

Transcript of Oral History of Alexis Cheatham

Interviewee: Alexis Cheatham

Interviewer: Emily Leiserson

Date: January 31, 2021

Location: Indiana, United States of America

Abstract: Alexis Cheatham, a student at Franklin University, shares her experiences working towards racial justice. She is the President of Franklin's Black Student Union, she is planning on getting her MA in Social Work, and has spent a lot of time protesting locally for the Black Lives Matter movement. She discusses her thoughts on politics in America and the current issues Black Americans face due to racial injustice and discrimination.

Emily Leiserson 00:05

Okay, we are recording. Hi, Alexis.

Alexis Cheatham 00:11

Hi!

Emily Leiserson 00:12

Thank you so much for being here.

Alexis Cheatham 00:14

Thanks for having me.

Emily Leiserson 00:16

Oh, you are welcome. This is exciting. So, we are here to do this oral history. My name is Emily Leiserson. I'm here with Alexis Cheatham. It is Sunday, January 31, at 2:34 by my clock. And I'm in Indianapolis, excuse me, Indianapolis, Indiana and Alexis is nearby in Franklin, Indiana. But we're of course doing this interview remotely. So I am going to start by reading the informed consent document, and then we'll dig into our questions this afternoon. So this interview is for the COVID-19 Oral History Project, which is associated with The Journal of the Plague Year: A COVID-19 Archive. It's a rapid response oral history, meaning we're, you know, we're trying to collect these things as history is unfolding around us. But we're focused on archiving the lived experience of the COVID-19 epidemic, and particularly during this phase of the project, this research group that I'm in is focused on collecting oral histories that speak to the experience of racial justice and racial justice movements in the context of COVID-19. I am doing this with the IUPUI Arts and Humanities Institute, which has designed this project so that professional researchers and the broader public can both create and upload oral histories and access them from an open source database. And it's intended to collect narratives and understandings about COVID-19 and to help us understand the impacts of the pandemic over time. Everything we're doing, the recordings and demographic information, and a transcript associated with it will be deposited in The Journal of the Plague Year: A COVID-19 Archive and the Indiana University Library System for the use of researchers and the general public. So do you have any questions on that so far. Could you just say that out loud? Sorry. That's okay.

Alexis Cheatham 02:43

No, I don't have any questions.

Emily Leiserson 02:45

Thank you. And taking part in this study is voluntary. You can choose not to take part; you can leave the study at any time. Everything is completely voluntary. So, you know, anything you have reluctance about sharing, that's totally okay; if you do choose to totally leave the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you're entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate, doesn't affect any current or future relations with Indiana University, IUPUI, or the IUPUI Arts and Humanities Institute. Participating in the project means that your interview will be recorded and videoed, and the recordings and possible transcripts and copies of any supplementary documents and your informed consent document itself will be deposited into the archive. And that also means that your name and any other means of identification will not be confidential. Is that okay with you, and do you have any questions on that?

Alexis Cheatham 03:51

That's fine. And I have no questions.

Emily Leiserson 03:54

Great, thank you. And, in addition to the signed document, could you offer a verbal confirmation that you just understand and agree to the terms overall?

Alexis Cheatham 04:08

I understand and agree to the terms of the study.

Emily Leiserson 04:12

Thank you so much. And then there's one last piece which is about the sharing license. So I believe you said you were okay with either of the sharing licenses on the informed consent document, so I'm just gonna, because it's shorter, say the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial Share and Share Alike 4.0 International, which basically just means it's okay with you that this interview can be shared for any non commercial purposes. Is that correct?

Alexis Cheatham 04:50

Yes.

Emily Leiserson 04:51

Great. And then could you confirm that you agreed for your interview to be made available to the public, immediately?

Alexis Cheatham 04:59

Yes, I agreed for my interview to be available immediately.

Emily Leiserson 05:03

Awesome. Thank you so much. Appreciate you going through all of that. All right, so let's get started. Alexis, tell me a little bit about yourself.

Alexis Cheatham 05:16

So my name is Alexis. I am a senior at Franklin College in Franklin, Indiana. I plan on going to grad school to get my Master's in social work after graduating from here. And I'm heavily involved on

campus right now. I'm the president of the Black Student Union. I'm a Resident Assistant. I work in Admissions helping recruit multicultural students. And I do a whole bunch of other stuff. My free time, I like to read. And I like to write and I like watching Grey's Anatomy and anime.

Emily Leiserson 05:53

Who doesn't? I mean [laughs]. So any of the other stuff that you want to share? What does your day look like on a daily basis, so you know a normal day for you?

Alexis Cheatham 06:03

So, I usually wake up for class. Depends on the semester when my class would be. I go to class, either virtually or in person, depending on what my campus is doing or my professor is doing, and if I am on duty, or have something to do for being an RA, I'll be on duty at night, which basically means from nine to midnight, I'm available for any of my residents. Or I might have a few meetings, because I'm President of the Black Student Union, like I mentioned. I'm also on a few presidential boards on campus. So I usually have at least one meeting a day. And then I'll do my homework at night, might hang out my friends, and then start all over.

Emily Leiserson 06:47

What is the experience of being in college like? How has it changed during the pandemic?

Alexis Cheatham 06:55

It's changed a lot. Um, so, before I'd have classes in person. My class, my college does a lot of activities on campus for students to go to, such as like cookouts, Bingo night karaoke, things like that. That's all done. [Laughs.] A lot of us, they still do activities, like we do a lot of trivia virtually through the college and win prizes, but that's really the extent of what we do, as opposed to like the in person stuff, activities we do beforehand. And as of right now, we're doing in-person classes, unless the student opts to go virtual or the professor opts to do a virtual class. So, all classes that are in person, there is an option to Zoom in. All the professors are required to have that for students. I prefer to go in person, because I found that I don't pay attention as much if it's on Zoom, because there are a lot of distractions in my room. But next semester, I have two classes in person, and one class is half-and-half, so half virtual half in person, and then one is all asynchronous. So, we're not even meeting on Zoom; we're just like turning in assignments and doing discussion boards. So it's a lot different, especially because I'm a creative writing and psychology major and a minor in English. So a lot of my classes, especially in the English/Creative Writing department are based off of discussion; like we discuss whatever we read. We have in depth conversations in the classroom, and it's not as much as that, of that, because a lot of it is on discussion boards. So it is a little hard, because that's like my favorite part of the class is listening to people's opinions on certain pieces. So I'm kind of bummed out that well senior year I don't get as much of it, but it's for our safety.

Emily Leiserson 08:45

Yeah. Yeah that is hard. All of the social things that you miss out on, those discussions, for sure. Are you, um, so Franklin College is a relatively small school, right? How many students?

Alexis Cheatham 09:01

A little less than 1,000.

Emily Leiserson 09:03

Okay. Yeah, yeah. So that explains maybe why it's easier for some classes to continue in person.

Alexis Cheatham 09:12

Yeah.

Emily Leiserson 09:14

That makes sense. Are you, has COVID been an issue on the campus? Have there been a lot of cases?

Alexis Cheatham 09:23

There have been a few splurges, especially like in the sports teams, because they're always together. And because we're such a small campus, when somebody has it, everybody knows. And our Franklin, The Franklin is our magazine, journal, so they like have a magazine out every month, and they'll do social media stuff, so they're good at telling the students when cases have splurged and keeping up with it. So we usually either send people home or we have a designated space for quarantine or isolation. But because we're such a small campus, we only have four dorms on campus, and we only have one dorm in the basement for isolation and quarantine, so there's not a ton of space. So we usually have to send people home, or we have to just do all virtual for a while if that is the case.

Emily Leiserson 10:13

Yeah, that makes sense. Well, okay so, to jump around a little bit here, so excuse me for that. So, when you think about common demographics - that can be any kind of typical US demographic categories - like age, gender, sexual orientation, how would you typically describe yourself?

Alexis Cheatham 10:45

I describe myself as a African American, queer, cis woman, from the middle class.

Emily Leiserson 10:55

Thank you. Um, and what about the area you're in. So can you tell me a little bit, if you see it, about Franklin outside of the college itself? What's happening in Franklin, in the pandemic or, or if you're home, you know, what's happening there during the pandemic?

Alexis Cheatham 11:20

So, Franklin, Indiana is also a small town. Like our colleges is half, like the majority of the town is Franklin College, but there is a town outside of us. Because we're a small town there has been some issues with masks and regulating. Some places don't do as great as others or some people fight against, um, wearing masks. I work at a local bookstore in Franklin, and my boss told me that she got hate mail about people not, like, refusing to wear masks, because it's their right not to wear it. I've gone to Walmart and seen people try not to wear masks sometimes. So I feel like it is difficult, especially in a small town to like regulate as much, because it's the way this town, like majority of the town is on the side of, like, this is my right not to wear a mask. So they fight it a lot. So it has been a little difficult.

Emily Leiserson 12:21

Yeah. Have you-. Yeah, I'll just leave it at that. Excuse me. That sounds challenging, especially when you're in a customer service role where you're trying to help people, but they're not following the rules. I imagine that could be a challenge.

Alexis Cheatham 12:46

Yeah, I had a guy come in without a mask, and I was like, there are some masks right there. And he like tried to come in. I said no, you need to put the mask on before you come in here. Otherwise you're not coming in here. And some people like will put the mask over their nose or just have it in their mouth, like that doesn't do anything. Yeah.

Emily Leiserson 12:59

Yeah, yeah, yeah. But Franklin is a pretty, pretty town, I, I used to be down there a lot before the pandemic.

Alexis Cheatham 13:13

Yeah, it's pretty. It's like really nice especially like in the fall, with all the leaves, and like, like the downtown Franklin has a lot of cute places to go to.

Emily Leiserson 13:21

Yeah, yeah. Well, okay. So, um, how would you say the pandemic compares to other events that have happened in your lifetime. So I know you're, you're 21. You're graduating from college soon, but, you know, how, how does it strike you?

Alexis Cheatham 13:44

I think this is beyond what I ever imagined would ever happen in my lifetime. I feel like things that have happened that have been like historical in terms of like on the more like horrific side, like 9/11 or the Great Recession in 2008, those are things that I was too young to like comprehend or remember, so I never really got to fully experience what it'd be like living during as I see like things changing due to those events. But now, 21 years old, I'm very cautious, or aware of what's going on. And I'm seeing how it's affecting people, and I will remember this past year, and as we continue to go into 2021, how it is resolved, and how it changes people from now on, because I don't think it's ever going to go back to how it was before. And, and I know like, you know, other events that I was alive for but wasn't aware of, things changed, but now that I'm 21, it's like that's always been how it is. Like I know, like, airports, were different before 9/11. But because I was so young, I don't remember what they were before. But like my parents are like yeah, like all the security and stuff, this wasn't a thing. I feel like after this whole pandemic there's gonna be stuff like, this wasn't a thing before 2020, but now, like this is a big thing. And I have like little nieces, cousins, they're like two or three. They're like has probably always been like this. No, there was a time before; you're just too young to remember.

Emily Leiserson 15:18

Yeah, yeah, it does feel like in a way like it's shaping a generation to come. Or, or a set of expectations that we'll have about society for a long time. Yeah. Um, what issues have concerned you the most or do concern you the most when you think about the pandemic?

Alexis Cheatham 15:41

Um, it's just people not cooperating with the guidelines basically put there to keep us safe. Like not wearing masks, or going to like really big social gatherings with strangers and not wearing masks and things like that just. And like if you do go to that, also like the next day putting somebody else in danger before you even have a COVID test or, like, try to isolate yourself if you do go to events such as those. Just people not being considerate of others. I know like there are some younger people who are like, "well I'm young, if I get it, it won't really affect me out bounce back." But they're not really being considerate of the populations that are at risk that you're around, and that you could be putting in danger. So I think just people's attitudes towards the pandemic and those who aren't taking it as seriously or thinking more about themselves than the people that they can be putting at risk. That's probably my biggest concern.

Emily Leiserson 16:39

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Well, um, have you seen people around you change their opinions, their relationships, their day to day activities in any ways we haven't talked about so far?

Alexis Cheatham 16:55

Um, really just like not going out as much . Like my sister, like my whole family is a big travel family. We like to go a lot of different places. And my sister like will not leave the house unless she absolutely has to. She's like I'm not going, excuse me, anywhere. I'm like, but the restaurants are open, like they do the social distancing thing. She's like, "No, I'll just order in. Things like that, which is like just being extra cautious, which is fine, but like, I feel like this whole thing, like people are going to continue to be cautious even when it's over. Because like it's so engraved in our mindset now that it's been a year. So I've definitely seen just people being more cautious going out, or people that are doing the opposite. And just like it's fine, I'll be okay, and this is like leaving. My grandfather does that a lot; he's like if it's my time, it's my time, and he just goes. I'm like no, you could not do that.

Emily Leiserson 17:52

Yeah, yeah. That's so true; it's so interesting. Well, okay, so I think we can switch gears for a second, again, and then, so I want to switch us to talk more about racial justice movements during the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement. Would you please share any thoughts you have about any of the racial justice movements that are currently happening? You know, just share any thoughts you have about them.

Alexis Cheatham 18:28

Well, Black Lives Matter is the movement that's like most present right now. I think like it's been around since the hearing of Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman, like how he was not convicted. That's really when it really began, but there was a time period where it wasn't as visible in the media or talked about as much. Like it was always there; just when George Floyd was murdered, there was a surge. And it was on everybody's social media pages for weeks, and then Breonna Taylor happened. And then it just continued to happen; things continued to happen. I thought it was interesting when people would go out to protest Black Lives Matter. It was during the pandemic, and people like they're gonna just make it worse, etc, etc. But like, no, we everybody who went to protests, they wore masks, they were safe, and it didn't affect how, like the statistics of any of the numbers growing or anything. Because everybody was saying, because we went out there to make a point in regards to pandemic. We're like, we need to be heard, and we need to show that this is not okay. And I watched Death to 2020, and Samuel L. Jackson,

he was like, I'd rather face the pandemic than racist policemen, in terms of my life, which is, I also 100% agree with. And I thought it was really great people going out and supporting it. I went out to a few protests. I remember my mom was like, "Be careful," because of the like violence that was happening. I know people who were tear gassed and shot with rubber bullets as well. My roommate she went with her dog, and she had to cover her dog in her jacket because they started throwing tear gas at them. Just terrifying. Um, and I think now that it's been, like, a few months, and then like you see it dipping down, I like, like to make it clear to people like this was not a trend. This isn't something that's just gonna go away. Like we're not gonna let that happen again. You need to, like don't just post it on social media and just like not do anything in your real world, or just post it because it's a trend right now, it will eventually go away. Like, no, I'm Black, I live with this every day. This isn't a trend for me. So I definitely try to make that clear to people who I've seen like post stuff on social media and then like not do anything or like they haven't mentioned it since. So, yeah.

Emily Leiserson 21:01

Yeah, absolutely. So, would you mind telling me a little bit more about what the experience of the protests that you went to was like for you?

Alexis Cheatham 21:12

Yeah. So, I went, maybe like a week after the George Floyd incident. And I went with my roommate slash friend, and every- when I was there, everybody was wearing masks, and we all had like signs, and such as that. It was a really, it was a really big crowd. It was in downtown Indianapolis, and the streets were basically like barren because there was like the curfew and not a lot of people going downtown. And like there was a moment that was like in between protests where there was nothing happening, and me and my friends were just walking down the street, and there were no cars, it was just completely silent. I was like, I've lived in Indy all my life, and I've never seen downtown Indianapolis like this. Like we were just walking in the middle of the street and taking pictures and stuff and I was like, "This is crazy." And then like a, like an hour later you start hearing chanting again, and you see people walking up down the street and I'm just like this is really beautiful honestly. Like just seeing so many people come together. And not just Black people, there were people of all races, all genders, all sexualities coming because like we're seeing that human rights are being put in danger. And it's not just about Black people; it's about like just treating people how they should be treated. And I like the advocacy that I saw in that as well. So I also like after, like I went a week after [George Floyd's death] due to like work and family things, so I wasn't there as present when it was like the tear gassing and things. Like it had calmed down a little bit, but obviously there was still like, if you were there after a certain time, it definitely did start again. I ended, I didn't stay too late, because my parents and grandparents were concerned about me, so I did end up going home before dark. But, yeah.

Emily Leiserson 23:02

Yeah. Um, so yeah, you talked a little bit about how the protests have, I would say maybe the narrative around the protests has changed over time, right? Like you mentioned, people start talking about it like it was a trend. But how, how would you perceive that narrative, and what do you think the reasons for it or for the change or no change in it are? What do you think the reasons are? Does that make sense?

Alexis Cheatham 23:41

In terms of like how it was in 2013 versus now?

Emily Leiserson 23:45

Yeah, yeah, or, you know, over the course of 2020, you know any period you want to think about.

Alexis Cheatham 23:53

I feel like, in terms of the Black community, I don't think it's ever died down, just because it's something we always live with. From the thing with Trayvon Martin until now, Black Lives Matter has always been something that I've read and talked about. But, like, for a lot of people if you're not African American, it doesn't really directly affect you, so I feel like when the Trayvon Martin thing, like it was big. And then people kind of dwindled it out, in terms of it being a big trend on social media, because a lot of people were like, okay, this doesn't really directly affect me. I did my part posting, and I went to a protest; now I can like continue to live my life. But if I'm African American, I cannot continue to live my life, because that's something I have to continuously deal with. And I think when the George Floyd thing happened, and it was seen on video, I think that was just another spark and another reason for people just to like, like start back up again. Like you see a man being choked on the ground for like seven or eight minutes. That gives such a type of emotional reaction; I couldn't watch the video. After a few seconds I started crying. It was very terrible to watch, and I think it was just, it showed people again the realities of the situation on tape. And it gave people a new reason to go out and protest again, and I feel like now people are less likely to like let it go, especially in the Black community. I see a lot of Black people who are like okay this is not about to die out like it did a couple years ago; this is going to be something that continues. We cannot keep dealing with this. And we're going to call people out on it. And I'm hopeful that this is something that continues to happen, and like, in terms of people continuing to show support and advocate towards something like this. And I also feel like the political climate also affected how people were seeing the Black Lives Matter movement, because the former president definitely showed his views on the issue and formal race issues, just human rights issues in general. And I feel like a lot of people were tired of that as well. So they were like we just, the world was kind of going down. So they were like we just need, we need to keep saying something, because clearly, nothing's gonna change unless we continue to, like, speak out and raise our voices and do whatever we need to do to stay visible.

Emily Leiserson 26:30

Yeah. Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Do you think that COVID played a role in it or not? And, and I guess what, how would you say that the the experience of the pandemic has affected the Black community? Is it related to the racial justice movement in your eyes or no?

Alexis Cheatham 26:57

Well, um, COVID in general, like you can see that, if you look at the statistics and the numbers, that the Black community are people who are dying more. So I think like that plays into Black Lives Matter, just seeing the number of African Americans who have died from COVID versus other demographics. And you're like, there's a lot of people that are Black who are dying. That's more than like we have. Like it doesn't make- it makes sense because of like, where Black people stand in society and where we are placed in terms of like social economic stance. So I think that definitely played a part, because I see a lot of people posting about that and speaking out about that. I don't think that if George Floyd happened outside of the pandemic that it would have given a different response; I feel like the main spark because of that was because of the video, and I think if this had happened outside of the pandemic, it still would have gotten the same amount of protests. I think people use COVID as an excuse for people to not protest, and they're basically like, "why are you guys all like coming together and doing this? This is



dangerous; you shouldn't do it. You should just wait." And then they're like wait well if you wait, it'll die out, and we'll just forget about it. I think people were using COVID as a reason for the Black Lives Matter basically to not do what it did.

Emily Leiserson 28:20

Yeah. That's really interesting. Thank you. Um, so, have you been a part of any organized BLM chapters? I mean you mentioned your work with the Black Student Union. Have you worked with a BLM chapter personally or, or no?

Alexis Cheatham 28:41

Well, not directly. The Black Student Union did do a one day fundraiser to raise money to go directly to BLM organization. We raised over \$1,000 in, like, a few hours, so that was really cool.

Emily Leiserson 28:57

Wow.

Alexis Cheatham 28:58

We have done like protests on campus, into Franklin, Indiana, toward the beginning of the school year, and we try to do meetings that talk about Black Lives Matter. We have at least one a year that is specifically for that movement.

Emily Leiserson 29:14

You said you did do a protest in Franklin.

Alexis Cheatham 29:16

Yes.

Emily Leiserson 29:17

What was that like?

Alexis Cheatham 29:19

Excuse me. Oh, we had a lot of people from Franklin College come to march, and we marched around campus. Then we went into downtown Franklin. There were a few people who like honked in support, but then there were also people who honked against the movement. Somebody like drove past us on his motorcycle, and he like left for like 10 minutes, and he came back with a confederate flag and basically followed us with this flag. So that was not great. So it was interesting to see the different reactions of people in town. I know like the majority of the demographic in this town is more conservative, right wing. So I wasn't expecting a ton of favor towards it. And like the Confederate flag was, it was terrible, but I wasn't surprised.

Emily Leiserson 30:12

Yeah. Well that's brave of you, I think, to do it, knowing that there's likely to be that sort of reaction. What, what do you feel the Black Lives, excuse me, Black Lives Matter movement means to you

personally? Or to your community, to the Black community, to society as a whole, you know, what do you think it means?

Alexis Cheatham 30:40

I think the meaning's in the name. Like Black Lives Matter is showing that Black lives have not mattered in history. Like you, it's basically been told to us in our treatment and in how we were placed in society that we have not been seen as people. And we have not been seen as people who matter. So now we're trying to, like, show you that we actually do matter. And I feel like people who take offense to the wording of the phrase or like try to change it to something else, like All Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, stuff like that, I don't think they understand what it's really supposed to mean. I don't think they really want to understand what it means. And I feel like they use their privilege in order to be like, "no, all lives matter, not just Black lives." It's like you have the privilege in order to say stuff like that, and I feel like sometimes people with privilege get offended when the focus is not on them, it's on like a minority group trying to get their voices heard or form justice.

Emily Leiserson 31:47

Yeah, that makes sense. Okay, so let's see. Have your experiences, any of the experiences we've talked about, changed the way you think about your family, friends, society, community?

Alexis Cheatham 32:17

Um, well growing up Black, a lot of things that have happened recently, like they're terrible, but I'm not surprised. Just because I've been raised to like know better, and to be prepared to deal with certain situations. It has made me more wary of like who I associate with in terms of I need to know your feelings on certain things, because some things, like we can have a conversation about, but some things I can't compromise. It's definitely like after the whole movement, like the George Floyd thing happened, a lot of people have showed their opinions on the case. And sometimes I have to be like no, I don't know, like I'll try to talk to them if I can, but I don't think I can like associated with you anymore, just because I don't know how you can say you're a friend, my friend, somebody of the Black community, but not be for getting us equal rights. So I think it's just like made me more socially aware of who I hang out with. And what crowds I'm surrounding myself with.

Emily Leiserson 33:24

Yeah. Yeah. That makes sense. What responses have you seen from, you know, leadership, whether that's politicians or other leaders in the community, who affect your lives?

Alexis Cheatham 33:42

In terms of the pandemic or the Black Lives Matter?

Emily Leiserson 33:45

Either or both.

Alexis Cheatham 33:48

Well I can only like, I'm usually in Franklin, so I'll talk about that.

Emily Leiserson 33:54

Yeah, that's great.

Alexis Cheatham 33:55

I know my college was late to the party, in terms of posting about the George Floyd incident. They like, a lot of the Indiana colleges were posting like the week of, just like putting their support out there, and showing their support to their African American students. Franklin College didn't post a public statement until six weeks after the incident. They got a lot of backlash about it, especially from alumni. And as, because this school is already very small, and there's only a handful of people of color here, it really just, at the moment it like hurt me, just to see, like I was literally waiting I was like, "Why is Franklin College taking so long to write a statement about this?" And then when they did post a statement, it was like two sentences. And that was it. And then later they like did a more formal like website, posted stuff on the website and sent an email out to students, but my concern was why did it take you so long to do that? What was the issue? What are you waiting on? Like you have Black students who feel like they're in danger. And you can't like even show any kind of stance towards them or like show any public opinions about it. So it really, it was hurtful, and I didn't really get, we didn't really get a reasoning why it took so long afterwards. And I feel like now they're trying to make up for it. But, and you can make up for it, but at the end, but I'm still going to remember that it took you six weeks to say something in the first place.

Emily Leiserson 35:26

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Do you think, what would you like to see from leaders? I think it's kind of implied in your statement, but I'll ask anyway.

Alexis Cheatham 35:46

Just a faster response. I don't like it when people try to play both sides in order to not get like backlash. I think people just need to be more honest with their opinions and show support for, like, hopefully the Black Lives Matter movement, but like show your true colors. Don't try to like be politically correct in terms of both sides are doing blah blah. Like it's fine, like, no, cuz you're just like showing, ultimately you're showing people that it's still okay to like do these kind of acts and behaviors if you're not saying like, no, this is wrong, you need to stop. If you're more like neutral slash like just being more passive about it, I feel like people just need to be assertive and be like this is not okay. And I know in my position I can get a lot of backlash from certain people who are on a different side, but as a public figure, I can't just be silent, and I use my voice in order to make a change in a more positive direction.

Emily Leiserson 36:45

Yeah, that absolutely makes sense. And, you know, it makes me think about the narrative that we hear since the January 6 insurrection, where people kind of talk about that in relation to racial justice protests. And actually I was talking to your mom on January 6 as all of that was going down. But it, if you don't mind my asking, what are your thoughts on that? Has that changed your thoughts on everything else we've talked about or not?

Alexis Cheatham 37:31

I think it's very clear how the Black Lives Matter protesters were peacefully protesting in Washington when they were tear gassed, and like, had a whole National Guard out there ready to take us down. But when a whole, when a group of extremist, white Americans storm into the Capitol, like nothing, like virtually no kind of force or like any reason to like try to stop them, like it was not as coming as if they were Black or any other race, it would have been a whole different story. Like if there were people of

color doing that, there would have been a firing squad, and that's just how, it's just how it is. Like as you've seen in history when Black people try to protest, there are people with guns and tear gas and rubber bullets. And they're armed, and they're ready. But when white people do it, and they're not doing it peacefully, because they're storming into a Capitol building where there are multiple public figures that are in danger, but we're basically let them go in. So, it just tells me where I stand and where people of color stand in society versus people like white people, and how they're seen in the government and in the law enforcement, and how they're treated.

Emily Leiserson 38:52

Yeah. That's a powerful statement. Thank you for sharing that. Well, okay. So as you think about all of these experiences, what, what would you like individuals and communities to take from them and to learn for the future?

Alexis Cheatham 39:22

I feel like people need to stop making excuses. Certain things have happened, that it's very clear what's going on in America, and just in general. Like example the Capitol, the storming of the Capitol. People are still making excuses and saying that like America's not racist, and they were like, they're trying to make it seem like these people were not very extreme Trump supporters. They're trying to be like, oh no, it was Antifa or no, it was like other people. Like no, we know who they were. Don't make excuses; it's like blatantly there. And like we see like how they're treating this group of people versus another group of people, so stop making excuses like it's not blatantly clear. Like I don't like when people just see facts and see like statistically what's been going on and then still continue to make excuses. And like ignore what's going on because they have the privilege to do so. So I hope in the future people look back on these, and they're not trying to make excuses, they're seeing, they're like analyzing it and saying like, "Oh, this is how we're treating these people; there's no reason why this should be happening. We need to change it."

Emily Leiserson 40:36

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Okay, so I'm going to switch gears again. We only have a few questions left. So, you know, feel free to jump in if you want to talk about anything else, if anything else occurs to you. But I would like to ask what do you, where would you like to see yourself in a year or two or five years? And what, what do you imagine your life being like then?

Alexis Cheatham 41:08

So I mentioned before that I'm trying to get my Master's in social work. So I'm hoping in two years that I will have it, and that I will be a graduate. And I want to be a trauma counselor for minority groups, misrepresentation groups. Mostly them and also children. And I also want to work with nonprofits that fight for racial justice and equality. So I hope to be on the front line for improving the mental health of underrepresented groups and populations, as well as just being on some type of committee or working with some type of organization in order to do more to better the climate of America, and to help people have equal rights, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

Emily Leiserson 41:58

Yeah. That's fantastic. Do you, what, what led you in that direction? What made you want to do that?

Alexis Cheatham 42:06

I think going to Franklin has really opened my eyes. Because I went to a liberal, diverse high school, and I did not face a lot of the problems I face at a small, white institution. I've either heard stories or been on the receiving end of either subtle or blatant racism here. Because a lot of the population here come from small white towns, they have not been exposed to racism. Some people haven't even met somebody of another race besides white, and it's very unbecoming, and it's very obvious. Some of the things that Black students, or just anybody with any type of diversity status has to deal with here, and I think that has led me to like try to change the climate of the whole, um, hopefully the world, but right now like just working smaller, like in the state and then in America. Just trying to fight that. Originally I wanted to be just a psychologist, but then I started like seeing the lack of mental health resources for misrepresentation or misrepresented communities, especially in the Black community, because like historically, the Black community has been victims to a lot of things in the medical field that have made us not trust a lot of like doctors or counselors, psychologists, etc. So I want to like break the bounds of that mistrust. And one way to do that is having more people of color in the roles of counselors and therapists and psychologists. And a lot of people of color or people from misrepresented populations deal with a lot of trauma due to their minority status. And, as somebody who's also gone to counseling, it is sometimes it is more comfortable if you are a person of a minority status to talk to somebody else who has had similar or same experiences as you, also coming from a minority status. Sometimes if you are talking to somebody who is of a majority population, like you speak of your traumas, as a person of color, or somebody who is queer or trans or etc., and like, you can speak to them, but ultimately, they can only empathize; they can't truly understand what it's like. So a lot of people opt not to go to therapy, because they don't feel like there are enough therapists out there who have the same experiences as them. So that's why I wanted to go into psychology. And then just seeing the climate of non-diversity on campus and seeing how our students deal with certain things or how its dealt with on campus, that's made me want to go more towards also fighting against, like, injustices and fighting for equality.

Emily Leiserson 45:02

That's wonderful. And you want to stay here in Indiana, it sounded like? No?

Alexis Cheatham 45:11

No. I know for grad school, I'm trying to leave. I've applied for nine schools, and only one of them's in Indy. That's my backup. And I'm hoping, at least for two years, to like not live here. I, I honestly don't know at the moment. I feel like I won't live in Indy. And if I do come back, it'd be in the Midwest somewhere, or in Indianapolis directly like with my family. And I'd probably only come back if I like got married and was raising a child, just so they're near my family. And I have that support. But this, I need to go somewhere that's more liberal. This is not it for me.

Emily Leiserson 45:50

Yeah. Yeah, and it's, it's great to experience a different place. Makes sense. Um, is there anything else you'd like to talk about? Anything we haven't covered.

Alexis Cheatham 46:11

I will say a statement.

Emily Leiserson 46:13

Okay.

Alexis Cheatham 46:16

Um, I don't know how much into politics we're going into these interviews, but I was just gonna say something. I feel like a lot of the things that have happened in the past four years have been due to what's happening in the White House and who was representing our country for the past four years. I think the actions of the former president have enabled and influenced people to be more open to hate crimes and racism and being more blunt about their feelings. Like obviously it's always been bad, but these past four years, you see what somebody in office is saying and doing, so it's influencing people that aren't, who are like, "Oh, he's saying these things, and I can say them, and I can do them." And a lot of crimes have been influenced because of that. And a couple years ago, I think in 2016, in August, two white men assaulted somebody who was a homeless man, and used anti immigration slurs towards him and basically we're saying that if Trump says all this stuff like, why can't we? Like, basically, it was influenced by him. And like during the presidential debate he called the coronavirus, the China, Chinese virus, and he basically was like, white supremacists, like, wait, and called them Proud Boys.

Emily Leiserson 47:43

Stand back and stand by, or whatever it was, yeah.

Alexis Cheatham 47:46

Right. And we voted this man into office. Like he was not shy about what he was saying before he started running for presidency; he's always been like this. There's a history of him being racist, homophobic, xenophobic, etc. But we still voted him into office, and I think that says a lot about where we were four years ago. And I think it says a lot about where we were now, because this man was also running again, and he was voted in to be the Republican candidate, and he almost got into office. And it says a lot about where we are and who we want to see representing our country, across the world. Like that's what we were representing us? Somebody who has had a history of saying and doing all these terrible things. It reflects the thoughts and the beliefs of people in America. Like you're gonna vote for somebody who aligns with your beliefs in some way, shape, or form, and that's who America voted for. And I think it's really saying, like we got Obama; we took like 10 steps forward. Then we got Trump and we went like 11 steps back.

Emily Leiserson 48:58

Yeah, yeah. Thank you for sharing that. Okay, let me, I'm gonna turn off the recording, but we can stay on if you'd like for a few minutes.