

FROM MILWAUKEE TO THE WORLD: CONNECTING DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

Versiti Podcast: Season 3 - Episode 6 – Part 1

Host: Edgar Daggett

Guest: Kobena-Marcus J. Collins

INTRO CLIP

KOBENA: My mind was blown that this is people's reality and I'm so grateful for that because that humbled me so much. And you know, even in this work, in DEIB, privilege is a real thing and everybody has privilege. And that was where I found out how much privilege I have and how much work I need to do as an ally for those who didn't have those privileges that I did.

BUMPER

EDGAR: Welcome back to another Stand Out From the Inside podcast presented by Versiti. I'm your host Edgar Daggett and hope you all are doing well. If you have not yet caught up on any of the past episodes of season three, go back, catch up, great stories, great information that you can use all in your daily lives to get better. Cuz that's what we, that's what we do here. We try to get better and better every day by learning about the experiences of others and how they impact. Our daily lives. But for this episode, we have a very special guest based out of Wisconsin. He focuses on a lot of DEI efforts, school efforts, or collegiate efforts and he has an amazing life story that is here to share with all of you. Please welcome to the Stand Out From the Inside Kobena-Marcus J. Collins. Welcome.

KOBENA: Thank you, sir. Appreciate it.

EDGAR: Hey, how you doing today?

KOBENA: Fantastic. I'm very glad to be here.

EDGAR: Hey, you're looking pretty dapper too ride to sit in cult too.

KOBENA: Look, I try to do what I can do when I can do it, but you know.

EDGAR: That was awesome. So welcome to the Stand Out From the Inside podcast. You know what we do a lot here is, you know, talk to a lot of the listeners, the viewers and kind of give them inspiration. You know, we talk about blood donation we talk about just standing out and using the resources that you have to either better themselves or help other than communities because together, you know, whether you're in a very small one, but all of our communities are together. You know, in some type of way we impact each other. You're, it's almost like neighbors. You have a neighborhood that's whole. You have your house. What you do in your house impacts your neighbors, and that impacts further out. It is a pleasure to meet you and I'm super excited to get this started and hear your story. So, you know, just to get this rolling tell the listeners, the viewers a little bit about yourself. [00:03:02]

KOBENA: Sure. Appreciate that, Edgar. So born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. And currently live it. Still live in the CI in the city of Milwaukee. Been here my, just about my whole life. I did some time in Illinois for my undergraduate degree. Traveled around the world for a semester as a study abroad program in my senior year. And then have been working in the community here in Milwaukee in a variety of different ways from working in education, elementary, middle school, high school. I've done coaching, I've done admissions at the, at the state school level. I've worked in admissions and recruitment and private institutions. I've done nonprofit leadership. Most of my career has been in talent acquisition recruitment space, specifically working in the diversity recruitment space at starting back in 2005. I've done, you know, speaking engagements at the local, regional, national, and global level. I really am passionate about making sure that I'm creating opportunities and connecting dots and connecting people with opportunities. That's ultimately, you know, what I want to do when I grow up, so to speak. You know, and I don't know exactly what that title of that type of a job is, but that's always been my personal passion. I'm a, as I said, a native of Milwaukee. But also my mother is from South Milwaukee. My father is from South USA, so, okay. He's from, you know, Mississippi. My mother is from a very do predominantly white community. My mother's white, my dad is black. Grew up in a relatively mixed neighborhood. Went to some of the most diverse schools throughout my academic career, from kindergarten through high school. So I've had a very unique opportunity to see cultures internally as well as from the sidelines. [00:05:08]

EDGAR: Ah, that's awesome. So what made the, so what made you stay in Milwaukee this entire time? What is it about Milwaukee that just keeps you there?

KOBENA: It's my city, man. It's, it's, it's where my roots are, you know? A lot of people, well, I'll say this, a lot of people who move to Milwaukee don't wanna leave because Milwaukee is a great city. You know, they call it a great city on the Great Lake, and it's for a reason. You know, we've got just about all the amenities that you would want in a larger city, but you don't have all the craziness of traffic and high living expenses. Also growing up I did a lot of service and so my foundation is rooted in service, so I'm always of service to my community. Even now, I still stay connected on multiple different levels from the work I do with my fraternity. Shout out to Alpha P Alpha Fraternity Incorporated, in addition to the work I do with the City of Milwaukee as a commissioner for the Our City Service Commissioner's Board. So it's just, it's home. It's where my people are, and that's not just blood, it's blood. As my brother-in-law would say it's blood and mud, so

EDGAR: That's awesome. Staying true to your city. Have you guys, have you ever been back down to Mississippi where your father's been?

KOBENA: No. Actually, you know, my parents went down probably about 10 years ago, and the city that he was born and raised in his early years isn't even on the map anymore.

EDGAR: Oh, wow. Okay.

KOBENA: So when you think about what that means, yeah. You know, from a larger, higher level, it's a lot of change, put it that way. He was from a very small town in, in, you know, rural Mississippi and my father grew up picking cotton and, you know, for money.

EDGAR: Yeah. And then the change, so you both moved to Wisconsin or direct into Milwaukee. How was growing up there? You know how Yeah. Rude.

KOBENA: Yeah. I was very fortunate, you know, I didn't, we didn't have a lot of money, you know, not a lot of money at all. You know, there were. Years where we very much struggled until probably I was middle school and things started to stabilize. But I always had, you know, my family, my mother, my father, my brother, my sisters, and I'm the youngest of five. All of us didn't live in the same house. Not, and all of us didn't live at, in the same house at the same time. My brother and I always did, but my sisters were with their You know, my oldest sister was with us and then my two other sisters were with their mom. And but it was a very diverse neighborhood. But it was unique in that sense that in the part of town where we are, it's right on the out, it's right on the edge.

Where on any block across any street, it could be a completely different world. Oh, wow. Just about and so. You know, there was, I grew up in the eighties where gangs were a really big thing, so you might have, there's probably about three, four different gangs and that would be in the neighborhood. But at the same time, there was a big Roman Catholic church across the street, and my block, my one block was very quiet. Wow. Across, on the back side of the block, it was a little bit less quiet, and as you got further west, it got less and less quiet. Mm-hmm. So same thing if you go north or south, it was a little bit louder versus my block. So it was a very unique community experience, but it was, you know, black, white, Puerto Rican neighborhood. So I was, you know, you go two blocks and you're at the basketball court, you know, you gonna see, you know, a bunch of black and Puerto Rican people playing basketball on the court. Yeah. So it was very unique. Again, I loved it because it, it helped me to, Give, ultimately make me who I am. You know, being able to understand multiple different cultures, understand the different, there are differences in with, you know, within and throughout communities. You know, it's, you know, black community is not monolithic. You know, the Latino, LatinX community is not monolithic. So it ultimately shaped me to my current understanding, which I still have a lot to learn. [00:09:35]

EDGAR: And would you say these different worlds were like within a 10 mile span?

KOBENA: Two mile.

EDGAR: Two mile? So

KOBENA: Actually, actually probably more like three blocks.

EDGAR: Three blocks. Wow. So any, there was maybe a lot of influences from both, from all sides. Cause even though your street was quiet, obviously you probably didn't stay in your own block. You can not at all walk in, you know, in a block. It's very easy to walk. Cover like, what, 30 seconds to a minute.

KOBENA: Yeah. Oh, yes.

EDGAR: There's probably a lot of influences like coming up all around on the city

KOBENA: Absolutely and being a mixed kid you know, when there weren't a lot of mixed kids, you know, I look Puerto Rican, I joke and say, my mom, my mom's white, my dad's black. And somehow they came out with the Puerto

Rican. You know, as a kid, I just, just call me Marko. So it you know, it, again, it all creates for a very unique perspective as an adult, you know, 40 years later. To be able to, one, be able to understand my own experience and how that has impacted me, but then to be able to be sympathetic, empathetic and sympathetic to other people's experiences and really open and non-judgmental to other people's experiences because, you know, as, as my crime company says, you know, our experiences are just one perspective.

EDGAR: Yep. Hundred percent. And that's what I love about also growing up in a very diverse and like area where you, you're able to understand and also see all those different sides and being, it's easier to understand. You're like, okay, you're like, and I've had friends from all different groups. They're like, okay, I've stayed over the houses and be like, okay, wow, this is a little bit different. And then as you grow older, you're like that, those like memories come back and, and it helps you, especially in, in our, in our careers. It helped, it helped me a lot with understanding, just being open to other people. And I also did a little bit of international business in college, and that helped a lot, you know, being able to like, okay, whether it's different cultures and more importantly, being open to asking questions and not being afraid of them. Because what people, a lot people don't understand is like when you start asking questions, they see an interest of whoever your group that you're talking to. And they're like, okay, you're asking questions. You're wanting to understand and they see that and there's nothing rude. It's just, they're completely open about it. And I think it's something that benefits, you know, myself, yourself and others as well.

KOBENA: Yeah. People love to talk about themselves and their cultures. Yeah. I have to do is open the door and they gonna walk right in and, and you, I mean, the thing is you might be, have to be careful what you asked for. You might be there for a little bit longer of a journey than you're heading to. Exactly. You know, I think that's the beauty of it, because people are just by human nature, they want to share. Mm-hmm. Right? It, it's when we create psychologically unsafe environments where people won't, you know, you think about companies and organizations that, you know, people go in, they absolutely will not, you know, share who they are. They, they're not authentic to who they are while they're at work because they don't feel like they can. Yep. You know, once you start having those conversations and asking more and getting to know people more in an authentic way, you know that changes the whole game.

EDGAR: 100%. I completely agree. And then that's gonna lead us to a different topic and if eh, later on about being true to yourself everywhere. Yeah. You are. Mm-hmm. So all these different influences came around you. You went to school, Illinois. How was that?

KOBENA: It was it was kind of, it was pretty tough for me. So again, I grew, I went to very diverse schools. I went to a PWI, you know, and for those who are listening, don't know what that means. It means predominantly white institution nowadays. I've been, as I talk to, you know, young college students, they have a new term. And I know I haven't done the research to see if it's academic yet, but it makes sense. It's, they call it EWI. Which is an extremely white institution. Right. So when you think about percentages of, you know, diverse students, when you're looking at 10% out of a campus of 20,000, that's not a lot of diversity. Yeah. And so I went to a predominantly white institution, very small. It was actually smaller than the student population was lower than my high school was. [00:14:00]

EDGAR: Oh wow. Okay.

KOBENA: I played three sports. And in college, and I worked, when I got to college, I just, I didn't have ser, I didn't have the study skills, so I almost flunked out my first semester. Not because I wasn't trying, I just didn't really know what I was doing. And to be going into the sciences, it was, you know, a lot of work. Lot of reading, a lot of notes. There was also a lot of foundational things that I should have had coming in that I didn't because I kind of took the easy way in high school. So, and then I had one professor that I was struggling in theirs, he was not receptive to supporting, and I had one that was, and you know, the one that was supportive. I ended up coming out with a, a decent grade and the other one it was, No, it wasn't great. It didn't, I didn't fail it. Missing, you know, it, it was not where, you know, I wanted it to be. Yeah. And then it, you know, I just, it's not too far from Milwaukee, so I came back to Milwaukee most weekends. If I wasn't, I didn't have a game. I was coming back to Milwaukee, hanging out with my friends here. But while I was on campus, I felt very isolated. Ultimately I had to find my way, which I ran a mentoring program. For young, black and Latino kids in a neighboring suburb. And I ended up doing all the training, recruiting of all the college students to do that mentor work with those students. I planned all the trips and the programming for three years, and I felt like that was the one space where I felt myself. But outside of that, in the classrooms, most of the classrooms, I didn't feel. Comfortable unless it was one of my black studies type courses.

EDGAR: And how was playing, how was the impact on playing three sports and what were, what were those three sports?

KOBENA: See now, now I gotta usually because we're alive and I won't put you through this, and we met, we probably be time limited. I played football, so I was I started off as an offensive lineman and moved over to a defensive

lineman. In football. I was also so contradictory and breaking stereotypes, which is one of the things I like to do I was a diver also, so I was a four-time all conference diver in college, and then I played baseball. [00:16:36]

EDGAR: Alright. What was the favorite? Was there her favorite?

KOBENA: Football was definitely my favorite. I was the most successful in diving, obviously, with, you know, four conference championships. And then baseball was just, it was just fun. It was club, so it wasn't like it was a varsity sport. So, yeah. But football was definitely my favorite. I felt like they. There was a lot of politics though. Okay. So that kind of impacted summit, sorry. Again, when you are working with, you know, some of these types of schools, private, small, you know, people with money coming in, playing, you know, there can be some politics to it.

EDGAR: Perfect. So went to school, graduated, I'm assuming.

KOBENA: Oh yeah, absolutely.

EDGAR: What was the next move? So we play, we had the sport. What, what was, you know, the transition of going through school to now getting the first job?

KOBENA: It was interesting. So I've had some interesting medical background. So I, I ruptured a disc in college and didn't know it until after my junior season and I was studying abroad and I started having back pains. When I got back, it was determined that I had a ruptured disc and ultimately I needed SUR back surgery at 22 years old. So the weekend after I finished my student teaching, that next Monday I had back surgery and had part of one of my disc cut off. Oh, wow. So I was down physically for a little bit and ultimately I ended up getting my first job offer on my 23rd birthday. And I was a director for a high school after school program for black boys here in Milwaukee, which for me again, you know, set me on a different, whole different trajectory I had. My undergrad was in secondary education and history. I figured I would teach for, you know, two years before I moved over to be a guidance counselor. Okay. And then potentially from there, be a assistant principal or principal that. Role changed the trajectory of my career in a positive way. Cause I wasn't a great teacher. I did end up teaching. I wasn't a great teacher. Classroom management wasn't my strongest suit. And we did a, I had to do a lot of soul searching in that process because I grew up in a very strict back, you know, household. My father's a Vietnam veteran, he was a Marine. It was, you know, You don't ask why. You know, he says, jump. You say how high. And I couldn't run a classroom like

that successfully because the students didn't work that way. And I didn't, I couldn't make that transition. So I transitioned out and let better people do that work. [00:19:34]

EDGAR: What was that transition to?

KOBENA: Well, I did a little bit of corporate sales. I bounced around a little bit. I did a little corporate sales, which. I'm really good at sales. Okay. I didn't feel like I was having any impact and ultimately could have been doing some damage because of the organization I was working with. So I left that and I taught, I went back to teaching for a short stint and then I said I wanna go into higher ed. And so I ended up getting recruited to be a recruiter for a for-profit higher educational institution. Specifically working with high schools around the thir the eight counties around Milwaukee. So in one year I did 175 presentations. Wow. And that's where I ended up really honing in on my facilitation skillsets, which to this day, I, most of the times I do a training or workshop, people are saying, this is one of the best ones I've ever had. So I became a master facilitator through those experiences. And then, you know, I ran, I started a, the expansion of a large national nonprofit called City Year to Milwaukee as a recruitment director, as a part of the senior leadership team. Transitioned to regional national leadership in diversity recruitment and then moved on to some other nonprofit work, did some work with the Boys and Girls Club. Started a recruitment staffing agency, specifically focused on diversity recruitment and then did some workforce development, which really gave me some insights to a different type of employee or a different type of candidate because I had always worked with more of the college age or those kind of, the more of the cream of the crop. And in workforce development, you're working with people who, you know, Before we got on, we talked about like different experiences. And earlier we talked about different experiences, their experiences. They weren't as fortunate as I was. You know, they didn't have the same resources I had. They had other things going on. So they may not have gotten the best education and they may not have had the mentors that I, I had to keep me on the right path. And now, but now they're trying to get jobs and they don't really have. You know, a bachelor's degree, an associate's degree, master's degree, any of those things. So a lot. And then the younger ones, they don't even know how to apply. They don't know how to fill out an application. Wow. Some of 'em don't even know how to write their address, you know, they just put the cross streets as their address. So I was, my mind was blown that this is people's reality and I'm so grateful for that because that humbled me so much. And you know, even in this work, in DEIB, privilege is a real thing and everybody has privilege. And that was where I found out how much privilege I have and how much work I need to do as an ally for those who didn't have those privileges that I did. [00:22:44]

EDGAR: Yeah, that, that's incredible. Like not even knowing how to write an address and that's, So where do you find these students or maybe non-students to be exactly. You know, how is that outreach happening? Is it in Milwaukee only? Only, or just general Wisconsin? How is this happening? How, how is this working?

KOBENA: Yeah, yeah. So the workforce development I was doing, so I'm not doing that in that space right now, but that was working with different community partners. So lots of community engagement, lots of relationship building. With other organizations that are also trying to serve people in the communities. And we shared, you know, this conf this information to say, okay, this isn't something that we do with our organization, but, and them over there they do. So, you know, okay, we send there or you know, the goodwill industries, they have a really good training program I'm gonna send you over here. So I ha I was able to be the conduit for people to Transverse from where they are now to where they were trying to go. But what the work that I do now specifically is with college students and recent graduates, or those who are currently in college and an organization that I partner with called Harbor Institute based out of DC and the CEO is based outta North Carolina right now. We work with colleges around the country and we connect them with corporations that we partner with to make sure that they have really good people for careers. But the challenge in, in having 20 years almost in recruitment, you realize that it's not always about do they have the skill, it's. Can they successfully communicate it in a way that it'll be received by the person on the other line. Okay. On the other end of the line. Yeah. And so, what we do now is yes, we have conversations, we have very authentic conversations, you know, as a black man and, and as a somebody who, people for whatever reason, they feel my vibe of, you're good with me. Like you are never gonna get judged, and you're never gonna be put down whether you're white, black, Latino Asian, middle Eastern, it doesn't matter. We're good. So whatever's on your mind, what's ever on your heart, let me know. And so because of that, I'm able to have very authentic conversations with the students and I can give them very authentic feedback and so I can help them to show their greatest self. To these organizations, to the corporations. And without that, I've seen some of the resumes and they just don't have, you know, they don't know how to write a resume. College students are not professional resume writers, right. Nor am I right. But I've got some experience in that space. So I can be an asset and an ally for them in that way. And so that's what we do there is we, you know, the CEO, he does workshops and trainings around the country. And then from there we talk to them, get to know them, we talk to the corporation, get when we know them and we make, you know, we're a matchmaker.

EDGAR: And that's awesome. And what I love to hear is that also businesses are looking at people like you guys and looking for that diverse talent as well. And Absolutely. And that's kind of like something around the DEI space that I want to get into is the importance of it. And again, you guys are using your or your skills to kind of portray a message or like be able to display that measure, effectively communicate that message for other people that can't, and get them in areas where they can succeed. Maybe they don't have that training or that. Degree, but can they succeed in this area directly? And I think based on your guys' experiences, your sales, you guys put the right people in the right places. Correct. So what's the, so you've also started kind of like a new business as well? Yes. And is DEIB kind of organizational strategy? Correct. So yes. How does that play a role now in your life? And what, what is that, you know, organization or what is that new business venture doing for you? [00:27:14]

KOBENA: Yeah. Thank you so much. So, the company's name is called Traveler Consulting. It's based on a West African story called The Traveler. And essentially the story is that there's an old man who you know, and on, on any given day, you'll find him underneath this big tree in the middle of a village. And, you know, one day he's sitting there underneath the tree and a traveler comes by and says, excuse me, why sir? I've been traveling for months and everywhere I've gone I have been greeted with open arms and people have given me clothes, food, shelter. Even when I, they, when they even send me on my way with extra food to get me through to the next village that I'll reach, will I find that type of person here? And he says, absolutely you will. And that's what the traveler finds. He, he's greeted with open arms, he's giving food, clothing, shelter, place to stay, everything, and, and sent on his way. And so, you know, a couple days later, he's under his trustee tree and another traveler comes by, he said, and ask you know, what are your, what type of people will I find here? And the wise man says, whoa. What have, what have you been seeing? He said, well, everywhere I go, I see, I meet negative people. Nobody will give me any support. Nobody will give me any help. They won't even give me a, a mor of food until I get to the next village. And he said, will I find that type of person here? And a wise man says, yes, you will. And that's exactly what he found. And so I created the company based on this story is because literally our experiences are just one perspective. And oftentimes our and all, every time our experience is going to color, you know, our future interactions. We just have to understand that that is true and consciously try to combat. Those previous experiences have come in with an open mind and open mind and an open heart. And so this organization really focuses on three main pillar, major pillars. And so one of them is diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging strategy for organizations from an internal audit standpoint or from just a coaching advising standpoint. The second area that we focus on is training. So for example, I'm in the process of developing a two-day training for a local

organization on psychological safety. And so I do trainings like that. I do other trainings with other organizations. I do speaking engagements. I was actually just on a global call this past week with a lady who has an organization called Bomb Bardi consulting based out of Minnesota. And she had a one-day summit with, you know, different talent acquisition and DEI professionals from around the world. And then the last pillar is early talent recruitment and talent acquisition, and my partner is Harbor Institute. We, you know, really are focused on getting opportunities for our young people and setting them up for success even in the process. So working with our interns, making sure that they're getting the trainings while they're in the internships, that's going to make them even better candidates for any corporation. So that ultimately our goal is to be to a point where if they go through our internship program they don't even have to interview. They apply and they got the job. Oh, wow. So those are the types of things we're working on with that organization, ultimately. We'll get there. [00:31:07]

EDGAR: All righty. I want to thank all the viewers, all the listeners. I want to thank you all for tuning in. Like and subscribe and we'll catch you all next time on part two. This has been the Stand Out From the Inside podcast presented by Versiti. See you all next time.