

Communities for Immunity: Stories about COVID The Peale, Baltimore | 2022

Cherring Spence (00:00): Hello, my name is Cherring Spence. I'm from Elizabeth City, North Carolina originally, but I've lived in Baltimore now for almost 50 years.

Whitney Frazier (00:11): And what part of Baltimore?

Cherring Spence (00:13): I live in Northwest Baltimore.

Whitney Frazier (00:15): And anything else about yourself that we should know? How many grandkids do you have?

Cherring Spence (00:21): Oh, now, don't get me talking about the grandkids now. We'll be up here forever. I have both grandchildren and great-grands. I have eight grandchildren and I have six great-grands with two on the way.

Whitney Frazier (00:45): Okay. We'll leave it at that. So in the past couple years, we've all been through it, but we want to hear a little bit about your experience with dealing with COVID and how you've handled it and how your family and you have worked together to get through this hard time.

Cherring Spence (01:09): Well, COVID has... I don't even know how to start with COVID. Thankfully, I personally have not contracted COVID, but it certainly hit many people that I know. Many people that I know have died from COVID. I've had nephews and cousins and my son, his wife, and all that, have had COVID. Thankfully they have survived. My immediate family, thankfully, they have survived.

Cherring Spence (01:51): When COVID hit, of course, we, like others, had never heard of it. We knew nothing of COVID. My mother died January 29th, 2020, and at the time my mom died, we didn't know anything about COVID. My mom's funeral was very large. My mom was organized, as she'd worked in the community and all for years, and so her funeral was very well-attended.

Cherring Spence (02:28): But what ended up happening when we all returned to Baltimore in different areas from the funeral, we found that quite a few were sick. My son came back sick. My granddaughters' mom and sister came back sick. And there were quite a few other family members, almost 20 all together, that were sick, and we had no idea what was wrong with them. And I called, because the only thing we all had in common was the fact that we had attended my mom's funeral. And some made the funeral, but didn't make the repass. Some made the viewing, but didn't make the funeral. So the only thing we had in common was that one thing, that one gathering.

Cherring Spence (03:26): And so I called my sister, who happens to be a nurse in North Carolina, and I asked her if there was any kind of virus, anything that was going on there. And she told me no, that they had some people that had come in with the flu, but no more than usual. And I asked her again, "Are you sure there's nothing? You all haven't had a big influx of people at the hospital?" And she said, "No. No, not at all." I said, "Well, something is happening." I said, "Something is going on, because there are about 20 of us that are back here and sick." And I said, "And you know we've been going to North

Carolina for 30 years now for my mom's birthday, which would've been the following week. So we would've been going to North Carolina that weekend anyway." I said, "We've been traveling backwards and forward to North Carolina all this time, and we've never had anybody to come back sick, particularly not so many people." And then just a few weeks after that, we heard about the COVID outbreak.

Cherring Spence (04:38): And so I feel really confident that they came back with the first onset of COVID, even though that's not what had been diagnosed. For some, it was pneumonia. For some, it was bronchitis, because they had all these breathing problems and different things that were going on. So that I considered to be my first real contact with COVID and all. And thankfully, they all recovered.

Whitney Frazier (05:11): They were all okay. Wow.

Cherring Spence (05:12): Then later when they started talking about whether to wear masks, not to wear masks, that was a big issue, because that was something that most of us were just not familiar with. So it was like, okay, if it takes wearing a mask, we'll wear a mask. But then when they came up with the idea of the vaccinations, I've got to confess, I was very reluctant. I was very reluctant because one, I felt like it was done too quickly. They were coming up with this vaccination all too quickly. But then we kept hearing more and more about people dying. We kept hearing more and more about several people in the family dying. I, as a minister, you hear from the funeral directors that they're handling so many bodies. And then they were making all the changes in regards to burials and funeral services and all of that.

Cherring Spence (06:13): So we actually reached out to the community. I'm also a part of Baltimore Action Catalyst Team. So we had a town hall to discuss the issue of COVID in the black community, because as with everything else, it seemed to have been affecting more blacks than anyone else. So we wanted to get some answers. We had doctor... I hope I get her name correct, I always stumble over it. Dr. Dzirasa, the health commissioner, she was one of our panelists. And we had the president of Baltimore City Council. He was on, and we had other people that were on, discussing the issue of COVID. So after having that town hall, I felt more confident about getting the COVID vaccination. And then we started encouraging other people to get it as well. But I have family members... I'm just like everybody else, I have family members who refuse to get vaccinated.

Whitney Frazier (07:23): Same here, yeah.

Cherring Spence (07:23): They refuse. And some of them have had COVID already, but because they survived, I think they're taking it for granted that, "Well, maybe I won't get it again. Or if I get it, well, I survived the last time so I'll survive the next time as well." And really when it comes down to it, it's a personal choice, yes, but it is a personal choice that can affect so many other people's lives. It won't just affect that one individual. It can wipe out a whole family. It can really, really wipe out a whole family.

Cherring Spence (08:05): We as a people... And I'm talking about in terms of black individuals now... We are gatherers. We are family gatherers, whether it's for Sunday dinner or whether it's for a birthday party or a funeral or whatever. And so many times, because we do gather in such large numbers... Even as we did for my mom's funeral, I mean, there were about 300 people there. We were packed there at the church, which is a large church, but we were still packed. So there's a possibility it was even more than 300. But to think of the people that could have been gravely impacted and could have died is just overwhelming.

Whitney Frazier (08:55): Yeah. So when you talk about... It sounds like you had a town hall with some people who people trust in the public eye, you know, public figures, and that helped shift your perspective on vaccination. But you said you also were talking to community members and people in the neighborhood, encouraging vaccination. What did that look like? What were those conversations like?

Cherring Spence (09:27): Well, the biggest thing was the town hall, because it was a citywide town hall, and we had people coming from all different back to provide information about the effects of COVID. I think we were one of the only organizations, that along with the doctors, along with those coming from the medical field, we were probably the only organization that also had somebody to come from funeral services.

Whitney Frazier (09:54): Wow.

Cherring Spence (09:55): Because they were able to give it from a perspective that nobody else was able, because they were the end result.

Whitney Frazier (10:03): What'd they say?

Cherring Spence (10:04): They were able to talk about the impact on families.

Whitney Frazier (10:08): Okay.

Cherring Spence (10:10): They were able to talk about the increase in numbers that they having, to let people understand this is real, this is not something fake. Because we were hearing all the talk about fake news and it's not as bad as it looks. And so they were able to come from that perspective, which was really, really good, and they were able to encourage people to take this seriously.

Whitney Frazier (10:42): Was that your idea, to invite them?

Cherring Spence (10:44): Yes.

Whitney Frazier (10:44): Mm-hmm (affirmative). All right, yeah.

Cherring Spence (10:50): Yes, because many times it's ministers and funeral providers or funeral service providers, we get to see stuff that other people don't see. Other people might hear about the shootings in the street. We have to stand there and preach or minister to that family. We get to see that body. We get to see the brokenness, we get to see the heartache. We get to see the heartbreak close and up front. And then many times we get to see the long term impact afterwards, because those same families, they don't stop grieving once the funeral is over with. They don't stop grieving or stop needing prayer after that person is put in the ground, because then they have to cope with the trauma of it. And if it was a husband or a main provider, you have all kinds of fallout from it. You have some people that turn to drugs, you have some people that turn to alcohol. You have some people that have mental health issues.

Cherring Spence (12:09): So with COVID, it's so far-reaching. My granddaughter, her husband, they're both clinicians, so they do counseling for people that... My granddaughter's actually a trauma specialist. So we see the impact that all of this had. And even with the kids that are in school, the trauma that they

encounter. You got ministers and stuff that are dealing with the families, the fallout. Everybody's under the pressure from it.

Whitney Frazier ([12:48](#)): And you still feel that it's still very much-

Cherring Spence ([12:50](#)): Oh, of course. Yes. Yes.

Whitney Frazier ([12:53](#)): What do you think needs to happen now in terms of healing or continuing to get people vaccinated? I don't know, what do you think?

Cherring Spence ([13:02](#)): Yeah, people still have to be educated. There's a trust issue, particularly, again, in the black community. We've had some horrific things that have happened to families from a medical standpoint, from women getting hysterectomies to men being subjected to the syphilis. Only word that comes to my mind is debacle, but that may not be an appropriate word. But all that would happen in that and them not know it, them not be told what was happening, what was going on to them, them not being properly treated.

Cherring Spence ([13:47](#)): So blacks have a real fear, a real concern when it comes to vaccinations or it comes to medicines, particularly when it's put out so quickly, particularly when on one side you've got people saying it's fake news and you can take this, that, and the other, which you know is a lie. But then it does make you wonder, because I know even with my family members that I've talked to, they're like, "Well, how do you know that they're telling the truth? Because there's so much stuff out there, and I'm not putting anything in my veins that may or may not be real. We don't know what they're giving us," that kind of thing. But yet at the same time, you see people that are dying every day. You see two, three, four, five people in one family that's dying, or you see two or three of them dying and then you see the rest of them in the hospital. That's real stuff that hits you in the face.

Whitney Frazier ([14:56](#)): So you think continuing to share the realities is important.

Cherring Spence ([15:00](#)): Share the information, share the reality, put somebody out there in front of them that they trust.

Whitney Frazier ([15:08](#)): Yeah.

Cherring Spence ([15:09](#)): That they trust, whether it's a pastor or a minister. And unfortunately nowadays, you have people that have mistrust even of ministers and pastors. But it's got to be somebody they trust. If it's somebody on the corner, but they have some confidence in them and let them know, look, this is the real deal, that this is what's happening, this is what's going on. Particularly when you start throwing in the variances: Omicron, Delta. You start throwing in all of that on top. There's already mistrust and misinformation, and then when you're throwing all this stuff in too... And I'm using the term stuff, I'm using it loosely. That's a word I use all the time. But when you're throwing in all this other information and you tell them, "Now we have this. Now we have this other condition over here," then it's hard for them.

Cherring Spence ([16:11](#)): Sometime the best thing you can do... I did sign Parklane up to distribute tests. We were only able to get 60, but we distributed those tests out to people. Because sometime even if they don't get the vaccination, they still need to test.

Whitney Frazier (16:29): Have you hosted through Parklane a vaccination van or something through the city that will come?

Cherring Spence (16:37): No, we haven't hosted that. We don't have the manpower to be able to do some of the things. We can't always work on a grand scale, so we try to serve the people that we can serve. We've given out over 4,000 masks.

Whitney Frazier (16:56): Wow.

Cherring Spence (16:57): Parklane Neighborhood Association has given out over 4,000 masks. Well, actually more than those. Initially, we were able to get 5,000 masks. Those were the cloth ones from the government with the silver. We gave out 4,000 of those. But then through various events and working in partnership with Catherine's Family and Youth Services, we've given out several more thousands of masks.

Laurel Stewart (17:33): I guess I'm curious. How do you think that you've changed since the pandemic?

Cherring Spence (17:43): I think I've become more grateful. We've learned how short life really is. Not that we didn't know it before, but we've seen people that one week or a day, and then we've got news two days later they're gone because of COVID. We tend to put off things, celebrations, birthday or otherwise. We tend to put them off and take them for granted. Oh, I'll do that next week. Oh, I'm going to wait another year to do this or to go here. But we learned time is only what we have right now. It is very fleeting, and it is gone like a puff of smoke. And so we really need to enjoy life, do what we can do for people right now.

Cherring Spence (18:44): I mean, I'm a senior citizen. My youngest son just turned 51. I don't have the strength or the energy, the stamina, the memory, that I used to have, but I'm still trying to do what I can do. It may not be a whole lot, but I'm trying to do what I can do. I'm trying to serve the people that I can serve. And I think that's been the biggest change with COVID. And love people. You love them, hug them, tell them you love them. You know?

Cherring Spence (19:27): I would like to say I'm hopeful for the future, but I'm really not. I know that might sound strange, particularly being a minister or pastor. I'm hopeful for the future. I'm hopeful for the future with God. I'm not so hopeful for the future without God. Our nation has changed. People have changed. I feel it is totally ridiculous, totally ridiculous, some of the things that we're seeing and hearing about COVID, about vaccinations, about masks. It's a mask. The vaccinations, yeah, you might be taking a shot, and for those that truly have concern, I don't have a problem with them. If you have a real concern about something, you have that concern. If you have a fear about something, you have that fear. So those are not the people I'm talking about.

Cherring Spence (20:35): I'm talking about all of the hype. I'm talking about all the people that know better. You know they know better. You know that they themselves have been vaccinated and that they themselves are wearing masks. You know their jobs are calling on them to be vaccinated, and they have been vaccinated, but they're pushing the rest of the world to, "Oh no, don't do that." That's crazy. You're talking about people's lives. You're talking about people's lives. Even this weekend, I tested myself before I left, because one, I wanted to make sure I was okay because I don't want to impact someone else. I don't want anybody to get sick because of me. I definitely don't want anybody to die

because of me. But we've become so callous, so despicable. That's the only term that comes to my mind. I think it is a despicable act when you do some of the things that I'm seeing and hearing now, and it's sad. I think it's a sad time.

Cherring Spence ([21:56](#)): So when you talk about hope, I'm afraid for our nation. I'm afraid for where I see our nation heading, and so different so many different levels. I've been around a long time. I've seen a lot of things, but I'm seeing and hearing things now that I've never seen or heard before, and that makes me fearful for the future.

Whitney Frazier ([22:27](#)): So what advice would you give a young person, like one of your grandkids or great-grandkids about how to...

Cherring Spence ([22:36](#)): Process it all?

Whitney Frazier ([22:37](#)): Yeah, process.

Laurel Stewart ([22:38](#)): Navigate this world.

Whitney Frazier ([22:39](#)): Navigate, that's the word.

Cherring Spence ([22:40](#)): Yeah.

Laurel Stewart ([22:40](#)): Navigate.

Cherring Spence ([22:42](#)): To navigate?

Whitney Frazier ([22:44](#)): If you were like...

Cherring Spence ([22:45](#)): Who was it that said, "To thine own self be true"? I think during this season of our lives, this season of our nation, this time with COVID, one thing I was sharing with the family members... And not to drag this on, but I was telling them I remember the measles. I remember when people were getting sick with the mumps. I remember before they were coming out with all of these vaccinations. My family members suffered with tuberculosis. I personally had come in contact with somebody because I used to be a nurse's aide a lifetime ago, and I'd come in contact with somebody that had TB. So, with the tests that they used to give for TB, and I went for about two years that I had to be tested, that I had to take. I remember that time. I remember what that was like. So I said, "They've come out with vaccinations, they've come out with medicines. This is not as bad as it used to be."

Cherring Spence ([23:59](#)): And I feel like people now are not being true to themselves. You got to remember your roots. You got to remember your character. You got to remember what you were taught, what you would learn. You got to think. If we just think about some stuff, we'll understand a lot of stuff don't make sense. A lot of stuff ain't real. All you got to do is stop and think for a few minutes. And young people, they got to be willing to sit down.

Cherring Spence ([24:32](#)): And then the other thing is listen. I think we're living in a time where this generation in particular, they really don't want to listen. They want to listen to what they want to listen to, but you got to be willing to listen and filter out that which is trash. I know I don't always use the right

This transcript was exported on Mar 11, 2022

words, but much of it is trash. You got to filter out the trash, and then you got to keep that which is good.

Whitney Frazier ([25:07](#)): That's beautiful.

Laurel Stewart ([25:09](#)): Yeah.

Whitney Frazier ([25:10](#)): Thank you, Ms. Spence.