

BELOW THE LINE

**USC UPSTATE CHANCELLOR BENNIE L. HARRIS
SPEAKS WITH DR. TONYA M. MATTHEWS, PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE
OFFICER OF THE INTERNATIONAL AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUM**



Tonya M. Matthews, Ph.D. (left) and Dr. Bennie Harris / Photo Provided

Welcome to Below the Line, a monthly question-and-answer column in which Chancellor Bennie L. Harris, Ph.D., of the University of South Carolina Upstate interviews a leader about change, technology, education, and leadership. This month, Harris spoke with poet, engineer, and educator Tonya M. Matthews, Ph.D., who now serves as president and chief executive officer of the International African American Museum.

“Dr. Matthews uses her unique background to bring a multifaceted perspective to her work,” Harris said. “She’s highly sought-after for boards and community projects, leveraging her extensive experience and leadership roles to drive meaningful change.”

The International African American Museum — situated on Gadsden’s Wharf in Charleston, where as many as 40 percent of African captives entered this country — “strives not only to provide a space for all visitors to celebrate and connect to this history, to these stories, and to this art, but also to find meaning within their own stories,” she has said. (This interview has been edited for content, length, and clarity.)

Harris: I read that you liked museums as a child. I always liked the idea of bringing children to museums, but it was often easier said than done, unless it was a place with lots of toys and games and interactive exhibits. Was that the kind of museum you liked? Or another kind? And why? What drew you to museums when you were younger?

Matthews: I liked going to museums, much to my siblings’ chagrin. I was down for the words on wall. I was always fascinated by things I didn’t know. But museums are often so physically big, with big statues, and big pictures, and stories that seem so old, so I was the kid

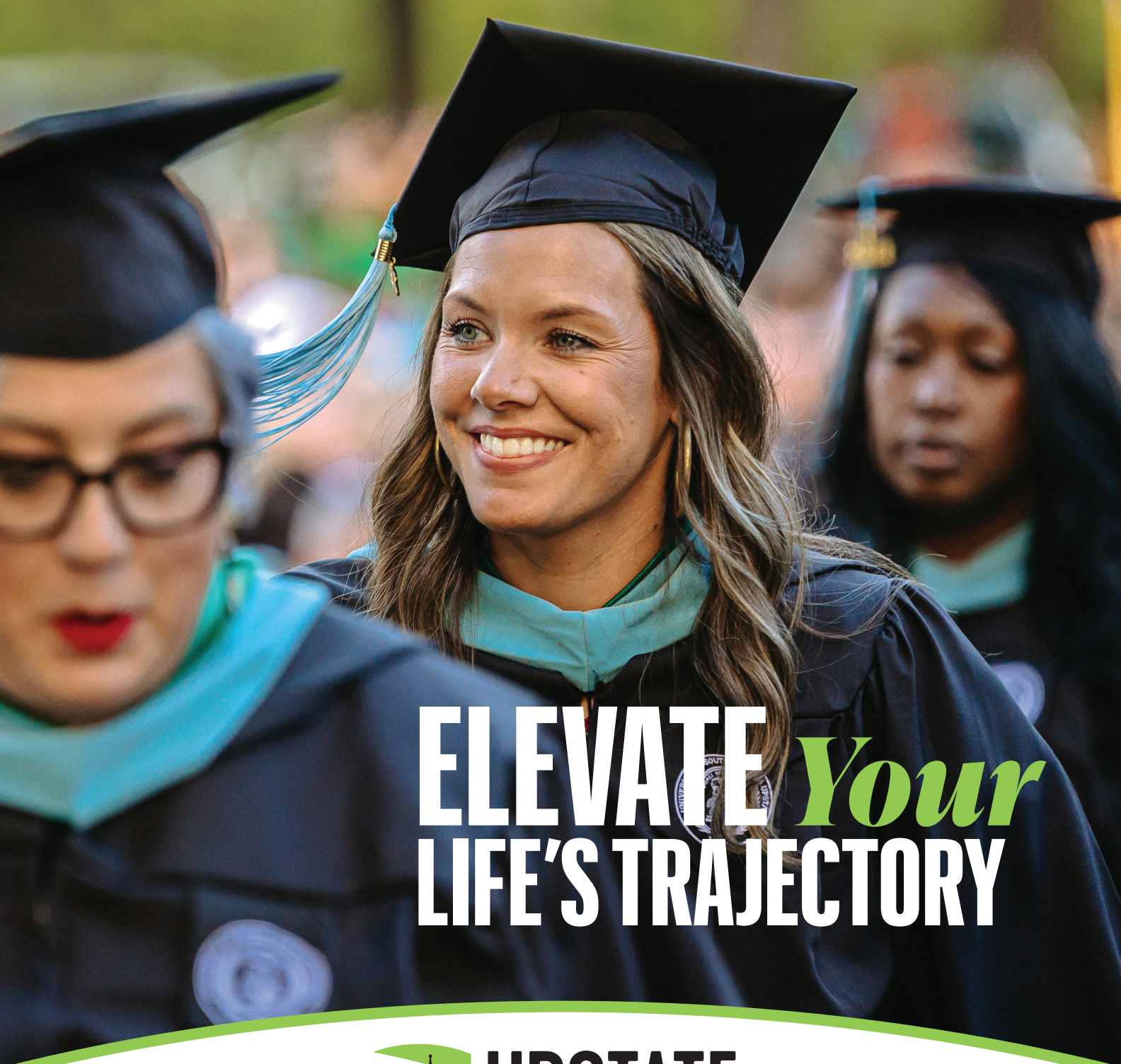
dragging the others. My mother would have to bribe my siblings with ice cream, and I’m responsible for a lot of those bribes. Still, I never considered museums a career path, just something to see or go to.

Harris: Let’s talk about your educational and professional trajectory. You studied biomedical engineering at Duke University and completed a course in African American studies while there. Then you earned your Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University, where you researched the DNA of inner-ear hair cells while working at the Maryland Science Center. So, first question here: Why inner-ear hair cells? And what did you learn that might be applicable to your life now?

Matthews: Oh, it was not just inner-ear hair cells. It was the inner-ear hair cells of chickens. The long story short is actually very simple: humans and chickens have the inner-ear hair cells in common. The difference is that for humans, when those cells are damaged, we go deaf. When bird hair cells are damaged, they grow back. And so that was the point of studying in that environment, to see if we could figure out how to trigger our own cells to restore and grow.

Harris: After finishing your education, you joined the Maryland Science Center, then worked at the Food and Drug Administration, the Cincinnati Museum Center at Union Terminal, and later took on the president and CEO role at the Michigan Science Center. While there you launched the STEMinista Project to engage girls in their future with STEM careers and tools. You’re now involved with STEMinista Rising, which supports professional women in STEM, with an inclusive emphasis on women of color. Can you tell me about these two initiatives?

Matthews: I think we’ve had a lot of conversations now about getting young girls and young female adults interested in STEM careers, and



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help them be seen and heard in those spaces. They've had a lack of role models. So, we are working on the project on that level.

What we also find is that once they've gotten their degrees, they have the job, we are losing female practitioners in the STEM space in under four years. One out of 10 is walking away after doing all of that work. So, we see that in addition to breaking barriers we have to prepare women for these fields and create community that offers encouragement and strategy.

Harris: Your career next took you into education, with stints as Associate Provost for Inclusive Workforce Development at Wayne State University and on the Governing Board of the National Assessment of Educational Progress and on the Board of Science Education at the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Education. Throughout this time, you remained focused on STEM, and what you've referred to as the 'pre-K through Gray' pipeline. Can you tell me more about what you mean by that phrase, and why it's important to make STEM a priority?

Matthews: The idea is that a child is never too young to have their curiosity engaged. The younger they are, the better they are. Children are natural scientists. On the other end of that spectrum, one of the reasons that America continues to excel and compete is because we are a lifelong learning society. It's actually part of the American ethos. So, part of what we were working on was to make this exciting, and something people

wanted to engage in from a young age to an older age.

Harris: What made you decide to take on the role of president and CEO of the International African American Museum?

Matthews: I had been, in my career, at predominantly white institutions, and it was an age where you were the de facto chief diversity officer and the voice in the room. So, I've had a lot of professional and personal practice in that space, in addition to the fact that I grew up in an environment that prioritized and talked about African American history.

When I got the call, to help complete the building of the International African American Museum, the first thing I did was violate my own rule of never participating in a startup. I had said that multiple times, but the more I learned about the project — everything from the scale of the project to the ability to be built at the wharf and the idea that we were going to be an international African American museum and have that conversation — it became an offer I could not refuse. It was a remarkable opportunity.

Harris: What are some of the challenges of representing the African American experience in one museum? And what are some of the challenges associated with leading this museum?

Matthews: I think the challenge of representing African American experience in one museum is that people still do not under-

stand that is impossible. When we think of art museums, for example, we know we need many, many art museums to represent all kinds of artists and art approaches. You still want to go to the Louvre because we have a natural understanding of how much there is to the story of art. We don't tend to look at African American history in that way. There's an assumption that there's only one perspective and if the museum is big enough, you can fit it all in there. We are the second-largest African American history museum of our kind, which means there's one even bigger. [Editor's note: The largest such institution is the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., which opened to the public in 2016.]

At our museum, we look at the African American experience from two perspectives. One is origin stories, where we talk about the origin of Africans and West Africans on the continent of Africa. We also talk a bit about the ingenuity that they brought with them.

The second perspective focuses on modern connections to the African diaspora. As we talk about slavery being a global industry, we can talk about the connections between food, culture, language, history, and even genealogy. We talk about all of that, and it's exciting.

Harris: How would others describe your leadership style? How would you describe it?

Matthews: I would say that my leadership style is collaborative, sensitive, and empathetic. You're stewarding other people's stories. So, there's the business of the story, but then there's also the personal side of the story.

The challenge is that the two are not always in conflict, but they don't always align. So, you do have to create trust within your staff and your team and also within your community.

Also, I'm not a fan of meetings or chat on Teams, but these things happen. I do like to empower others, so they have the flexibility, the framework of understanding of how we are going.

The one thing that I know that my team says about me is that I am the epitome of a relentlessly optimistic person. I had one of my teammates say once, 'you should just bring (Matthews) a problem. If you want to see her light up like a Christmas tree, you just bring it to her.' Leaning into that space helps the team understand I am less interested in the appearance of the problem than I am in our relentless track toward solving that problem. And God help us — can we do this joyfully?

Harris: You're also a published poet, with one of your works appearing in the 100 Best African American Poems in 2010. How did

you become interested in this art form? Some people might think poetry and engineering couldn't be further apart from each other. But do you see a connection? Why do both fields resonate with you?

Matthews: I think a lot of kids grow up, you know, writing poems about roses are red, and Mommy, I love you. I kept up with it from there. When I got to college, you know, I assumed, like most folks do, that I was going to have to put the poetry down so that I could focus on getting this engineering degree. What I discovered is that when I put the poetry down, the engineering became harder. I wondered if maybe I was actually supposed to be a poet, which is kind of an 'Oh no,' because I enjoy my health insurance. But still I tried to do a little bit more poetry, and kind of half-step on the engineering. But that didn't work for me either.

It turns out that both are inside me, and the two of them are balancing each other. So, I do not write poems about math or engineering and that kind of thing. And I do not consider a chicken's inner-ear hair to be poetic.

Harris: So, what was that particular published poem about? What inspires your poetry most?

Matthews: That poem was a metaphor about superpowers. I would take the things that that were challenging African Americans. So, for example, I would talk about a chameleon and how its power was that if you robbed the drug store, you could start out a six-foot-nine, bald-headed man with dark Black skin and by the time the cops caught you, you would be four-foot-two and weigh less than 100 pounds, and have dreadlocks.

I was basically using these images of Black folks that had been used against us and transformed them into superpowers. It was tongue-in-cheek, kind of funny and sad.

Harris: OK, last question: Do you have a hero?

Matthews: One of my heroes is writer Toni Morrison. As a writer and poet, I read other people's books, and sometimes I say, 'I could do that,' or, 'I'll be there one day.' I've never read a Toni Morrison book that I thought that I could recreate in any way. I was always in awe of her ability to write. But then I actually found out that she was an editor. I never knew that she had worked for a publishing company.

She always seemed so calm and effervescent and just stately. And so, she has become a hero for me, because of her ability to just maintain that in those spaces and to command her own narrative, which a lot of us don't get to do.

Harris: I'd next like to talk about Leading Below the Line. What I mean by that is that oftentimes we don't know what's going on beneath the surface — for leaders and for their teams—and we have to dive in and find out exactly what's at play in order to make a project or a plan successful.

Matthews: Frankly, failure is easier to learn from than success. Right? And so, I think a lot of times, particularly for us in this startup phase below the line, is trying to figure out what is working when many things aren't working.

For example, we've welcomed more than 155,000 visitors in our first year, and it hasn't even been a year yet. The question is: who, why, where, where from? And can we get them to come back?

The other big thing that's happening for us is that we're in the midst of a culture change, because we went from building a building to running an organization. And some folks are realizing, 'I'm a builder. I like to build things. I like things that are concrete. You stack this brick on top of that brick, and guess what? The building's there.' But then there's the other side.

I prefer the dynamism. I like the fact that every day is a new day.



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