

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

**Whitney Frazier (00:01):** So if you'll first just introduce yourself and where we are right now, and anything else about your identity you want to share?

**Pat Jones (00:09):** Yeah, a good day. So I'm Pat Shannon Jones and I'm the director of the Immigration Outreach Service Center. We are here in our offices and our offices are on the grounds of St. Matthew Roman Catholic church. We are a 501(c)(3), but we are quite blessed to have the community of St. Matthew around us, so that we're able to hear what the needs are of the community. And our community includes people from about 45 different countries, hence our interest in promoting immigration and assistance to all immigrants who come to our door.

**Whitney Frazier (00:47):** Great. And what has your work been like the last couple years of COVID?

**Pat Jones (00:54):** So we've been quite impacted by COVID because as we know, we had previously had a lot of refugees coming into the country, that decreased over the last six years, and then COVID hit. And so we've had great challenges but we have been very blessed because we've been able to go to our community of immigrants and ask them what they are comfortable with and how we should perceive with all of our activities that we do.

**Pat Jones (01:25):** So at the beginning of COVID, we were anxious about having our tutoring program continue in person. And one of the things we did was to talk with parents and to talk with tutors and to decide that we would go virtual and we pivoted very quickly to a virtual setting. And I have to admit our staff was absolutely phenomenal in getting us to virtual and our students though, you'll hear people saying, oh, the students aren't learning as much. I think they've learned more. They're so savvy with laptops and computers and iPhones now that it's really amazing.

**Pat Jones (02:04):** We have run a virtual tutoring program, a virtual financial literacy, a hybrid computer literacy, and a virtual ESOL program over the last two years. They've been very successful. The clients all like them, because they don't have to ride buses to get here and they're just delighted with it. So we're very pleased with how things have gone and we're about to start our next semester in the next couple weeks. And so we'll be opening our doors again for our hybrid computer literacy and continuing in virtual for all of our other teaching programs.

**Whitney Frazier (02:39):** And does that serve all the age groups [inaudible 00:02:42]

**Pat Jones (02:42):** Yes. Well the tutoring program serves from kindergarten up through high school. During the COVID crisis, we did cut out some of the younger age students because they were just having difficulty with the computer. But throughout COVID we've been continuing the tutoring for second grade all the way through high school.

**Whitney Frazier (03:06):** Great. I guess tell me a little more about how families find [inaudible 00:03:12] and what that looks like.

**Pat Jones (03:15):** Yeah, it's interesting. In the early days, people found us by word of mouth. We actually had a guy who came in the door one day saying he had been on the bus. He had arrived at BWI, Baltimore Washington International airport, and got on the bus and really didn't know even where he was going. The bus driver said, "Well, I know someone and you can talk to." He had shared that he was an immigrant. He needed to declare asylum. He didn't know what to do. And the bus driver turned and there was one other person on the bus who happened to be a client of the immigration center. And lo and behold, this guy arrived at the door that afternoon and came to apply for asylum through us.

**Pat Jones (04:00):** Other folks find us through our website. I get calls. Yesterday I got a call from Chicago, from a guy who wanted to ask some questions about how he should proceed since he had not gotten the renewal of his work papers. So I was able to coach him to look for a law school near him in Chicago and there are several and to have him go online and look for a legal clinic, an immigration clinic. And so we're able to help people even as far away as Chicago and California and whatever, but most of our clients come from the region.

**Pat Jones (04:37):** And we started off in 2000 with folks, mostly from Africa and the Caribbean islands. And as I had said earlier, we've managed to touch people from not just the 45 countries we see here at church, but 123 countries around the globe. And it seems like every six months or so a new population of refugees or asylum seekers come through the door just because of some of the push factors that push them away from home, everything from ecological disasters to political, to religious persecution and even gender and sexual identity persecution as well.

**Whitney Frazier (05:19):** So I want to ask more about COVID, but I also want to first ask, why do you do this work or how did you find yourself doing this work?

**Pat Jones (05:29):** I did global work for many years in research. So I was traveling around the world doing clinical trials and peer reviewed research and just became, I just fell in love with the cultures that are out there and having seen how cultures are repressed or kind of held back from their full blossoming here in this country, I wanted to do something that would affirm people's cultures and their home countries in some way. I was going to retire in 2000 10, 11, 12, but I had an opportunity in 2010 to continue on my work. And I decided not to, I decided to take a little, little bit of an early retirement and wound up working actually in Haiti because that was right after the earthquake in Haiti. And so between my work in Haiti, after the earthquake and Nepal and being on the board here at the IOSC, I eventually stepped into some more hands on work and became the director in 2013. And it has, when people tell you that when you find your passion, work will no longer be work. I never quite believed that, but it is true.

**Speaker 3 (06:48):** So when COVID hit or when you were first learning about it, can you kind of describe what that was like for you in the community here that you work with?

**Pat Jones (06:58):** So it was very difficult when COVID first struck here in this part of the country. We had been hearing about it coming across originally starting, I guess, in Washington, somewhere in the Northwest. And we were very concerned. My previous work prior to retirement was in epidemiology. And so I was reading the signs and signals that I was hearing from CDC and other places, and I was very concerned. And so we immediately took action because we did not want to become a site that might cause more COVID infection. So we immediately closed down and began to process how to start a totally virtual tutoring program, financial literacy, computer literacy, and ESOL. Our staff just jumped

right on it. And the director of our tutoring program became a Zoom expert overnight. And we were able to continue on very quickly.

**Pat Jones (08:02):** The next thing that arose from our communities and we have here at the church, a great, a large population of Kenyan community members, Nigerian Rwandan, and Sudanese, and then quite a few from the Caribbean islands. In sitting and talking with them when this first happened, they were worried about getting vaccines, getting vaccinations because they wanted to at least keep their family safe because if you have a family where mom and dad are going out and working, the kids are going to school and people are coming home, there's the potential to bring COVID home. So as soon as the vaccines became available for the adult population, a lot of our folks were asking about that. So I made a couple phone calls.

**Pat Jones (08:52):** I've been very connected with the MedStar hospitals because obviously being here at St. Matthew, MedStar is literally just up the hill. And so I called a couple of people up there. They had a wonderful director of outreach and they also have some faith community nurses there who work with the faith based churches or synagogues around the area. And so I called both of them and said, this is the situation. And we have people who are asking about vaccinations. And I said, if they're asking, this is a really good sign because a lot of immigrants were avoiding healthcare at that time. It was a very difficult time in terms of our administration and people were afraid to be seen and participating in any events.

**Pat Jones (09:43):** So I heard back from both of the people that I called at MedStar Good Samaritan, and they gathered us together and said, we have a great opportunity. Initially they thought maybe they could do a vaccination clinic here at St. Matthew. But then they decided to use Shepherds Clinic, which is down near the old stadium. And we went to Shepherds Clinic. We got a great number of our Nepali community and Nigerian community. And then a few other scattered communities, Kenyans came. We had immediately a population. We filled the whole clinic. So it was really very exciting for me because it meant that we were bringing just that much more safety to the community, particularly for the younger kids, that if parents can go to work, they're vaccinated, they can feel safe coming home to their children. This worked out very well. At the time we did this, it was last February. It was when the 65 and older group were being vaccinated. And we filled the clinic with 65 and older folks. So that I thought was really dramatic. And then since then we've had others and continued in close work with MedStar.

**Speaker 3 (11:00):** Great. So it sounds like there wasn't a lot of hesitation or fear around vaccination. Why do you think that is for the populations that you're working with?

**Pat Jones (11:12):** I think that this population of immigrants have been here for four, 10 years or more. I think once immigrants become settled in an area and their kids grow up, get through college, maybe even into healthcare professions, they begin to bring more healthcare knowledge home. We also have some healthcare care clinics and some healthcare, a public health person here who does some healthcare education. And for that reason, we had no problem trying to, if you will, sell the vaccine to people. They were right on top of it and very interested and very excited about it. And so it has been now over the months and year or two, since then, we have had some younger immigrants not want to take the vaccine or have to be coached a little bit to say, why don't you want it? And how can we explain it to you? And do you know you had vaccines when you were little tiny things and this is not much different. So we've worked on that as well.

**Speaker 3** ([12:23](#)): Yeah. Can you say a little more about what that coaching looks like? What works? I'm just curious.

**Pat Jones** ([12:30](#)): So what works generally is to sit down with folk and say, just to sort of give them an idea of first of all, how something like COVID spreads. It is so easily spread. At least in the early stages, it was so easily spread. And to explain that to our youth made it very much clearer. Some of them were still coming to church. And we had, I explained to them that when they went up to get communion or if they went up to speak or read or whatever, they should leave their mask on until I got all the way up the aisle. Because if you walk up the aisle, you could be dosing the community with your aerosol spray, from your own breathing. And the more they thought about it, they realized that there had had to be some solution that would be of help. And once they began to see some of their peers getting the vaccine, it became a little bit easier to convince some of our youth.

**Pat Jones** ([13:30](#)): So it's been one of those things where we teach, we show by our own example that we've been and gotten all of the vaccinations, et cetera. And then after we teach again, because sometimes the first time around, doesn't go in. You don't hear it. And so in many cases, you know when you're going to speak, you say what you're going to say, you say it. And then you recount what you just said. So same sort of thing. We teach two, two or three times. And once that's done, we ask them for their input and what they think about the whole situation. And particularly when you get a group of peers together, they begin to talk back and forth about the fact that this isn't so bad and maybe we should consider it for our younger brothers and sisters and for our families and elders and whatnot.

**Speaker 3** ([14:21](#)): So where do they gather? Are they gathering like a youth group at church? Is that when you're talking to them or here at the center, or I'm just curious about-

**Pat Jones** ([14:32](#)): So some of our immigrant groups together for a special gathering say once a month, and for instance, our Kenyan community gets together about once a month. They have a special mass in the church, and then they have a community time in the hall afterwards. And so it is during the community time that often you can sit down with the youth and the families and talk with them together about situations. We can do announcements, we can do individual talks, short 10 minute talks or whatever and we can sit down with some of the youth who will be there.

**Pat Jones** ([15:12](#)): And one thing that you will find is in the immigrant community, when parents go to church, usually the kids go to church too. You don't see them break away from church until they're off to college. So we have the opportunity to sit down with them and talk with them. Same for the Nigerian families and quite a few of the others. Some of them are smaller groups, but still we're able to reach them. We also have a group of youth from the, what we call the Northeast Catholic community. And that includes six or seven churches in this Northeast area. And we have someone who runs a youth group. And so he also has a lot of access to them.

**Speaker 3** ([16:00](#)): It sounds like a lot of trust too.

**Pat Jones** ([16:02](#)): Well, it is, it is. And that only happens. It's not something you can do when you know, COVID breaks out and you run to the community and say, "You have to do this." No it's to trust first. And that comes way before the COVID hit and then sitting down and talking about it after you're trying to make decisions and help people coach them through it.

**Speaker 3 (16:23):** And so I guess thinking on that, how do you build trust? You know, and like you're saying, it's not issue based. It's from the beginning with people that come to you or come to the center. What does that look like in the relationship?

**Pat Jones (16:39):** So we have something that we say to everyone, whether they are here as clients, or just coming to visit, or we are visiting with them. And what we always say is our door is always open, regardless of what the issue may be that you're bringing here, our door is always open. You are free to come in, you are safe to tell your story and we will walk the journey with you. And we say it so often we get to the point where we all say it in the staff. And we say it because that is our mantra, that we will provide a safe place and we will have people tell their story, but then we will also provide services that help them to improve their skills or educate them about their healthcare. Something like that. Yeah.

**Speaker 3 (17:35):** I'm sure there's lots of stories, but are there any stories that stand out from the last few years of certain families or persons that I don't know, whether it's a story of struggle or a story of hope around getting through COVID, I don't know. Anything come to mind?

**Pat Jones (17:55):** Let's see if I wanted to tell you a story that would sort of capture who we are. I think I would tell you about something that happened right after we opened our doors. We closed our doors for a month or two, because we wanted to revision who we were. We had been doing a lot of legal services and we knew we wanted to revision what services we wanted to offer. The people who came to our retreat that we had to discuss that were immigrants and grant funders. And just about anybody who had had contact with the IRC over the years. And the things that came up were around youth. And so we thought, Hmm, we have to find some way to serve youth. This was September and less than a month later, a group of students came from Maryvale, one of the local high schools and said, we want to tutor immigrant youth. And I said, "Well, if that isn't the spirit moving through the community, I don't know what is."

**Pat Jones (18:53):** And so I said, "We have seven youth right now that I can tell need some experience, need some help with tutoring." And so we opened our tutoring program, the following January, and we had seven students, who four of them were refugees from Sudan. And three of them were from Togo. They were French speakers. And I will tell you that the Sudanese family has been with the tutoring program in fits and starts. I mean, different age children, all the way through since 2013. We've watched them grow up. Two of them are in college at present. One of them who's in seventh grade now I think will be the mayor of Baltimore someday. And the other one is going into healthcare.

**Pat Jones (19:53):** This is something that I don't think would've been possible when they were in Sudan or in the refugee camp in Uganda. And what they've accomplished is really amazing. Mom was functionally illiterate when she came here. We worked with her to get her to be able to shop and find good prices and all the things she would want to do to be a good breadwinner. They are a woman run family and she has been successful. She has a job where she has the keys to the operation. She runs it. It's a laundromat. And not only has she been successful, she's taken care of all of her children's healthcare and education and her own healthcare. She got COVID shots when they first came out and has been boosted and has worked all through COVID with no problems.

**Pat Jones (20:51):** Her children have all managed to, the ones who are able to get the vaccine have, and they've just done extremely well. They're really such a success story. The problems that arise in refugee families who are single parent families are huge. You can't even imagine they had five kids total in the

family and she has managed to not just raise them, but to keep them comfortable, safe, secure, and healthy. So it's been just a wonderful experience to watch them grow up. So we've really enjoyed that.

**Speaker 3 (21:24):** Thanks. And I guess we'll end with some other positive thoughts on it sounded like the virtual tutoring program was a positive that you were able to reach people despite transportation issues. Anything else that kind of has come up that has shifted your thinking?

**Pat Jones (21:46):** I think that as we look at immigration, the things you always hear are over the last five years have been a lot of negatives and what we have seen, and what I have seen in the work I've been doing is that, every six months, every year, the population of immigrants shifts and each group of immigrants brings something new and positive either in terms of language, cultural identity issues, something that they bring that is very special to their community. And not only that, in many cases, they bring just a real sense of solidarity and unity and hope in coming to this country.

**Pat Jones (22:30):** Right now we're settling Afghan immigrants and we are helping them get acclimated to Baltimore. But we're also rejoicing in learning how to cook Afghan rice and to learn all that very special stuff that each group of immigrants brings. And right now I'm looking yet and expecting that we will have immigrants seeking asylum from Ukraine, if they don't seek refugee status, which will take longer, but the asylums will probably arrive first. And so each time we think about this new wave of immigrants, I look at it as an opportunity to learn what their gifts are and to learn to appreciate what we have for ourselves, but also what we can give away from our hearts, what wonderful ideas and hopes and dreams we can also give to them and to their families.

**Speaker 3 (23:23):** That's great. And what would you say, I guess, to the Baltimore community or to the world, however you want to think about it, that how can we support immigrant populations and well, or support the work that you're doing?

**Pat Jones (23:39):** Right, right, right. I think we all, everybody here on the staff always says the same thing. When someone comes to the door, we always have an open door. We always welcome people in. We always provide them a safe place. We always ask them to tell their story and tell them that we will walk the journey with them. If we can have that attitude towards those people that we meet, who come from other countries, either seeking safety or security or hopes or dreams, if we can open our door and listen to stories, I think we will find that our attitudes will shift and that we will have a much more welcoming city for immigrants who want to come and help redevelop Baltimore, make us a more successful city again.

**Speaker 3 (24:30):** Thank you.