

The Zeppos Report #22 with Jami Cox and Ryan Connor.mp3

I'm Nick Zeppos Chancellor of Vanderbilt University. Welcome to The Zeppos Report, a podcast where I talk with the people shaping and helping us understand our world. Who better than to be my guests today graduating seniors. Jami Cox and Ryan Connor the outgoing president and vice president of Vanderbilt student government Jami and Ryan have been essential members of our Vanderbilt community over the past four years serving in multiple leadership roles on campus while excelling in their academic ventures. Jami and Ryan welcome to the Zeppos report. Thanks for having us. Thank you. Thank you. So it's a privilege and you join many distinguished guests and I'll ask you to sign the little poster here the banner at the end. And I think everyone will be proud to have their name up there with you too. So just do remember the first time you walked on the campus. Yes. Jami you go first. Tell me what was there when you first stepped foot on the campus. Wow. Yeah actually so my first time coming to Vanderbilt was as a Mosaic student when I was still in high school I came in February it was cold with my little sleeping bag and my duffel bag and I was very nervous because I had never really spent time on a college campus before and I was just greeted by all of these people excited to have high school students and we kind of marched in a little group around the campus because we were afraid to get lost coming from commons to the main campus. So it was a very nerve wracking week. But Vanderbilt was beautiful and I fell in love with it then.

Wow.

Yeah. So my first time was actually when I was a junior in high school. I was actually at a music competition at Belmont and we had about three hours of downtime so I decided you know to see the campus. I had heard about one person from high school going there a few years ago stepped on the Wyatt lawn I just was awestruck. Pulled up the Wikipedia article for Vanderbilt started reading through it and I texted my dad I was like I think I'm going to apply early decision to Vanderbilt and he's like I thought you were at Belmont what's going on Ryan. Call me. But I knew just by walking on and just seeing the people and like Jami said smiling and helping you around and I knew I was going to apply early decision to that make a big impact on you in terms of becoming a leader but also kind of saying I'm going to try to preserve and develop those qualities that drew me particularly this sense of embracing and welcoming and college admissions can be so stressful. Is that made an impact on how you've led and you've kind of interacted with students over the years. I would definitely say yes. For me I remember my Mosaic hosts were so friendly and so loving. There was a part of Mosaic where you actually had a formal tour on campus and I was kind of in the back of the tour lagging around and there was a student behind me who wasn't the tour guide but just wanted to walk around. And he became my mentor.

All four years I called him every other week in the summer trying to figure out how to use Yes and what classes to take. And he never cared he would sit on the phone with me for hours and talk me through it and he also majored in econ which is probably why I went through that. I want to be an econ major phase. But yeah just having that kind mentorship really inspired me to want to give back to other students while I've been here for years and do the same like he and a lot of the other people that I've met that first week did for me. Yeah I think in my case because it was so organic. I really was able to kind of come in with an open mind and you know go through a bunch of college tours. I'd never took a college tour that Wyatt long step was as much research as I did in the Wikipedia article. And I think just you know it was this sense of feeling on campus that was really stemming from the people. And so when I think about how that impacted you know my four years it really just made me want to be incredibly people oriented. Well I've been here and very relationship driven and I think that has one introduced me to so many amazing people on the campus but also I think impacted you know how I am as a leader. What you all have some very very bright futures ahead of you. Do you think that that's something you'll take foreword. I know you're going into

consulting at McKinsey and you're a Schwartzmann scholar or you're moving to China.

Do you think those are skills and values that will be important in the next phase and thereafter. Yeah, I definitely think and I think just getting to know people and really investing in you know people as themselves is going to be something that you know I want I just really love to do it's just incredibly enlightening. You get to learn so much from people when you do that. So I think seeing how that's impacted me for years at Vanderbilt. I think that's something that I'm going to try and utilize for the rest of my life. I don't I don't see it changing.

Yeah I would agree. I think one thing that Vanderbilt definitely gives you especially in environments like that is just being a driven person and being outgoing and being a go getter and I know being a Schwartzmann scholar I'm going to be around a bunch of passionate driven people over an entire year. And so definitely just continuing to have that drive. It's something I know in all four years whether it was in classes or just being involved in student organizations or talking to people on campus. I was always surrounded by people that push me. And so I want to continue to be like that for other people even going into graduate school and I'm sure again in my program that I will find those people to do the same for me. So keeping that up yeah. When did you know I think the transformation over going to a senior in high school coming out coach campus coming as a freshman and now you're on Friday walking across the stage as very distinguished graduates of the University with very bright futures.

When did you actually start to crystallize kind of goals and aspirations for yourselves and in the Yeah. You know it's kind of no one comes and when kids do come and say I want to be a doctor or a lawyer or you know most people just come in and it's like I just don't want to get lost. I don't want to be lonely. I mean just kind of these basic goals but yet you know you're leaving what these really exciting steps forward. When did coal start to crystallize around you like. You know I want to be doing X or I want to learn language why I want to live in cities Z I want to have complex problems to solve A B and C for different industries. Where did that come from.

So it's ironic that you asked that question Ryan and I met in a freshman seminar called Making Connections which was really about doing yeah required Yeah. That was that was the best class I've by far because I think it was a class where the assignments what to do exactly what you just said to write down what you want to get out of your four years what you want to major plan in your classes. Think about what clubs you want to be in. And Ryan was my peer review say buddy. It's incredible. Yes. So we've known each other since since that classmate like Jami said one of the assignments was literally to go on to Yes and like create these. This is what I want to major and these are my actual requirements. This is every class I want to take at Vanderbilt.

So we really didn't have a choice. So you're really stuck with you know planning out for years but you know it definitely has varied from that plan. But I think you know having that class were forced to be forward thinking and you know got to meet Jami so net positive. That's great story. There's an old joke that you know the politics on a university campus are really vicious and tough because there's so little at stake and you know it's an old joke and I don't really believe it. I think you know what's at stake is really the future of our city state country and the world. As I look at you and I think of the other graduates going out but you have had to know where this had as a student leader and be a student and a leader and listen and learn and be patient and I mean you kind of model civil discourse for us how how did you come to appreciate that being central to your engagement out of the classroom, in the classroom, and then in the myriad ways that you're approached by you know really really important issues of equity on the campus inclusion on the campus parking dining how you know how did you say I'm going to sit and learn and listen and try to engage with people.

Yeah I think on my end really I think the biggest benefit and the biggest intersection between the

two has been truly how the liberal arts education really teaches you how to tackle things holistically. And I think that's helped a lot in the intersection of being a student leader because we'll be presented with this issue and in the classroom it's taught us to think about things in so many different ways and there are so many different ways that an can impact certain groups of people over a different group of people. So I really think that intersection between the interdisciplinary liberal arts education really helped in that regard. Yeah and I would agree with that I think. And then of prying those principles and how you interact with other students because as student leaders on this campus you faced so many different pressures from different angles and different people with different backgrounds and beliefs that all feel that your actions should be a certain way but you can't think about it for one person. You have to think about it for the whole entire campus a campus that doesn't agree a campus that is full of different people. And so right now I'm definitely in the past year faced a lot of moments where we had to think really hard and put our own beliefs aside for what we felt was the good of the campus and what would benefit students. And I think that even though in four years. Right and I have had very different parties and backgrounds or sometimes even we were at odds about issues. And I think learning how to overcome that in a small scale and think about kind of as Ryan talked about what how different pieces come together together for a common purpose is how we kind of approach some of those situations.

You know I was I was really kind of struck when Vice President Biden said You know you know publicly and privately were saying you know like Mitch McConnell and like John McCain these are these are people I really really like. I can disagree with them but not vilify them. And and have the conversation the next day about something and I was struck by Justice Sotomayor saying I really disagree with Justice Thomas on a lot of things but you know what I really like him as a person and how one negotiates those relationships to say we may disagree but I go to school with you. Now I'm in the Senate with you. Do you think you'll try to take that to the broader world and say Well I disagree with this person but I'm not going to burn a bridge. I mean I can stand on principle but yet I'm not going to have relationships that are just destroyed in trying to make a difference.

Yeah I think most the one of the beautiful things about VSG that I've loved in the past four years because being when I was a sophomore I was a senator and we did have those moments in Senate when we debated small issues from what how we should write a letter to campus dining to larger issues about conflicts and things going on a national scale that a lot of senators just disagreed with and we had to have really passionate debates. But the thing about it is we all had to go to the VSC general body gathering meet and we all had to go back to that the next day. So it kind of taught you how to have those conversations even though they're difficult and continue to balance the relationship.

Yeah I was really kind of struck at some of the major issues that you had to debate and that were openly discussed that were you know tough raw issues were on the front pages of all the newspapers. OK. Well how do we have that debate. Realizing that we're back at it tomorrow. And you found Vetus G was able to do that.

You too Ryan. Yeah I think you know especially reflecting on the Biden talk. I remember one quote that really stuck with me was when he was talking about his colleagues in the Senate when he said You can question someone's judgment but never question their motives. And I think like Jami who is kind of talking about earlier I think VSG has been a great learning experience in that aspect because it's really taught. You know we're sitting in the room and like Jami said we would disagree every once in a while on how to approach an issue. But you know realizing that everyone in that room wants to do what's best for campus and that's what's driving them. It has really been able to allow us to work through those disagreements in a way that's been constructive and you know allows us to still be friends at the end of the day. So you know there are many things you know obviously that you know I would say we're proud of and I think the increased diversity the funding

and the generous gifts for I think almost 400 million dollars for opportunity Vanderbilt now. But I think we've all learned very much that you know having a robust admissions process that diversifies a class that creates opportunity Vanderbilt is only the beginning of a journey for a university and a student.

And so you've worked so much on what is the kind of learning social placement environment on the campus and we have a lot of work to do there what do you think are the things that you've worked on and then kind of as Lanier and Tarique think about it now this is not a one year project. What have you worked on and that we should keep working on generally and even specifically and we've talked about things over the last year. You know our wonderful meetings. Yeah I think one of the most important things that Ryan and I worked on this year was economic inclusive city and that broadly looked like a lot of things for us that was first starting the economic exclusivities committee enviously would try and lead. And then working even on campus with Achrafieh and the activities to see how those are allocated to different student organizations and how those disparities can impact students experiences depending on whether the organizations are large or small or what purposes they serve. And there's even one in two transportation initiatives like working with Lyft and Uber to try to make sure getting around Nashville is affordable and fair for students so I think that's one thing we're really passionate about this year and we kind of put that in mind in every aspect of things that we try to do and bring that canvas. And I think what was great about working on that issue is the dialogue that I think the campus is starting to have as it relates to economic inclusive.

But I also just think it's amazing how multifaceted The issue is so I think when looking at these you know long projects that the university will tackle it's something that I think affects a lot of different layers whether it be in the classroom the social experience interacting with the city of Nashville. I really think there are a lot of layers that will slowly start to start to be exposed as the dialogue increases on campus but echoing Jami I really think economic inclusive city is one of the biggest issues that we tried to start tackling this year and hopefully BSG tackles in the future.

Yeah I think that you know I would I would commend you for tackling that and your persistence your patience and you know also just the sophistication and nuance you bring to. OK. Where are the levers of power. How does the funding work. Because at the end of the day you're working with a fairly well-established systems that maybe haven't changed as much as you have all changed as students and that the values that you want to bring in the other students want to bring. And so I think you know there are really tough issues around Act fees and support for student organizations. And no one can shy away from those and say well works and things like that or one can say well Vanderbilt changed. The students have changed. We aspire to do more and be different. Is this changing. And the minute you ask you if that's changing particularly when involves money. I mean it really requires a lot of you know I think courage and persistence. So let me ask you about do you have mentees yourself as you now are leaving. And does it stun you that for you. I think you're amazing and I think you're amazing when you came.

And I've kind of I would say no you know pretty much almost your whole career development season. Do you feel like wow I've kind of moved along this developmental trajectory where I could have something to give back to somebody. Yeah I definitely do. I think for me and because I've had so many different positions in my four years where I've been in leadership roles and just active on campus. I was the president of the Black Student Association. I was a VUceptor. I was an R.A. in each of these roles. I was able to interact with so many different students and in some ways touch so many different students in ways that I didn't even know at the time I was doing. Then when I became student body president I had students that were emailing me and texting me and telling me how much they looked up to me and how much they wanted to do this program that I did or this internship that I had and I had one of the girls that joined my sorority this year also went on the

same MayMester program that I did one on the same Oak's program that I did not wanting to join the city. And it's so interesting to look back and see how people pay attention to the things that you do even when you're not putting conscious effort into doing them.

And so that really kind of inspires me that their passion for wanting to pay attention to what I do inspires me to want to do more and be a better mentor for them because I know I had those people looking back that I looked up to and was watching what they were doing and was trying to do the same thing. So now that I'm that person for somebody else it kind of adds a different pressure to you.

Yeah I think one of the best parts about Vanderbilt for me is I was a common RA for two years and just seeing especially my residence you know coming in. And I'm sure I looked the same way. But you know wide eyed and you know trying to hectically move in and then seeing them progress throughout their four years has been amazing. And I think when I look back like Jami was saying that the mentors that helped shape me and my leadership and my experience at Vanderbilt. It's been a blessing and something I never thought that I would be in the position to really do that for someone else. And seeing some of my residents who have gone on to be a HRs of Kissam funny funnily enough Tariq went to my high school and he was also in the dorm that I was an RA in and my sophomore year. He was he was a first year student in the East house so watching his progression through VSG has just been amazing since I've known him since he was 10. So it's really been one of them one of the highlights of my Vanderbilt experience is watching people grow and being a part of that.

I think it's for those of us who kind of really chose to and devoted themselves to being in education and on a college campus. That's why we do what we do. I mean we love kind of the beauty of the campus and the freedom of thought the freedom of expression that comes with it but it really is the ability to kind of see somebody go on to do amazing things because you were part of that journey with them. And I think it's you know as much as I mean it's a real privilege to be the chancellor. But I think seeing my graduates like you and going back 31 years go out and you know lead really really amazing diverse productive lives and contribute to society. You're getting a taste of that and the responsibility. You know you certainly embrace that. You know I get asked a lot and I ask at our Chancellor's lectures when we have distinguished speakers you know what does leadership mean to you. What is your leadership style. You know I'm kind of I'm like well you know I don't know. It's not like I read a bunch of books about it and then I developed a thesis it's and you've seen Secretary Gates you've seen Vice President Biden you've seen you know acting Attorney General Sally Yates. You know you've seen Carly Fiorina do you start to think they talk about leadership. This is what resonates with me as I think of being a leader do you feel like if someone as your mentoring kids hey you know Jami what's your leadership style what's your leadership philosophy. And it's like I just turned 21 you know ask the secretary of defense. Ask someone who ran for president, ask the vice president. But do you feel like you're starting to be able to answer that question at a very young part of your career.

I think so. And I think so for a lot of good a lot of different reasons. And that my view of leadership I think has changed all four years every year because I've been placed in a lot of different situations where I had to lead differently sometimes leading from being student body President and sometimes leading from just being a member of a general body or a member of the Senate and both of those situations are leadership which is something that I've learned here at Vanderbilt. And so just being able to realize that and think of that as sort of helping me define what leadership means to me. But I've also learned that leadership is something different to everyone else. And so you have to definitely develop your own personal leadership style because in situations that you go into if you do want to make change and you do want to influence the spaces that you go into it requires you to lead other people differently and adjust your style to those rooms in those situations. So yeah I think

that's what I've learned and gotten out of being in BSG and everything else that I've done. And these were years. And it's sort of wild for me to realize that and think of that because if you ask me that question as a freshman I wouldn't know how to answer it or even talk about it being that even as Vanderbilt students come from being involved in high school and in leadership roles in high school but that's very different than being twenty two. I get picking a homecoming theme is a little different. It all starts with something. Exactly.

Yeah I think especially reflecting on these past four years I would say and I think Jami was sort of hinting at this but how situational leadership is and how circumstantial it is. And I think that's something that I'll definitely take for it is just realizing and having the awareness to what is my role in this situation and how can I be a leader even if that's not in title even if you know I would say like next year I'm planning on going into my job and just being a sponge and just you know trying to soak in all that information that I can in hopes of being a better leader in the future. And I think realizing what role you play has been a big lesson that I've taken from Vanderbilt especially freshman year when looking back on it I was that spot and I was just getting coffee with people and how that helped me four years later in this role. So I think it's incredibly situational and I think that's why if I had to say a thesis at this point that's probably what I'll take forward. I know history is written over long periods of time but reflect on the Vanderbilt you came into in 2014 and the one you're leaving for short. Are they different schools. Are they the same. I mean. I mean I'm in this weird position where I see differences that are fairly significant but yet when I walk across the campus and it's like the trees are still there. OK that building still needs to be fixed. I still don't know my way around Stevenson. What did Vanderbilt change or did you change or is it a combination of both. I definitely would say it's a combination of both for me.

I know when I came in in 2014 my view of Vanderbilt was so much more narrow just because coming from St. Louis and being just aware of things that were going on nationally in the country there was a lot of tension on campus and it felt like there was a lot of confusion about what college campuses role was in processing these things and processing the views of students. And so I felt like I was very much in the middle of that. And so I watched Vanderbilt. I felt like go through that change and figure out how to tackle those issues in four years and that's manifested in a lot of different things. The organization Hidden Doers being formed on campus and the removal of the name Confederate from Memorial Hall and the addition of the vice chancellor and vice provost for equity and inclusion in schools of excellence. All of these different new things that we've added and changes that we've made to the campus that our class has gotten to watch. All in my view for the betterment of the students and for how students are experiencing different things as just being a person of color on this campus I felt like Vanderbilt has progressed in a lot of ways exponentially and areas of diversity inclusion which is something that was very important to me when I came to campus because that was such an important part of my college experience. And so in that way I think the campus experience has changed a lot for students that were involved in organizations like I was in the Black Student Association or and hid indoors and that a lot of the issues that we were trying to tackle four years ago aren't issues anymore. And of course there are a lot there's a lot more to do and there's a lot left to work on but I think the fact that we've just overcome so much in the time that I've been at Vanderbilt and I was able to be a part of that is something that's really powerful.

Yeah I would say it's interesting I definitely agree that it's a combination of both and I think not only just change but growth. I think you know obviously we've both grown and matured over four years. But I think the university has really grown as well and in the sense that I think when we came out of this campus you know there was a lot of national issues going on there was you know things happening on funeral's campus that I feel by their very nature is sort of reactionary like it was it you had to just sort of take things as they came and try to develop solutions. But in looking at how you know the university has operated this year and sort of what we're planning on doing with

future view I think it's shifted to a very forward thinking and not necessarily reactionary but more you know let's let's look towards a future. How can we do better. And before things get worse. And I think that's been an amazing shift. You know I think it's interesting too and I think a lot of students faculty and staff particularly would be like how's my voice heard. And does anyone really care what I think.

And you know and kind of when I look at you know the last four years you've been here and you know before that just impact that the students coming and their values and their aspirations for the school make on me and the desire for a better great Vanderbilt which always has to be our goal. And you know often the mismatch between what we want to be great but well do we really need to take that. I mean it's like yeah. I mean you have to and so I think that you know I would kind of you know we would meet regularly and talk about a lot of things. I hope you leave with a sense of there's a school that your part of that. Yeah everyone tries to work together to make it better and to really change it where you know it's never going to be perfect. It's never going to be really even close to that. But you know we've got to kind of say OK we listen and we talk and we learn and then we move forward. So I hope you feel a student leaders that whether it's working with me the provost vice chancellor Kopp stain Dean bandit's that a lot of that change is because number one you chose to come to Vanderbilt and then you chose and you love the school but you also said it can be better. It can change. And I think those two things very much go together you know for me and many others that you know I wanted you to come to Vanderbilt. I wanted you to tell me what could make Vanderbilt better. And you know I think that you've done a really remarkable job in the changes and contributed to that.

And I take great pleasure in the fact that I got to work with you to let me focus a little bit on Nashville and change. Did when you came to visit did you have any sense of the place called Nashville or the place Vanderbilt in the city of Nashville and what Nashville was like. So when I came here I come from a fairly small town in Illinois. So Nashville's by far the biggest city that I've spent extensive time in. And I just had no idea. As a first year student the different opportunities I think that Nashville provides Vanderbilt students and in the four years that I've been here just being able to soak in the city of Nashville. Whether it be different restaurants concerts seeing it change has been amazing sometimes a little overwhelming. I think seeing how quickly the Artisan and hotel went up it was it was a little bit of a culture shock. But just the city of Nashville has just been amazing in watching it grow in tandem with the university and how the two have interacted has just been definitely definitely one of the most positive parts about the Vanderbilt experience on land. Yeah I would agree with that. I think from the opposite side of being from St. Louis Missouri a big city. My view of Nashville was it's a small country playing nothing but fast food and cowboy boots was really my perception. Obviously that was wrong.

So yeah coming to visit and seeing just how large and how vibrant the city was and how much of a college town it was it was a shock to me because I didn't know I knew there were neighboring universities around Vanderbilt but I just didn't know how that impacted the city and how that impacted the culture of the city because I think the young people being here have definitely said Nashville on a trajectory where it growing at an amazingly fast rate. There's a new building up it seems like every other day looking around campus and that's only going to increase from here. Oh yeah being a part of that slice for four years has been really interesting to watch and I think that I'm scared to come back for our union because it's not going to be the same place that it was when I came to it. I think when graduates come back for a reunion or just visiting the city the person the campus will look familiar You know perfectly particularly you know you walk around Peabody and you walk around your campus. Some of the things you know when they see I lived in Kissam that's a lot nicer or now you E. Bronson Ingram College. Well that's a lot nicer. And boy this wonder is really cool and so the thing that things change. I think for us Nashville is a really extraordinary draw for bringing college students recruiting staff faculty because all we are is a place of diverse

talent. And trying to build a community that's beloved around that and people are drawn to creative spaces creative cities. I think the challenge for Vanderbilt now is to never think are that our investment in Nashville is for ever and that people can't be left behind in a transformation of a city.

And you know I think for us on FutureVU that you know we've talked about it's like OK you know and these are kind of more general concepts apart from the transit initiative. But it's like OK what is the impact of Uber and what is the impact of Lyft. How do students afford that interact with it how do we make it more accessible more affordable and then what about the students who don't live on the campus and are driving in and the rents are really expensive. And what about you know workers who can't afford to live close to campus anymore and have to drive in and clock in. And so how do I think you know I'm so proud of the academic progress but you know just working to make this a better city for everybody I think is really important because you never want to be a great great university. It's like oh there are people live around us. I think that's really corrosive to the mission. And actually you know it's it's losing your moral compass. And so I think far for what you've done on the campus and talked about Nashville also was being alert to it will what does a health care like in Nashville who is really getting these jobs who is really benefiting from all this construction. I think those are things that really still are on my mind and on your mind because we have to coexist and we just can't have opportunity Vanderbilt we've got to have you know opportunity Nashville and opportunity in America. So I think it will be very interesting to see how the city continues to develop and making sure that you know we don't become a tale of two cities with those who did not have an opportunity and those who did.

And hopefully when when you come back you'll say yeah you know I recognize a campus it's a better place and I like the way that Nashville is developing. So it's been a real honor to be with you. And I will have to say that it's you know my privilege to work with you in a time of great excitement and change and challenge at Vanderbilt and you've been incredible contributors to this. So thank you Jami and thank you for Ryan for joining me today. As we reflect on your time at Vanderbilt your many accomplishments and I look forward to having I guess at last brief moment at commencement but as we say Vanderbilt for life. And you know I expect you to kind of stay in touch with all of us and we'll celebrate your many accomplishments going forward and always take great pride that you're graduates of our great university. So you can download this and other episodes of the Zappos report at VU dot edu slash Zeppos dash report. Thanks so much for joining me today. Thank you for having us. Thank you.