

Transcript of Interview with Willis Porter By Kit Heintzman

Interviewee: Willis Porter

Interviewer: Kit Heintzman

Date: 07/21/2022

Location (Interviewee): Florida

Location (Interviewer):

Transcriber: Angelica S Ramos

Some of the things we spoke about include:

COVID safety precautions as a prior transplant recipient; liver transplant as a child. The impact of facing mortality at a young age on spirituality. Hearing about COVID while completing a degree and creating an action plan. Having continuity of care with a medical team prior to the pandemic; consultations and hyperspecific recommendations when the pandemic hit. Initial safety plan: quarantine for 3 months, and then having that period extended. Having close, positive relationships with doctors; recognizing doctors as humans. Quick access to CDC information in Atlanta. Recently catching COVID, 103°F fever; mother traveling to provide care, mother catching COVID and shifting caregiver roles. Emotional and analytical reactions. Doing a remote medical internship in the second year of the MA program. University recommencing football games and not allowing a traditional in-person graduation. Media references to immunocompromised people. How the media can humanize the people they are covering; centering personal stories. Either/or mentalities in politics and health policy. Assumptions about an overlap between someone's chosen safety precautions and political leanings. Checking in on friends; giving and receiving emotional support. Fighting disease as warfare. The choice to be a victor rather than a victim. Focusing on what one can control.

Kit Heintzman 00:00

Hello, would you please start by stating your name, the date, the time and your location?

Willis Porter 00:06

Certainly, my name is Willis Porter. The date is July 21 2022. And the time is 5:11pm. Eastern Standard Time.

Kit Heintzman 00:17

And do you consent to having this interview recorded, digitally uploaded and publicly released under a Creative Commons license attribution noncommercial sharealike?

Willis Porter 00:27

I consent.

Kit Heintzman 00:30

Thank you so much. Would you please start by introducing yourself to anyone who might find themselves listening, what would you want them to know about you?

Willis Porter 00:39

Sure. So to anyone who might find themselves listening to this my name is Willis Porter, like I mentioned at the beginning, and I am a liver transplant recipient of now 22 years, I was originally transplanted at children's in

Atlanta, back on January 1, 2000, during Y2K, if anyone's alive and not alive, and remembers that. And if you're not alive during that, and you've never heard of it, just look it up. Um, and I'm very thankful to be here, you know, lots of challenges with transplant, lots of challenges during the COVID pandemic. But again, it's about extending the conversation and really focusing on those expenses. And I'm very grateful to you Kit for inviting me on here. And for us having this conversation.

Kit Heintzman 01:28

Would you tell me a story about your life during the pandemic?

Willis Porter 01:33

Certainly, so when I think about my life, during the pandemic, the biggest memory that comes to mind is right, in our quarantine, starting with the virus was something that was overseas that didn't really feel like in the United States at the moment, however, that very quickly changed. And by the time I was, I was on spring break. And by the time I come back from being out of state, it was just all over the place out of control. And so my medical team, and I and my family ultimately made the decision for me to quarantine, originally, that was three months, that then turned into six months, that then turned into nine months, it was different levels of quarantine throughout the process. But that was really hard, you know, going from being a graduate student to seeing people in class, you know, doing the whole life thing, seeing people to basically seeing no one outside of your extended family, except for one person for an entire year. So you can imagine the psychological impact that that could have on somebody. But again, very, very grateful to have those support systems around me to help me in that initial quarantine, because we really didn't know, you know, we didn't know if a vaccine was going to be available, we didn't know the the vaccine efficacy, that that would have are really much of anything very much an unknown territory, if you will. And again, here I am on the other side, here we are on the other side, but again, still a lot to be done, still need to be covis, conscious, still need to be aware of what was going on. And ultimately, I think at the end of the day, just take care of ourselves and make sure we're in the best physical health we can be, you know, to battle this thing, should we get it.

Kit Heintzman 03:25

I'd love to hear more about having a medical team and then having conversations with a medical team when this all started.

Willis Porter 03:35

Absolutely. So again, I'm very blessed in the fact that my medical team in Atlanta was really proactive in maintaining the line of communication. early on during COVID Everything from sending updates to me in the mail, to using the online patient portal that I'm sure all of us have used one way or another in some form of our own medical care. And so we really maintained those lines of communication at the end of the day, the conversation, no matter what we had, ultimately came down to me and my decision and what I thought was best, again, taking everything into consideration and it's really it's really when you have that going on to be able to have the input from so many people. You know, you have your GI doctors, you know, you have your your specialists, you have your main hepatologist you have bad deeds, continuing the health care process, sleep, to your medical care, and that is the way it is for all transplant recipients. Now whether you choose to do that is up to you and your discretion. But I was like you know what, let's let's bring everybody in on the table. Let's have a massive conversation. And we did and that was really, really big blessing to be able to have their expertise to lean on because there was a lot that we didn't know. But there was also a lot we did know, there was a lot of lab work,

there was a lot of diagnostic data that we could look at, historically of where my health had been trending, to ultimately allow all of us to collectively make the best decision possible, that I do believe to this day was continued to be the right decision. And that was to quarantine until ultimately being reintroduced into society eventually. But it was really neat, you know, to be able to rely on that, and understanding that that's not necessarily what everyone has at their disposal, so to speak. And again, being very conscious of that, and being very aware, and blessed, you know, to have that and thankful. Because I'm sure there were a lot of other people that wish they did have that, to be able to consult so many people, especially being in Atlanta, you know, the CDC is right down the road. So we're constantly getting brand new updates daily. And it was, it was really cool to be able to lean on all of those experiences to ultimately help you make the best medical care decision that you needed to make in that moment. And that was really vital. Because time was of the essence, we didn't have the, we didn't have the luxury of time on our side. This was rapidly, rapidly developing. Decisions weren't made. In days, and months, they were made hours, they were made in weeks, there's a difference. And when it comes down to that you need the best team around you. And I believe to this day that I still have the best team around me.

Kit Heintzman 06:33

Would you say a little bit more about your sort of social relationships with doctors sort of what it feels like to have these kinds of relationships and how long you've been working with this team?

Willis Porter 06:47

Sure. Of the doctors, I my perspective on healthcare is very different than a lot of other people, I look at doctors as my best friends, I look at them as almost peers of mine in a way just because, you know, when you grow up having a medical condition that requires you to have a transplant at age three, and you go all the way through from three to 18, you bridge over to adult care. And you know, from age 18, to the point where I was I was 18 to 25, 25, 26 years old, they've been in charge of my care. So that's key years of rapport built up years of conversations that we've had outside of the healthcare setting. And so it's really cool, you know, for when I sit down and I talk to my doctors, I talked to him, you know, yes, there's a respect there, right, for the position, there's a respect for the academics, and the knowledge bases that they have, and the value that that brings to me in my medical in my medical care overall. But also at the same time, they're humans, you know, adult, they're their folks they got feelings to, you know, and believe it or not, a lot of them have some really great sense of humor, at least I think they do. And so, you know, being able to have those people to rely on during that time was so important, especially given the amount of knowledge that they had on me dating back to before I transitioned care from pediatric to adult, where they were able to no pull data from when I was in high school or all the way through to where I am now. Historically to be able to see, okay, well, here's how he's trending, he's trending in a really good direction. So, you know, based on that, you know, we were able to figure out the exact level of a say, risk, so to speak, that I was at, but being able to have those relationships, I think it's really unique for me, because, you know, I've, I was very fortunate and blessed to have had an excellent teen transition program in place. When I was transitioning care to where I knew about my health care, I knew about the medicine I took, I knew about how I needed to take care of myself, the medicines I took and what would happen if I didn't take them. I knew the names of them everything, you name it, I knew it by age 18, 19 years old when I transitioned out from from peds to adult. And so because I had that knowledge bases, I could talk with my physicians on a very different level that I guess commanded a little more respect, so to speak, but also command a lot more attention than some physicians, I guess you could say unfortunately, give their own patients sometimes. But again, it's the benefit of being in advanced practice setting where you know, the people that you're getting care from are the best of the best. And, you know, the academics, they've been through, you know, the residencies they've had to go through in

order to be where they are in that moment. And you rely on all of them. We have conversations. I remember my main my main doctor at my hospital. When he found out I was a UVA grad like he just stuck to that He was like, How's UGA? How's it going? How's your school, and I'm like, it's so cool, you know, to be able to have a physician that is actively, you know, has an active vested interest in your well-being not only in the clinical setting, but also outside, you know, because so much of your life and so much of your success and health care has nothing to do with what happens inside the halls of a hospital. And inside the, you know, the room of a physician's room, it has everything to do with what's happening outside, externally. And physicians that in my view, the physicians that have a vested interest in their patients who are keeping those communication lines open, such as what we did, that only benefits a patient and I love my team, and I absolutely love them. I'm in the process of transitioning care right now, now that I've moved states, and it breaks my heart because I absolutely love them. I love them to death, I joke around with them. We have inside jokes, we just we have a good time. You know, because when you're in this setting, you know, you understand the acuity of it. But at the same time, you know, my view is if you're not having at least a little bit of fun in there, like you're just you're wasting your time, like just chill. You know, life's crazy enough, you need a team around you that they can support you through thick and thin and have a good sense of humor along the way. And that's definitely the way my team is.

Kit Heintzman 11:23

When did you first hear about COVID-19?

Willis Porter 11:28

Oh, geez. So when I first heard about COVID-19, I was on spring break, I would have been 2019, 2019. Going into 2020. I was about halfway done. I was almost halfway done with my graduate program at UGA is when I first heard about it. And again, it was something that was overseas that once it got to the states just spread from there. But that's ultimately that's when I'd first heard about it. And it's been in my vocabulary ever since.

Kit Heintzman 12:00

What were some of your early reactions?

Willis Porter 12:03

Ooh, that's a really good question. So early reactions to COVID. When I originally thought of this, I thought a very almost like a was making an action plan, so to speak, of, you know, one, what is it to at this moment in time? What level of threat as opposed to me and my health? Based on that. Three, what are actions that I need to take, in order to one protect myself right now in the moment? And to then what are things that I might need to be doing in the future to make that change? And then finally, that fourth thing was, you know, an action of what I need to do right now, you know, do I need to stay here in Florida? Do I need to cut my spring break short, and go back to Athens, you know, go back home, you know, so those are the really the four main things that I looked at. And again, those I continually updated each of those questions and ask myself those questions throughout the entire process of really, you know, making sure I understood the volume of the situation and ultimately, the actions I needed to take.

Kit Heintzman 13:11

Would you help me understand how your experiences brought you to a place that when there's a sort of external health threat like COVID-19, moving around, prompts you to have that awareness that sort of, there are next steps that are quite serious?

Willis Porter 13:32

Well, I think as far as the seriousness of it, no, it's understood, you know, you can look on the news, you can read newspaper clippings, what have you to see the acuity of the situation and to see, at least at the beginning stages of this, just how rapidly the spread, and the gravity of the situation I think anyone with who has a fully, fully developed brain, you know, can look at that situation and be able to see that this is, this is serious, this isn't just another virus this this is this has the potential to be deadly, you know, and then once it comes over to the States is ultimately when I saw it was like, Okay, this is this is picking up steam quick. And this isn't just a Here today, gone tomorrow kind of thing. And really, once it started coming over to the states was when I started making that plan of okay, what I need to do, I'm an Eagle Scout, there's a lot of stuff that we did through in training that just sticks with me, and one of them is that no matter where you are having action plans, either get out or fight your way out of it, whatever it might be. So if you're in a rough situation hiking, and you need to get out of that rough situation, how do you need to do that, you know, a lot of emergency emergency preparedness, you know, Merit Badge classes, first aid, everything, you know, all of that training kind of came back to mine, if you will, of you know, at the end of the day, it's about taking care of myself and that's something that was instilled within me very early with my medical team. as well, to ultimately allow me to see what the threat was in the moment. And as far as allowing myself to understand the seriousness of it, I think that for someone who's been through a lot of medical challenges, it's a lot easier to be able to come to terms with difficult situations and difficult life circumstances when you already have been through a lot of them already in your life. It doesn't really surprise you, so to speak, and more so of here's another thing, let's get through it. You know, and again, understanding the the very nuanced nature of this, of that, you know, this was something that was brand new, but it's something that, again, I had the the, I guess you could say unfortunate experience of having been through so many other medical challenges in the past that I just approached it like I would approach any other medical challenge what I need to do to take care of myself, how long is this going to be looking like and update that accordingly?

Kit Heintzman 16:05

What are some of the things you noticed about the reactions of other people around you at the beginning?

Willis Porter 16:12

Wow, that's an excellent question. So as far as the reactions of other people starting out, there were a couple there were one was a lot of unknown. You know, there was a lot of not knowing, you know, was this an isolated incident in the region of the outbreak? Was this going to go global go viral? To use the term we use now. No, so there's a lot of unknown. There were also people that reacted as a knee jerk reaction, and it was just fear based and fear based alone, which I understand it, you know, there's, there's a lot of emotion going on, and that, but I also think there's a lot of danger, when you strictly just react in feelings in you also don't look at it analytically, as far as how do you health, how do you in a healthy way processes feelings. And again, throughout time, that came, that fear level went down a little bit. So that, you know, there were those that reacted in those two ways. Another one, I would add would be the animal would be the analytical type, you know, the type of people that looked at this, who were, you know, the actual physicians, you know, the doctors, the nurses, the people that were in the healthcare setting, that had the ability to literally put under a microscope, what they were looking at it, and look at this with an analytical mind and a scientific mind to be able to say, Okay, here's the information we're seeing, here's how it, you know, broadly applies to the general public. And here, here's what we need to do. And so then the final group was, you know, us the ones that are, you know, the, in the general population, so to speak, maybe

we reacted out of, you know, fear, maybe we acted out of denial, that's another group. But regardless, we you know, we're, we're involved in this individually, and collectively, at the end of the day, it came down to, you know, all of us taking taking actions, but how you chose to react, I think, probably disproportionately led you to where you are today, whether that be for good or for bad. You know, we see, unfortunately, the a lot of these days and news and everything else for yourselves, not good news, bad news, it sells when people attach themselves to it. And when you add fear on top of an anxiety over the unknown, you start to deal with forces that you don't want to deal with, psychologically, they'll get inside your head, and it almost becomes like the psychological warfare against yourself where you're trying not under a very real threat, but at the same time, you have to look at this, win feelings, but also analytically to be able to see how you need to react. And so those groups of people again, the people that were, you know, the unknown, there was a political group, I would say, the 50 group of, you know, half analytical Yes, you know, there's some danger which is good, you know, to know that, you know, you are afraid of this, you know, that's very important. But also at the end of the day, the other side of that in the 50/50 group is okay, how do I react?

Kit Heintzman 19:36

Tell me a little bit about what your day to day living situation looked like pre pandemic.

Willis Porter 19:42

Pre pandemic, I was in graduate school, so I would wake you up every morning, fix my coffee, you know, get me some good old breakfast, drive, drive to campus on a UGA it was about a 20 minute drive, settled down and UGA campus was was my workplace, you know, I'd go to class, then I got an internship, you know, I'd have all of that it was very well structured, very well scheduled, I was on track to graduate on time, everything was going good. And that was kind of pre COVID. And obviously COVID really changed a lot of that. Lots of social interaction, you know, go into coffee shops go into, you know, go into the dining halls and meeting your friends for stuff, you know, it's a massive University campus. So it's just the amount of the sheer magnitude of the students and the the revenue that is being generated by that university is going to, you know, by nature, bring in a lot of people so very, very busy, a lot of lot going on.

Kit Heintzman 20:49

What did it look like after you entered lockdown?

Willis Porter 20:52

It was a ghost town. It was an absolute ghost town. A you could get from one side of campus, north side of campus to the other relatively quickly, which is almost unheard of coffee shops, everything went either was basically an order only status, you know, you order it in curbside pickup, that's all you would do. Indoor dining was was closed, especially in Athens Clarke County, where we were hit us really hard. And that was felt and not only in the communities that, you know, we're living in Athens, Clarke, but it was also the surrounding, or surrounding places as well, you know, your business, your business sector was really hit hard. Our medical sector was hit, big time. I originally had an internship placement in a medical setting my second year, but when COVID happened, I made the decision to change my internship sites solely based on the fact that we were getting COVID overflow constantly, as I was hearing from all over, you know, COVID, here, COVID. They're just constantly inundated with COVID. And I was like, This isn't good. And so it really it the trifecta hit the business sector, it hit the university sector with the students, and then it hit the medical sector as well. And once once all three of those were hit and max to capacity, it became a ghost town and it just became a survive to tomorrow mentality.

Kit Heintzman 22:26

What else happened with your graduate studies?

Willis Porter 22:30

Great question. So originally, we were on campus, and the decision was made the university level to originally delay the start of classes coming back from spring break and hopes that that would kind of quarantine the group of people coming back from spring break to head that had COVID symptoms, you know, and kind of buffered that from the initial waves. And ultimately, it was left up to our college, the school to really make an action plan themselves as to what they want to do with their students. And our college made the decision to go fully online. So it was at that point that I did. So I went I, in my master's program, it was a two year program, the first year was online. The second year was coat was the COVID year, so that was fully online, and that for me, and that included an internship that was done remotely, that was not necessarily the case for others. But it was strictly due to my immune suppressed status that I felt that it'd be best. And so I became a fully online student living 20 minutes away off campus in a very different world away from COVID. Quarantine. Not not what you would expect to be the standard graduate school experience. I don't think anyone would assume, you know, unless it's a fully online program, and that is what is portrayed and marketed to you at the start. That's not what this was. This was full on site residential program that had to make a very fast shift to fully online. And that was a very interesting change. Because I had friends in my program, you know, I had buddies of mine that I was really close with the you know, we'd get together and study for a test, we'd work on a paper together. But all of that went online. And there was a lot of things that helped in that, you know, the use of Google, Google documents and other things of that nature. But there was the social aspect that was left to left a lot more to be desired. And that was really interesting to see that dynamic change so suddenly, and what started as kind of a short term change turned into a long term agenda.

Kit Heintzman 25:04

What happened with graduation?

Willis Porter 25:08

Oh boy, great question. So graduation is a touchy issue. Um, mostly because, you know, by the time graduation rolled around, we were playing this thing called college football. And some students aptly pointed out that it was rather interesting that a university would hold football games, but somehow tell all of its students that it had to do a none in person virtual graduation. That did not settle, well, with a lot of people, I was fine with it. Originally, I was like, you know, we'll figure it out. And thankfully, you know, by the time graduation rolled around, at least for where we were, COVID kind of started getting better. And so the ability to do graduation ceremonies came back, which was awesome. And so we were able to do that, however, we had to do it in a more open air environment. And so instead of having our college graduation for our school, as well as the university graduation, we, they did kind of like a virtual school graduation thing. But basically, they mailed us, our diploma was basically what they did. And then we had the option to attend a massive graduate school wide. So for basically, every graduate program at the University held a massive graduation ceremony at Stanford Stadium at UGA. And so that's what we did. So in the, the coldest month, you could think of, you know, there in May, so, you know, think May, and April is April, April, May, you know, around that time, you know, think that in the summer, Georgia, outside, wearing black graduation regalia. Um, but you know, we were there, you know, we had, we had a blast, you know, we had fireworks, so we had the graduation experience, which was awesome. And I know that unfortunately, not everyone got to be able to say that. But as far as making it, making it happen, and at least, you

know, helping make that memory for a lot of people that was very deserved. They did that. And it was awesome. You know, I got to see my friends again, it was almost kind of like a class reunion before the graduation of, you know, we started like, Oh, that's so and so how are you doing? You know, how's quarantine been? Did you get COVID? Did you not get out of it? Have you found a groceries, have you not run out of groceries, like all these things, that is almost like, you know, life resumed for that one day. And then the our college did something really cool. They did a outdoor celebration. So it was a really neat way to honor the school graduate, the graduates from my program individually. And so they had dean of the school, you know, the department has, and all these folks there, they had like a little graduation gift that we could pick up, you know, that we signed up, you know, to make sure, you know, we would be there to get it. So it's very different, but I thought it was kind of cool. You know, the fact that it was it was different. But you know, we still got to be there in the stadium, which is a hallmark of the university, you know, and then to go down the road, and for at least for me down the road, for everyone else it was, I don't even know where they went, they probably got in a car somewhere. Go down the street, and literally, you know, see your dean see all these folks that were really instrumental in helping me especially, you know, get through the online experience, because it was tough, you know, but it was a lot of fun. Lots of partying. At that time. Dining had kind of become an option. And so we were able to go do a graduation lunch. And thankfully, it was a little bit cooler, where we went. And so we were able to get some covered dining and sat outside. And then found out there was like no one that the restaurants so we just went inside and we were good. But it was fun. It was really great. But it was definitely a process started out as a strict no. But you know, with COVID, the nuances of that at the point where it got it was a possibility. And we had we had a ball. We had an absolute blast, we threw a party. We absolutely threw a party. It was fun.

Kit Heintzman 29:35

What are some of the things that you noticed about a sort of wider public conversation of the needs of immunosuppressed people during the pandemic?

Willis Porter 29:46

Boy, that is an excellent question. Great observation. Um, so as far as the wider population having the discussion around immune suppressed folks, it was mentioned It was mentioned, we got mentioned status, which I guess is something. But overall, at least for what I was watching, I was watching the news a good bit to start out. It was discuss. But I don't feel like it was appropriately discussed. No, it was, oh, well, it's that group of people. And whenever you say it's that group of people. Those are I feel like it's kind of underhanded. Do you know where it's like? We had the conversation, but we didn't have the conversation. Because here we are saying, Here's a pandemic, this group should, you know, isolate which we should. But it's this group, and whatever you refer to it as a group. And without actually doing the dude, in my view, doing the due diligence to that group. It was very dangerous very quickly, historically speaking, and also in this, and it kind of became a thing where no, some folks felt like, oh, yeah, you know, it's being talked about, but me, I as well as some buddies of mine, my friend, Anthony, I'm sure you'll I think you're talking with him here pretty soon, too. He and I really felt that it was untouched topic, if you will, of no actually highlighting what it was like to go from having an in person graduation ceremonies, stealing people all the time going to work, things that we do in normal society, to a lot of us that got changed very quickly. I know, some buddies of mine that didn't have the option to quarantine that were like, No, you're going to work, you're going to work. And I can imagine being those people and the absolute craziness that had to go around knowing we don't have a vaccine, and we got to be here. But again, I was very fortunate, I guess you could say that I got to quarantine. But there was a lot of challenges that, you know, I didn't really see a segment on the nightly news about the psychological impact that can occur. I'm sure they occurred

every now and again, I've seen Scott about how it is really is Campbell's space is really once again, this is before a vaccine. Before, you know my name is Monica, this body being more all of this was even a possibility. And I sat there and I'm scratching my head and I'm thinking to myself, There's got to be something that's interesting conversation by blocking off staff members. Groups, you know, we're having a conversation. But it became very segmented. So where it was being discussed, but you had to know the right groups to go to. And you had to know the right chance to plug into outside of mainstream media and outside of regular press and media, in order to get that information and to actually see the impacts of it. And within those groups, the conversations were being had. But there was a disconnect between those groups and those actually being brought to light, which was very dynamic.

Kit Heintzman 33:49

What are some of the qualities of the pieces of journalism that really did justice to immune compromised people that you weren't seeing in other media?

Willis Porter 34:04

So there were a couple of diseases that I felt were very good was one newspaper article here and our local news here in my county that was actually I think it was highlighting ski school system. transplant or there was something something there she was immune suppressed. And it was a really well written story about you know, the challenges that that was presenting to her. I think she was recently out of transplant or it was something about where it was like she was she was a high priority as far as making sure that she didn't can really focus on the individual the focus on the family or the focus on this diagnosis.

Willis Porter 34:55

You know, you saw it occasionally, you know, somebody's going to dialysis or being able to get access to your how long the personal impact that and how challenge. So sharing story, really focusing and highlighting the individual, the media outlets they ended up doing are far more beyond their time. The coverage of this and also by frankly, their, I guess you could say, your competitors, so to speak, actually seeing the impact this had and being very proactive and highlighting the stories, that a lot of folks are knocking around to two years from moving from nursing. [technical difficulties noted in interview]

Kit Heintzman 35:57

So, 2020 was such a big year for things other than the pandemic, there was a lot going on, would you tell me about some of the other issues that were on your mind during that year?

Willis Porter 36:11

Sure. So 2020, it was really rough, like you said, you know, and one of the biggest challenges that I was facing during that whole period was, I guess, just the, the transition, you know, from seeing my friends, seeing, you know, buddies of mine doing playing Ultimate Frisbee on campus, doing all these things that are so much part of just my life, you know, going, you know, going to church on Sunday doing this doing that, whatever it might be, like I did, it had a great time, I had my crew, I was you know, doing life, and then you know, this thing called COVID happens. And, you know, you're you're sitting here and you're dealing with all these things that you'd never thought you'd have to go through. And so you find yourself really adjusting from the life you thought you would have to the life you ended up having. And coming to terms with the fact that that was very, very incongruent. There was there was a lot of incongruency. There. And so overall, in 2020, it was just really, you

know, coming to terms with that, you know, also, there was a major presidential election, I'm sure a lot of people are still reeling from that. That's all I'll say about that. And it was nice. And that did not help in the slightest, because I think that was probably one of the biggest challenges I say I faced was that, you know, here I am someone immune suppressed, who needs to wear who needs to wear a mask who know that health and safety, my health and safety is of utmost priority, you know, and here I am sitting through a presidential debate, you know, where no, one group of people is saying wear a mask all the time. And you must wear a mask all the time, there's like there's no in between. And the other side is, you know, what, forget this mask, we're going to burn them. And we don't need them. And there was no healthy in between it was just one side, and the other. And if you didn't fall within those two sides, people looked at you very differently. People looked at me very differently. They were like wills, like you know, you believe in, you know, living your life. And like, yeah, I live my life. It's called life. Like, if you're not living your life, that's the antithesis of living, right. Like is you're dead? They're like, No, but like, you know, you just, you know, do you have political views? I'm like, Yeah, but they don't matter. And they couldn't understand that there are things beyond just the simple things of life of you know, will you either vote for party a or party B, you either have ice cream flavor a or ice cream flavor be like, there's so many different things that because I was immune suppressed, and because I was in that group that I kind of got lumped in and inadvertently, with, you know, what one group thought or another thought, and I was like, Look, the biggest challenge of 2020 was just being like, look, I'm out in person. You know, at the end of the day, it's about me taking care of myself and making the healthcare decisions that are best for me, period. And if you want to put a label on that, if you want to say one thing or another, that's your prerogative, but at the end of the day, it's about me doing what I need to do. And the biggest challenge probably during 2020 Was that whole thing, you know, of, of hearing people of people who I thought were my friends, say, Oh, you must be this or that. That's not the case. Quite frankly, it's the opposite. And seeing that from people who you assumed would take the time to actually Sit down and look at what was going on and understand your point of view. And they didn't. That was probably the biggest challenge of all, quite frankly. And that was, it was it was hard, you know, but again, you know, I had my crew around me, you know, I had my support system, and I relied on it. But that was a really, really hard time, during 2020, you know, of adjusting, the social adjustment in and of itself was a lot out on top of that the election, and all the just bonkers craziness that that was, and you find yourself being lumped in into conversations and being told you have to pick a side. It's not about that. But of course, you know, no one wants to hear the time for you to explain why, you know, it's there's more to life than that. And they just tell you, you know, how to where to go and how to get there. That's really hard to know, especially from from from people that you expect, would not do that. They end up doing that.

Kit Heintzman 41:05

As, as time stretched on into 2021. And now 2022, what are some of the other things that I've been staying with you?

Willis Porter 41:15

Some of the things that have really stayed with me, number one, is that a lot of this hasn't changed. A lot of the people's perceptions have not changed. It's still you either wear a mask or you don't. Then there's politics rolled into it, there's theology rolled into it, there's all of these things that are thrown in on all of this, that I think is very elementary, when people look at it, instead of actually sitting down and analyzing the situation for what it is. And I think because of that societally we are not where we need to be, or at least we're I could say to be fair, you know, we are not where we should be. Had we, you know, actually listened to other people who had very real reasons for why they need to wear masks, we've had very real reasons for why they chose to get the vaccine or

why they chose not to get the vaccine. You know, there's a lot of people out there that have pre existing medical conditions, you know, heart, you know, heart, heart challenges and other stuff that, you know, they had issues. They're people that had Bell's Palsy, they're people that reported these symptoms to the CDC, that no one followed up with them. And no one's ever going to follow up with them why? The answer is as good as then your answer is as good as mine. And so really a lot that I carry right now is just the continual knowledge that this is an existence and it, you know, is mutating. No, that's, that's the nature of this virus. It's the nature of a lot of diseases. And I think something that I carry with me now, and it's a mentality that I've had from the very beginning, that a lot of people have just not come around to and others have been seeing it in this way for a while, is that I would argue COVID is something that is not going to be eradicated. I just don't think it is, I think that it will be there, it will become less and less over the years, however long that takes medicines evolve, you know, different things are going to evolve where it isn't as big of a deal. But we're not there yet. We have a long way to go. We have a lot of data, we have a lot of longitudinal studies that we need to do we need to be doing longitudinal studies of folks that have had gotten the vaccine that are immune suppressed, you know, I know multiple hospital systems, large name, hospitals have done that. Kudos to them, good for them. We need more of it. You know, we need more storytelling projects, we need more things to come to fruition to help highlight these things. And that's I think, I would argue is the one of the biggest things I carry from this is the I'm continuously baffled that for as difficult as the virus this was for us to get through that. societally. We're, I would argue we're worse off now than when the virus started. Because when the virus started, you know, there were a lot of socio political things going on under the surface. COVID exacerbated that. Instead of looking to find a middle ground, I'm looking to have actual conversations about this as this is the situation at hand. These are the groups of people that are impacted by this. However, we as a society, individuals as a country, going to make sure we come out of this 1235 1015 years from now better than when we went in. I guarantee you the answer is not where we are now. Where the I would argue we're more divided, we're more focused on our own individual echo chambers, rather than actually having real substantive conversations that focus around the, the well being of of us as individuals and taking those steps we need as individuals to take care of ourselves, we've had those conversations, but they get lost in news, they get lost in all these things. So I think that's probably what I carry the most is that, you know, I'm just continuously baffled. But at the same time, you know, continuously grateful, you know, the fact that I have these nice support systems, I have my friends. You know, I have the support systems that I have, and I'm very blessed in that. I understand, I understand that not everybody has that luxury, not everybody has that blessing. And so for me at this point moving forward, and what I'm carrying is that, you know, it's kind of my, my burden, if you will, that I'm carrying to make sure that I can see taking care of myself and also that also check in on my friends, you know, I check in on my buddies that I know, got COVID, that it really impacted them a lot harder than it impacted me. And I got it pretty rough, I had a really high fever, probably should have gone to the ER, but I was so dang tired, I didn't even realize what the actual temperature reading was. That's conversation for another day. Um, but yeah, that's really what I carry with me, you know, is the continuously baffled of, you know, it's further divided our country rather than bringing us together, you know, continuously checking in on my friends, and, you know, being continuously grateful of you know, that I didn't get COVID, early on, and that I got, I would argue, a much more weakened down version of the original virus. And again, I know that everyone's experiences the same, they're equally valid, they're equally poignant. And every conversation I think, should be explored. And everyone should be heard out, because everyone's everyone's going to have diverse opinions on this, everyone's going to have diverse experiences, but it's, I think, collect about collectively coming together and recognizing that this impacts all of us as individuals, as a community, as a country. And as a world at large, you know, and really understanding, you know, what that means for us, and how we might want to look at doing life a little bit differently moving forward.

Kit Heintzman 47:24

Would you tell me a story about what of what one of those check ins on a friend looked like who that person was to you?

Willis Porter 47:31

Yeah, absolutely. So I had a couple buddies of mine. One of them was my friend, Anthony, he and I are really close, I met him actually, right before COVID actually really hit hard. And we have had an excellent friendship. And he got COVID really rough, he had a rough go at it there for a while. And so I was constantly texting him checking in saying, Hey, man, you know, I know you're tired, I know, you've got a lot going on. Just just checking in on anybody, let me know how things are going. Whenever you're free, you know, small stuff like that keep a very open ended, you know, allow them and, you know, recognizing what they're going through, but also recognizing that, you know, he's got a family, he's got stuff, he's got to do these kind of job, you know, checking in on them, had graduate school friends of mine, and my graduate program that I would check in on some more than others, you know, maybe maybe I know that, you know, a friend of mine, you know, has a specific mental health condition, you know, that, that makes it really hard for them, you know, when they're alone, and they don't have a lot of people around, you know, really focusing on those groups. You know, focusing in on all of really, a lot of, I kind of had a list that I made of people, I'm like, okay, these are probably the people that are going to be impacted the most. It started with my transplant friends, and it branched off from there. You know, really checking out what it really subsequently looked like was, you know, it was either a phone call, or it was a text. And regardless of what communication medium it was, through, the focus was the same, the focus was one, how are you doing right now? And are you okay? To, is there anything that I need to be, you know, that we need to talk about, you know, are there any challenges you're going through? Three, you know, how is your week look, and you know, what are you doing, other than, you know, making sure you don't catch COVID You know, focusing on all the other things of life because life goes on and really focusing on those things. And you know, I got friends of mine that still do that with, I still check in on my transplant buddies, I still check in on my friends that we've been right here to my friends from the very beginning and that's not going to change they've, they have a couple friends divided have known me since I was five, six years old. That we've we all had transplants, we've all been through that whole process together. It's look different for each of us. You know, but really checking in and making sure they're okay. And how I can help them and the little ways that I can, you know, an ultimate really, I think I think at the end of the day, regardless of what it looks like, I think the premise is the same. And that is that I think we all just want to be seen. And I think we all want to be heard. And I think that anybody taking the time to do that, whether it's me whether it's you, whoever it might be, know, just take that time, it might be five minutes, 10 minutes to then take that long to send a text. I've seen my friends send texts way faster than I can. It's pretty impressive. It doesn't take a lot of time, it really does. And I think at the end of the day, it's really just about being seen and being heard and knowing that someone is out there that cares about you, because during COVID, and especially those early times of COVID, that was really important, because it was really rough for a lot of people. And I saw it firsthand. I saw it secondarily. And that was really what it was about was checking in on your crew and making sure they're okay. And as long as I got my crew in order, and I'm in order, we're good to go.

Kit Heintzman 50:59

Would you share some more about when you caught COVID?

Willis Porter 51:03

Sure. So I got COVID Very recently, as in last Wednesday, last Thursday. I, it started out as what I thought was a really, really horrible sinus infection. A horrific headache that just wouldn't go away. Like it was it was bad. And I was at work and I came home from work and I was like, I'm just tired, I'm just feeling off. And so I went and bought like three really large things of Gatorade, like at the store, you know, the Gatorade, things that are like, you know, huge, like, Y'all probably can't see my hands on the screen. Like they're, you know, they're the big ones you buy at the gas station. I bought three of those and I drank all three of them and I went to bed woke up had a horrible fever, um, a lot of stuff, you know, horrible headache the way I would like, and it was as if, you know, in my way, I kind of see it as I got a sinus infection. And I got the flu at the same time. Imagine if you got that that's what I had. And those really rough body aches, chills, the whole nine yards for all of it. Continuously kind of got better in a way the sinus stuff did used a concoction of various over the counter medicines to help scientists meds etc. And then finally kind of it started subsiding and became more of a cough on say, Saturday ish. And then after that, my body kind of turned a corner, it was more of like a four day really rough. Virus, and then it just kind of stopped. And it was rough. It was really hard, you know, being down, out of state away from your family away from your support system. You know, I had a family member of mine come down and I told him over the phone, like you do know, when you come down here, you're gonna get COVID. Right? Like, you know what you're walking into? They're like, Yeah, I know what I'm walking into isn't, Okay. Come join the COVID party, I guess I don't know. Um, but I'm doing a lot better now. You know, very, very fortunate for that. You know, still wearing a mask when I got in public, you know, still I got a test negative. I gotta take a negative COVID test before I returned to work. I got some doctor's appointments and stuff this next week that I already took time off for some already up here. You know, preparing for that preparing for what I believe will be a negative COVID test, which will be good. It was rough. It was really rough. Like, when you run a fever as high as I did, I had a 103 Fever. And I was so tired. I didn't even look at the fever. Right. And I saw a one on one. And that's probably the first sign you're not feeling well, when you don't even read the thing, right? Probably not good. So to go into the ER didn't they know I had someone looking out for me, I guess you know, and that was rough. It was really rough. But I'm over it now. And hopefully I never catch it again. But we'll see.

Kit Heintzman 54:06

Tell me about the person who came down.

Willis Porter 54:10

Yes, that was my mom. She's she's just saying she's she's gonna get an angel wings or something someday. She came down and really helped out just because you know, I'm six hours away from home I have COVID We have no clue what it's going to look like. I'm immune suppressed. There's a lot of unknown variables. And you know, if anything, you know, I need somebody to drive me to the hospital I guess either I'm taking a free or I say a free ride not so free when you're looking at the insurance bill. And an ambulance, you know, to get to the hospital is only 15 minutes away, but that's a long way we're running a high fever. You know, she came down and really helped out you know, just we were you know, couldn't put in a ClickList order for Kroger. I think it was Kroger or target pickup list that was a contactless delivery. So that was awesome. You know, being able to do all of that and have those support systems was really vital for me early on, especially because boy, it was rough, who was really rough, and then it was really interesting to watch the dynamics shift from, you know, when I was better, like I was, I was doing good. Like I told her kind of half as a joke, it kind of wasn't a joke, like, I was feeling really good. And like, I might go to the park and walk a little bit shoot basketball, and I do something tired of being inside, I'm probably probably don't need to do that. But I was feeling that good. And then she just got come,

she just had her like a freight train too. And so it was kind of an interesting dynamic shift from being the one being taken care of with one taking care of someone so fast. But again, I think I'm very blessed in that regard of that I was able to do that, you know, but you know, we're, we're back home now. You know, we're doing good. And, you know, she's, she's making it we're all making it a little bit of a lingering cough, but that's really about it. We're in a sweatshirt right now. That's probably my first mistake is wearing a sweatshirt in the summer in Georgia. I'm telling you to know yourself, don't do that. But she's great. She's an absolute Rockstar. She's she's been through thick and thin through a lot of through a lot worse, through a whole lot worse. And she's been the consistent one throughout the years. Mom and Dad have been consistent, but apparently my mom likes to just go in first. I don't know. She just she puts on that battle helmet. And she's like, No, we're getting in this are getting into the nitty gritty. I'm coming down there. I don't care. I'll drive I'll fly. I don't really care how it looks. I'm gonna get there. Her choice. I told her, I'm like, you don't have to come down if you don't want to like me, okay, I got friends down here. I got work buddies in mind not far away. They can pick me up and draw me if I need to. I got a friend, literally in the same apartment complex around the corner that can drive me if I need. And she was like, No, I'm coming down soon. Okay, you're coming down. And so we we braved COVID. Together, I guess.

Kit Heintzman 57:08

I'm curious, what does the word health mean to you?

Willis Porter 57:12

Who Boy, that's a good question. Health, I think is twofold. Physical and mental. Actually, I'd say threefold physical, mental and spiritual, whatever that might look like. Physical, obviously, you know, how are you physically? Are you physically healthy? Are you in the hospital? Know if your immune suppressed? What level of immune suppression are you on? Are you able to live the life that you want to live with your medical stuff? And if to some extent, you know, are you able to do that? And if you are, I would consider you to be healthy. While you might have challenges. I think it's about how you look at your challenges and how you choose to live that life whether you choose to be a victim or a victor, I think really it comes down to. So that's number one is, you know, your physical health, your mental health? Do you have support? Do you support systems around you? You know, are you? Do you have mental fortitude? You know, when times get tough? When you do get COVID? Like I got, you know, are you down and out and use? Do you stay down and out for a long time? Or do you just kind of look at the situation and say, Well, we're here, let's go. Um, you know, the mental health, I think, you know, COVID, especially put a highlight on just how many mental health challenges were going on in our country. And I think I would argue that there was a lot of silent mental health challenges, and, quite frankly, a silent mental health crisis that happened in our country that a lot of people highlighted, and, you know, good for them. But there's a lot more work to be done. So, you know, do you have your mental health, and also your spiritual health? You know, regardless of what your faith is, you know, do you have folks in your faith community, you know, that you can turn to when the rough gets really rough? Like when it gets real bad, like, when, when, when everybody leaves? And you're quarantine, and you have nowhere to go? You know, do you have that karate, you know, or do you? Do you have all three of those elements. And I think if you have all three of those elements, and whatever capacity that might look like, whatever might look like for you, if you can say in each three of those that you're doing pretty good, I would argue that you are doing a majority, better than a majority of our population right now.

Kit Heintzman 59:31

Spirituality has come up a few times already. And I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about your relationship with spirituality?

Willis Porter 59:39

Great question. So mine is very unique in the fact you know, I think that a lot of folks that have been through major health challenges such as organ failure, such as cancer, especially those two come to mind, you know, there's a very different relationship that I think someone has a spirituality when they face their own mortality at such a young age, whatever experiences that might be where mother be a cardiac arrest, a seizure, a near death experience, whatever it might be, I feel like that there's a different level of spirituality and focus on that element of life, so to speak. And that dimension, if you will, that not everyone who has been through those experiences will have and will may never have. And quite frankly, I don't wish it on anyone, I don't wish for anyone's child to go through organ failure, I don't wish for anyone to look down and see you have cancer, like, I cannot imagine the impact that that has on an individual in a family. But you know, to be able to have those, those folks, your church or wherever it is, you know, to lean on, that are, you know, actively vested in your help and your interest, you know, and praying for you and checking in on you, whatever it might be, you know, knowing that you got that community and depending on the size of your church, or however you're wherever you're at, you know, I think if you're plugged in, we know if you're plugged into maybe a group, like I'm part of a group that it's a it's a church, I don't go to don't attend, so to speak, but so, you know, we'll do Ultimate Frisbee soccer, so tons of running. So I've stayed in great, awesome, I'm also reminded I should I, it's a good thing, I didn't play D one sports, because there are folks out there that are way better than I'll ever be, you know, but it's having those groups of people, you know, that are that can you can do life with, you know, that when the rough, it's rough, you can call them up? No, I've had that at every step of my life. And it's looked a little bit different throughout, you know, obviously is a child, you know, it's more so the family, you know, in the in the parents versus now that I'm knowing my 20s it's more so me individually, you know, of having those connections of, you know, I might not agree with everything. I don't I don't have to agree with you on everything. At the end of the day, it's about like, can we hang in, you know, are you, you know, are you somebody that I can do live with and hang out with? And, you know, if the roof gets rough, you know, can I call you and be like, Hey, I'm struggling. I got COVID I got this, I got that, you know, and I've kind of helped shoulder that burden. You know, I think that that's really important, especially for, for me, in my own experiences, you know, being able to have folks in the transplant community and beyond, you know, the, you know, faith leaders, whoever it might be, you know, to be able to call them up and shoulder that burden, you know, of really getting through the rough times when all you see around you is the rough. You know, there's a light at the end of the tunnel eventually. But you have absolutely no roadmap and you have zero GPS and telling you how long it's going to be until you're out of that very dark tunnel. It helps. No, it really does. It really helps and in being able to have those people to lean on. Because sometimes life that's all you got.

Kit Heintzman 1:03:06

What does the word safety mean to you?

Willis Porter 1:03:10

Oh, good question. Um Okay, so I think safety is twofold. I think safety one in the literal physical sense, you know, are you safe? Like is, is there something actively threatening you a person or disease, whatever it is? And also, I think safety comes down to, you know, how comfortable you are knowing yourself? Of, are you safe in yourself? Are you confident in yourself? Are you a safe person to be around, I think is the third one. You know, when someone looks at you, they see someone they can leave their kids with. You might not want to hang out

with them. That's another conversation for another day. We'll get to that later. Um, you know, but you know, are you know, so are you physically safe? You know, are you? You know, do you are you a safe person to be around? You know, I think health safety and health, too, I think is the third element of this that COVID really showed, you know, that there's a lot to be said, for maintaining the status quo as the status quo that I think we've kind of just come to take for advantage, kind of take advantage of, of, you know, we haven't really at least my generation, I'm not going to speak for the larger group. My generation, I don't think is had that since COVID. And once COVID kind of got introduced, that really was a threat. You know, and I think there's there's such as being too safe. I think the term is safety ism. I think it's The term that is used, and there's such as being so overly conscious about your safety, that you let it rule your life, and you let it psychologic negatively psychologically impact you. But I think someone who is truly safe is health wise, they're extremely physically wise, you know, they're safe, they're not threatened by, you know, a major external force or an individual that is, you know, actively working to their destruction. I think number two, they're safe within themselves, they're very confident and who they are as an individual, they know who they are, you know, they know why they're there. And they know what they should do. Because in my view, if you know who you are, you know what to do. And the third one, you know, are you are you a safe individual to be around, you know, do or do you, you know, exude confidence in yourself, but also, you know, do others have confidence in you and being someone that they can trust? That's the third element of safety. I think the fourth element is safety. I think it's the health safety, you know, the health safety and individually and also collectively, they're, you know, they're, they're the extremes on both sides. But I think in the middle is that sweet spot of recognizing a threat when it exists, such as COVID, COVID, still a threat, whatever that threat might be that think that's more better defined the individual level? And I think that's kind of the if I were to define safety, those would be kind of the ways I would define it.

Kit Heintzman 1:06:31

There was such a narrow narrative of safety during a pandemic, very focused on physical health. What are you, you've touched on some of them already. But what are some of the things that under that tiny framework you are doing to keep yourself safer?

Willis Porter 1:06:50

So I actually wrote about this a little bit in a blog that I sent through with Anthony and I can send to you if you'd like, I did something called rules for advocates. Where I kind of talked a little bit about one the importance of being your own advocate when it comes to your health care. Yes, we have a health care team, but also, you know, I think I subscribe to the view that, you know, there's only one person in this world that knows how you're going to respond to something best. And that's, you know, and being your own advocate, and then that, you know, as far as no safety is concerned, you know, things that you do, number one, you know, we're going to start with the physical, alright, we're gonna start with physical safety, physical safety, with regard to COVID, was really focused on what I could control, because there's a lot I couldn't control, but really focusing on what I could control. And that was where I went, the quantity of people I was around. And the measures that I took before, during and after those interactions, to make sure that I was COVID conscious, so to speak, I guess is the hot button term we use now. You know, so you obviously, you know, washing your hands wearing a mask social distancing, the kind of trifecta that No, we were, we were told to do starting out. So that was the physical safety. Then came the second level of psychological safety, of being secure in myself, of really winning the war within, within your own mind, of, and the way that I did that was I kind of looked at COVID. Like I was at war, so to speak, you know, there's this entity out here, that is a very real threat to me, and I love history. I could ramble on for hours about it, big battles, strategies, all sorts of stuff. And so for me, looking at things through the framework

of war, actually helps me understand things the best sometimes when it comes to this. And so I looked at this as psychological warfare for myself, of how am I going to fight this battle within my brain from feeding into this safety as I'm feeding into all the news and everything. And so what I did to reach that level of health, psychological health was number one, I turned off the news. Yes, I followed the numbers for my area. But I also I've really honed in the message to what applied to me in the moment. And that was it. Again, being able to have my transplant team to be able to have those people that I knew had my best interest in mind that was so important as far as the news that I get, because I think if you can know that the people who are giving you the news that you need have your best interest in mind and it's actual, substantive data that is really important and is constantly changing. And so the efficacy of that increases that really helps on reaching that psychological safety. And also I think the the other element of psychological safety for me was you know, reconnecting with friends, you know, reconnecting with people and making sure I create a safety net. So To speak around me to make sure that I had friends that one knew the challenges I was going through, but to know that I could just talk with no. And so I was very proactive in engaging those conversations and having those conversations with friends of mine, some of them behind talk within years, you know, that I, you know, kind of rekindled, you know, relationships with it was awesome, you know, and so there was the physical safety, there was the psychological safety. And then I guess, the spiritual elements, so to speak, since we've been talking about it, that third element, you know, that's really hard to do, when, you know, you're so used to going to, you know, worship services and other stuff, and all of a sudden, you can't do that anymore. And by about week, four, you're getting about sick and tired of the online, you're getting tired of online and work and everything else, you know, you start, you know, finding more unique ways to get the content that you are, you know, you're showing up, you know, I guess on Sunday, or Saturday, or whatever that is to get. And so what I really did to help myself through all three of those elements was podcasts. I started listening to podcast, I started listening to audiobooks, I'd find books about mental health, or books about things that just interested in me that might not even be related to COVID or anything else. But you know, really using those and really looking at innovative ways to get information and to I guess, have leisure, so to speak. That didn't include going out in the blazing hot heat of the Georgia summers to shoot basketball or rock. I did that to that, you know, really looking at those innovative ways to help me have overall health, so to speak, whether it be physical health, and safety, psychological health and safety, or spiritual, all three elements.

Kit Heintzman 1:12:12

How are you feeling about the immediate future?

Willis Porter 1:12:17

Honestly, and I might be the minority on this, I'm kind of optimistic. I really am, like, at this point, like a beaten COVID I hope I never get it again. That was oh my gosh, so so bad. But you know, I'm very optimistic. You know, I think that a lot of the feature has to do with this, of how I set myself up for success. Long term, you know, and I kind of develop that, in my own health, my own healthcare experience, know what my transplant journey is that, you know, a lot of these surgeries of how their major surgeries a transplant, you know, this is a hip to hip, you know, they cut you hip to hip, you know, they're doing all sorts of other things that that's a major recovery. I've had other major surgeries before, and my mentality with that is that my recovery process is only going to be as good as my preparation, if I prepare and I set myself up and train my body, to be able to take what, at least to some level, what I'm about to go through, the better. So what that looks like for me and my future is that, you know, continuing to take care of myself, you know, continuing to run to work out to walk to do whatever it might be to get my body in the best physical health it can be in, because the healthier my body is, the better my body is going to respond when, let's say COVID comes in again, or whatever it might be. And so I am I'm very

optimistic about the future. I feel like, you know, in life there, there are a couple people, there are people that choose to be victims, and there are people that choose to be victors of their circumstance. Again, both are very valid, valid views to take, you know, I'm not going to sit here and tell somebody how they should feel. That's not what this is about. It's about me, and it's about the how I choose to view my life and how I fit into my own life circumstances in this case, COVID. You know, I want to view myself as a victor. You know, I want to view myself as somebody that you know, yes, challenges came in abundance, plenty of them COVID, quarantine many more. But for me, it's about, you know, how I take care of myself who I surround myself with, you know, in my career that I that that I choose to continuously let speak life into me instead of not speaking life into me, you know, then I think is set me up for success and I'm optimistic, you know, yes, COVID is out there. And there are a lot of unknowns of that there are a lot of unknown territories when it comes to COVID. But I at this point in my life, I never have let a medical challenge keep me down for too long, at least, you know, I've never let myself least in my, what I've tried to do, you know, never let myself, you know, become so focused on the challenge at hand that I don't allow myself to also live life. You know. And so I am I'm very optimistic about the future, cautiously optimistic, you know, there's a healthy level of caution. But you know, there's also a very healthy level of understanding that, you know, this is the world, you know, there's a lot in this world that I can't control. But there's also a lot I can control. And I'm going to focus on what I can control versus what I can't. And typically, that bodes very well, for me, I would argue it bodes well for a lot of people. But again, this isn't about I'm not, I don't want to sit here and tell other people how to live their life, this is about me, this is about what I need to do to take care of myself. And as far as that goes, it's taking care of myself, health wise, taking care of myself, psychologically, spiritually, those three elements of health that I've discussed. No, ultimately, and also, you know, the mentality that I take, and that is the, you know, I've been through a lot. And there's a lot of that, I know, there's a lot there, there's a lot to unpack. At the same time. When you go through those that many challenges. Sometimes you develop this mentality of like, you're a warrior out here, and it's just go time. You know, you enjoy it, enjoy your life, and when it does address the challenges when they may come. But you know, that's life, life isn't going to be all roses and butterflies all the time, it's going to be tough, it's about how you bounce back and the fortitude that you have in those tough, tough moments. So ultimately become better for it. And allow yourself to not allow me allowing myself you know, to, to be a victim of my circumstance, instead of rather looking at my life circumstances and viewing myself as a victim, because in my view, there's no, there's nothing good that can come out of me, viewing myself as a victim of my own circumstances. Rather, there's a lot, I think there's a lot of power. For me, as an individual to be able to have, over my life, when I look at the things I've been through and recognize them for what they are, recognize the challenges for what they might be coming, moving forward for in this example. Know and understand how I need to move move ahead accordingly. At the end of the day, it's about living life and, you know, love and life along the way. You know, we only get one shot at this, you know, you only get one shot. And it's about making the most of those opportunities, knowing and being able to look back on your life and with no note, no regrets, I guess, you know, but I'm very optimistic about the future, cautiously optimistic, you know, and we'll see what, we'll see what may come. But, you know, that's life, it's gonna happen. It's just about how I react.

Kit Heintzman 1:17:59

What are some of your hopes for a longer term future?

Willis Porter 1:18:04

Whoa, boy, we're getting some questions here. Okay. All right. So hopes for the future. Um, I think when I think the biggest one, if I could summarize all of them together into one would be hope for consistency, in that I remain

consistent and being who I am. So that I can be who I need to be so I can do what I was made to do. You know, that said, with my family, that's what my friends that's what every aspect of my life, you know, that I want, I want to make sure that I'm consistent. And I'm the same person. As far as my outlook is concerned, now than I am in the future, now I'm going to grow, I'm going to things are going to life's gonna change, you're gonna go through stuff, you know, but at the end of the day, for me, my hope is that, you know, I take every day as it comes, you know, it's for me, it's about enjoying the journey. And there have been times in my life, I've done a better job than others of enjoying that journey. You know, but for me, I've been through so much medically, I've been through so many challenges that, for me, it's just about living life and enjoying life. And that's kind of what I I hope to continue to do. You know, yes, there are going to be challenges, but there's a lot of joy in the process. There's a lot of joy in the journey, so to speak. And that's ultimately what I hope to continue to have now and for many, many years to come.

Kit Heintzman 1:19:33

What are some of the ways that you've been taking care of yourself?

Willis Porter 1:19:38

Oh, boy, good question. So ways I've been taking care of myself. Exercise. It's a lot harder to do during the summer months in Central Florida. Um, namely, you know, when it's 99 degrees and 99% humidity, it kind of gets a little difficult. But you know, that's when walking indoors and Walking towards the evenings helps, you know. So being being physically active, you know, I mentioned before I got an ultimate frisbee group, a play ultimate frisbee with I play soccer with, you know, I've run, try to walk a lot more now in the summer months, just because it's less wear and tear on my body. And I think it's a little bit healthier for me to do that, as far as physical exertion. So then I do that for the physical element. Now then for my psychological element, you know, I'm working on, you know, reading books, listening to podcasts, listening to audiobooks, whatever it might be, you know, to help advance my brain and my knowledge, and, you know, what I'm interested in and feeding into that, you know, I think there's something to be said, for being able to have interests and being able to, even though you might have your job, you know, being able to pursue those interests, whatever that might look like. You know, being able to take care of, you know, my writing podcasts, whatever it might be, that I decide to do, you know, having those elements and having those, having those elements and being able to plug into those free will, that's really important. And finally, you know, that third element of health, you know, that spiritual element, you know, of, you know, continuing to surround yourself with a community of people have of like mind, I guess, you could say, so to speak, you know, that you can plug into and really have, you know, have your back when the rough gets really rough, you know, and be able to look down and help you through that. You know, so having those three elements of health and taking care of myself are really kind of what I do. So it's physical exercise, basketball, ultimate soccer, whatever might be, you know, podcasts, books, and ultimately, you know, your, your, your crew, you know, on Saturday or Sunday, you hang out with the, it's your faith based community that you can really have, and my idea behind all that is all three of those working in collaboration at the same time. And ultimately, if I can have all three of those working at some level of functionality, I'm doing pretty good for myself.

Kit Heintzman 1:22:11

I'm coming to the end of my questions, and they take kind of a hard turn. I wondering, do you think of COVID-19 as a historic moment?

Willis Porter 1:22:23

Yes, very much. So. I would argue it's a watershed event, so to speak. When I was doing my blog stuff with, with Anthony on, we did a series called COVID Chronicles. In that one of the writings that I did was called defining agenda was called a generation to find and that my basic premise was that there are certain events throughout history that have been watershed events or events that have disproportionately defined the generation that came of age during that time. You know, you think of the rise of the Roman Empire the Byzantine Empire whatever Empire might be you think of that maybe major wars World War One World War Two Vietnam Korea, the list goes on and on. You think you know, natural disasters, you think, you know, Pompeii way back when you know, you think know, manmade disasters, so, you know, 911, bombings overseas, whatever it might be, you think of no world changing events. And in for me and my generation, I think COVID fits in as one of those MIDI watershed events, for society and for my generation, that has forever changed our perspective on a lot of things and how we live life and how we will continue to live life. So yes, I would, I would definitely say that it is definitely a defining moment in history, I would argue, a world defining event in history.

Kit Heintzman 1:24:06

What are some of the things people in the humanities and social sciences so disciplines like literature and film and sociology, anthropology, what can we be doing to help us understand this the human and social side of this moment?

Willis Porter 1:24:27

[takes a second] Getting over COVID trying every day. Um, great question. So I kind of have a little bit of a humanities background. So I can kind of speak to a little bit of that as well. I think really, what y'all can do is one continue doing your project you're doing right now. I think this is incredible. You know, looking for people to tell the story in an innovative way that not everyone else is doing. That is something that I think for me is very rare. For me. It's very refreshing. And I think that for a lot of people, they'll find that to be A very different way of looking at things. So as far as in the social sciences, I think one focusing on the individual impact of specific groups of people, groups of, you know, different classes, different socio economic statuses, whatever it might be, you know, class, race, gender, you know, you have your whole thing, you know, looking at that, but more so than that, I think really drilling down to looking at this as a as the human experience, right, of looking at this as something that just didn't impact one person. This impacted generations and generations of people across the world, everyone is going to live life differently, everyone has different cultures. So each of these cultures obviously know is going to have a different experience. So to speak with this virus, you have your subcultures, you know, your, I would argue, you know, your immune suppressed population, for the purposes of today, you know, really, when it comes to the social sciences, and looking at the immune suppressed populations, I guess, the way that we have been impacted by COVID, you know, really focusing in film, you know, focusing in psychology, sociology, anthropology, you know, looking at all using all of these different fields, but, you know, flexing each of the arms that they have, you know, in the unique perspective that they bring, you know, in looking at each of those unique elements, looking at, you know, the historical implications, you know, of other societies and how know, viruses and other such, you know, entities have have impacted, you know, societies historically, you know, in translating that into, you know, translationally you know, how that relates today, you know, what people can do with film, you know, maybe there's a documentary series that can be made, maybe there's something out there, that can be done, you know, that really focuses and brings the highlight to that impact. I might be dating myself a little bit here, but way back when when Dateline, you know, it was like a big thing. Yeah, we remember, you know, dateline and 3430, and, you know, all these, you know, things that, you know, we're drawn to, right, we're drawn to these things. And it's, I think it's about creating something like that almost.

No, where you are bringing in a captive audience, you're creating an audience, yes. But you're also captivating them, right? You're captivating them with the human experience, you're captivating them with the more I would argue unexplored, yet unexplored elements of something like COVID-19, and you really focus on the, the very human aspect of that, and that is very different for each group, but also bringing in, you know, things outside of the field. So bringing in medicine, bringing in, you know, different areas of, you know, your your your folks that work in you know, your renal, your renal folks, you know, your kidney folks, your your liver folks, your hepatology, you know, these different areas, and really come to the table as one large group, so to speak. And really continue, I guess, to advance the conversation. No, it's really what the focus is here is investing the conversation around how this is impacting has impacted us as a society and as an individual population, so to speak, is the immune suppressed community is concerned. But also really, I think at the end of the day, it focuses on one thing, and that's the individual. You know, it's it's very individual, it's collectively focused, yes, but I think the more individually focused you can make it, and the more real you can make it for people who are seeing the other side of this, you know, someone's going to get there, get a hold of this interview, someone's going to get a hold of this video recording whatever it might be, in that there is a goal that you want them that there's a goal that you want, there's there's a message that you want them to see you want them to see that this is impacted us as a as immune suppressed community. You know, you want them to see that this has impacted you as an individual. But at the same time, you also want them to realize, you know, that, yes, that's impacted me. But turn the camera around. You know, on the individual and say, Okay, well, now this is how it's impacted me, how has it impacted you, you know, in really having those human conversations, I think is really, you know, advancing those human conversations, you know, so the three things know, you advance the human conversation, you know, you show the humanity, the human side of this, you know, collaboration is number two, you know, working with, you know, within department, so to speak a university or whatever it might be, or as a field, and also collectively, you know, coming together and looking at new innovative ways to advance the conversation, you know, number one, you know, and, you know, however it might be. And also, I think the third thing finally, is really focusing on the individual, of focusing on the individual. And having a goal, I would say is your fourth. And if you can do those four things, I think you will, with great success, be able to document for all of history to come. Just how challenging of a virus this was, the massive implications that it has for us as a community now as immune suppressed individuals and into the future. And ultimately, the final thing is, how does that apply? And that's an answer that we don't have yet. That is ultimately I think, going to show itself for whatever that might be into the future. But we have to wait. And when that time comes, all those into all those entities, you know, all the folks in the humanities, are gonna be able to look down at all the work that they've done, they're gonna be able to see the answers and find the answers to the questions they're asking.

Kit Heintzman 1:31:53

That segues really well. I'd like you to imagine speaking to a historian in the future, someone far enough in the future that they have no lived experience of this moment, as they go forward with their project, the history of COVID-19. What would you ask them to sort of hold on to what would you ask them to keep in their mind, not necessarily their research question, but just what can they not forget, as they go forward, trying to understand this moment, from the perspective of a complete outsider?

Willis Porter 1:32:28

Wow, that is an excellent question. I think that the root of that question, you know, is really focusing on, you know, what is the one thing you know, if there's one thing in here, that through your work, you never need to lose? First, I want to be abundantly clear on what that one thing is, and that one thing is that these are individual

lives. This isn't a number on a sheet of paper. This isn't a statistic, this isn't a historical fact. Yes, all three of those things might be true. But at the end of the day, there is a face and there is a name, and there's a life experience. Behind each of those numbers of people of however many people got COVID of the immune suppressed community, whatever community it might be, never forget. De rol um, I guess the the raw human experience that this is, the COVID is you might have never heard of COVID before. You might be worried about this in a history book. If we have books I don't know. You know, might be a hologram. I don't know make it up do something. You know, but I think an all the work never forget the human implication that this is, you know that this is an individual life. This is my life. This is your life, kid. These are other feet, people's lives that are impacted. Yes, it's gonna look different. But they're come I think there comes a certain level of gravity to the situation, when you realize that these are individual lives at stake. These are individuals who have died. These are people that are waking up tomorrow without a father without a mother without a brother without a sister without a stepfather without a stepmother. Without a stepbrother, stepsister, whatever it might look like. These are lives at stake. This is real life, with real consequences for good or for bad. Never forget that in your work. Never forget that it impacts individuals for good or for bad. And that the human experience is ultimately I think what you as a researcher, whoever you might be out there listening, I think that is what you're ultimately looking at. Right? That's what you ultimately want to capture that you want to capture that moment you want to capture that story, you want to capture that audience. And the way you do that is focusing on the individual. Focusing on the stories, focusing on the impact that that has, never forget that. Because if you don't have that, and you don't focus on that, I think you're going to lose the very thing you are searching for. And that is connection. Connection is the I would argue the most important part of the human experience. And if you lose it, it's very hard to get back. So the one thing I'd say, always focus on the fact that this is an individual, an individual being impacted. And never forget that the most powerful thing in the world is human connection. And if through your research, and through your work, you can highlight that connection, at every turn in the boy, every turn in the process. You my friend are an excellent researcher, you, my friend are an excellent practitioner of your field. Never forget that there's an individual on the other side of the screen, there is another individual, there's there are individuals, there are people on the other side of those statistics, that your reading. Never forget it.

Kit Heintzman 1:36:19

I want to thank you so very much for the generosity of your time. And the beauty of your answers.

Willis Porter 1:36:27

Thank you

Kit Heintzman 1:36:27

Those fields that questions I know how to ask at the moment, but I'd like to open some space. If there's anything you want to share that my questions haven't made room for. Please take some time and share it.

Willis Porter 1:36:39

Absolutely will first Kit I want I want to thank you. Yeah, I really do. Because I am blown away by the the magnitude of this project, like oh my gosh, I can't imagine, like, you know, listening to all these people listening to all these stories, like, I just think it's incredible. So first, I want to thank you. Second of all, I want to thank you, whoever takes the time to listen to this, you know, I think it's very, you know, brave of somebody to, to listen to an experience that they might have never personally experienced, they might know, know a whole lot about, you know, but they're interested enough in the topic they're interested enough and the implications it has for society to

be able to explore that unknown territory. And if there's anything else I could say, first of all, no, and, you know, I feel like a lot has been covered. And I feel like the only other thing I'd want to say is that, you know, really focusing on the research, and focusing on the folks out there in the humanities and the social sciences, you know, that are looking at the implications that this has, whether it be you know, your doctoral thesis, whatever it might be. Like I said before, never forget the implications that this has on the individual. Without the individual, there is no failure. Without the family, there is no community without the community, there is no world. And without many of those, without it and with without any of those things in existence, your field does not exist. And so I think that it's important that you focus on those things, and you never lose that focus. Because I would argue that you the second you start losing that focus, it becomes more about completing the paper than it does actually finding the answers to the questions that you seek. I think that's a very dangerous place. And I would I hope that any researcher out there, their number one hope is to never lose the passion for finding the answers to the questions that they seek whatever those questions might be. In this case, notice the impact of COVID-19 there might be another virus that comes up whatever it might be, you know, never stop asking those questions. Never stop looking for those answers. The answers are out there, the work is a lot. You know, it's a lot of work to find these people, there's a lot of work to do interviews, look at data, whatever it might be, you know, but always focus on the individual. Because, ultimately, is the individual story that I think makes the most connection with anyone. It's the thing, it's the most raw, a few of all human experiences. You know, there's something profound, in my view, about the spoken word. You know, you can speak life you can speak death. You know, you can do all these things with it. It's almost like a double edged sword. No, like, you can pierce with, kill with no. But you can also bring life. You can also bring answers to the questions that you're seeking. She used to do that. She used to be a researcher that does research that from now until eternity people can look back on and say, research right there. They had it right They focused on the individual. So again, Ken, thank you so much for this opportunity, it really is an absolute joy. And again to the researchers out there, never lose the focus of the why always recognize that the individual is at the center of everything. And from that expands into the rest of the ether, so to speak, in the human experience. And remember the spoken word, at least in my views, you know, most profound thing about the all human experience and as a researcher, as an individual, as a community, it's about highlighting the that human experience and bringing that to light. Again, Kitt, thank you so much for this opportunity is a definitely a massive joy and a massive blessing. Your questions have been absolutely on point. I can't imagine how much time it's taken you to do this. You know, this has been an absolute pleasure and an honor. Definitely in honor of my life. And again, to anyone out there who gets this. Thank you for taking the time to listen, and I wish you all the best in whatever work you are doing. And I hope that you ultimately find the answers to the questions that you seek.

Kit Heintzman 1:41:11

Thank you so much.

Willis Porter 1:41:13

Yes, ma'am. Thank you