

# BELOW THE LINE

USC UPSTATE CHANCELLOR BENNIE L. HARRIS SPEAKS WITH  
LOUIS STEWART OF NVIDIA'S GLOBAL DEVELOPER ECOSYSTEM



*Chancellor Bennie L. Harris, Ph.D. with Louis Stewart  
Photo by Terry E. Manning, USC Upstate*

**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, Dr. Harris spoke with Louis Stewart, Head of Strategic Initiatives for NVIDIA's global Developer Ecosystem.

**Harris:** You grew up in France and Italy before returning to the U.S. Can you share a formative memory from your early life abroad that shaped how you see innovation and leadership today?

**Stewart:** Absolutely. My dad played professional basketball overseas, and I grew up in France and Italy. English was actually my second language. French was my first. When I was 3 years old, I became fluent and started translating for my parents. From ages 3 to 10, I helped them navigate life in France: ordering food, understanding contracts, everything.

That experience taught me how to walk into a room, read it quickly, and figure out what's being said, even if it's not said out loud. Today, I use that same skill at NVIDIA. I often find myself "translating" between what universities need, what government leaders are asking for, and what a global tech company hears. I help our teams learn to speak the language of partnership and community, not just engineering.

Growing up that way taught me humility, listening, and how to make complex conversations actionable. That's what leadership is for me — being able to translate across perspectives.

**Harris:** I understand your father played basketball professionally, and you did too, both in Peru and Belgium. How did competing in that environment influence your leadership style or mindset toward risk

and adaptability?

**Stewart:** Peru was really where my mindset of "start with yes until I have to say no" began. Before that, I had turned down chances to play in Puerto Rico, Australia, and other places. One day, while I was working at Macy's selling watches, I got a call two days before Thanksgiving asking if I wanted to play in Peru. Without asking about money, season length, or anything, I said yes.

Two days later, I was in Lima. I didn't speak Spanish, and no one on the team spoke English. I was the first American to play there in 20 years. So I learned Spanish through telenovelas, the radio, and a dictionary. In about a month, I could communicate well enough to lead the team.

That experience taught me how to build trust quickly and how to lead when you're the outsider. It also showed me that saying yes, even when you don't have all the information, can open doors that change your life. At NVIDIA, it's the same idea. I need to understand people, speak different "languages," and adapt fast to earn trust and deliver results.

**Harris:** You earned a Bachelor of Arts from Santa Clara University. How did a liberal arts education shape your approach to technology and strategy?

**Stewart:** The liberal arts actually found me. I started at Santa Clara as a chemical engineering major, but I didn't have the mentors or support system to stay in that track. My coaches convinced me that engineering would take too much time away from basketball.

While I was figuring things out, I took art and sculpture classes just





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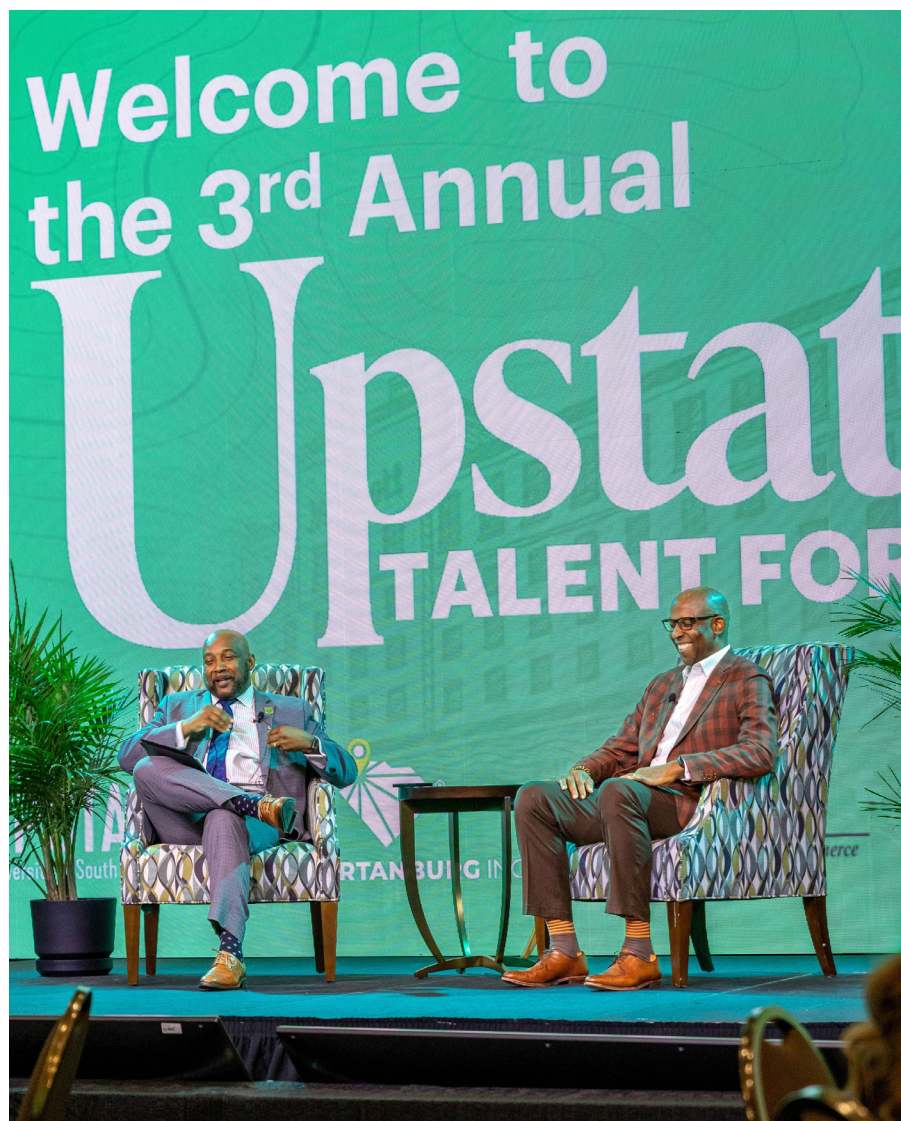


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because I loved them. When I eventually lost my scholarship and left school, I worked for a while, then came back. My counselor told me I had a year left to finish my degree, and the only path that made sense based on the credits I had was studio arts. I graduated with a degree in sculpture and ceramics.

That background has been invaluable. I think both as a creative and as a technologist. I don't just look at things through a single lens; I take in the whole landscape before deciding how to move. That approach has helped me in every leadership role I've had.

**Harris:** Before joining NVIDIA, you spent about 13 years in the public sector, including serving as Sacramento's first Chief Innovation Officer and California's Deputy Director of Innovation and Entrepreneurship. What motivated you to shift from public service to tech, and how did that experience prepare you for this role?

**Stewart:** Honestly, Covid-19 motivated me. I had been thinking about a move into tech, even having conversations about opportunities abroad, but when NVIDIA called, it all clicked.

It wasn't about leaving public service. It was about scaling it. In government, I was serving communities and driving innovation for the public good. At NVIDIA, I still get to do that, but on a global level. My North Star hasn't changed: it's still service, just with a wider reach.

**Harris:** You've worked in government, startups, and now at a global tech leader. What have you learned about leading change when you don't control all the levers?

**Stewart:** It's hard. You have to walk into a room and own your space, even when you're an introvert like me. I bring my background as a translator and ecosystem builder to the table, but often, the people you're working with are starting at a different point. You can't use a one-size-fits-all approach.

Sometimes you have to slow down and start from the ground up: building understanding, trust, and shared goals. The challenge is telling that story clearly enough so that everyone wants to come along.

**Harris:** NVIDIA has done massive workforce training efforts, with something like

100,000 trainings in California. Looking back, what lessons did you learn, and what would you do differently?

**Stewart:** The biggest lesson is that you can't move without alignment. If the state, universities, and partners aren't fully aligned, progress slows. We made a big splash by signaling that we were entering workforce and economic development, but we didn't get the acceleration we needed because the alignment wasn't there.

Now, when we replicate that model in other states, we start from the governor's office down. We bring in universities, community colleges, learning communities — all at the same table — to truly transform an economy.

**Harris:** You often describe your leadership as service-based. What does that mean in practice, especially when you're under pressure to deliver results?

**Stewart:** One of my biggest beliefs is that I can't be successful unless others are successful. Inside NVIDIA, that means my job is to create wins for the people who help me deliver. I can't write code like an engineer, but I can help them see how their work impacts communities.

So I ask: what's in it for them? How does helping me advance this initiative make their story better, their work more meaningful? Leadership through service means aligning people's purpose with the bigger mission.

**Harris:** How do you sustain curiosity and growth when you're operating at such a high strategic level?

**Stewart:** Curiosity comes from not knowing what's next. Every conversation introduces new ideas and new possibilities. I love discovery — walking into a room and being surprised. If you treat each moment as a piece of the puzzle, you stay open.

And that "start with yes until you have to say no" philosophy helps. The more you explore, the better your instincts become for when to say no and when to take a risk.

**Harris:** NVIDIA is helping shape the global AI ecosystem. How do you ensure equitable access to these technologies across communities and regions?

**Stewart:** Tech companies sometimes get labeled as aloof, but we're trying to walk alongside communities. It's about inclusion, access, and opportunity. Everyone should be part of this next industrial revolution, not left out the way many were during the internet and broadband eras.

**Harris:** What specific strategies are you using to democratize AI access?

**Stewart:** In tribal communities, we're helping preserve and celebrate culture — language, dance, and heritage — through AI models. In California and Alabama, we're working with Black-owned newspapers to tell stories around civil rights and journalism. And we're doing similar work in Africa.

These focused partnerships show people that AI isn't something done to them; it's something they can use to tell their own stories.



**When I worked in government, I assumed the state always acted in the best interest of residents. That wasn't always true. That realization taught me how to see what's really happening below the surface — the politics, the systems, the barriers.**

**Harris:** In conversations about AI ethics and responsible innovation, what blind spots do you think organizations still have?

**Stewart:** They're not having the conversation at the baseline. There's no single answer, but ethics requires more than engineers and data scientists. You need philosophers, sociologists, artists, and other people who think about humanity. Otherwise, you get innovation without reflection.

**Harris:** How can historically underrepresented communities position themselves to participate in the AI economy?

**Stewart:** Community colleges and community-based organizations are key. They're the first access points for working adults. States need programs aligned from top to bottom — from state policy to local training — to marshal people through.

We also can't lose sight of the trades. We still need electricians, plumbers, and IT pros to build the infrastructure that powers AI. It's not one or the other; it's all connected.

**Harris:** Looking back over your career, is there a decision you would have made differently?

**Stewart:** A few, yes. First, I would have gone overseas to play basketball at 21 instead of waiting until I was 27. Second, I probably wouldn't have stayed in state government as long as I did. I was being introduced to so many industry leaders, but I thought I could make the most impact inside the state.

And lastly, I would have joined NVIDIA back in 2012.

**Harris:** How do you see the balance between human creativity and machine intelligence evolving?

**Stewart:** I don't think they can or should be separated. I used to draw everything by hand, and now I do it digitally. As long as the human stays in the loop, AI becomes a tool, not a replacement.

In manufacturing, in art, in film — humans and machines can work together to extend what's possible. The danger only comes when you remove the human altogether.

**Harris:** The title of this series is Below the Line. Often, leaders have to guide others through things unseen, like the part of the iceberg beneath the surface. What does "leading below the line" mean to you?

**Stewart:** For me, it's about seeing what's underneath, the part people don't talk about.

When I worked in government, I assumed the state always acted in the best interest of residents. That wasn't always true. That realization taught me how to see what's really happening below the surface — the politics, the systems, the barriers.

At NVIDIA, it's different but similar. Eighty percent of the company is made up of engineers and researchers. Coming from government, I had to learn the culture fast and help shape the language. Leading below the line here means understanding what drives people and helping to connect their technical brilliance to a human purpose.

**Harris:** Do you have a hero, or someone who's had the biggest influence on your leadership journey?

**Stewart:** My parents, definitely. They introduced my brother, sister, and me to the world through basketball. But if I'm honest, the person who's had the biggest influence recently is my wife.

She helped me reconnect with my family and reminded me why I was doing all this

work in the first place. She grounds me.

**Harris:** Is there a quote or mantra that resonates with you?

**Stewart:** Two. The first is "start with yes until you have to say no." It's about being open to opportunity.



**In tribal communities, we're helping preserve and celebrate culture — language, dance, and heritage — through AI models. In California and Alabama, we're working with Black-owned newspapers to tell stories around civil rights and journalism. And we're doing similar work in Africa.**

The second is, "I can't be successful unless I help someone else be successful." I live by that. Whether it's my kids, friends, or colleagues, my goal is to help them win. My job is to remove barriers, share knowledge, and be a part of someone else's success story.

**Harris:** Finally, when you look at your journey from athlete to public servant to tech leader, what unites those chapters? What's the through line that defines your leadership story?

**Stewart:** At the core, I'm a student of life.

In basketball, I learned how each position connects to the others. In government, I learned how civil servants, appointees, and policymakers connect to impact residents. Now, at NVIDIA, I'm studying how technology connects to people, and how it fuels the next wave of innovation.

For me, leadership is about finding the connections between systems, people, and ideas and helping them move forward together. That's the thread through everything I've done.