

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

**Whitney Frazier** (00:00): If you can introduce yourself, please.

**MonTressa Tripps** (00:03): Absolutely. My name is MonTressa Tripps. I have been a resident of Baltimore city the majority of my life. I am currently a community health worker where I do outreach in the community, providing harm reduction tools, as well as overdose education and distribution of Naloxone. I just really enjoy being in the community, engaging individuals, giving resources, talking with them about what they may need to help them live successful lives. Yeah.

**Whitney Frazier** (00:50): Tell us what a typical day looks like for you with your work.

**MonTressa Tripps** (00:57): So, with my work in outreach, I generally have a lot of sites through the city where we go in saturated areas of drug activity and we distribute Narcan. A typical day is going on one of the major corners in Baltimore city, standing outside, talking with individuals, engaging them, giving them resources as well as the overdose reversal medication of Narcan.

**MonTressa Tripps** (01:34): During those times, I get to familiarize myself with the day-to-day thoughts and activities of average Baltimore city citizens. I really find it thrilling just to be able to sit and talk with those that have been in certain communities for years. And they express to me what they see and tell me how they believe change can come. So on a daily basis, that's part of my day. The other parts of my day, I collaborate and interact with a lot of different Baltimore city agencies to assist them in getting the information out there to the citizens as they need it.

**Whitney Frazier** (02:22): I'm going to keep going with a couple more questions about your work, because I find it really amazing and intriguing and not something I know a lot about. So if you don't mind answering a few more questions. So I guess one question is what brought you to do this work? How did you get involved in that type of work?

**MonTressa Tripps** (02:46): Actually, it was the blessing of receiving a job as a outreach worker. I was looking for part-time work while I was pursuing my bachelor's degree and during that I was fortunate enough to come across a agency that was willing to hire me. I started from the ground up, I moved through ... And in speaking with them at the interview, what really engaged me and excited me was the fact that I could do what I love best, and that's give information.

**MonTressa Tripps** (03:23): I love to talk to individuals and express to them something they might not have known prior, or even get information that I didn't know about. You have a lot of history ... excuse me, a lot of historians that are average citizens that know so much about the city. And it really fascinates me when there are those that feel comfortable enough to speak freely about their own life experiences. So that drew me to the position and allowed me to just flourish within in that organization.

**Whitney Frazier** (04:04): And how are you received when you're out on a major corner in Baltimore? Are you met with any adversity or are people welcoming to you being out there? How do you approach that work?

**MonTressa Tripps (04:25):** I approach that work with an authenticity that just literally goes, "Okay, I'm willing to listen to you. Are you willing to listen to me?" There's not a lot ... I believe that I'm received openly. In the few years that I have been doing this work there has been little pushback unless the conversation gets overly heated with someone else who butted ... who intruded on a conversation, but we're welcomed. The group that I work with, we're expected. They look for us for the information as well as the harm reduction tools we are able to supply them with.

**MonTressa Tripps (05:14):** So that's been a great part of it. The thing that surprised me a lot with this position was that even in the current state of things, average individuals are open to talk with you, if you're willing to explain to them what it is you're offering. Not just come up, "Here, take this. I got this for you. It's free." Sometimes free will get their attention, but the information afterwards and what it's free and what it's used for is the most important part.

**Whitney Frazier (05:53):** So now a little bit about the last few years. What has your work looked like over the past couple of years of the pandemic and how is that different or-

**MonTressa Tripps (06:09):** Right.

**Whitney Frazier (06:09):** What have you been doing?

**MonTressa Tripps (06:10):** Right. So the last few years was like a ... someone cut the light switch off on the world and all of us were walking around with candles, right. When COVID hit, I was actually doing my last semester in a graduate school of graduate studies. And it was like, "No more school, sit home. You've got to do it virtually, and this is what it is." So I had to adapt. I had to bob, weave, pivot, every adjustment that came about in order to find some type of balance.

**MonTressa Tripps (06:53):** Along with that, with school that came the same with work, because my work is in the community, forward-facing healthcare information that we give. We literally had to find other ways to get those needed tools into the community. So that took a little, as we say, ingenuity, and that was to make sure that the places that every average everyday citizens go to that might need them, would be able to supply it to them by us supplying it to them.

**MonTressa Tripps (07:33):** So if I go to The Dollar Tree and The Dollar Tree is in a community that's saturated and could possibly use it, that Dollar Tree has patrons that come in and some of those patrons need resources or need assistance. Overdoses are not timed. Overdoses are not seen on an average individual, not knowing what they might have digested before walking in a store. So those things were ways we were able to keep those supplies in the community.

**MonTressa Tripps (08:09):** The average corner stores, barber shops, phone stores, dollar stores, supermarkets, that's where we had to change from talking to everyone face-to-face to making sure everyone still had what they need freely. This wasn't something they had to walk in the store and say, "Here, can I purchase one of these?" It was there for them and they knew that they could go to that store because we left it there for them. So it was a big change for us to stop the process of going out every day, talking to everyone in different areas, but we still were able to conduct our services, not as normal, but just about just as much.

**Whitney Frazier (09:00):** When the COVID-19 became a thing did your role shift in terms of what you were being asked to do in terms of healthcare or yeah, what was that like for your conversations with community?

**MonTressa Tripps (09:19):** Definitely. Definitely. There was a large demand and a large usage of PPE from masks ... We had masks, we had sleeves, we had the face shields. We supplied everyone with ... as we gave out the Narcan, we supplied every ... the community with masks, with hand sanitizers. For my team and myself, we actually wore these things on a regular basis in order to go conduct our day-to-day lives as well as to do the work we were asked to do.

**Whitney Frazier (09:59):** Were you afraid?

**MonTressa Tripps (10:03):** I'm a believer. I am a believer. I'm a woman of strong faith. There's always some trepidation and fear that it could attack me, but there ... I wouldn't say completely scared for myself. It was the fact that I could get it and give it to someone else. That was the biggest fear that if I would ... the work that I was doing, if I contracted it, that I would pass it on to those that I made kept safe, that were close to me. But it was a little tumultuous, but it was somewhat able to be done. Yeah.

**Whitney Frazier (10:49):** Yeah. It sounds like you didn't stop. You just found a way to keep doing the work that needed to be done. So when the vaccination came out, how did you feel about that and were you-

**MonTressa Tripps (11:04):** Um-

**Whitney Frazier (11:05):** Are you vaccinated?

**MonTressa Tripps (11:07):** Absolutely. Vaccinated and boosted and willing to get the next one if needed.

**Whitney Frazier (11:11):** Okay.

**MonTressa Tripps (11:15):** So when the vaccines came out, I'm somewhat of a person that does a little research before I totally invest in a theory or an idea. That comes from my time in matriculation of a professor always saying, "Well, how do you perceive this and what's the underlining story behind what you're perceiving?" Right? The vaccines, when they were coming out, when they were creating them, it was a thing of who did what work? What is the percentage of the tests that they conducted on these vaccines? And who did they conduct them on?

**MonTressa Tripps (12:02):** Then you look at the statistics. You look at the numbers. You look at the manufacturers. You look at the small issues that might have come about in creating the vaccines. So I was methodical on which vaccine I wanted, but I knew I was going to get it because it would make ... it would put a shield and a guard up for me to be able to continue doing what I needed to do and it would also protect those around me. So there was very little hesitation about getting a vaccine.

**Whitney Frazier (12:39):** I know this from Ms. Gwen, but you can tell it how you want to, that you were very active in helping others get vaccinated, correct, or ...

**MonTressa Tripps (12:49):** Correct.

**Whitney Frazier (12:50):** I'm curious how you did that because I have family that still isn't vaccinated and I know there's still a lot of fear around the vaccination. So curious how you-

**MonTressa Tripps (13:03):** Absolutely.

**Whitney Frazier (13:03):** ... how you shared, how you went through those steps with people?

**MonTressa Tripps (13:08):** Right. So I was the first in my immediate family because of being a forward-facing healthcare worker. I was on that list to be first. Having elderly parents and a companion that has underlining conditions, they were ... it was like, "Okay, I'm setting you appointments. If need be, I'll take you and let's go do it." There was no questions. There was no pushback when it came to them. Everyone was willing, ready, and able. All of them are boosted and it's a thing whereas, we want to stay alive, so ... and we want to keep those around us alive. So let's just do it.

**MonTressa Tripps (13:56):** Now to go with the younger generation, the conversations with young adults was the most interesting things I have ever done. And I'll give you this little antidote where I have a 28 year old son and talking to him about the vaccine and saying, "Well, why won't you get it? Why won't you get it?" He literally went to the refrigerator and got a magnet and put the magnet on my arm and stated that, "Don't you know that that's going to make you magnetized?" The vaccine.

**MonTressa Tripps (14:39):** I said, "Really? Do you really believe that?" He said, "I don't know, but I'm just checking." I said, "Okay, well." And it was still a tussle with a lot of them and their friends and things of that nature. But when it came down to, "Well, do you want to work? Do you want to be able to go to the shows? Do you want to be safe around your children? I mean, how do you perceive being able to do that if you're in a community that doesn't want to get vaccinated from this deadly virus that's killing people?"

**MonTressa Tripps (15:18):** "If you don't want to get it, that makes you the odd man out and therefore, you won't be able to conduct things, life as usual without it, until we can all get some type immunity." A lot of the associates, his associates, went on and got vaccinated, but he still wouldn't do it. So it's still a thing of trying to convince him that there's no harm in it and it's better to have it than not to have it.

**Whitney Frazier (15:56):** Wow. Thanks for sharing that personal story.

**MonTressa Tripps (15:59):** Yeah. You're welcome.

**Speaker 3 (16:02):** Amen. [inaudible 00:16:02]

**Whitney Frazier (16:04):** Yeah. So what about people in the community that you were face ... interacting with? Were you talking to them? I'm sure they were asking you because they trust you as a healthcare worker, right?

**MonTressa Tripps (16:20):** Correct. So, because we promoted the vaccine and testing sites, the ... I would say it was about a 60/40 percentage. You had a 60% of individuals that said, "Yeah, I'm boosted. Yeah. I've got my vaccines. Where can I go get it? Did you get it? What did it make you feel like?" You had some stories whereas, "I was sick for the first shot. The second shot was okay. My arm hurt."

**MonTressa Tripps (16:55):** Little symptoms that some received but it brought humanness to the conversation to let them know, "You go ahead and get the shot. Your arm might hurt for a minute. But then next thing you know, you protected from COVID or severe COVID symptoms, things like that." So I think it was about a 60/40. Younger people were on the cusp of, "Yeah, I'm going to do it because I want to keep my job." And some of them was, "No, I'm not getting that shot. Don't need it. Don't want it," things of that nature. But the conversations were really real. They were riveting.

**Whitney Frazier (17:35):** What have you learned from all this, or how has your perspective changed or shifted over the last few years of all this?

**MonTressa Tripps (17:46):** It's not really a change, it's more so of an obvious understanding that ... I'm going to let that go by. That individuals have a right to believe what they believe and if they're open and willing to hear the facts and listen to the information, maybe they'll receive an aha moment and go, "Okay, it's a possibility, let me give it a try." Experiencing something that's not going to cause any harm to them or to anyone else.

**MonTressa Tripps (18:20):** I've learned that isolation can be tough because COVID kept a lot of people isolated. And in a lot of ways, it brought out the humanity of average citizens who wanted to make sure that their neighbors and their community had necessities like food and water and things of that nature. I've learned that that's still there. Common compassion for an average individual is still there. Even though there are a lot of differences, there are a lot of similarities and that one incident brought out the similarity of love and compassion for one to another.

**Whitney Frazier (19:12):** That was really nice. Thanks. So as we hopefully get out of this, what are your hopes for the future, for your work for Baltimore, for the world? I don't know.

**MonTressa Tripps (19:31):** Yeah. And so my hopes is that this experience has taught us more than we knew from the beginning. It has put us on the cusp of being forward thinking and prepared in case there may be another episode or epidemic that sweeps through and takes so many lives. That's the one thing that I dislike most about this, about COVID is that so many people had to die for us to get a better understanding of what it is, what it does and what it can do to humanity, to a whole state of living.

**MonTressa Tripps (20:17):** What COVID has really shown is that we are resilient people. We are able to stumble, make mistakes, sometimes wrong choices, and we are still able to get back up. We're able to do what's needed for ourselves, our families, our community, and it's for the good of everyone, not just for personal achievement. That's part of another thing that I enjoy about my work. It's not just for paycheck. It's not just for, per se, saying, "I'm doing something."

**MonTressa Tripps (21:01):** It's the full action and the capacity to ... the ability to see how what I do has the capacity to help so many. What we deliver and how we impact one community at one point is reached over to the next community because these things are shared. The information is given to someone that knew nothing about what we do.

**MonTressa Tripps (21:29):** So it's really strengthened my belief that we are here only for a purpose. And a lot of times when we make use of our gifts, that our purpose comes clear and I love what I do. It's a thing whereas if someone has information that can help another individual, I'm going to make sure it gets out there. So that's the best part of where we are with what we do and where I work. Yeah.

**Whitney Frazier (22:04):** Thank you. Hey, I'm going to ask a couple more questions about your work because I am ignorant to what you do and how you do it. So I'm just also intrigued by it. But do you ever get frustrated seeing people in ... the drug issues day-to-day in Baltimore and do ... you seem like you have so much hope and I love your smile. And I feel like if it were me out on the streets, trying to make sure people were not overdosing and that kind of thing, I would get hopeless really easily. So how do you keep your hope up? How do you not get frustrated? That kind of thing.

**MonTressa Tripps (22:57):** That I keep my hope up-

**Whitney Frazier (22:58):** I'm being real with you. Yeah. I just want to be real and whatever. Yeah.

**MonTressa Tripps (23:02):** Yeah. Yeah. So to be real is being a person with lived experience. That's how I keep my hope up because I know where they are. I've felt what they've felt to some extent, because everyone experiences it differently. And I believe that there's a way out, there is a way through it. There is a way to find some peace and balance in life. That goes with the overdoses. That goes with the addiction. That goes with the drug distribution.

**MonTressa Tripps (23:36):** There's a balance. There's a way for those that are still in the grips and living with addiction to come through and that's with information. If you don't know a way out and you're feeling hopeless and depressed and that there's no way to come through what you're feeling at that moment. I see what we do as that, like I said before, that aha moment, that shining light because they could see a pamphlet that we have that we give out.

**MonTressa Tripps (24:14):** We had a campaign and the campaign informed on how to test what you do before you use it, how to make sure you have a buddy system, don't do it alone. Just information that average individuals take it upon themselves in order to want to feel better and not think about the circumstances or situation they're feeling better in.

**MonTressa Tripps (24:37):** So I stay positive because I've been there. I keep hope because I know that there's a way to balance how you're feeling and what you're doing. And it also helps to be a woman of faith and to have a strong support system that helped bring me along. So, and that continues to help me today.

**Whitney Frazier (25:03):** That's one of my questions. How do you take care of yourself, with all over the last two years, especially? How do you take care of yourself?

**MonTressa Tripps (25:15):** Well, I've learned that self-care is very important. I've learned that moments of me time, definitely time with my higher power, and being able to have a community and a support system that I can talk to openly and freely. That helps me stay afloat. At any given moment there's an emotion that might come over that has me feeling a little dismayed, a little agitated, but we have those three ... those four things that we say, halt. Never get hungry, never get angry, never get lonely, never get tired. You can't get too far in those things to whereas you're unable to pull yourself out. So I think of about that.

**Whitney Frazier (26:09):** Thank you.

**MonTressa Tripps (26:11):** Mm-hmm (affirmative). You're welcome.

**Whitney Frazier (26:12):** What neighborhood do you live in?

**MonTressa Tripps (26:15):** I actually live in between Penn North and Upton area.

**Whitney Frazier (26:20):** Okay. Yeah. Cool.

**MonTressa Tripps (26:22):** Yeah. Yeah. So as you know, this is a very, very busy fluctuating area. They're rebuilding. They're doing some beautiful things in the area, but as well as providing programs for individuals that might need assistance, mental health and substance abuse. They're working on trying to give the community what it needs.

**Whitney Frazier (26:48):** Right. Yeah. Because when one of us is suffering, we're all suffering on some level. Right. We're [crosstalk 00:26:55]-

**MonTressa Tripps (26:55):** Yes. Indeed.