

Fireside Charla 001 - Final Transcript

Perette: *Fireside Charla* season 1 starts now!

This year, San Diego State University celebrated its 121st birthday with the historic appointment of its first permanent female president Dr. Adela de la Torre. And it is so appropriate that we are kicking things off this month because it is also Women's History Month. Now, if you've been following her social media, I don't have to tell you that she's already generated a lot of excitement with her unique approach to leadership. My name is Perette Godwin, a proud SDSU alum and I am honored and thrilled to kick off *Fireside Charla*: a new podcast featuring President Adela de la Torre and her exciting lineup of guests, all of whom will inspire us with transformational ideas and stories about what it takes to make an impact in the community and the world today. We'll talk more about the vision for *Fireside Charla* in a few minutes, but first, I'd like to offer a warm welcome to Dr. Adela de la Torre.

Adela: Well thank you, Perette, I'm so happy to be here. It's just a wonderful opportunity to spread the word about San Diego State as well as our vision.

Perette: Well we expect to hear so many wonderful things but I want to talk a little bit about you and I'm going to give folks a brief bio about you. So let's start with Dr. Adela de la Torre joined San Diego State University in June 2018, and as I said earlier, she is the first permanent female president of San Diego State and is the first woman to serve in this role. She brings with her 30 years of service and leadership roles within institutions of higher education. This is not her first rodeo, including the California State University system, the University of Arizona, and the University of California Davis. So prior to her appointment as President, she served as the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and campus diversity at UC Davis, and folks that's going to be important later on down the line, but we wanted to share that with you. And Dr. de la Torre's research focuses on aspects of Latino community health, an area in which SDSU is a national leader and I am so proud to say that. Now I could of course go on and on about her credentials, her accomplishments, and her dozens of publications but this is after all *Fireside Charla* or, *charla* actually just means "chat," in case you haven't kept up with your Spanish. So President de la Torre again welcome and we're excited to have you here and producing this podcast at KPBS. Why do this?

Adela: Well I think, Perette, it's really important for us to really have the kind of outreach, to reach people, about the great work that has been done at San Diego State and where we're going. Every single day there's some innovative projects that are occurring here that people just don't know about. For example, we have pathbreaking work looking at multi-resistant tuberculosis or programs to effect, to look at autism in children, or other areas that are focused

on heart disease. And many, many people don't realize that San Diego State is a great research institution as well as a great institution for our students. We have been so successful that today if you look at any student at San Diego State, it doesn't matter what race, ethnicity, class background, they will graduate approximately the same rate as any other student. So that's a great testament of what we do here at San Diego State.

Perette: It is and I know we can expect more under your great leadership. One of the things I want to say though is, I like to call you Madam President, because it just sounds really quite cool. But I understand you really like to be called Adela.

Adela: Yes, I absolutely do. I come from a background where strong family ties result in very close relationships and I really want to kind of exude that that's important to me and I don't want to have a barrier like a title like President to create a barrier in how people communicate with me. It's important as President to be a leader, but for me as a leader it's important to listen and to have people communicate with me, and if a title prevents somebody from knocking on my door or coming up to me with a new idea, then I really will fail as a leader in listening to the great ideas that people have, so I love people to call me by Adela. It's a name that my grandmother had and I think it really has a lot of meaning when I know people feel that familiarity with me and I can feel like I can really have a conversation or charla with them.

Perette: All right well Adela it is. And with that, we'll be right back.

Narrator: You're listening to Fireside Charla, a new monthly podcast with Dr. Adela de la Torre, President of San Diego State University where we prepare the future global citizens, compassionate leaders, and ethical innovators who will change the world. Mark your calendar to catch new episodes on the first day of every month, and be sure to join the conversation at sdsu.edu/firesidecharla.

Perette: Welcome back. Before we dive deeper in this Charla, let's give those listening a sense of what they can expect from this episode. First we'll answer the question: who is Adela de la Torre? Now if you've ever wondered what it takes to break a glass ceiling, this episode is definitely for you, because she'll talk about that. And if you want to know why there's never been a better time to lead authentically with vision and compassion, this is the episode you want to hear. And if you ever wanted to learn from a powerful mentor like Adela de la Torre, this is your chance because we're going to put her in the hot seat and ask her some of the questions that definitely everybody wants to know. And you can join the conversation on

Twitter, Instagram, or LinkedIn, #FiresideCharla.

Perette: Okay, Adela. We're going to start with with some fun questions. I want to know about your family. So I understand you're an animal lover, and you've got a couple of pups.

Adela: Oh, absolutely love dogs. I've always had dogs all my life and I have three dogs. I have Moxie, which is a terrier mix. I have Frida who's an Australian shepherd. And then I have Bodie, who's a dachshund mix, they're all rescue dogs and they pretty much control the household.

Perette: Well, thank you, for the rescue part. I have to say because I'm, I'm a big fan of rescuing. We've got a lot of dogs out there. So I appreciate that. In that mix, I also understand there's a husband.

Adela: I have a husband, Steve. We've been married for 35 years. I met him when I was in high school. So it's much longer than that. But it's been a great relationship because he's been so incredibly supportive, both with my kids and with my career.

Perette: All right. You mentioned your kids. Tell us about them.

Adela: Well, I have two daughters. My oldest daughter is named also Adela, Adela Guadalupe, and my youngest daughter is Gabriella. Both of them are fabulous, they are both married, I have one grandchild named Javier and they have been the important part of my life that really makes me proud of being a mother and knowing what my real purpose is beyond being President.

Perette: So is Adela then, is that a familial thing?

Adela: It is a familial thing. So my grandmother's name was Adela and then I was named after my grandmother and then my daughter, I named my daughter- the year that my daughter was born my grandmother died so it's three generations of Adela.

Perette: Okay, so that's important to you. Tradition, I guess, then is as well.

Adela: Oh, yes. I mean, I really do think that it's important to keep the ties with your family, in fact I'm going to be going to a baptism of my great nephew in Los Angeles at Mission Dolores Church, and it's going to be a fun occasion, all the family will be there, my sister, my cousin, my nieces, my nephews, my daughter, so it should be lots of fun. But those those types of relationships are very important to me.

Perette: And people, especially women leaders are inspired by your career path. And the fact that as a Latina, you've been able to achieve this tremendous success, both professionally and personally, as we've just mentioned some of your family, I'm sure, that hasn't been easy.

Adela: Well, it's not easy. I think the generation that I grew up in, there were very traditional roles for women, particularly for Latina women, in terms of the pathway of success. And I was able to navigate those because I did have a lot of support from both my mother, my grandmother, that were really supporters of education. And so I think that really helped me in fact, I would say, every year that I was in graduate school, I really relied on them just to provide that emotional support because there weren't a lot of women in in economics.

Perette: Well we can hear how important, obviously, your family is to you and I'm sure that they helped really ground you when there were challenges. What what types of challenges do you think you faced?

Adela: Well, there's no doubt in my profession as an Economist, discrimination is very very present. And in general, the types of biases that exists were ones where the traditional males student usually was brought forward, whether it was on a research project or in terms of advising. And so I experienced that type of discrimination going through graduate school. You know, I had to create a pathway where I was resilient, and I think that was really important to have resilience and grit. And that allowed me to navigate those types of hurdles that existed, particularly when I was in grad school and in my early career.

Perette: And did your family help with that?

Adela: Well, I think it was difficult because I was the only one to have gotten, who finished a doctoral degree. So for my mother, and for my grandmother, they were supportive, but they didn't see really those barriers because they saw me as a very resilient and persistent young woman. So I would say probably, I had other friends, I had a lot of strong women friends that

were in graduate school, and we were able to commiserate and support each other through that process.

Perette: And you talk about these strong women friends, and I'm going to guess that some of them may have even been mentors. So who helped influence you? Women, men?

Adela: I would say, particularly when I was at Berkeley, we created a group of Latina women who came together to create a group called *Mujeres en Marcha*, which is a group that were PhD seeking students, all Latina students, and we worked together as a team. And we would talk about our research, would support each other, and all of them ended up graduating from Berkeley being very, very successful, most in faculty positions across the state and the country. So those were the key mentors for me. And then later on, I did have some important mentors that were male mentors, but that was really later on my career.

Perette: How important is that team kind of concept that you talked about?

Adela: I think for women, those social relationships are very important because navigating your personal life, your familial live, and your professional career requires, I think, a team, a team that really can understand what you're going through. And that is why throughout my career, I've always had a team of women that I've always relied on as colleagues and friends.

Perette: You know, Adela, as anyone navigates through their university life, it's always important to have mentors, or someone that you can look up to, or ask help from. Who are some of the mentors in your life that have gotten you to where you are today?

Adela: Well, I would say my earliest mentors were my mother and my grandmother. I think my grandmother in particular was really determined to make sure that I would really push forward in my education. And even though she did not have a college degree, she was very, very committed to exposing me to a lot of opportunities. My mother was a teacher. So one of the things that I think was really important is that she really introduced me early on to reading. And so, I was able to start reading at a very young age. And I loved reading. And that, I think, is really important as a foundation for you to explore education. Later on, I was also exposed to a number of colleagues who are able to help me intellectually develop in terms of the kinds of research that I wanted to do. So I was able to work with a faculty member at UC Davis, who really helped me in honing my research skills so I could really do the kind of work I want to do, and help disparities.

Perette: Now, one of the things that I know you have told, and I've heard this story before, but I think it would be important to share is, your grandmother tells a story, or you tell the story about your grandmother, and the importance of really sticking to what you're doing. I mean, it had to do with even cooking, how she would grind some of the meal?

Adela: Yeah, so my grandmother always made things very, very fresh. So we had a *molcajete* that she had, and she would grind. If it was a salsa, or when we made tortillas, she would actually make them from scratch on a *comal*, and so everything she did was always in the mind of making sure that it was healthy, using great food, and making sure that we really understood that everything had a beginning and an end and that you had to work for it. So I think that was really an important model for my sister, and myself, moving forward, recognizing that you complete the projects, because when you do you have a wonderful, wonderful outcome.

Perette: So we have your mother and your grandmother as strong mentors, who else?

Adela: You know, I would, I would say that in terms of my mentors, all through my elementary and my high school, there were always important teachers. So I had a really important teacher when I was in high school who was my Spanish teacher who really recognized that having been bilingual, I was raised speaking Spanish at home, that I could do more things with that language than I had thought about and really pushed me forward it in that area as well. So I was lucky to find different people who really saw the skills and told me to go the next level, which is really important, whether it was in mathematics, whether it was in Spanish, or whether it was in research as well.

Perette: You know, talking about your style, I want to say, and what you've probably learned from some of your mentors, is you have a unique style that I have appreciated in the opportunities we've connected. And that is that, I feel like you really know how to connect to people, whether it's your students, faculty, and staff, whether it's alumni. I can see that you really love speaking with people, touching people. What inspires you, or what drives you to be this type of a leader?

Adela: Well Perette, I have to say, I love listening to people's stories, because I really learn a lot. And from that, and from that knowledge, I can create a new pathway and build the type of vision that I want. You know, it really does take a village. I think a lot of times people think of leaders as that individual person moving forward, and quite frankly, from my observations, really successful leaders are those who can really work with other people and can engage

them and get them excited about what you're doing. And so from my point of view, and from my observation, I really think that my leadership style lends to somebody who really wants to bring people in by first listening to their stories, valuing their stories, and helping them build their vision with your own vision. And that really creates a kind of leadership energy that I think we need today.

Perette: And I would agree with that 100%. I'm going to switch gears for just a minute. And I think we're going to talk about who you are or where your profession sort of started, how your career sort of started. You're an Economist, am I correct?

Adela: Yes.

Perette: Okay. Tell me a little bit about that. Because I, what does that mean?

Adela: So when I was at Berkeley, I actually wanted to start as a Biologist, but organic chemistry did me in so I couldn't seem to do it, but I had a lot of math, I had a lot of science, and I began taking courses in Economics, and that really sparked an interest and I love mathematics, always did love math. And so what happened was one of my professors, here's a good, another great story: when I was trying to think about what I wanted to do, he took me aside, "You know, you're not bad in Economics. Why don't you think about a master's degree in Economics or in Ag Econ" and I said, "Sounds like a good idea." And that's what I did. I ended up going into a master's program and then did well there and then applied to a PhD program, not knowing that there weren't a lot of women in Economics and not knowing at the time that I was the first Mexican American woman to graduate in Ag Econ out of Berkeley at that time. But it was because I absolutely loved doing the types of projects that Economics had to offer. I was interested in social inequality, I was interested in understanding how to create a society that would bring everybody to the table, and Economics provides you with that tool.

Perette: How do you, okay, so you've talked about first of all math and science, which I was a journalist, because I struggled in both of those. And you're- it's almost like I'm seeing that grinding that we were talking about with your grandmother's stories is that you just keep moving forward. Well, how do you do that in an arena where it's primarily men?

Adela: Well, I think in my case, I just was able to focus on the problem that I wanted to look at. You know, when you go into a doctoral program, or any type of a research program, the most important thing that you need to have is a passion for what you want to do. And when

you know that's really what you're going to do, a lot of the noise that comes from the environment dissipates. It's still there, it's still hurts, it still can create barriers, but you become very, very focused on the fact that with this degree, you're going to be able to create change and have an impact. And in my case, I really wanted to teach students, particularly students like me, and so I just became very, very driven. And win my goal to become an Economist, even though the conditions weren't ideal.

Perette: How do you create that change today, do you think? Because here we are, Women's Month, and they're still women who feel like they're struggling, whether it's young students, you know, middle aged folks, or even older folks, and I say, folks, I really mean women?

Adela: Well, I think you need to understand that, particularly in disciplines or in areas where there are not a lot of women, you've got to create the environment, you have to have support systems, you need to have those mentors, you need to have the types of opportunities so that young women know that, yes, it might be tough going through this particular program, but you're going to, at the end, get this wonderful opportunity. And as I say, too many students that I talked to, just as I'm a President, you may be a President, and then they can look at me and say, "Gee, you know what, I can become a President." So I think all of those factors come into play when you talk about young women, it's creating that vision, that image that they want to see and know that there's a pathway to be successful.

Perette: Is that what we're doing here at San Diego State?

Adela: That's exactly what we're doing at San Diego State, Perrette. I just think that we're really at this time where we're going to be creating different vision, a different mold, we're going to look for a way that everyone can participate and do what they want to do without thinking about, "Gee, maybe I don't fit." Because it's that notion that you have behind, you know, your head, "Well, I'm not really the right person. Or maybe I'm not competent, or maybe I'm an imposter?" Well, we really want to break that. I don't think anyone can be an imposter, and I think everyone can be competent, as long as they follow their passion.

Perette: I love that word: passion. All right, we're going to take a quick break, we'll be right back.

Narrator: Thank you for being a part of Fireside Charla. You can join the conversation by sharing your comments and questions for President de la Torre and also have the opportunity to access a transcript of today's episode and other resources at sdsu.edu/firesidecharla. And

be sure to connect with President de la Torre on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram.

Perette: I can really hear how passionate you are about what you plan to do here at San Diego State, just in those few things you just said, but what is your vision for where we go forward?

Adela: Well, I think the most important thing for me is: really focus on the students. And the three pillars that I have, have become my mantra, is that we want to create global citizens, compassionate leaders, and ethical innovators. And behind that are tremendous opportunities in terms of the kind of research we do, the kind of teaching we do, the type of community service that we do, that will allow us to build this type of framework so that when our students go out, people are going to say, "Wow! These are students that are going to lead in ways that we have never imagined."

Perette: Well, you know what I will ask you, I'm curious about is, the three pillars.

Adela: The main thing that I wanted to focus on was students, right, and, and so I think part of it is, what is it about students? I didn't want to make it into a metric, like, "Oh, they graduate in four years." I mean, this is all important stuff, but not when you're talking about quality. What is the quality that you want? And the quality you want is that when students who come out of San Diego State, they're individuals who people go, "Wow, the educational experience they had really prepared them to go into any career and have the emotional intelligence and the academic intelligence to be these great leaders." And so often what happens is, we tend to want to talk about things in very narrow terms. But you know Perette, you need to have so many different dimensions to be successful in your career. And so, you know, compassion is important, because we want people who are if they're going to be supervisors, to be able to be empathetic, right? And right now, what we call ethical innovators, I mean, you know, we're in a national crisis in terms of those issues. And then the global citizen is, again, let's not be so national, you know, people want to understand the world, our students want to understand the world, they want to be able to walk across any place in the world, and not think about themselves in a narrow, nationalistic way. And that's not the future because the world is flat, people are going through, you know, when you think about your transactions, you look at your phone, and you're connected to the world. I can look at any newspaper anywhere on the globe, I can talk to anyone in the world, and I need to have the skill set to understand that and see the value in that, right? So I think that's what's the issue when you think about, you know, why do you focus on that? Because I think so, so often, we want to think about things that are important, but they don't define who the student is. And what we're talking about is the quality of the experiences of the student such that when they walk out, they're really providing a value proposition, but they themselves are proud of who they are. Because of that, it's a really interesting direction. And I do think that's unique. There are ways that we can create it right? We can talk about the kind of research that we support here, which really engages a

community. We already do that, but we want to connect our students more than that, or when we talk about the type of teaching that we do in the classroom. How are we interacting with a student in a way in which they're really learning? They're learning things not because they're memorizing, because it has meaning to them.

Perette: And how do you trickle, how do you get your vision and and help trickle it down? Or how do you get it trickled down to the faculty who are educating our students, or the staff who interact with them on a daily basis so that we're all seeing the same vision, your vision?

Adela: Well, I think what's really important at San Diego State is that we do have what's called a strong shared governance structure. Faculty want to be engaged in meaningful ways with the administration as well as with the students and they really want to prepare our students in the best way possible. So those conversations will happen as we move forward, when we develop our strategic plan. Because I certainly am going to say, "This is important to me. But what's important to you?" And I already know that our faculty care deeply about their students. And so how we begin to operationalize these in terms of the kinds of intersection points will be really through this conversation and this mutual listening, which is very important when we talk about a plan vision for the campus. We also can incentivize faculty. And that's through providing research dollars that really help in collaboration. So they themselves are willing to show, "We're going to work across departments, we're going to work across colleges, we're going to work with the community," and we're going to try to incentivize our faculty. Now many faculty are already doing this, but we also want to have more opportunities so faculty begin to understand the importance of this. So there are many ways in which we can enhance this type of environment that really provide the background and the opportunities for our students. And then of course, our students are also going to voice in and they're going to provide their feedback on what they think we need to do so they can create meaning from this vision as well.

Perette: You know, what I really do appreciate is that when you first came, one of the things you did was you went to constituent groups, and you listened to what they wanted to share with you. And that was really special to me, and important to me, because I sat in on one of those. Why do that? Why was that important?

Adela: I think it's important when you come into a community and you're new, and I was very new, having not lived in San Diego, to really understand the environment and to understand the history and to respect that history. Because too often new leaders come in, and what they want to do is replicate who they are and what they've done. And yes, I bring, I think, some important knowledge and skill sets, but there's a huge legacy. I mean, San Diego State has been here, what, 121 years? Oh my God. And there have been people here, staff and alums, who've been involved with the institution and they can really help me in my trajectory in being a successful leader by sharing that knowledge, and also sharing not only the success but also

the pitfalls so that I don't walk into those pitfalls and get buried in them and basically stay in this environment where I'm not productive. So that's an important thing for me, is to really learn and listen from these great experiences that people have.

Perette: What do you say to people who think, "Man, it's a challenging time, I don't know where our country is going. And yet I need to be present. And in the moment?"

Adela: Well, I think you have to think about the future. I mean, if we think about the present, we tend to get caught into the dynamic, particularly the political dynamic. But when we look at particularly this generation, the generation of students, there is such a creative energy that exists that I get excited every single day when I see and talk to the students because they have imagination. And I think that imagination is going to create the types of opportunities that are going to transform the world. So I would say that yes, it may look dire right now but when we look in the future it's going to be a fabulous time.

Perette: It is going to be, we all hope. Thank you so much. One nugget or something that you can leave us with, and that was a good one, as we end our first Charla?

Adela: Well what I would say, particularly because when we look at Women's History Month we always want to look at how we can promote the development of young women in their careers and in their own personal lives, I think it's important to understand that you need to keep on top of your passion and recognize that any distractions you have are momentary. Not that they don't hurt, and not that they don't last, but recognizing that if you follow your passions and you really move forward you can transform the world.

Perette: One word: passion. Well that brings us to why Fireside Charla has been created. We need to have these types of meaningful but casual conversations, don't you agree?

Adela: Oh, absolutely. I think the idea of a Fireside Charla is exactly what it is. It means having those wonderful conversations, having those *platicas* which are "talks" that allow people to hear somebody and eavesdrop on the conversations that are so important in daily life without anything that is censoring the conversation. So I really am enjoying these wonderful talks, particularly with you Perette, and I want to thank you so much.

Perette: What do you hope ultimately will happen as a result of what we're doing?

Adela: Well, I'm hoping that we were able to tell the story about San Diego State, the great

institution that I lead, but also hopefully inspire young women in the future who may want to be Presidents of a university or a CEO. I have this unique opportunity to do both things: talk about a greatest institution, but also be an important role model so that other individuals who look like me, who are like me, can see a future in leadership in higher education and beyond.

Perette: That sounds wonderful. Thank you so much.

Folks, I just want to share with you, this is just the beginning. Once monthly, we'll have the opportunity to hear from our leaders, trailblazers, innovators, creatives, and catalysts making an impact today, both in our local community and beyond. Now get this, next month you'll hear from Jordan Evans, Deputy Director at NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab. He led the team that landed the rover on Mars in 2012. A great charla about the heart of innovation. And Jordan also happens to be an SDSU alum.

For now, I invite you to catch Charla #2, also available today. President de la Torre talks to Dr. Seth Mallios, the University's History Curator and an Anthropology professor at SDSU about why Presidential Inaugurations matter and why a very special and historic inauguration taking place on April 11th, 2019, is an event you and your whole family won't want to miss. This is Perette Godwin, a proud SDSU alum, hoping that you are inspired to create some interesting charlas of your own.

Narrator: Fireside Charla is recorded at KPBS studios. Our Senior Producer and Managing Editor is Maria Keckler, our Operations Manager is Morrisette, original music and editing is by SDSU student Kevin Krck. And for their help and creative input we give special thanks to: Tom Karlo, John Decker, Perette Godwin, Brittany Santos-Derieg, Luis Murillo, La Monica Everett-Haynes, Joyce Gattas, Michele LaGrandeur, Kelly Woodhouse, Jeff Ernst, Scott Hargrove, Sean Hawes, Ethan Garcia, Dan Montoya, Travis McCauley, Luke Wood, Coleen Geraghty, James Tarbox, James Frazee, Cory Marshall, Kao Saechao, Rudy Arias, Uriel Avila Zuniga, Katie May, Angela Odis Brawner, Seth Mallios, and to you for listening and sharing this podcast with others.

Join the conversation at sdsu.edu/firesidecharla and be sure to connect with President de la Torre on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram.