

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

Paul Best (00:07): All right. In the spirit of the black oral tradition, I would like to ask permission from the elders before I move forward. Thank you, mama Deborah. Also in the spirit of the black girl tradition, I must bring my ancestors into the room. And today I want to bring with me my ancestors who are storytellers, artists and educators. My father, Calvin [Best 00:00:35], my aunt, Valerie Harris, and my cousin Myron Keith Miller. Now, since everybody want to tell what happened when COVID hit, I was teaching eighth grade and when the principal sent that message saying school was getting closed indefinitely.

Paul Best (01:00): I put on a pot of greens. And if you know anything about greens, you got do it low and slow. I knew I was going to be home for a while. As long as they wasn't my face, we was going to figure everything else out. So once the greens got that nice stink in the house, I knew they was ready. I sat back and wonder, "What's happening next." Now in Swahili, there's a saying called [foreign language 00:01:32]. And it means how are the children. And the Maasai warriors use it as a greeting to each other. And they understand that even so most of these Maasai warriors don't even have children themselves, that no matter what the life struggles may be, they cannot overshadow the wellbeing of the next generation.

Paul Best (01:58): So, we did a whole year of virtual and it was good. And then school started back up fall 2021. And, remember these are middle schoolers. Teaching middle school children, it's love joy and pain all at the same time. So, I kind of missed this cheering. So when they came in and they were running up to each other, high fiving and fist bumping and catching up, there was so much joy because they hadn't seen each other in so long. And then there was all these rules. Put your mask up over your nose, under your chin. When you're eating, you got to be quiet.

Paul Best (02:47): You all weren't really washing your hands after you went to the bathroom, but now you got to wash your hands before you go to the bathroom too. You wiping your desk down three times a day. You wipe them your screen down twice a day and most importantly, keep your hands to yourself. Now everything was cool. I saw the black girl being great, I saw the black boy joys. They were doing they little tick talking and stiff hiping. And what do you want to say to Joe Byron? Be [inaudible 00:03:19] all that stuff. And it was just this great atmosphere of the joy of being back in the classroom and then October hit.

Paul Best (03:29): And if you know anything about being in education in October, it was dark when I left for work and it was dark when I came back and the time had changed. And there was a shift in my classroom, the culture took a huge nose dive. Those same boys who was best friend and play fighting now they fighting for real. Those same girls who was best friend TikTok and doing all that joyous stuff, now they hate each other. The eye rolling, the bullying, the disrespect.

Paul Best (04:07): And I had to sit with it because I wasn't sure what was going on. Because that kind of still goes on in middle school anyway, but it happened to go up quite a few notches and it didn't sit well with me. And so in teaching, in pedagogy, they have this thing called a classroom reset. And when you do a classroom reset, you sit everybody down because the culture has gotten so bad. Everybody,

whether you was involved in it or not, we need to sit down and realize what went wrong and how can we fix it?

Paul Best (04:41): Now I know these are middle schoolers and even though they like to text and talk on the phone and on IM and everything, they was not ready to pull out their feelings around their peers. So I said, "Write it down. What's wrong? Why you hurt? Don't write your name, put it in the paper, put it in the box. I'm the only one that's going to check the box." So a week later I go to the box and I pour all of these voting notes on my desk. And I hear all these stories of pain and disappointment and hurt feelings. And we was cool online when we was playing video games. But when we got to school, he act like he didn't know me.

Paul Best (05:25): She was cool, she was my friend before all of this but you know, she liked that girl that I don't like. I ain't cool with her, so since I ain't cool with her now she cool with her, I ain't cool with none of them. And what I heard was a whole bunch of children who were trying to get back their social standing in their society. They were fighting to get right back where they were a year and a half before. And I had to think, I was like, "Okay, now what can I do about this?" And being the history teacher, I had to remind myself, "Now wait, this has happened before." When a plague hit people and it just kind of reset everything. So I took them back to the children and I opened up the lesson.

Paul Best (06:16): I was like, "Okay, now you all learned this in seventh grade, but we are going to recap this. You all remember that thing called feudalism where you had all these people at the top? You had the Pope, the king, the priest, and then you had the Knights and Nobles and the vessels and at the bottom was these peasants. And the Bubonic plague hit. And one thing we know about a plague, it doesn't care who you are, how much money you got and it knocked everybody out. And feudalism was just kicked up in the air.

Paul Best (06:46): A reset happened. Now I told these kids about this reset and as I began to explain history to them, I was like, "Well, there was a whole lot of bad thing that was going on in Europe. Now tell the truth, Africa was living their best life right now. [Mali and Sanka 00:07:04] empire was going really good, but Europe needed a reset. And when the reset happened, what happened was this beautiful theme called the Renaissance. Where all of a sudden there was an increase in thinking for our sales, an increase in philosophy, an increase in art and increase in religion and faith and ingenuity and science. It was beautiful."

Paul Best (07:29): And I realized, and I told my kids, "When I read those letters, you all didn't just miss being together, you missed the connection. You were trying to get back where you were. But there was something else you all was missing." Our children forgot a lot of their social skills. Our children forgot how to self-regulate. That's why so many letters are saying, "She hit me, I thought she was playing. But then I found out she was for real. What she said to me was funny last week, but it ain't funny this week." So our children had lost this ability to self-regulate, to give a compliment, to say please and say thank you. It was like, I was teaching them to be in fourth grade all over again.

Paul Best (08:17): And I thought about the Renaissance. And when you are finally caught up with Africa and was able to use all of these beautiful things that came forth. Now, there's a beautiful thing about being a history teacher and a storyteller. I know the story, I can tell the story, but even better, I know what it takes to change the story. And as we are moving forward, trying to figure out this COVID 19 thing, do not forget about the children. We need to reteach them how to be together again. And while

This transcript was exported on Mar 30, 2022

we do it, they need our love, our compassion and our patience more now than ever to understand what it takes to get along. So years from now, when the question is asked, [foreign language 00:09:22] we want to say the children are well, I say. (Silence.)