

Charla 002: Final Transcript

Perette: *Fireside Charla* starts now!

Adela: I am excited to have Seth Mallios here who is our campus historian and professor in Anthropology. I remember, Seth, I met you when I was climbing up Hardy Tower my first day at work. Seth, why don't you tell me a little bit about what you do?

Seth: So I am the University History Curator, but I'm also an anthropologist and an archeologist, and what that means is bringing together an excitement for the local past, but also looking at rituals and ceremonies that are so important to binding us all together as a community.

Adela: So, Seth, we're going to be having an investiture, in fact it's my investiture, the first one we've had in 22 years, can you tell me why you think it's important to have an investiture?

Seth: I think there are two key things here: First is, an investiture is not just an inauguration. Investiture is a special term that has to do with an academic ceremony that's full of ritual. In fact the "vest" in investiture is Latin for "dressing in robes." And like all rites of passage, this is about a very important transition. It's symbolic, but it's also very meaningful. And when you think about where San Diego State has been and then where we're going, especially with all the key issues going on right now, whether it's Mission Valley, whether it's our identity as a Hispanic serving institution, or whether it's what's going on globally with discussions about border and migration and empathy. I can't think of a more important time to have this ceremony that says "We're embarking on this together."

Adela: You know, Seth, I agree with you. I think it's really an important time to celebrate these changes. You know, we're walking into an important global time when we really need to focus on what brings us together and not what separates us, and San Diego State is at this important time. We're going to launch a brand new campus, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for San Diego State, we're a Hispanic serving institution with opportunities to even grow and create more synergies given our border location, we have a wonderful campus in Imperial Valley that is now growing with a new 4 year degree, and we have a wonderful opportunity to have the first woman- me- as president! And I think that's also viewed as another important change when we look at leadership in higher education. More and more, we're seeing, particularly in the CSU system, more women as presidents, and that's an important thing to honor as a change in leadership, not only in the system, but throughout higher education.

Seth: I think you bring up so many important points. First, this being a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the campus in terms of growth, that's not an exaggeration at all. I was just looking in the archives of photos from 1928 and 1929, and the similarity between then and now

is uncanny, because there were cars here on the campus, it was the middle of nowhere. There was no development at all. And hanging on the back of these cars was "Vote for State Bonds for College." And that was for this campus. So that was 1928, 90 years ago last fall, and then it passed in the spring of 1929. So again we have this 90 year anniversary, and it's this same parallel of presenting the local community with an opportunity for an educational core. And so I think when you talk about this being such a unique experience, it really is. This isn't hyperbole, this is a time where we really are about to do something that hasn't been done before, in 90 years.

Secondly, in terms of talking about the importance of a female leader, that is something that is so important for San Diego State when you consider its history. We started the first Women's Studies Program in the nation. You know, this is not a coincidence that you are here. It's one of these great things: we're thrilled you chose us but we also chose you. And when you look at our architecture here, the first building on campus, Scripps Cottage, that was built with money donated by Ellen Browning Scripps, a female philanthropist who helped start not only the culture of philanthropy, but that building was designated as a safe space for women in the 1930s. There's so many moments where the things you're talking about suddenly transcend time. Even though we don't think of it as a 1930s idea, it's also a 2030s idea at the same time when you talk about your vision.

Adela: So I think you really hit something right on the nail on your description of why it's important. We're really talking about bridging, if you will, the past with the future. We're really talking about the opportunity of community, and we're also talking about San Diego State as a very unique institution. It's been an outlier in so many different ways, not only in the CSU system but also in terms of even philanthropy. It's great to hear the role of women and in Scripps Cottage, to see the leadership many many years ago and to bring that to the forefront when we start talking about why the investiture is important. It's important today, as I said, because we're at this unique moment in history, but it's also important to really recognize the importance of the past. So looking at the past, maybe you could provide us a little background on what happened the different investitures that we've had and what are the key things you've seen as a historian and as an anthropologist?

Seth: The first thing I can say is, the word "investiture" had never been uttered on this campus as far as we can find. It was always about inauguration, and part of that was because they were often pairing it with something else that was going on with the university. When President Hardy was inaugurated in 1910, they built that into the opening of one of the annex buildings, in fact it's the only building from the Normal School that's still standing there at Park and El Cajon.

There were other moments where they tied it to what was going on, but one of my favorite moments when you go looking through the archives was at President Love's inauguration because there is a photograph that has President Love with President Hepner and President Hardy. And, now, I may be the only one who gets really excited about this but bear with me for a second, because you have 50 years of SDSU Presidents in one photo there, and that is

something that is very unique about San Diego State, is, yourself included, we've had 9 Presidents in 122 years. The average term has been 15 years.

That is so different from other major universities. USC has had twice as many presidents in the same time. And it gets at one of the reasons San Diego State has been able to be successful, has been steady leadership that comes with people who are fully invested. Not using the place as a stepping stone, not constantly looking over their shoulder to leave, or to retire on the nice golf courses and tennis courts, but to be here to make change. And that's what gets so exciting about you coming here is building into an average term length of 15 years. In terms of having that ability to really invest in a set of ideas to make them happen.

Adela: Absolutely, I think the opportunities here are tremendous. Again, we have this regional presence that is really transnational, transborder, which creates this opportunity that few presidents can have. We have the community, in fact that's a piece that has always been at the forefront everywhere I go whether it's in town or even around the region, people really know San Diego State as being the fabric of the San Diego region. It's part of the community. And the faculty and the students are very involved in the community as well. And then of course the future is quite remarkable given, again, we have this Mission Valley project where we're going to have not only the stadium, the river park, the residential pieces, but the innovation district which is going to create a new paradigm for universities not only for San Diego State but the future.

So this is really a special time for San Diego State. We're at this really important crossroads, we're going to make a difference, and I'm excited about being part of this difference as leader of the institution. The other thing that's important for people to understand for investitures are what are the symbolic elements? A lot of times you think about the investiture of just being a moment where the medallion is placed over the head of the president, but what does it mean to have the medallion and go through this process? What does your research tell you about this?

Seth: It's funny, we're so used to seeing gowns at graduations that we don't even stop to think, what's going on with this uniform? You think about the gown itself, it's this big billowy garment, it really is a cocoon. The whole point of this is we're supposed to spring forth with new ideas, new passion to make change. And we started out in these cocoons, and then we have this seminal moment, whether it's a tassel being moved to a side or a medallion being placed on you, and that is the moment where, it is a spectacle, it is a key part of the ceremony, it is this rebirth, every rite of passage has some sort of symbolic death and then this rebirth, and the rebirth is a time of joy, it's a time of excitement but most importantly it's a time of community for everybody that's there.

And that's what we need to remember, that these things are worth the time and effort. They're hard to pull off, you know, it's like so many communal events, you may feel leading up to it, "I'm not sure if I have the energy for this," but it's always worth it. These are these key moments that everybody will triangulate back to. These are the events you bring your family to because they will say "I was there. I was there at that once in a generational moment. I saw the new

President. I saw the first Latina President. I saw the change," and it tips the first domino. You get to then see the trajectory of all the change that we can make happen.

Adela: You know, it's just incredibly exciting. The process by which I've been involved, I'll give you an example: The medallion process was quite interesting for me because it was the first time that I really had to think, "What does a medallion mean?" I was able to look at Steve Weber's and he had the iconic Hepner Hall there, but one of the things that I really wanted to make sure of is that I had one that was symbolic of who we are in terms of our Aztec identity, but also symbolic of the future in terms of the ebbs and flows, and also a legacy piece that, in the back of the medallion, I had all the permanent presidents who'd been part of San Diego State.

And so I think for every president that walks into this role, whether they are calling it an inauguration or an investiture, it is that moment that you recognize you're stepping to a job that's going to require the type of leadership that's going to push the institution at a new level. And the medallion, in many ways, forces you to think about that. And it's taken me awhile to really find the right medallion, but I'm really pleased, we had a student design it from our program in jewelry making and he's done an amazing job, but more importantly it really does talk about the future in the way that you were speaking about. It really speaks about pushing us to understand the opportunities that we have here to make us distinct, to create distinction, and to create a new generation of leaders, who are our students, who will really become the backbone of this region and beyond.

Seth: That's so fun for me to hear because I often think about these bigger moments in comparison to how busy everyday life is, and you've already made that step that is thinking about legacy now. It's a very powerful moment to say, "I'm going to slow things down a little because I've seen this medallion, because we're going through very careful planning to be inclusive, to be transparent for the ceremony, and to realize that it's about something bigger." That's not something that we always do. Sometimes we go from crisis to crisis, and that's where taking that spacious moment to embrace a ceremony that people will remember is a very special thing.

Adela: So in your analysis of all of these different events that we've had here, what element has really struck you that you think is important when we think about the investitures? So we've had the 8 presidents, not all of them have had investitures or inaugurations, how many have?

Seth: Only about half. And it's funny, I had the privilege of, I guess this was about a decade ago, of having lunch with 5 of the presidents, and you could not have 5 more different people. Personalities and in terms of leadership styles. But what I can say is each person's decision reflected what their priorities were. But what I found is, for those that did have it, it provided two very important things. One was clarity about where we're going and then two was this sense of community, that we're all doing this together. It's not one person is making a decision and you're

all going to follow me, it was that notion of we're in this together. And that's where- rituals are about the community, and that's where I think you've already made this first step of making it not only a public ceremony but by emphasizing this is for everybody. It's not just that everybody *can* show up, it's that we'd *like them there*, that we want their involvement in this.

Adela: And I think that's why we really ended picking Viejas Arena for the event, because we really wanted everybody who could come to come, students, faculty, community members, to recognize that this is really their celebration, and it's an opportunity for them to see, if you will, the great community, the great diverse community, the great opportunities that we have. It also is going to be an opportunity to bring presidents from across the system and outside of other systems that will be joining us at the stage party, which is fairly elaborate. We'll have people from Georgia, we'll have faculty from our Georgia campus, we'll have again this richness of diversity and it will provide an opportunity for us to really stay at this one day reflect is that iconic moment as you said, that legacy moment, where I will be looking at really the core values that are important to me as president and moving forward for the institution.

So it's really a great opportunity for students and for faculty and for community to really spend that moment celebrating this new journey that we have together, and I would imagine that many presidents, when they made the decision, and this is where you can shed some light, recognize at that moment, they knew the importance of this particular ceremony, that it was not just about them, but it was about the institution, it was about the importance of the institution, and it was about the future of the institution.

Seth: Yeah. And I think that that helps to answer this question of, why have an investiture in April if you've been here since June? And the fact is if you did this immediately in June, you wouldn't have yet gone on your listening tour, you wouldn't have learned so much about this place, and been able to tailor your experiences, your vision, with everything you've seen from all the commentary from people. And that time is very important to make a more careful assessment of what's going on.

And I also know that, knowing limitations of, you know, you don't get to meet with everybody who wants to meet with you. Malcolm Love used to live across the street at 66th and Montezuma and he would walk to school every morning, and you can imagine he was just flocked by people and there came a point where folks had to tell him, you know, "President Love, I'm not sure that's the best plan if you want to get to work on time." But taking these key moments where you've put in the thought into how to interact with people in this public forum, it helps balance this institution of over 30,000 individuals with the demands on your time.

Adela: Absolutely, and I think the other piece that I really love about the investiture, and you mentioned it earlier, is it brings my family in so they can become part of the Aztec family. It humanizes me because in the context of what they see, they see the whole person in that

moment, and you're right, many many people don't see me in that way, they see me at a distance, and I want to minimize that distance.

And I agree with you, the other issue is, you're absolutely right, it is hard to have an investiture when you've just walked into the job, and you really don't know what are the critical factors outside of what you've read about the institution. So the opportunity to spend time, to listen, the opportunity to have the listening tour really helped ground me on what really defines San Diego State and what was important so that moving forward, the investiture would have meaning. And I know even in the context of how I have celebrated, or plan to celebrate this event, is going to include the type of music, the engagement of students, in fact I have students in multiple levels, so that we can highlight the great collective effort this particular project will have for the whole campus community.

Seth: I love your ideas about family and community and it reminds me, one of the presidents who was here the shortest, Brage Golding, was somebody that folks didn't get to know that well, but there was a great silver lining in that his daughter Susan became mayor of San Diego. And that's what's so funny, is you think about the impact of that is, the Golding's don't come here if it weren't for the job at San Diego State and then you have somebody who was such a popular and successful mayor within San Diego, and I think acknowledging that family is community and community is family, we're all in this together, and when we have these shared experiences, it pulls us closer. It makes us a little more patient with each other, I think we all know we cut our family more slack, and that's a virtue to be patient with people, to express empathy as we go through tricky times.

Adela: I want to thank Seth Mallios for his wonderful conversation about the investiture. We learned so much today, and also I want you to save the date. Investiture at San Diego State will be April 11th, between 2-4 p.m. in Vlejas Arena, and Seth Mallios will be our emcee. So thank you again, and see you at the investiture.

Perette: 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 at sdsu.edu/firesidecharla. There you can also access the transcript for this episode and a link to RSVP for the inauguration. Remember, it's April 11th 2019. Years from now, you and I will be able to say that we were there when the first female president and the first Latina president of San Diego State University was inaugurated. This is an event for the whole family, and you definitely will not want to miss it.

Last but not least, don't miss the next episode coming April 1st. President de la Torre chats with Jordan Evans, Deputy Director at NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab. He's the guy that led the team that landed the rover on Mars in 2012. It's a great conversation about how to keep innovating despite failure. And, my favorite part? Jordan Evans also happens to be an SDSU alum. This is

Perette Godwin, another proud alum, hoping that you are inspired to have a few 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 Lisa Morrisette, original music and editing is by SDSU student Kevin Krick. 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](#).