

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

Charity K. (00:06): Hey y'all. My name is Charity K. I'm a senior currently at Cristo Rey Jesuit High School. And I have seven minutes to tell y'all my COVID story. And that was two years worth of an experience. I'm going to try to do my best. So honestly, I really just want to start with saying that when COVID happened in March 2020, I was 16 and I was a sophomore. I remember hearing about COVID coming into existence. It was like, whoa. What's was that? That's a weird name for a disease. What's going on? Not a disease, but you know what it is. But I was in school. I think I was in English class and we were working on Where I'm From poems and we were writing. And that week was the week of my sophomore ball. So I'm like, "Yo, this is how you do it."

Charity K. (01:02): I'm thinking about Montel Jordan. I'm thinking about partying, having fun. And then right in the middle of the school day, the principal is like, "Sorry, the sophomore ball is done. It's canceled. You're not having it." And I'm like, "This is not how we do it. What is going on?" And I was so upset. I went to him and I was like, "Principal reap." That's his name. "Is this a joke?" He's like, "No, I'm so sorry. Charity." Mind y'all I had my dress, had my shoes. I had my hair done. I came to school with my hair. Now I was so ready. And it was just this event just took over the whole world. It just really stopped everything. And so for the first week or two, I was like, "Okay, it's a little vacation."

Charity K. (01:45): "I'm chilling at home, hanging out with my nephew, just kicking it, watching my shows." Honestly, I'm not going to lie to y'all. I was not doing that much schoolwork. I was just like, "This is my time to relax. I'm chilling." And the reality hit, I got an email in my inbox after finally picking on my computer. Okay, let me do some work. I opened up my computer and my principals like, "We're shutting the school down indefinitely until further notice." And I'm just like, "Wow." It wasn't a vacation anymore. That was my life.

Charity K. (02:21): Any bit of normalcy I had was gone because in my mind I'm thinking, "Okay, I'm going to have some friends over, we going to kick it. We going to have fun." And it's like, "No, you have to stay home. You have to keep your masks on. If you do go out, you have to have a few people at a time." And it was just so many rules and regulations. And it was just, I can't live my life. I just wanted to be a sophomore. I just wanted to go to a dance. I just wanted to have genuine fun. And it was like everything stopped. And so in the midst of all of this, a cool head came to me by Octavia E. Butler as I was scrolling through Instagram.

Charity K. (02:54): And it says, "All that you touched, you changed. All that you changed, changes you. The only lesson truth has changed and that God has changed."

Charity K. (03:01): And I was like, "This change can't be good." Because, mind you, I'm a very spiritual person. So I'm like this can't be God's doing, this is just so crazy to me. Why is my life on hold? And what did I do to deserve this? And so I just went in my mind. I really went a little coo-coo a little bit. Because I'm like, "Okay, I'm at home for a few weeks with these people that I'm not even trying to be around 24/7. I'm around my mom. I'm trying to use the bathroom. It's five of us in the house. I'm trying to use the bathroom, brushing my teeth. She walk past. She's about to use the bathroom. I'm like, ma-am, I'm brushing my teeth. What are you doing?"

Charity K. (03:38): You got the nephew running by in the stroller. Not the stroller to walk, because mind you he's getting ready to walk. So now he's really busy and it was just so much going on y'all. And I'm just like, "Oh my God, I need peace of mind. I need sanity." And so I just really got on my knees one night and I prayed. I was like, "God, I'm really losing it. I really need some peace. I need some clarity. I need to understand what I'm doing." And I was like, "If there's a story you want to be made out of this, I need you to help me get through this so that I can tell it." Because I knew if I didn't pray, if I didn't do none of that. I would not be here. And so I was given the opportunity with Debt Education, a local nonprofit here to make facials for a dollar.

Charity K. (04:19): That was my first introduction to having a job. Because at the time I did just turn 16. So I'm like, "Okay, let me make these facials for a dollar." So I got a dollar for every facial I made. And then before you know, it's June/July, the world's opening back up a little bit more and I'm like, "Okay, the world is getting normal again." One of my friends had a cookout because one of her cousins has graduated. So I was like, "Okay, now we're back to Montel Jordan. This is how we do it. This is life. Okay. We're getting back to some normalcy." And I started a summer program with them. So they have different tracks. It's social innovation, start-up garage, stories for impact. There were so many different things. And I signed up for the social innovation track.

Charity K. (05:01): Through that track, you're able to like create different items and sell them to help your community. So the topic was mass incarceration and I had to create something to help the community or the people affected by it in Baltimore. So I'm like, "Hmm?" While I was in quarantine, I took up journaling a lot and I went back in my journal. I'm like, "I wrote a lot." So let me try to make a journal prompt book for youth affected by a loved one who are incarcerated because my brother was incarcerated when I was what 12. And it took a toll on me. So I'm like, "Okay, let me write a book to honor this experience." I went back and forth with my comrades and we were talking about it and we're like, "Okay, let's do this." So at the end of the summer program, you have to have a big presentation for it.

Charity K. (05:44): And my book was picked for it, mind you, this is just doing a beta version of it. You're not actually going to sell it. You're kind of idealizing it. And so one of the people in the room that were watching my presentation sent me a message. We want to make this habit. We want to really take this to the next level. So from March 2020, till I want to say September 2021, I worked on this journal. I worked on launching it for SoHo Publishing and just all that. And then it crashed and burned. It was so much I didn't know went into SoHo publishing and getting certified and just getting copyright. It was just a whole long process and it crash and burned. And one of the mindsets is to fail fast and keep learning. So I'm like, "Okay, let me think back to some other experiences I can do and pull from to create."

Charity K. (06:30): So I was like, "You know what? Let me just create healing center storytelling workshops for you to just come out and tell their stories as they want to. Kind of like this. And so I pitched the idea, got the funding for it. Thankfully. And just last Saturday I had my first storyteller workshop for these youth who are impacted by the pandemic and just life before and after it. Just helping black youth address their traumas and reclaim their narrative. And since then I've realized how important it was for me to have that experience in the pandemic. Because a very crucial moment at that workshop, last Saturday was a young girl just coming out, "I feel very affected by how many youth and..." Trigger warning. "How many youth are taking their lives in Baltimore and beyond. Like just back to back. There's so many people I know personally and just all over the world who have taken their lives." And I'm just like, "Wow."

Charity K. (07:24): So many people in this room have gone through experiences with wanting to not be here anymore. And I remember in the pandemic, I literally tried to clock out and I was just over it and God said, "No". And I did not understand why until last Saturday. And a girl came up to me, she said, "Yo, this workshop really saved me because you don't know where I was at." And so just thinking back to last Saturday and thinking to now. I was so nervous to come up here and share this story but if it had not been for COVID, I would not have worked on self-publishing a book. I would not have created and cured storytelling workshop for black youth to heal in communities where they can rest and radically do that. I would not have been the person I am today. I would not even be talking in this microphone to y'all.

Charity K. (08:12): I'm like, "Who am I?" I'm having an out-of-body experience right now. I'm looking at myself like, "Are you really talking right now? Is this real life like?" But COVID really gave me my story. And I know a lot of people are like, "COVID did this to me and COVID hurt me." That is so valid. There's so much validity in feeling like COVID caused more trauma than good. But for me, COVID caused me a lot of trauma, but I got a lot of blessings out of it.

Charity K. (08:39): I got a lot of good, I got my life back. I finally understood what was like to want my life again and to want to help other people want their lives too. And I just hope that with y'all hearing my story, if you're going through something or you feel like things aren't coming into fruition like you want them to, they will. I think it's just a matter of letting it all play out the way it should. And it will. I'm still in the process of writing my story. I'm telling y'all just a very small portion of it. Because mind you, I got seven minutes and I don't know how many I got right now, but I just want to thank y'all for coming out and just letting us tell our stories.