

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

**Chisom (00:07):** Growing up, I was a very shy child. Speaking up in class used to make me very nervous. So for a while, I sat comfortably with the label of quiet kid, until, thank God, my parents put me into a lot of activities like karate, ballet, and hip hop, soccer and swimming, a whole lot of activities that just were really uncomfortable for a natural introvert. And with all of these activities, I learned how to really express myself with confidence, and I carry that all the way through high school, where I got into other activities that made me uncomfortable.

**Chisom (00:56):** And so fast forward to my senior year of high school. I became the president of our high school's African Student Association. Shout out to North Stafford High School in Virginia, and shout out to our club sponsor, Walisa Sabb. Love them, love them.

**Chisom (01:15):** And so being president, I learned a lot of things really fast. For one, I learned how to work with a team, not leading in front of or behind, but right next to the people I was in the club with. And by working together and really supporting each other through our roles and encouraging each other to step up and just do our best, we became more than a club, really. We became family. And that trait of ours was really passed down from our first president who was before me, Bernard, may he rest in peace. He allowed us to really come close together, and I took the same ideals from him to not only be performing within a school club, but be able to connect with those around me in whatever we were doing.

**Chisom (02:15):** At first, we started as a dance group, performing Afro Dance, and that was really fun, but we wanted more. So within three years, we worked to become an organization which had connections outside of our high school, within our community, and we became a group that had more than just our dances to us. We had our Black History Month celebration performances. And through the doing all of that, I had ASA or African Student Association become a group that's very close to my heart.

**Chisom (03:03):** And going into Hopkins, I kept this same value with me. This was fall of 2020, and it was a very weird time with coronavirus for me and all of my high school friends. We had really gone through a time where we couldn't see each other, but stayed in communication. We actually had Zoom birthday celebrations where we surprised each other on Zooms and stayed updating each other with what was going on in our lives, and it really shows the power of Zoom. They should sponsor me. They should.

**Chisom (03:50):** And the time that we had before we started classes, we were having the same feeling of missing out of the college experience we dreamed of. We had a sort of loneliness of not being able to meet other college students as we would do on campus. So, one day thinking through all of this, I decided there should be a social event that's COVID-safe. And I brought an idea to our Hopkins African Student Association, where I was on the e-board, and I proposed the idea of having a virtual speed date, and they loved it.

**Chisom (04:38):** So, spring of my freshman year, this was 2021 now, we started planning and formed a group to create the event. We had started working with the National African Student Association, as well as UNC Chapel Hill's African Student Association, and we together started planning first the

matchmaking form, which we had students fill out to give us their preferences and tell us more about themselves so we could match them with someone compatible. At least, what we deemed as compatible. And so we had people invited from 12 different universities. They filled out this matchmaking form to find whether it was a new friend or a romantic interest, and really they had about a couple days or a week or so waiting for the night of the event to meet their match.

**Chisom (05:45):** So, fast forward to the night of the event, we had encouraged people to dress up and keep their cameras on in order to really connect. And people showed out. They did. People came out in African traditional wear or in dressy gowns or dress shirts, and everyone just looked beautiful. And we did have over 80 attendees throughout that night.

**Chisom (06:15):** It was a Friday night. We began around 8:00 PM and we had people begin with a breakout room, where me and my operations team, which we kind of just were the background where we had a breakout room. And in there we were working on the same Excel sheet where we had people map out who was going to be paired to who, while I moved them around the breakout rooms. Without my team, I really would have just probably froze, because there was so much information from the form itself. But yeah, there was some technicalities involved in the actual event, but in general, everything went very well and everyone had a good time.

**Chisom (07:13):** For me, though I wasn't actually involved in the matchmaking game, I remember coming out of the operations breakout room and asking everybody, "How's everyone doing?" And I remember seeing just a bunch of boxes of smiling faces and people put up their heart emojis on Zoom boxes, and it was so nice to see that people were genuinely open to having connections with other people.

**Chisom (07:49):** What I really got out of the event was I learned that creating connections and creating spaces for people to connect is something I'm really passionate about. For people that night, people who didn't match with a partner, we had created a love is not lost message to show at the end where we told everyone that we all deserve love and genuine connection, so just keep being your amazing self and one day you'll attract the person you deserve. That was so nice to everyone sharing that same message.

**Chisom (08:32):** And really, the fact that I'm still in connection with so many people I met that night, and people exchanged contacts that night, in addition to if they had a match, which we also, on top of this, we did have a little competition going on where the top three compatible pairs ... We had people fill out a compatibility quiz based on whether they really got to know the other person. And once we figured out who were going to be our top three pairs, we had each of them get prizes for a date night. For example, we had a cash card for people to buy groceries together and make the same recipe, so it was very, very, very sweet.

**Chisom (09:22):** And once the night was over, it was actually a three-hour long event, so either people had nothing to do or they were very patient or they were just really having a good time, or all the above. And so I was just so, so grateful that it was able to come together, and I would like to pause and take time to thank my team because it really did have a lot of different roles involved, so I'm going to read out their names so they know they're appreciated. So, shout out to Ameerah, Vanessa, Josie, Crystal, Rebecca, Ree, Obi, Ogechi, Fatim, Pearl, Tade, [inaudible 00:10:07] Tobi, and Yared, and shout out to everyone who came that night because it would not have been as great without you.

This transcript was exported on Mar 30, 2022

**Chisom (10:14):** So, with all of this being said, I'm glad I really overcame my shyness and learned that really, the two things that got me through this time, which were given right back to me through this event, were love and connection, which I believe we really need to get us through these tough times. Thank you.