

# Essential People Project EJ Labb

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, dementia, residents, wearing, building, masks, support, joy, conversation, protect, challenge, goggles, abnormal, happening, families, team members, entertainers, fear, feel, shower cap

## SPEAKERS

EJ Labb, Armand Coleman

**Armand Coleman** 00:04

Good morning how are you doing?

**EJ Labb** 00:06

I'm good. How are you doing?

**Armand Coleman** 00:07

Doing just fine. I'm doing just fine. My name is...

**EJ Labb** 00:10

Nice to meet you.

**Armand Coleman** 00:12

My name is Armand and I'm actually like honored to actually meet you. And I want to begin by just thanking you for like the work you're doing.

**EJ Labb** 00:21

Thank you. I'm EJ. I work at an assisted living facility for people with dementia. I've been doing it for a little over 20 years. It's been a great career for me, something I've been really proud of. It's challenging in the best of times, and as we know, these are not the best of times. It's been a whirlwind to say the least, I'm on not a lot of sleep right now.

**Armand Coleman** 00:51

How has, how has things changed? You said 20 years [?], the last eight weeks has been

**EJ Labb** 00:57

Crazy.

**Armand Coleman** 00:58

Crazy, exactly. What is crazy? That's what I'm saying.

**EJ Labb** 01:04

You know, I think at first, there was a lot of adrenaline, and a lot of talk of kind of this short term emergency for all of us. And so there's, you know, a ton of motivation, a ton of coming together and positivity. I'm blessed with an amazing team where I am and great support from my home office. So, at the beginning, it was like, kind of like, okay, let's rally, we're gonna just focus on you know, stay positive, and there were policy changes happening, you know, constantly so it was keeping up with that, adjusting at home, supporting team members adjusting at home with childcare and schooling and all that. And we didn't even see it as a new normal. We saw it as a new abnormal, and now here we are two months later, and it's setting in for everyone. Like wow, okay, this isn't it's not like June 1, hey, it's over. This is going to be a long haul. We've been hit by it, the building has been hit by where I work. So we're dealing with you know, Coronavirus every single day.

**Armand Coleman** 02:17

How do you feel like being like in contact with it?

**EJ Labb** 02:23

Ah, I feared it so much at the beginning. You know, it was like, you know, just wanted to keep it away. And that was the main goal was like how do we keep it away. Now, I just want to be safe, and I want to make sure my colleagues are safe and my teammates are safe. I've already had one negative test so I know I can be around it and not get it. And I have team members that have been around it a lot more than I have doing direct care who have not gotten it. I've seen people with elderly people at risk people survive. It is not a death sentence for everyone. And as we learn more, we know you can get through it so the fear is kind of with time has gotten a little bit better, for sure. But you know, to add to that, I have PPE, and my team has PPE. So I have, you know, I'm alone right now, but I have, you know, the second I leave this office I have, my goggles, I have my N95 mask, my surgical mask that I can put on to protect me, I have plenty of hand sanitizer, wipes. My company provides that and we work really hard to keep that which is important for my to keep my fear at bay and to support my team. There are people in places where that's not the case. And that's a really different story. Unfortunately.

**Armand Coleman** 03:44

But you feel confident that you're safe and you're secure in?

**EJ Labb** 03:49

Yeah, I mean, I guess as much as I guess to some extent, yes, not secure, but I do feel protected. But I have to say I, you know, I'm sitting in my office, I'm the director in a community and I'm asking team members to go and do direct care. It's a lot different. I've done the direct care here and there, but you know, it's different going in there all day, every day and sweating in those masks. And so as much as I'm helping out on the front lines, it's really my team that is, is doing the harder work that harder physical work. And I don't know that they'd answer that the same way that I would. So we check in a lot about it, and I, you know, I try to make sure they have everything they need to feel safe. You know, I don't care if they wear a poncho and shower cap and full body, you know, suit. I mean, they can wear

whatever they want. I just want them to feel protected. So we're just trying to make those supplies readily available, so that they can feel secure.

**Armand Coleman** 04:53

Yeah, so I've kind of like I see what you just said about like, you're the director so you're the one that's directing people into the battlefield.

**EJ Labb** 05:02

Right?

**Armand Coleman** 05:03

Does that weigh on you at all?

**EJ Labb** 05:05

For sure.

**Armand Coleman** 05:06

For sure?

**EJ Labb** 05:09

Yeah, it does. I'm not, I'm not always sure I'm making the right decisions. But like I said, I think the value of of team is that these decisions are being made, usually with a lot of conversation. So, you know, I have elderly workers who have stepped out of the building, but now want to come back and so a lot of conversation, you know, here are the risks, here are the benefits, and making those decisions together, but yeah, it definitely weighs on me. It's a lot to ask of people.

**Armand Coleman** 05:43

Yeah

**EJ Labb** 05:44

You put their lives on the line literally. You know, you can call healthcare workers heroes all you want, but this is not this was not what people had in mind when they started this job. I mean, certainly we've had other epidemics. I mean even the flu is hard every year but this is something we didn't expect to see in our lifetime. So, it is a lot to ask.

**Armand Coleman** 06:07

What is something that you've seen like, like now? Like just like a regular like scene or incident, something that happened that you thought you would never see, that you will never forget, that would basically capture what we're going through in a snapshot?

**EJ Labb** 06:28

I think, myself and my colleagues inviting the National Guard into the building for testing...

**Armand Coleman** 06:35

Wow.

**EJ Labb** 06:36

was something I'd never thought I'd see. I mean, just the military showing up and they were fantastic. Young, you know, cadets or whatever you call them in full, you know, their, their uniforms, pulling up and, and getting into hazmat suits, was pretty surreal.

**Armand Coleman** 06:53

How has the life of like the residents changed. Yeah, I would think that like, No, no, I think the visitors I don't know. [?]

**EJ Labb** 07:00

We see like we have a lot of people mandating what the the new abnormal is, there's certain workers that can come in, but no visitors. So that has been a tremendous change for these residents a lot of our the way we communicate with people with dementia is facial expressions and warmth and kindness through expression. And now we're wearing masks and goggles, so they can't hear us as well, they can't see our expression, and so communication has become really a challenge. And on top of it, the regular visits they get from friends and family have stopped. So we do utilize zoom like we're utilizing now to have this conversation we utilize, you know, telephone calls, but especially when you have dementia, it's really hard to navigate that. I mean, even when we're supplying support, they don't always understand what they're looking at on the screen. Some of them are fine, but you know, some are challenged by that and to not be able to hug someone you love I mean, we all know what that feels like. And for these folks, for their families knowing that they're so they're so vulnerable. It's been, it's been a really heartache for so many families. We're, luckily, we have a lot of technology and we're able to still run great activities, have awesome staff who just put on their masks and go right in and have awesome programming for them. So they still have joy and they have great food and you know, fun things - music we do entertainers, we have entertainers outside, like we've gotten extremely creative. But this new way of it's been a learning experience for all of us. But I mean, my job has always been in this field to create joy, and that is still what we're trying to ,create joy even in these unprecedented times.

**Armand Coleman** 08:56

I don't know, like the whole scope of the dementia so I'm actually like...

**EJ Labb** 08:59

Yeah, no, that's ok.

**Armand Coleman** 09:00

Do they understand like from day to day, like what's happening and forget the next day, and then you have to go over it? Like do they even understand what's happening?

**EJ Labb** 09:07

That' a good question. Dementia, dementia is sort of an umbrella term for memory loss. So we have people with varying diseases. But everyone has some form of memory loss. I have folks that are

following the news, residents who follow the news every day, read the paper, and know exactly what's going on. And for those people, we can have conversations like you and I are having so you know, it's a like, oh, you know, you tested negative, you know, we do have some cases, but people are doing fairly well, we'll have a conversation just like you and I would have. Then I have residents who understand that there's something going on, but aren't quite sure, might forget day to day. And so for those folks we'll support them in their questions, but we're not constantly reminding them that we're in a pandemic. And then I have probably majority of the residents that don't understand what's happening. So they'll ask why are we wearing masks? And we'll say something like, well, there's a very bad flu and we don't want you to catch it. So we're wearing it to protect you. So luckily, we have known them for a long time. So we know kind of where they're at. But we are trying to support them where they're at, and not bring them into pandemic mania on a daily basis, because they don't, it's not helpful for them. I have been known to do a little music in my day. I had a band years ago, it's something I still enjoy. But it's mostly like rock and hip hop, and they're, they're not that into that. So I do a lot of dancing. I think that's where my musical background kind of comes into play. I love dancing and they love to watch. So, just as I'm moving around the building, I do a lot of dance moves. And I think they get a kick out of it. So, and that goes back to bringing joy. I try to do anything that brings joy and supporting my staff so that they can bring joy and bring safety and caring is really my rules.

**Armand Coleman** 11:05

Thank you for your service.

**EJ Labb** 11:06

Thank you. It is a pleasure. It is an honor and a pleasure speaking with you. I hope to see you in real life someday.

**Armand Coleman** 11:12

Hopefully, hopefully, and have a good day.

**EJ Labb** 11:14

You too Armand. Bye bye.