UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

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Laughter as Lens

“I tell jokes, but I’m not kidding.”

So says W. Kamau Bell, the sociopolitical comedian and host of CNN’s “United Shades of America,” also author of “The Awkward Thoughts of W. Kamau Bell,” who uses humor to examine — and engage diverse audiences in discussion of — complex issues such as racism and race relations.

He’ll do a bit of both in a pair of virtual appearances for UC Santa Barbara as part of UCSB Arts & Lectures’ ongoing series “Race to Justice” and an associated programming initiative.

The public event “Ending Racism in About an Hour,” on Thursday, February 11, at 5 p.m., will feature Bell in conversation with Belinda Robnett, the university’s vice chancellor for diversity, equity and inclusion. Immediately following, at 6:15 p.m., Robnett will moderate a roundtable discussion between Bell and UC Santa Barbara students.

“The messages regarding racism that are offered by W. Kamau Bell may be underestimated,” said Robnett. “He may use humor, but he is also imparting knowledge and an understanding of the historical roots of inequality in the U.S. I am particularly inspired by his willingness to engage individuals who hold racist and bigoted beliefs. We are incredibly polarized today, and while it can be frustrating and angering to dialogue with those with whom you vehemently disagree, he does not shy away from doing so. In that regard, Bell stands apart from many public

figures, activists and scholars.”

Bell, also a prolific podcaster and an ACLU Celebrity Ambassador for Racial Justice, is part of the robust slate of presenters assembled by UCSB Arts & Lectures for its season-long look at systemic racism and its impact on society. Race to Justice is a suite of events featuring leading activists, creatives and thinkers, meant altogether to expand our understanding of the issues and to inspire an expansive approach to advancing racial equality.

“W. Kamau Bell manages to make us laugh while having tough conversations — or as he says, awkward conversations — around race, identity and more,” said Celesta M. Billeci, executive director of Arts & Lectures. “We’ve had a lot of very serious presentations on our Race to Justice series, and those have been important and powerful, but we’re looking forward to taking a different approach with Bell. It’s going to be thought-provoking and fun at the same time. And I think he’s the perfect person to have a roundtable discussion with our students. He’s patient, compassionate, curious and open, and he brings out those qualities in us while he’s exposing us to ideas or situations that maybe we hadn’t encountered before.”

New to UCSB in 2020, Robnett is helping to foster an equitably inclusive campus climate in support of the advancement of all faculty, students and staff. Known as an effective advocate for diversity and equity, as well as a successful bridge-builder, she hopes the upcoming events with Bell will reflect and further those efforts both on campus and off.

“Too often, events focused on racism and inequality attract individuals who are already committed to equity and justice,” Robnett said. “We are often preaching to the choir. My hope is that [these events] will attract a broad audience who may hold other viewpoints. It is an opportunity to impart knowledge beyond the confines of the university.

“Bell and other comedians provide diversity education to the public in a manner that is far less threatening to those who may not know much about institutionalized racism, the differences between prejudice and racism, etcetera than, for example, an academic presentation on racism in the U.S.,” she added. “In many ways, comedians have a broader reach, and may have a broader impact than activists and scholars.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.