioned that Dr. Hrabowski was the President when you were an undergrad. How does it—how does it feel to kind of come full, full circle in that way and kind of be in a leadership position to a role that you used to have as a student.

Candace Dodson-Reed: I'll have to tell a story 'cause I, I like to tell this story. So on the first day I was talking with—meeting with Dr. Hrabowski about an article that I was writing with him, and I was interviewing him. And the way that Dr. Hrabowski interacts with people on his team—I mean, he has just like the, just, amazing personality, and he's like that in the office. And so he started talking about values and inclusion, and—and this, this was actually for an environmental piece, but he was, he was making the point that these, the sort of ingredients, and the, you know, the culture that we have at UMBC with the inclusive excellence and social justice and that sort of stuff, and how that translated into the environmental movement, or should translate into the environmental movement. And so I was sitting there, and I had a laptop, and, you know, at first I was taking copious notes. And then I just started sitting there listening to him. I mean, he was—it was almost like he was giving a speech. And I was sitting there listening, and I was like, "Oh," and listening and listening. And then I realized, "I'm not taking any notes whatsoever." I'm just sitting there like, like I was as an undergraduate student, just listening to him talk and just feeling so engaged by the conversation. And then he stops and he says, "Um, are you taking notes?" And I was like, "Oh—" I was like, "I, I was!" And this is like, day one, right? And I was like, "Oh, my gosh, I'm flunking on day one. That is horrible." And I was like, "I was, and then you were talking, and I got all into it, and I was listening! And so no—the answer's no. I stopped taking notes." And he was like—and he's so sweet. He's like, "Let's just go back." And I was like, "You can do that *again*? You're incredible." So I mean I guess, you know, day one, it felt very—it felt a little surreal. Like, I was like, "I cannot believe I'm sitting here in this space and, and have the opportunity to work with Dr. Hrabowski." And then, you know, we kind of hit our, our stride and our groove. You know, we have a relationship of trust, and, you know, we, we kind of built that trust over the years. But I thought it was important to have a close relationship with him to sort of understand his vision for the university. And I had to learn to step out of being the student who called him "Doc". For a long time I couldn't even call him "Freeman". He was like, "Please call me Freeman." And I was like—so I had to step out of that, you know, that role that I was in as an undergraduate student and really think about how I could support him and his vision for the university with our external folks and with our internal folks. And so it was a bit of a shift, and a mindset shift. But, but I'm there now.

Tirzah Khan: Yeah. That's amazing. So what is the story of the most UMBC thing that you have ever experienced?

Candace Dodson-Reed: Okay, so I, I have to say this, and I hope no one sort of takes offense to this. I don't think they will. So I find UMBC to be, like, the most collaborative place in the world. I'm talking about from faculty, students, and staff. And I can remember—we were addressing some of the challenges that we faced as a university in 2018, and, and working, you know, through that—the challenges with students, faculty, and staff. You know, and I was having meeting after meeting after meeting, and I was sort of getting drained even though I

wanted to listen to literally everyone, I want—I wanted to hear from everyone. And the most UMBC thing to me is that literally everyone will participate and, and contribute. I mean, it is—it's amazing. And sometimes I'm like, "Oh my goodness, does everyone want to?" You know, literally everyone wants to participate. And then I step back and I think how fortunate we are to be at a university where that's the case. Like, students are not afraid to come knock on my door or set up a meeting with me to, to let me know how they feel, and I love that. And so I think the most UMBC thing—one of the most UMBC things in my opinion—is that literally everyone will contribute. Everyone. And, and that's such a great, wonderful thing. It's fun.

Tirzah Khan: Yeah. Was that the case when you were an undergraduate student, or has that shift happened over the years?

Candace Dodson-Reed: I think the shift has happened—I mean, I was a little bit of an introvert, which is hard to believe now, but I was an introvert as a, as a student. And, and so—but I, I was in touch with, you know, certainly, activists, activism, and activists on our campus. I feel like it's a little different, and I think part of it has to do with social media and access—and students have access to much more information than I felt like I had, you know, at, at your fingertips. Like, you have it immediately. There's that instant gratification piece. And so I think students have, you know—I even see this with my college student—much more access to information and, and want to act based on the, the information that they have. And so I think the—you know, there's always been activists from, you know, the—you know, my father was an activist in the 60s, for example, and I certainly—I did the Million Mom March when I became a mother in 2000, right? And, and I have done subsequent marches and active—had an activism role after that, and even a little bit before that. But I think the students today, I just—I think there's the activism piece, but what, what I love even more is that—'cause it's okay—a protest is fine. That's fine. But what I love even more at UMBC is that after the protest there's the, "How do we work on the solution?" Like, "What are the solutions to these challenges?" And UMBC students are special in that way, and I don't think I experienced that in the same way when I was an undergraduate student. And, and, and really—I mean, I have students come in with solutions to these big problems or like, you know, "I saw this on whatever, here's a—here's what's happening." When, when we were forming the Office of Equity and Inclusion, I had students coming in saying, "Here are the best practices. We did a little research and we found out what, you know, they did at University of X, or, or X, you know, University," and, and came with real data and, and information to help shape that process. And I—you know, I don't—I don't remember it being quite like that—and, again, I was an introvert, so maybe they were doing that and I just was not aware. But I do think the level of access that students have today and the interest in really working on our challenges both as a university and as a country has, has sort of given a rise to this, to a, to a level of activism that I have not seen before. You see it even broadly with, you know—I think about the unfortunate Parkland shooting, right, and the student activists that came out of that related to, to gun violence. And,

and they're still raising their voice, right, and, and inspiring people all around the world. You think of the young woman who's the environmental activist who talks about climate change. Her first name is Greta, and I'm blanking on her last name.

Tirzah Khan: Thunberg. Greta Thunberg.

Candace Dodson-Reed: Yeah. Yes. Yup—and, and, and what she's doing. And you think about the students who have lifted their voices to stand up against racial injustice and stand up for LGBTQ rights and—I mean, I'm just inspired by it and am grateful that we have that level of activism on our campus as well.

Tirzah Khan: Yeah. So going forward, what kinds of things do you hope and wish for the UMBC community? Like, what kinds of goals do you have for us?

Candace Dodson-Reed: I hope that we can—you know, we're in some difficult times. And I wrote a piece that you probably saw for the Center for Democracy and Civic Life on, sort of, the after-the-election reflection, and I—we're in difficult times. We're dealing with a pandemic related to the worst public health crisis that we've seen in our lifetimes, right? We're dealing with another pandemic related to racial injustice, right? We're dealing with a country that is divided, currently, over an election that happened two weeks ago, right? And we're—they're still not resolved there. And we have a lot of healing to do. I think, and I hope, that the UMBC community can, can lead in a way in which we show other people how to do this—how to say, "You know what, we may disagree on whatever topic, or we may disagree on whatever issue, but we can agree on these things. We can agree that—on the, on the collective values of our university. We can agree that everyone is a human being and deserves certain rights, right? And deserves to be treated fairly and right." And my hope is that we set the example for the nation on how to do that, with the work in the Center, of course—we also have the I3B Center, we have the Office of Equity and Inclusion, and we have the smartest faculty and staff and students—I'm gonna say in the country, in the world. We are, we are—look, I'm biased, right? I am biased! But, but any day, you can step outside on our campus, and you can hear students talking about—when we're on campus—you can hear students talking about any of the biggest issues that we're grappling with. And they're, they're trying to think it through. And it's students of all races and cultures and identities and religions really sitting down and trying to work on these challenges. And my hope is that we continue to do that, and that we set the tone for how civil discourse should happen on a college campus.

Tirzah Khan: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. So is there anything else that you'd like to share?

Candace Dodson-Reed: No—just, you know, I, I know I said this already, but I'm just so inspired by our students, inspired by our faculty. I get the opportunity as Chief of Staff to

interact, you know, with students, faculty, and staff broadly—like you know, I, I am fortunate in that way. And, and I just—it, it's inspiring. You know, I, I was thinking about the fact that, you know, we are in these multiple pandemics and such division in our country. And I'm, I feel so fortunate that during this time, when it feels overwhelming at times, that I work at UMBC. I feel very fortunate that that's the case, because I do—it gives you some relief, you know, that you can go into the workplace and I can interact with our campus community and feel like, and feel like we really are trying to do what's right.

Tirzah Khan: Yeah. Absolutely.

Candace Dodson-Reed: And I'm, I'm encouraged by that from both President Hrabowski and all of our students, faculty and staff.

Tirzah Khan: Yeah. Alright. Well, thank you so much for sitting down with me, having this wonderful conversation. It's been enlightening and inspiring. And yeah, I just really appreciate it.

Candace Dodson-Reed: Aww! Well, thank you very much for the invitation. And thank you for your work on this. Like I said, I'm a fan and I will be sure to tune in.

[musical outro]

Tirzah Khan: Thanks for joining us on Retriever Tales. Keep up with the Center for Democracy and Civic Life by following us on Instagram and Twitter @civiclifiumbc and find other Retriever Tales episodes at civiclifiumbc.edu/retrievertales. We believe that stories are everything. What tales do you have to tell, and how do they connect you with the larger story of us all together in community?

[outro music fades]