**Why Voting Matters & How You Can Become a Leader for Your Community - Episode 165**

00:00:00 **Giovanni**

As a queer Latina student in a working-class environment, I didn't get to see very many people that were in positions of leadership. I think I felt like I didn't have a voice growing up, and I really wanted to be involved.

00:00:17 **Giovanni**

I think it is important for all folks to develop leadership skills. Like Kelly said, it's really important for us to start developing those skills now and empowering our student and actually, see that civic engagement is important, and it's a need so that we create a much better world going forward.

00:00:39 **Kelly**

When populations aren't engaged, the system tilts to those who are, and it matters to me a lot that we have a representative republic and that all people are represented.

00:00:56 **Christina**

Hi, I'm Christina Barsi.

00:00:57 **Sun**

And I'm Sun Ezzell, and you're listening to the Magic Mountie Podcast.

00:01:01 **Christina**

Our mission is to find ways to keep your ear to the ground, so to speak - by bringing to you the activities and events you may not have time to attend, the resources on campus you might want to know more about, the interesting things your colleagues are creating, and the many ways we can continue to better help and guide our students.

00:01:18 **Sun**

We bring to you the voices of Mt. SAC, from the classroom to completion.

00:01:22 **Speaker 1**

And I know I'm going to achieve my goals, and I know people here are going to help me to do it.

00:01:27 **Speaker 2**

She is a sociology major and she's transferring to Cal Poly, Pomona! Psychology major, English major ...

00:01:33 **Sun**

From transforming part-time into full-time-

00:01:35 **Speaker 1**

I really liked the time that we spent with Julie about how to write a CV and cover letter.

00:01:43 **Christina**

Or just finding time to soak in the campus.

00:01:45 **Speaker 1**

To think of the natural environment around us as a library.

00:01:48 **Christina**

We want to keep you informed and connected to all things Mt. SAC, but most importantly, we want to keep you connected with each other. I'm Christina Barsi, Mt. SAC alumni, and producer of this podcast.

00:01:59 **Sun**

And I'm Sun Ezzell, Learning Assistance Faculty and Professional Learning Academy Coordinator.

00:02:04 **Christina**

And this is the Magic Mountie Podcast.

00:02:06 **Christina**

In our previous episode, we featured Mt. SAC's Constitution Day event, and today, we have a special behind-the-scenes conversation with Kelly Rivera, Professor of Political Science, and Gio Rodriguez, Student Activities Coordinator about the importance of this event, and even more so, the importance of leadership and how you can get involved and be a leader for your community. Enjoy!

00:02:36 **Sun**

Welcome back to the Magic Mountie Podcast. This is your host, Sun Ezzell, and I'm so excited to be here today with Kelly Rivera and Gio Rodriguez, welcome to the podcast.

00:02:47 **Kelly**

Thank you for having us.

00:02:48 **Giovanni**

Thank you, I'm excited.

00:02:50 **Sun**

Well, I've been really looking forward to talking with you about Constitution Day. Congratulations on a wonderful event.

00:02:57 **Kelly**

Thank you, Sun. It's great to have this event every year on our campus. Always wonderful to collaborate with Gio Rodriguez, Student Life and Associated Students.

00:03:07 **Giovanni**

Yeah, same here. I love working with Kelly. Always great to start the year off with civic engagement.

00:03:15 **Sun**

Before we jump into talking about Constitution Day and some of the work that goes into that and what inspired you to bring Constitution Day to the college, I was wondering if you could just tell our listeners a little bit about yourselves, a little bit about your work on campus.

00:03:30 **Kelly**

Happy to. So, I'm Kelly Rivera, and I'm a co-chair over in the Geography and Political Science Department and a professor there. I'm also an academic senate director and a co-advisor to the Political Science Club.

00:03:43 **Giovanni**

And my name is Giovanni Rodriguez. I'm a coordinator for Student Life, and I serve as one of the advisors for Associated Students. And Associated Students is the student government group on campus, or AS serves as the official student voice on all college-related issues.

00:04:02 **Sun**

Thank you both so much, and thank you for all of your amazing work. Your involvement is really amazing, just the different areas on campus that you're dedicating your time and energy, so thank you so much for that.

00:04:13 **Sun**

I was wondering if we could dive a little bit into Constitution Day. What is Constitution Day and why does it matter?

00:04:20 **Kelly**

So, this year we celebrated the 235th anniversary of the United States Constitutional Convention signing, which happens on September 17th, the anniversary being September 1787. And we are federally mandated to do so as a public institution that receives federal funds, but we do so for more than that reason, of course.

00:04:43 **Kelly**

And at Mt. SAC, we do this as the Political Science and Geography Department in collaboration with Associated Students. We designate an annual lecture series and voter awareness drive to bring modern political issues to students that connect them with the U.S. constitution to really bring it alive and show students the relevant issues embedded in the Constitution that connect to their everyday lives. And really involve them in the issues that are relevant to their lives today and encourage their voter engagement and civic engagement.

00:05:18 **Giovanni**

And to expand on that notion a little more, Associated Students, we're funded by Student Activities fee and the student representation fee. The student representation fee itself, it's used to promote civic engagement and advocacy in any kind of student government; local, state, federal.

00:05:40 **Giovanni**

So, it's definitely one of the priorities of Associated Students to promote the votes to get involved, to be part of that process.

00:05:50 **Sun**

I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about your collaboration to bring Constitution Day to the Mt. SAC community.

00:05:56 **Kelly**

I'm happy to. So, I was hired at Mt. SAC and I started in the fall of 2016. And in that year, I asked around about who hosted the Constitution Day events. I was really excited to get something started, and I learned that history Professor Bill Jones had been working on sort of the academic side of events for a while, and he shared with me some of the wonderful activities they had been putting on and invited me the following year to really help coordinate and sort of take that over.

00:06:27 **Kelly**

And so, I planned with my department, the Geography and Political Science Department events. So, the following spring, I started planning, and I happened to have in one of my classes, the Associated Students President. So, I was sharing some of my enthusiasm and ideas for planning in between classes and speaking with the president.

00:06:48 **Kelly**

And he shared with me some of the plans that were happening in Associated Students, and he said we should collaborate. And he introduced me to Gio. And I think that's how really the connection happened the first year, and it's really due to a student.

00:07:04 **Kelly**

And so, since then, I've really just been grateful for that connection and have had this phenomenal working relationship with Gio each year where we've been able to coordinate at the department where we plan thematically the lecture series, and then we have sort of the logistical planning and the activities and Associate Students runs the voter drive and all of that piece. And so, we put those two pieces together for the same event on the same day.

00:07:36 **Giovanni**

Yeah. Kelly and I started around the same time. My predecessor gave out Pocket Constitution books and had popcorn during this event. And I'm like, "Okay, how do I start this? I'm new." And it was serendipitous - Kelly just emailed me and I'm like, "Oh, definitely. Let's go ahead and whatever you need, I'm the co-curricular component. Just tell me what your vision is, and I'll help to see it through."

00:08:08 **Giovanni**

And I love working with Kelly and the rest of the professors, and I learned - even as a staff member, I learned so much every single Constitution Day. So, I'm in it, I love it. I know our students really appreciate it.

00:08:23 **Kelly**

Yeah, and it's been great. And each year, the theme changes and we highlight new themes, new topics, what's relevant to what's happening in our political world. What might the students be interested in? What are they hearing about? So, this year, we focused on midterm elections and redistricting.

00:08:39 **Kelly**

In past years, we've focused on things like free speech or understanding the media, and perhaps even the phrase things like "fake news." How do you understand what that means or how might you identify it? We have reached out to faculty across disciplines to bring in experts across disciplines. We've invited our forensics team to post-debates during Constitution Day.

00:09:06 **Kelly**

So, it's really been like an all hands on deck activity where we bring in this kind of interdisciplinary approach to understanding these modern political topics. And it's been very successful. And even during the pandemic, the height of the pandemic in 2020, we just moved online and did an online presentation, which actually met the Zoom room cap when we maxed out at 300 at one point.

00:09:34 **Kelly**

So, it's been a successful recipe, and we're just going to keep going because it's been really fulfilling to do this work and impactful for our students. The kinds of conversations that we get to have with our students after the event, and even weeks or months later, students will come up and share things they learned or what they've done with that learning, or how they've actually registered to vote at this event, and the kind of difference that it has made is really meaningful.

00:10:02 **Kelly**

So, those are the sorts of things that it does. But beyond that, the collaboration is fairly meaningful because there's a bigger goal here for civic engagement and political engagement that's not just Constitution Day, it doesn't end here. And one of those things that really brings us together is this kind of shared goal.

00:10:22 **Kelly**

So, at Mt. SAC, generally, in our mission statement, we say the college is dedicated to serving our community through improving economic achievement, advancing civic engagement and environmental responsibility, enhancing personal and social wellbeing, developing information and technological literacy, communication and critical thinking, and enriching aesthetic and cultural experiences. It's part of our very mission as what we are as a college.

00:10:48 **Kelly**

And I really believe very deeply in this goal as part of our responsibility as a college, that we have this bigger role in our society to promote civic and political learning. And it's something that I see Constitution Day as this bigger piece of.

00:11:09 **Kelly**

So, there's this report that came out of the national task force for civic engagement called A Crucible Moment. And there have been other works that came out of the American Political Science Association since then that have calls for increased civic engagement across the country.

00:11:27 **Kelly**

And they're related to things like increasing the youth vote. But if you think about our student population, we're a majority-minority institution; we have this really important call to action upon us to help engage our student population, to be a part of our polity, and a real opportunity to help imbue a sense of political efficacy and an understanding of what their power is in the world that they live in.

00:12:00 **Kelly**

So, we can bring to them just beyond what they learn in a political science class, things about what are their social interests and their political interests. And we can help build those political habits like voting, but also showing up to a city council meeting or even an Associated Students meeting to advocate for things that matter to them right here at Mt. SAC, and help them learn through our social systems and educational systems, these critical citizenship skills.

00:12:31 **Kelly**

Like how to be a critical thinker or how to deliberate a really big issue before them - openness to new ideas and how to be influential in the realm that they occupy. So, it's this kind of pluralistic view of society that we have this central role in as college educators.

00:12:54 **Kelly**

And having an event like Constitution Day is just a piece of that puzzle. Associated Students is a huge piece of that puzzle and that role of what they're doing for students, of teaching them to be leaders (I'll let Gio speak to), it's also very critical. Student club leadership is another piece of that puzzle as well.

00:13:15 **Giovanni**

Yeah, and echoing off of Kelly's remarks, California community colleges has this really great shared governance system that states that every single group has a say in how we move forward with college matters. And so, there's three senates that report to our board of trustees. There's the academic senate that Kelly serves in a leadership capacity in, classified senate, and then the student senate is Associated Students.

00:13:44 **Giovanni**

And so, I do a lot of the practical skill, developing the practical skills. And so, that participatory democracy isn't just this conceptual idea, but it's real and it's tangible for our students. And they oversee a half a million dollar operational budget that is funded through student activities fee and student rep fee that they advocate on students' needs on campus.

00:14:14 **Giovanni**

Some of the things that I've seen in my tenure in these past few years is that Associated Students came together with faculty to form the LGBTQ task force, so then now, we have a Pride Center. Associated Students pushed for a food pantry, and now , we have our Basic Needs Department, which served a crucial service during the pandemic.

00:14:40 **Giovanni**

Our AS officers also pushed for our social justice major, and that happened with the student voice. And so, like Kelly said, it's really important for us to start developing those skills now and empowering our student and actually see that civic engagement is important and it's a need so that we create a much better world going forward.

00:15:04 **Sun**

You're reminding me of one of my college professors who said much to my bafflement at first that some of the most important learning opportunities in college wouldn't happen inside of the classroom. And it seems like that's part of what you're talking about, is those opportunities for students to engage in making their voice heard, making change on campus, so that then, they know how to do that in the larger community as well. That's really powerful.

00:15:31 **Sun**

And both of you speak so passionately about the work that you're doing. I wonder, would you be willing to share what is it in your past that made you so passionate about civic and political engagement? Like what got you hooked?

00:15:47 **Giovanni**

You know, as a queer Latina student in a working-class environment, I didn't get to see very many people that were in positions of leadership. My parents also didn't finish grade school, and they immigrated. And so, opportunities and resources were very scarce and I think I felt like I didn't have a voice growing up, and I really wanted to be involved.

00:16:18 **Giovanni**

And then fast-forward into my undergrad, and then just being involved in student life, I was involved in a club, and then that just like it put me into this trajectory where I was like I think it is important for all folks to develop leadership skills and to tap on the shoulders of folks that have never been tapped on. Because if you're not within those networks or those circles, it's really hard for you to know about leadership opportunities.

00:16:52 **Giovanni**

Usually, someone taps you on the shoulder, and I wanted to be that. And so, I naturally fell and continued my career within student life, student leadership, and civic engagement is one of those key things that I never thought that I would do, especially as queer a man. I never thought I'd be like, "Oh, civic engagement, you got to vote," all these things.

00:17:19 **Giovanni**

But it's really important and especially now that we're seeing some things being challenged, that makes me go, "Hmm." And maybe if we had representation in all levels of government, would this nation still look the same or feel the same? And would things be happening that wouldn't have been happening if we had better representation? So, I'm going to stop there.

00:17:48 **Kelly**

Gio, thanks for sharing that. I think it's a complicated answer. As someone who participates in politics and who doesn't, it turns out it matters a lot to outcomes. And in a republic, which is what we live in, we live in a democratic republic - when populations aren't engaged, the system tilts to those who are.

00:18:11 **Kelly**

And it matters to me a lot that we have a representative republic, and that all people are represented. And I will work until my last breaths, and I hope I have a lot of those left. I hope I have a lot of breaths left in my life to get as many people represented in this system as possible, because it's part of one of my very core goals that this system represents as many people as possible.

00:18:41 **Kelly**

I believe to my very core in that ideal of what this country can be as one of the ideal goods of what we are. And so, I see the college environment as the place where we can do the work to try to bring as many people in to that opportunity as possible.

00:19:07 **Sun**

Thank you both so much for sharing. I know that students also are motivated and engaged by your passion that you're sharing with us today in our conversation. And I'm sure that our listeners will be as well.

00:19:27 **Sun**

I was wondering if you could just talk a little bit about some different ways that you see folks engaging or some suggestions maybe for folks who are ready to dive in and they have tons of time and energy, and what about those who feel they're kind of run down, they don't have a lot of time and energy - like what's an easy first step?

00:19:49 **Kelly**

Yeah, I think everybody makes a difference in the way that they're able to make a difference. I really look around, I see my colleagues working so hard and they're so dedicated to their students. I really commend everyone on this college for the ways that they are engaged right now.

00:20:07 **Kelly**

And every discipline might have different approaches. I mean, as someone who teaches political science, you might be listening to me talk about Constitution Day and you're like, "Okay, well, she does that, that makes sense." So, I mean, I'll share some things that and some ways that I know many colleagues are involved, like student clubs, what an amazing way that you can be involved and you can help advise or co-advise students and really support their engagement and activity.

00:20:33 **Kelly**

You can help support students with getting involved in their communities and areas of interest to them. I recently had students looking for ways to become more involved in things related to sustainability. So, I helped just connect them to people who knew more about internship opportunities and different things happening in the community that they could be helpful to them with.

00:20:55 **Kelly**

Something kind of bigger that I really was privileged to be involved with a few years ago - two years back to back, I was able to receive funding from the president's office first, and then Associated Students actually funded two lobbying trips where I had two groups of students work with me first on learn how to lobby. They came up with their own policy goal, they wrote their own policy goal, they put together pamphlets, and then we flew to Sacramento and we went to a conference, and then we actually went out lobbying to state lawmakers.

00:21:27 **Kelly**

And we made appointments and the students went, and for some students, this was their first time on a plane that I went with. I mean, it was incredible. Every single one of the students who was involved in this project, they have all transferred to UCs and I'm in contact with them all. They're really just doing amazing. And I think I might have gotten more out of it than they did, honestly, it was so fulfilling for me.

00:21:53 **Kelly**

But that kind of opportunity to see the growth that it had for all of them and the level of just this huge increase in political efficacy for all of them, that they could actually speak to people who had power in this state one-on-one - that they didn't even think that they could do that was pretty incredible.

00:22:12 **Kelly**

So, I know for a fact that people on this campus have connections to opportunities that you might not even realize you have. And there are students who need that connection, and it's those connections that open doors for our students. So, just think about what that is.

00:22:28 **Kelly**

It can be small, it can be big, and sometimes, they just develop organically. A student comes up to you and says, "Hey, I want to be involved in sustainability." And then you just send an email to somebody who knows more. That's a way to help.

00:22:41 **Giovanni**

I'm going to go ahead and mention three things. First is the student representation fee. The second one is the student senate for California Community Colleges, also known by SSCCC, the Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Act, AB963.

00:22:56 **Giovanni**

So, as Kelly was saying how associated students funded lobbying trips; funds from the student representation fee that every student pays $2 in the fall, $2 in the spring, one of those dollars, it goes directly to SSCCC. And the other dollar we get to keep at Mt. SAC.

00:23:19 **Giovanni**

SSCCC combines all 116 community colleges. So, there's a delegate for every single school that meets, and they vote on legislation that then goes to the California State Senate for consideration and approval, which is exciting, if you're a student going to SSCCC meeting with delegates from all across California and you vote on legislation.

00:23:42 **Giovanni**

The other dollar, we keep here so that we can promote co-curricular activities. Conferences are one that most students don't have the resources to just pick up and go, and stay a few nights somewhere else. And so, Associated Students funds departments, groups, clubs to experience these and conferences are such an eye-opening experience.

00:24:07 **Giovanni**

We now see ourselves in leadership roles in which we didn't see ourselves before, to be in a space with like-minded individuals that promotes just leadership development and networking. And it goes a long way. One of the examples that I gave AB963 was started off by SSCCC. It was voted and signed by the California governor on October 2019.

00:24:34 **Giovanni**

It stipulates six things; that every California community college and CSU must either hire or appoint a civic engagement coordinator, create an action plan, plan events, send emails about upcoming elections that include even like civic engagement information, voting information.

00:24:55 **Giovanni**

It also stipulates that we have to put all that information in the academic calendar, and that we must have a social media that we can use to disperse information. And that stipulates that we have to have an action plan by 2022.

00:25:07 **Giovanni**

So, I'm hoping that our administration finalizes that process soon and gets to appoint or let us know who that designated civic engagement coordinator will be. So, those are some of the examples that I say that we can get involved is use AS as a source of funding lobbying trips or conferences for civic engagement, be a part of Associated Students.

00:25:36 **Giovanni**

We currently have 42 open positions for student representatives on Mt. SAC college-wide committee. So, if you want to be part of a sustainability committee or anything, we have so many different committees, so many different spots open. And if they want to become part of AS or run for an in-office position, a great thing about all of our leadership positions is that they are stipend.

00:26:01 **Giovanni**

If that is a concern, every student does receive priority registration and a stipend for their service as a senator, student court justice, or an executive board member.

00:26:13 **Sun**

Thank you so much. And we can include links to those things in the show notes so folks can access them easily. I was wondering, are there any resources that you find that you turn to frequently that you might like to share with the listeners? Something that you've read that's been inspirational or useful to you, or a resource that you just find that you point others to frequently?

00:26:36 **Kelly**

So, A Crucible Moment is one of those, and I'll share that with you all. That was that task force that came out of the White House in 2012. And it was done with AACU, and then also, there's John Dewey, Democracy and Education. That's an old one. But that's a pretty classic philosophical analysis on the role of education in democracy and how you replicate institutional structures through educational systems.

00:27:11 **Kelly**

And of course, the American Political Science Association is now running an annual teaching and learning conference. I have not had the opportunity to attend that yet, but from what I have heard from the coordinators, it's supposed to be fairly phenomenal. And so, that might be something that's worth attending if you're interested in learning more about sort of practical application of what's happening in the discipline. So, those are some things that might be of interest.

00:27:39 **Kelly**

And then of course, I think Gio and I are always open to collaboration too. So, if there are folks who are listening and they're like, "Hey, I've got this great idea and I want to work with you guys," like please reach out because we're always excited about these topics, so we want to work with folks.

00:27:54 **Sun**

Great. Thank you so much

00:27:56 **Giovanni**

For me, Sun, I have a James Baldwin quote in my office and I do think that especially with folks that have been either marginalized, underrepresented or disenfranchised, I feel has started off in the arts and through advocacy and civil rights.

00:28:18 **Giovanni**

And so, just having a reminder and having histories and thinking of folks like Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera - folks tha you may not think that are contributors to civic engagement. I think it is. I think these displays are what happens when we don't see folks that represent us in leadership positions.

00:28:46 **Giovanni**

And so, the beauty of the folks that I work with, even students that may not think that they belong in AS, some students have come to me like, "Oh, I'm an international student, how do I fit into this?" Or, "I'm deaf or hard of hearing, can I be part of Associated Students? It seems like a very hearing world-centered kind of organization?"

00:29:11 **Giovanni**

And so, I think part of it is learning how to dismantle what we have set already and maybe make it a new, and maybe make room for students that I didn't think about in the first place. But then our organization becomes so much more enriching and better than what it was a few years back because we have all these folks that come from different backgrounds and experiences.

00:29:35 **Giovanni**

So, I always lean into the arts. Political art for me is beautiful. And I think it's what I use to motivate me when I have those times when I'm feeling kind of tapped out.

00:29:49 **Sun**

Thank you so much. Would you be willing to share the Baldwin quote with us?

00:29:55 **Giovanni**

So, I have the poster and it says, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." Again, James Baldwin.

00:30:06 **Sun**

Thank you so much.

00:30:08 **Giovanni**

One of the things that I would like to share, Sun, is that if anyone ever feels they are on the fence about taking a leadership role, I would say do it. Just do it. Come talk to us. Either, if it's for a club, for the Political Science Club, if it's for Associated Students, you are going to be surrounded by so many educators, advisors, and even our colleagues.

00:30:34 **Giovanni**

Our students are such a wealth of knowledge. We help one another. And I promise you, you will see yourself in a different light and you will be glad that you took that opportunity. Don't doubt yourself. I know some of us struggle, I still struggle with imposter syndrome even as an educated queer man of color still in spaces within education.

00:30:57 **Giovanni**

And I too feel that, am I a leader right now? Am I still a leader? Do I still got to work on it? And I'm dealing with it as well, but I think that you'll come to find that you find a space of authentic exploration and leadership development. And we're here for you. Just join, come talk to us. We'll leave additional information on how to get involved in the show notes.

00:31:22 **Sun**

Thank you so much Gio, and glad too. I appreciate that you mentioned that the quote is something that's helpful when you're feeling a little drained. Because I think that's one of the challenges of doing something that we care deeply about, is that change is slow and sometimes, we do feel kind of emptied out and we need to figure out how to make the work sustainable. So, I'm really glad that you mentioned that as well.

00:31:49 **Giovanni**

Thank you, Sun.

00:31:50 **Sun**

I just want to stay on Zoom with you guys all day. Thank you so much for putting aside the time and the energy to have this conversation. I'm so grateful to you and just thank you so much for all of the incredible work that you're doing on behalf of students and the Mt. SAC community. And it must be so fulfilling to know that students are going out into their own communities and continuing that work.

00:32:14 **Kelly**

Thanks, Sun. And thank you to the Magic Mountie Podcast for featuring this event. And thank you to my departmental colleagues who participate each year, and for all of our colleagues that have participated in all of the past years, and for Student Life and Associated Students for all of the work that you've done.

00:32:30 **Kelly**

It wouldn't happen without the community that has pitched in to make it happen. So, we really appreciate the airtime, and thank you to you for all of the work you do for our campus in keeping this podcast going and keeping us educated with all of the fantastic things happening.

00:32:49 **Giovanni**

Yeah. I want to echo those remarks. Thank you, Sun. And everything that Kelly has said. And also, I also want to thank Kelly. She thanks everyone and I also want to thank her because it is your passion that is contagious. Like I feel like I'm not even working when Kelly reaches out to me, I'm like, "Of course, let's make it happen."

00:33:10 **Giovanni**

And it takes a team, it takes a village. I also want to say thank you to my director and administrators. They empower me to step to the plate as well. And if we didn't have a nurturing environment, if we didn't have Mt. SAC, I don't think any of this work could be done.

00:33:27 **Sun**

Thank you both so much. And if you have ideas for future episodes, please reach out. We'd love to have a chance to collaborate again. Yay!

00:33:37 **Giovanni**

Thank you.

00:33:38 **Sun**

Thank you.

00:33:41 **Christina**

Thank you for listening to the Magic Mountie Podcast. And don't forget to share your favorite episodes.