

S6 E33: Disproportionate Impacts Of COVID-19

(AJ II & LaShyra 'Lash' Nolen)

Previously recorded on Monday, April 20th, 2020

0:00 AJ: The coronavirus is affecting the entire world. This week on *Max Out Time*, Lash Nolen, Harvard Medical School's first black woman class president is here to break down the pandemic causing disease and it's societal effects.

0:19 [Lash speaking in an audioclip]: Technically speaking I am not supposed to be here, statistically speaking speaking, this is a miracle and mama, you are so silently are the architect behind all of my dreams and the dreams of so many in our family. I just want you to know that you are the first superhero I ever came to know. And, I want you to know that I have this privilege of putting on this white coat and feeling like a superhero every day because of you. I want you to know that this is your white coat and I thank you for giving me the privilege to even wear it. Lastly, to all the little black girls out there you can't be what you can't see but I hope you see me now and I hope you see yourself in me. We have to keep pushing, you have to be here because medicine will not progress without us, the marathon continues. Thank you [audience claps].

1:03 Intro Song: 'For The City'

1:40 AJ: Lash, how are you today?

1:41 Lash: I'm doing well AJ, I am so happy to finally have this conversation with you.

1:45 AJ: [laughs] I am excited, I can hear that enthusiasm in your voice right now. I mean we just listened to such a motivating speech. It made me want to get out there and be on the frontlines like you are right now. Harvard medical school, white coat ceremony, and then becoming the first documented black female president of this illustrious school.

2:08 Lash: Crazy.

2:10 AJ: It is crazy right? You couldn't write it up, you know when they do the documentary on you in 30 years, make sure you put the podcast in it though.

2:17 Lash: I will say AJ was there, AJ was there! [laughs]

2:20 AJ: I was down for the struggle you know. So please, before we formally begin. I just want to know: your family, how's your mom, how's your aunty, how your little brother? The people who are so influential in your life, who brought you this far. Your mom was a teenager when she had you, like like you said, you're not supposed to be here. Is everyone okay, is everyone safe?

2:46 Lash: Once again thank you for having me and for showing the white coat ceremony speech because that was one of the best days of my life, to be able to celebrate my mom in that way. Because, I would say that my accomplishments are a reflection of the people that have really uplifted me throughout this time. Right now my family is going through other [inaudible] my grandfather, he is 65 years old and he is still working as a truck driver, putting his life in danger. My mom is a small business owner, so she has been dealing with the brunt of that, my aunt got laid off as well, so she's been dealing with those challenges. I have a great grandmother who is in a nursing home dealing with the challenges with respiratory failure etc. I think I am in a privileged position to understand medicine and to advocate for

them and help be this cultural broker and translator of medicine to like everyday language. I think a lot people may not have this privilege especially our people. Considering how few there are black folks in medicine. It's something that I don't take lightly, and even though it's challenging right now, I feel this great honour to be able to protect and advocate for my family this way.

4:09 AJ: The work that you are doing is so vital. But I didn't realize so much of the work your family members are doing is vital as well and they're on the frontlines. I did read the article about your grandfather and how he is still a truck driver going back and forth to his destinations. Now to know that your mom's a small business owner, I know a lot of these people are directly impacted right within your household, in your family. So we are praying for them, we are praying for you. We're so thankful for you in your role in this pandemic. Can you just talk me through what your day to day is like now that things have shifted in this world?

4:52 Lash: At the beginning, a lot of it was just trying to support my classmates and trying to support the administration in dealing with all these new changes. The same week that Harvard University was told, ya'll need to get out by Sunday –

5:10 AJ: Yeah, they told them to pack their bags and get on stepping and keep moving.

5:12 Lash: Right, they said, you ain't gotta go home but you can't be here.

5:17 AJ: You got to get the out of here.

5:20 Lash: Right exactly! That was just that was so crazy to me because I was thinking about international students, students who are low income, students who may not necessarily have a safe and hospitable environment to go back home to.

5:33 AJ: Lash, I know there are homeless student's there too. Let's call it what it is, I know there are homeless students who can't even go back to their households, who don't have parents and don't have stable environments to go to. For Harvard University, Harvard University, not Hofstra, you know what I am saying, to do that, it was very eye opening.

5:57 Lash: Yes, 100%, and we really worked hard with our administration to make sure that that wasn't the case of Harvard medical school. I worked closely with the dean of students, We made students had access to storage, they had financial support to move back home if they needed to, so the students who weren't able to move had another option to stay somewhere else. A lot of that was going on. And I was also trying to book a flight back home to Cali and trying to figure that out –

6:28 AJ: Which is basically impossible, I mean flight restrictions especially to LAX and into Los Angeles was a nightmare, I'm sure.

6:37 Lash: Oh yeah, oh yeah it was wild! It was wild! And on top of that we were in the middle of that we were learning about the heart and the lungs –

6:45 AJ: [laughs] Still learning to do –

6:49 Lash: [laughs] Still trying to become a doctor!

6:53 AJ: [laughs] You didn't think year one, you'd become class president and then you would really become 'president president'. You really had to step out there into the front lines.

7:03 Lash: Exactly! That first month was rough and I was also standing in line at the store with my mother to get toilet paper and water because they were only letting people get one of each item per family, it was crazy. I was over there trying to study but then I also had to be there for my family too, to make sure that we had our essentials. So those first couple of weeks was challenging but then as time had gone on, I got used to having my classes online and that's what my day looks like, it's class for 4 hours and study for another 4 hours. When I am not doing that, I'm usually on the grind, how I can bring awareness on how this pandemic is impacting communities of color, communities that are marginalized and populations that are in shadows and are not illuminated in mainstream media.

8:00 AJ: Now, as a person studying in medical school, as a person who so deeply cares about people, marginalized people, healthcare systems, what should people be doing?

8:14 Lash: AJ, that's a great question. I think for me, the core of it is, I love medicine and I love science, but I do think it's important for people to understand that – especially as people who are going to be providers and work in healthcare – that as someone comes into the clinic, they bring with them a whole host of life experiences and challenges and barriers. It took so much for them to even arrive at your office that day. It's so easy to just write a prescription for diabetes or for insulin or for whatever the treatment might be, that's what you go to do, I wash my hands and I'm done. But, no, there are so many barriers that people have to go through to have good health in this country, a lot of that burden is put on people of colour.

9:04 AJ: It's much bigger than just this this virus.

9:07 Lash: Oh, it's so much bigger than that. I think what COVID-19 is exposing is all the previously existing inequities that we had entrenched in our country's DNA. From the beginning, we had racism, we've had sexism, we had all the isms but now we see the gap even more spread. Because, when we look at who keeps the country running who's becoming quote on quote essential in our society, it's a lot of people of colour, a lot of people of low income and people who traditionally haven't been considered essential in our society.

9:44 AJ: Truck drivers, grocery store workers, pharmacists... yeah you're right.

9:48 Lash: Yeah yeah exactly, cashier clerks, they are literally the reason why society can continue to operate despite this pandemic.

9:57 AJ: So, if you're not one of those people and also if you are, what gear should people be wearing? This this PPE, personal protective equipment. A normal person can't just walk into a Safeway or a CVS or whatever and get N95 and these shields and everything, so what's the best way to protect ourselves?

10:19 Lash: Yeah, I feel that the best way is to protect ourselves is using a normal mask. You can even use a bandana to cover your face. You want to make sure it covers from your nose down to your mouth. If you can you can wear glasses to protect your eyes because the virus can go into your eyes as well because the virus can get through the eyes. The main thing is that you're covering your nose and your mouth. You want to make sure that you are washing your hands regularly, at least for 20 seconds. You want to make sure that "high

touch surfaces” like your phone, your computer, things like that that you touch often, you want to make sure that you using soap and water to make sure it’s clean regularly. The thing about the N95 mask, in reality for folks who are just going to the grocery store or going outside for the bare minimum essentials that they need –

11:16 AJ: Bare minimum, just small recreational type activities.

11:20 Lash: Right, exactly, like I don’t think that those individuals really need a N95 mask especially because right now we have healthcare workers, physicians, nurses, everybody working in the hospital. Even custodian staff, they’re using the N95 mask for the entire day because there’s a big shortage of personal protective equipment. We don’t want to take away something that is greatly needed in our society right now during this pandemic. That has really been a huge issue with our government and how they have distributed PPE because these masks are supposed to be used for one or two patient interactions at that, but folks are using the same mask for the entire week, and are having to clean it every day and it’s just not the way.

12:11 AJ: I don’t think they’re educated enough to know that it’s not the way. Seriously, we need to leave them for the front line workers and hospitals and doctors and people who are giving out these tests, right? But at the same time, the government has not given out this equipment for people who need it in these hospitals as it is. So there’s a shortage of this equipment first and foremost so definitely we don’t want Joe Shmo to have it while going to the grocery store when Kimberly at Med Star hospital has nothing.

12:46 Lash: Right, exactly, exactly.

12:48 AJ: You’ve touched on African Americans and the inequities in this country, especially the healthcare disparities. But, will more black healthcare professionals help during this time?

13:00 Lash: I one hundred percent think so, I think for years we have seen a decline in black men entering medicine. Overall, percentage of black folks who are entering medicine have been much lower than it ought to be. There are studies that have shown residents – residents are those who graduate from school, they do their residency training and then become a board certified physician – they’ve done studies to show that these people who are residents, they still think black folks are less paying than white folks. Studies have shown this in the last 5 years.

13:42 AJ: I do hear some of those crazy narratives as well.

13:45 Lash: Right and I think we also saw that with the opioid epidemic. For those who are less likely to be prescribed opioids because they assume that oh this person is black, they probably don’t feel pain as much therefore I will not prescribe.

14:04 AJ: They made it through this crack epidemic, so they can make it through this. They been there done that with another drug so they’re cool.

14:17 Lash: Right [laughs] just problematic all around, problematic all around. There are studies that show that black men have been given morphine for their pain, whilst other folks have gotten actual prescriptions. If you do the research, it’s out there and I think that that is something that needs to be confronted by having more people of color in the healthcare field working in our communities because now there just is this erasure of black pain in medicine. I think that we’re going to continue to see that in COVID-19, where people come in and they

say that they have these symptoms and this is what I am going through and folks might not believe them. I think traditionally black folks have been ostracized and taken advantage of by the medical institutions. If you look at syphilis experiment in 1932, that went on for 40 years.

15:13 AJ: You showing the research skills too, hold on!

15:14 Lash: Oh yeah! Like it was nothing.

15:16 AJ: She said 1932 like it was nothing, just brushed off the Great Depression.

15:21 Lash: [laughs] Listen, I am telling you, and this is the stuff that folks don't always talk about at medical school, naturally. This is the type of research that you have to do on the side, this is really happening in the community to my people. To answer your question, at the core of it, we definitely need more black doctors, that's how we're going to see lower mortality rates for black women in labor. I think we will see less disparities in general, I think that would be key in COVID-19.

15:57 AJ: I mean I'm talking about more black doctors, more black nurses, more black hospitals, more hospitals in the hood. I mean we got to bring it all together like you said to erase some of these disparities that goes back hundreds and hundreds of years. But fortunately, we have someone like you because in 2023 when you are stomping out of medical school, we're going to right there.

16:23 Lash: We're going to be ready! I'mma be like y'all ready?

16:28 AJ: We're going to be 3 years removed (hopefully) of this pandemic. You're going to be on the frontlines, you already got it, you're battle tested! You're battle tested from day one. But I want you to expand on some other notable black medical professionals right now. Who should we be reading? Who should we be consuming, who should we really be listening to besides Lash Nolen? Because we could be listening to her all day long, but we have to spread the wealth a little bit.

17:00 Lash: I have some giants who have paved the way for me. Many amazing trailblazers and the first that I can think of is Dr. Camara Jones, she actually wrote this beautiful piece called the *Gardeners Tale*. She has this talent where she takes stories, she takes really complex topics like racism and she'll transform it in a way that is more palatable and the story is like something you can share so people can understand it better. She's a PHD, she was the president of the public health association, so she is next level, so I would say Dr. Camara Jones. Mary C Bassett, she was the ex commissioner of the New York City health department. She was also one of the black panthers, she had a health clinic back in the day
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18:02 AJ: Black shero, I like that.

18:04 Lash: Oh yeah, she's a huge black shero, I would definitely check her out, she's fantastic. Uche and Oni Blackstock check them out on Twitter, they're both graduates of Harvard Medical School, their mother was also a graduate of Harvard Medical School.

18:21 AJ: You know when the teacher goes on to the next slide and you're not done doing the notes yet, you rattling these names off too quickly for me, good thing I'm recording!

18:29 Lash: Right. You told me to put on my women. I said I got you!

18:34 AJ: Thank you for sharing this list, thank you so much for your insight. Is there one more extremely beneficial fact that you want to get out there, some piece of virus prevention, or health awareness tips that you want to leave us with before we let you go?

18:55 Lash: I would say, don't don't negate the power of social distancing, I think we're feeling a national pull to get a lot of PPE and things like that. Sometimes having the gloves and the the best PPE when we're going to the grocery store and making sure we don't touch certain things we're not supposed to touch –

19:21 AJ: Right you hink you're invincible because you got that shield on.

19:24 Lash: Right, exactly but we're not we're not invincible at all. The other piece is just know right now we're going through this pandemic and we're going through COVID-19 but even after this pandemic, we're still going to have inequities, we're still going to have racism and we're going to still have health disparities, that is what we need to tap on, that's what we have to remember. After all of this is done, we have to see if we can develop policies and programs that improve and uplift our communities.

19:57 AJ: You hit it right on the nail. This conversation **must** not stop, it's only expanded to a point where it's necessary right now and we have to take a deeper dive and a deeper look at health care disparities in this country and in the world. It doesn't stop here. Social distance, wear the PPE and continue to discuss these issues. Obesity, diabetes, the things that you have done scholarly work on. The conversations have to continue, so we can continue to help our people.

20:32 Lash: One hundred percent, we got to hold our our government, our local and our state leaders as well to make sure that they meet us halfway.

20:40 AJ: You're right, we are holding them accountable, all year round, every day. Thank you so much, as always my special guest, Harvard Medical School student council president, 25 year old black woman, Lash Nolen, thank you so much, anything you want to leave us with?

20:57 Lash: No, this was great AJ, and I wish all of y'all safety and peace and wellness and stay socially distant.

21:05 AJ: You be safe out there. Thank you so much.

21:08 Lash: Thank you. You too.

21:10 Please continue subscribing at *Max Out Time With AJ II* on iTunes. Add @lashnolen on social media. Like me on Facebook, follow on IG and Twitter, and rate and review this podcast on all podcast streaming services today, AJ out!

21:29 Outro Song: 'For The City'

21:57 –End–

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