

## **Transcript of Interview with Meeka Caldwell By Kit Heintzman**

**Interviewee:** Meeka Caldwell

**Interviewer:** Kit Heintzman

**Date:** 07/15/2022

**Location (Interviewee):** Maryland

**Location (Interviewer):**

**Transcriber:** Cass CC Walrath

**Summary:** Being a mother in a blended family with 6 children. Getting sick circa Thanksgiving 2019-February 2020. Working at an environmental nonprofit and hearing about the pandemic through colleagues who were scientists. Climate change. Children's understanding of the pandemic; having honest conversations about fear and mortality; one child entering therapy. Teaching son with Down's Syndrome safety precautions. Husband needs to continue working outside of the home, deepening relationship with husband. Making the home a more pleasurable environment to isolate in as a family. Having a love/hate relationship with the medical profession. Medical racism and struggling for diagnosis and treatment; needing to advocate for self and children. Being able to tell when a doctor cares and is listening. Slowing down and having time. Racial reckoning in the USA immediately after the murder of George Floyd. Navigating COVID safety boundaries in social relationships; assumptions about judgment; withholding judgment. Fear of coughing and sneezing in public. Moving from frenzy to calm. Emotion reactions to the changes in grocery store layouts and movements. Food and health. Changing relationship with technology, media consumption, and education. Not learning enough about Native American and Black history in high school, learning more after attending a Historically Black College.

**Kit Heintzman 00:02**

Hello, would you please state your name, the date, the time and your location?

**Meeka Caldwell 00:07**

Meeka Caldwell. It's July 15, 2022. It's 1:02 pm. Eastern Time, and I am in Maryland.

**Kit Heintzman 00:17**

And do you consent to have this interview recorded, digitally uploaded, and publicly released under a Creative Commons license attribution non-commercial share alike?

**Meeka Caldwell 00:26**

Yes.

**Kit Heintzman 00:28**

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

**Meeka Caldwell 00:36**

Ah, my name is Meeka Caldwell, I'm currently I'm a mom, a wife, I'm a sister I have, we have six kids total. We're a blended family. Just very diverse. Uh my occupation, I'm an HR talent director for nonprofit organization

based in Washington, DC. And I'm also a children's book author. I actually specialize in writing children's books for those communities that are unheard. So, my son who was eight years old, has Down syndrome. And he is a wonderful black child. And I noticed that we didn't have any books that, that highlighted black children with Down syndrome, much less Down syndrome at all. So that's why I became a children's book author.

**Kit Heintzman** 01:21

Tell me a story about your life during the pandemic.

**Meeka Caldwell** 01:24

Oh, boy, the pandemic, I, you know, I reflect on that a lot because it's funny how we move about the world now versus how we did during like the height of the pandemic. Um, just the memories of being at work and just hearing about, you know, this condition or this thing that's going around, and people are catching it, and not really understanding it fully. Just thinking, "Oh, okay, that's something that's happening", and let me keep on working. But when they started to shut the schools down, and even work down, that just became, like, unheard of, because I'm thinking like, "How bad is it?" And then getting home and just designating, like my husband as the only one to go outside. And that was different, he was the only one to go outside, he was the only one to go shopping. He actually had to still go into work a couple of times a week. So we thought that was safest. And I'm just recalling like, him coming in the house with gloves, and a mask. And going to all the big box stores. I just remember the mayhem. But I also remember, it being a time where you just got closer to those that were in your household and in your family. And it became something fun after a while when you're in and you're trying to figure it out. And I have three little kids at home. To get, like we got a trampoline, we got a pool, we got all these arts and crafts. We had so much fun. I feel like reconnecting and just understanding like the simpler things in life. So, it went from like sheer panic to alright, how do we move in this particular environment? How do we make it the best for us? How do we make the experience good for the kids, while still surviving, but not going overboard with the things that we do? And I found that just a time of connecting, I don't think I don't think we ever had any moments like inside the house would be spent that much time together. And you realize how much of a hustle and bustle that your life was, and how much it didn't have to be, and how much you value the communication relationship with your family. And then you change things. So, I didn't get COVID I felt like I got COVID in the beginning of it. I feel like a lot of people thought that too. Like, oh, this is some particular condition. Oh, no, I'm still sick. I was sick from like, Thanksgiving of the prior year, always maybe February of the that year, not knowing what anything was and just come to realize that probably was COVID, because no one just knew but just feeling like so grateful to not have gone through the worst of it. The feeling horrible for those families that are going through it. So you just really value your time and your people more and I feel like it was a stop, just put on us. Like stop and reevaluate your life. You're moving through life too quick, let's figure out what we have to do and what, what means the most to us.

**Kit Heintzman** 04:07

Do you remember when you first heard about the pandemic?

**Meeka Caldwell** 04:11

Again, I felt like I was at work. Am I, I work for an environmental organization. So I work with a lot of scientists. I work with people who are experts in certain fields and who um, you know, Washington DC, or the powers that be, look to them for advice for certain things. And so I figured like the my coworkers were experts like it, they're saying, Wow, this is what it is. And this is what it is. And I just remember thinking like, well, what

is it okay, we're going to be gone. I grabbed some stuff from work. We're going to be gone about a week, and then it turned into months, and then it turned to years. So and then seeing it on the news and trying to figure out like, what is it and trying to understand the science behind it too. Because although it's a it's a "pandemic" and it was something that um, they discovered and called it COVID. Like, where did it come from? How did you identify it? What is the processes to figure out a cure or vaccination and understanding like how they were in the process of this already just trying to understand that too, because there's a lot of things that come across to say, oh, no, this is this is a sham or this is not real. Because the vaccination was, was so quick to some people. But just to understand, like the science behind it, like these are the things that scientists, um and specialists work on, like constantly, like, "how do they know this?" So I just remember thinking like in our lifetime, and looking up the flu, I think I went back and looked up, like what happened during the flu, like, what did they do then was this a pandemic, did they wear a mask? Honestly, just to be it was kind of funny, when I looked at pictures, and people were wearing masks, and here we are thinking, like now was when masks were implemented, you know, anything they have masks then, and just realizing like, yes, and just trying to figure out and, and also looking at the history of that, and figuring out how many years of that last, like, what does that mean for us and trying to project it? Yeah, so the first time at work and trying to figure it all out, but not taking it 100% seriously, because you're like, oh, it's gonna be gone in like two weeks, and we'll come back to work. But then when it goes further, you're like, oh, no, maybe I should do something. And this is a whole, get Lysol and I just sprayed the house. I still have Lysol today that I haven't even used. So one of those things like, did we need all that? So? Yeah.

**Kit Heintzman** 06:36

To the extent that you're comfortable sharing, would you say something about your experiences with health and healthcare infrastructure, pre-pandemic?

**Meeka Caldwell** 06:43

Oh, boy. So, I have a lot of experience with healthcare, I kind of have a love-hate relationship with healthcare. Healthcare is not always accessible to all. And I find that that it was, healthcare could be discriminatory. Healthcare doesn't always serve those communities that it's meant to serve. And I think for me, as a mom, I think I've had health issues with every single one of my children where I had to advocate for better care. I had to advocate for better doctors, I had to advocate for second opinions. And that has been the vein of my existence as a mom caring for them throughout. And I will tell people the story all the time, even for myself when things happen. And I'm trying to say no, this is serious. Like, it's not all in my head. It's not something that I'm making up and having people believe me. Just a real quick situation that I had for myself, I had what most people call like tinnitus, you have that ringing in your ear, and it goes away. But mine was actually something that was constantly happened in both ears to switch things down to the point where if I'm having a conversation like I am now and someone is talking back to me, it will be difficult for me to understand what they were saying, because of the noise. And I went to the hospital, I went to the ER because if you can imagine not having silence, not having a moment of just regular air, it can get really, you could just become crazy. Like it's not something that you want to have, and going to the hospital and having them say, oh, it might be something called a pseudo pseudo tumor and being scared, like, what is that? Then going to different doctors and having like a spinal tap having all these tests done? And then they say, oh, it's not that. Then going back to the original doctors who said, Oh, tinnitus and going It's not that. And finally, I think I got fed up and went to a whole other doctors, like, Listen, you have to listen to me, this is what's going on. I can't focus, it is hindering my life. And them having a light bulb and going you know what I think should goes to this doctor. Think the doctor was at Johns Hopkins go see this doctor, they specialize. But before I went to see that doctor, I looked the doctor up. I emailed the doctor, I told the doctor, this

is a situation if you can't help me, tell me now I will not waste my gas and time to go out there for an hour. If you tell me that you don't know what I'm talking about. I went to that doctor. They were like, no, no, no, but I understand what you're saying. Even though I'm still skeptical, because I'm still like, Okay, go to the doctor. And he knew exactly what I was saying. And to find someone and this is after years I have been living with it for years and to find someone and that person actually told me this happens primarily to black women. And this being he was a white, Jewish doctor. And I told him about my experiences with other doctors, and they were so sorry. And it was like I just like I don't even know, I ended up having to have surgery on our skull for this particular condition. And I was able to talk to someone else another patient who had it because I don't go into surgery easily. I want to see who you did it. I want to see your record. I want to see all that stuff. And they were so gracious enough to connect me with someone who's also a black woman and tell me Okay, I went through the same thing. But just to understand how I went through all these processes just to get to one person who knew what I was talking about when everyone else was dismissing my concerns, and a doctor previous to that, who dismissed my concerns and told me "Oh, just lose weight", like that would help the sound in my ear. And I sent an email back. And I said, this is an issue that we have at the society that we don't listen to black women, we think that we are strong, and that we can tolerate pain and that things are in our head. And immediately he called me but I said, I don't want your phone call now. Because you've told me no, you told me this is, just a headache and told me, you need to lose weight. You told me this in So now when I say to you what the truth is, that you were looking at me different because I'm a black woman, then you want to give me a call on your such a busy day, when you couldn't before. And those are things I take with me because I have to understand how we move in this world. And for my children. When we go to the doctors, I definitely advocate for them who don't have voices loud enough right now to do so for themselves. It shapes my experience. So like I said, I've had experience with myself, all my kids, similar situations where people were saying this is not what it is. And it ends up being something completely different that they just don't have the care enough to look further in. And I feel like at times, it's simply because of who I am, what we look like, what access they think I have, what insurance they think I have, how I can pay, all those things factor into it. And that's why I say I have like a love-hate with the medical profession in general.

**Kit Heintzman** 11:36

Would you say something about what it felt like to finally be heard?

**Meeka Caldwell** 11:41

It was relieving. And it was one of those things where I wanted to go back and tell the other doctors. Look, this is what he was able to do. Like, why couldn't you do it? And hopefully, I wanted to foster like a network of like collaboration like, Okay, I went to this ENT, I went to this primary, can you call them and tell them what this is? Can you call them and say, you know, okay, you saw Mrs. Caldwell. And this is and this is what we found out. Because I think that doesn't happen. I think when we tell our doctors, or they have experience with patients that they this is their 10th opinion. And you figured out what it was, that there's no communication going backwards, so that these other doctors can be educated, also. At least you know that you're the specialist in this, or at least to know, okay, I needed to look a little further or I needed some different tests, but it just made me feel validated, it made me feel like finally someone cares. And I really looked at this doctor, and I knew that he cared just by the time he took with me, you know, a lot of doctors aren't patient, a lot of doctors are swinging through their schedule. He actually sat down, like when a doctor sits down to talk to you, it's a little bit different than when they're standing up and they're moving around. Or when they take the time to sit, you know, roll over and be like, tell me what it is. It felt good. And it made me say, Okay, I'm going to keep this doctor, in my, in my range of doctors, I'm going to keep him and I can always go back and I still have to have surgery on the other side of my

skull. But this is going to be someone that I go to because I trust them, and that they care about their patients and that they do go the extra mile, and that they understand that we all need to be heard and feel validated. And our concerns are, you know, are ours. So we just are telling you as those experts and I also understand that you're a practicing physician. That's one thing I think physicians are always learning and always educating themselves. And they kind of need to do the same with their patients and other colleagues that they have too.

**Kit Heintzman** 12:11

Pre-pandemic, what was your day-to-day looking like?

**Meeka Caldwell** 13:48

Busy. We have I work full time. But like I said I was also um, trying to get the book out I don't think my book was out pre-pandemic. And we have three little kids. So it was definitely busy, hustle and bustle trying to find time to have dinner together. Always a schedule, I go by the schedule, if I if it's not on my schedule, I can't do it. So it was definitely just a lot of running around. Previously, I was a stay-at-home mom for a little bit. So that helped. But it's still hustle and bustle, make your stay-at-home mom too, because you don't actually stay at home. That's just a term that we give. But it was always busy. And I'm always trying to educate myself. I'm always trying to do stuff. So it's hard for me to say no when it's something that I can learn from and get educated from. So I kind of make myself busy, but that's what it is family, friends being busy work. And just the challenges of finding your next thing to make you a better person.

**Kit Heintzman** 14:46

What did some of the things, what's are some of the things that changed sort of when lockdown began to hit?

**Meeka Caldwell** 14:55

The pace of everything. I think I said it was realizing that I didn't need to do so much stuff. That we have time that we have to carve out for those people that we care about. And it literally it was like a speed bump, like one of the biggest speed bumps ever, because it slowed us all down. And I just think that change, I think the focus change, I think, um, pandemic, you're in the house, and you're kind of going on the resources you have. And you're being really grateful for those things that you have. Just simple water, food, those things that you like to eat instead of those things that you need to eat. And being grateful for that when instead, maybe before, you know you had, you go to the grocery store and you bring in stuff or you go to any stores and you bring in stuff and you're just like, okay, but you're sometimes you're not sitting in that gratefulness of this is what we're able to do. Thank God for resources, this is what we're able to have in the pandemic, I think that change because you were just focused like it doesn't, I don't have to have these things. You know, I have a home with the roof on it, I have, you know, good air, I have clean water. And you kind of understand the struggles of other people more, and how you can assist, but it definitely slows you down. And just like I said, make sure you focus when before I say hustle and bustle of life and going through things pandemic changed just how like, we cook together, just how we ate dinner together, just how we spent time together. Even my husband and I, we're going to be married for 14 years this year. And I think that pandemic, it's like, we spent so much time like like on our deck and just like having our own party and it was like, wow. But you thought about why didn't you carve out the same time before. Why wasn't it as important before this happened, and you realize this is how it needs to be like, and I think that's how I feel like the working world is because I'm in talent. I feel like that's how candidates are people are when they're looking for jobs or employment or things that they love to do. Or like I'm gonna give some time to you, but I have to get the most time to myself. And that's a good balance to have.

**Kit Heintzman** 17:06

How much do you think your younger children understood about what was happening?

**Meeka Caldwell** 17:11

I think they understood a lot, I think, because of the schools, I'm not sure if it was, it wasn't practice, no one knew what this was it was gonna happen. So I felt like even they didn't have a protocol on how much information to give the kids and how to do or most times, like, you know what the hurricane protocol is, you know what the tornado you know what certain things are, but not the pandemic. So I think they over shared because they were just like, we don't know what this is like, go home, you know, and the news, like kids have access to YouTube, they have access to the news, they have access to their friends, and oh, so much social media, as much as you allow them to have. But even those little things, I think they knew. They knew, okay, I don't want to get sick. And it was to a point where even talking to them. That was the fear that I just I don't want to get sick and die, because that's what they heard the most, because that's what they were predicting on the news the most is how many fatalities were caused by the pandemic. They weren't projecting necessarily 100%. More that, oh, make sure you have these items, make sure these are the sales of the store. So, they weren't projecting that as much as they were projecting deaths. So I think they were scared of that. That part, like I just don't want to get sick. I don't think they understood the part about vaccinations and just a part about like, you know, older populations possibly being more risk. I don't think they understood that. But it's understood, I don't want to get sick, I don't want to die, because this is what this is doing.

**Kit Heintzman** 18:42

What was it like helping your children navigate those fears?

**Meeka Caldwell** 18:47

It was telling them, I'm really honest, we're really honest with our children. I never say you know, oh, no, this won't ever happen. I mean, we're all going to have a moment where we're not here anymore. But what we can do, is while we're here, make the best of each and every day. So that means don't be afraid of those things that can come because either you're afraid or you're not afraid that could still come. So then why have your energy tied to that? Do what's safe, so wear your mask, hand sanitizer, wash hands, which we should have done anyway. When you think about how much we should have poured into like, just just the germ part. But navigating those, it wasn't hard, but it wasn't easy. It was one of those things where as a parent, you're like, Okay, we have to go into this, this conversation, this discussion and what does it look like for them? And all of my or my one child like I even got her into therapy. I am a proponent of therapy for all people. But just to kind of help through that because I didn't want them to have a fear of I don't even want to go outside or fear of the things like even when you go into the store, everyone's just panicked. I don't need that to be a part of their, their life, because they're too young for that, and there's too much joy that they can find other where or other ways in the world that I didn't want them to be. But it was basically explaining so much. And then what my son who is aided with down syndrome is basically teaching, wash your hands. Don't touch this when he touches everything. And trying to just try to figure that out. And routine is good for him. So if you do it, a lot of times and consistent he'll do it and it's fine. But it was also just showing them hey, we can still go outside, we can go out the backyard, we walked out to the parks. But that was hard, because even when they shut the parks down, that was hard for the kids to see, like yellow tape on the park, they should have I mean, you could have done something different but yellow tape just looks bad. Um, on the parks, it looks bad. So yeah, we got through it. But it wasn't always the easiest.

**Kit Heintzman** 20:56

What was it like having the division of labor in your household with your husband, with him being the only one to leave the house?

**Meeka Caldwell** 21:03

Um, I don't think that was difficult. My husband is very, he's very much the husband, I want to say like of my dreams, like I don't, it's, he does that, like he goes out to the grocery store. He's the one who takes the trash out, I haven't pumped gas in my car for I don't know how long, because that's the things that he does. So for him, it was only right because he had, he was outside the house anyway. So I don't think it was it was that different than kind of what we did before not that he only went out the house. But just taking on some of those more riskier responsibilities as we felt like it was only because of his position of going to work. But it was so hard because it's like, I don't want you to be the one that's always out and doing all the stuff. I want to be there too. But managing the kids in the house and making sure everything was good for when he did have to leave and come home and making sure that we didn't get too much that we didn't need. Um, making sure we were supplied with those things that we didn't need. So we had certain things like he wasn't, I was making a list, he was going and getting it. If we had something that was missing, I would make sure. But I was also making sure he was safe too. So at the front door, if you're taking off your stuff, because we have to throw it in the laundry downstairs, then that's what we did. So it wasn't that different. It was just a different thing at the time.

**Kit Heintzman** 22:37

2020 had this sort of notoriousness of like being a pandemic, and all of these other crisis, and then 2021 had that same sort of pandemic and all those other crises. And we're in our own sort of weird space of that with 2022. I'm wondering with sort of thinking beyond just the pandemic, pandemic in isolation, what are some of the other issues that are on your mind and heart over the last period of time?

**Meeka Caldwell** 23:04

Um, you know, what I think, because of the pandemic, and I think because we were so focused on the things of the world, because of the pandemic, we really weren't that just the harms done to black people, just the murder of George Floyd that brought about all the, as they say, Um, racial reckoning in the world for organizations, for people, individuals, for certain departments. I think it was, those things have been always a concern to me, I'm a black woman. So I already know the history of, of who I am. And it was, it's one of those things you navigate through, because you know, everyone has a focus on this now. So what does this look like when the focus is not on that? So what do you do on this period to make sure that the things you're setting up, can continue? So if you're fighting for equal rights, for all, what does that look like? When the focus is off when they take off the lens and go, Okay, well, this was, you know, 2020 to 2022. And that's because we were all focused, we're in the house, we had the chance to watch the news, we had the chance to see these videos, get a chance to kind of understand and take the time. And I hope that it doesn't end during this particular cycle. Because for me watching, it was like this is definitely a concern. But I wonder what have happened if it wasn't just all these things happen at the same time? What happened if it wasn't the pandemic going on? And had people really looking at it like that? What would have happened? Would it have still been a topic of discussion? Would have still been something that we fought for would it have still been groups coming together? Because I think it was, we're fighting, we're understanding the plight of black and brown people. And then we understand the plight of those like the COVID. And let's also understand the plight of those persons with disabilities or those in disadvantaged communities. And all of this was

put highlighted, so what does it look like when it's not highlighted? Or will it, will it stay stay highlighted through this like? So just navigating just all the things in the world that's going on, managing your own household and all this stuff, it can be overwhelming. But if you kind of know what your own personal focus is, and kind of how you want to guide your family, um, you can kind of get through into understand what it is. But I don't know, it's still kind of a weird time. I feel like, I don't feel like we're over all that we will never be over it. But just to kind of get through it. And then also looking at all the and every opinion, hey, if you didn't want to get the vaccine, that's your prerogative, if you wanted to get it, that's your prerogative, but just seeing just the vitriol that comes with just differences of opinions. And that was just disheartening. Like, it's not for anyone to just disclaim. It's just if this isn't for you, it's not for you. But just the energy that was put in to either say it wasn't true or even say it was true, it was one of those things where you have to take a moment to educate yourself on figure out where your sources of information were coming from, to make the best decision for you and your family and not the time to judge others. But to keep yourself safe. So someone practice something that you didn't agree with and keep yourself safe, and to keep yourself away, and figure out what that looks like for you. So I'd say it's still kind of like, you know, what's, what's happened. And also with the, yeah, with the presidential elections, all those things that are going on, and the criticism, it's a lot to handle and to be in a society. And it's a lot to manage, especially when you have a new generation that you're raising that's going forward. And hopefully some of these things, but I think it highlighted those important things, just a racial justice, it highlighted just the preparations for the pandemic, and highlighted how we needed to be active in our local and our national government, how we need to all have our voice heard, and how we just need to be educating ourselves and figuring out where our source of information come from and be bolder, and speak louder. So that our generation to come, can have some space to live. That's really it and live good.

**Kit Heintzman** 26:03

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

**Meeka Caldwell** 27:22

I think it just means a state of being. I don't, it doesn't mean for me like medical health, because health is just whatever your overall health could be your mental health, could be your spiritual health, could be your physical health. Yeah, so I think it's just a state of being how are you? How are you better? Like, how are you in all those facets that accompany you? How are you with that health and managing those around you? What does that look like for you? Like I said, it just encompasses all those things. So just your state of being, your state of being well, or your state of being unwell? And what's that look like. And where is that coming from.

**Kit Heintzman** 28:08

What are some of the things you'd like for your own health and the health of those around you?

**Meeka Caldwell** 28:14

Um, I know, better food. I think food is health. Just better information on how to be healthy with your, like I said spiritually, mentally, physically. And individual health, education, you know, everything is not for everybody. So if I think oh, yes, acupuncture will help this pain. For some of the people it might not help the pain. So I think just education and health, better access to health resources, better access to those things that will keep you healthy, like better food and better medicine, if that's what you choose to do. Better environments, better air. Better community. Yeah, that's yeah.



**Kit Heintzman** 29:04

What does the word safety mean to you?

**Meeka Caldwell** 29:09

Safety? Um, I've never had to explain that word. I think it's just the, yeah, the ability to either keep yourself unharmed, or keep your environment from being breached and setting your own boundaries, to me.

**Kit Heintzman** 29:35

Thinking of safety under this really narrow framework that was put forward under COVID, how to stay safe from the virus. What were some of the things that you are doing to make yourself feel safer during the last couple of years?

**Meeka Caldwell** 29:49

I think he's just deciding where to go, if it's necessary, keeping track of whatever exposure I had, and then also understanding that sometimes that doesn't always work, I feel like you have to understand how to be safe and how, even if you are safe, things can still happen. And it's not necessarily a fault of anyone. It's just that's just could happen. But I think just following like we wore masks, I never wore gloves though. So, but just like masking, which I can still mask now, it's comfortable for me. And making sure we didn't go to where we didn't need to go, realizing how much contact you have with people, things that could spread. So I think you're more aware of your own safety. But you're also aware of others safety too, because you have to realize that you might have family or friends that might be immunocompromised, and you in order to keep them safe, you have to keep yourself safe. But not to become obsessed with safety, I think that's safe to, because you can just get to a point where, we don't want to roll around in a bubble. I know I don't. So, you have to realize there's some limitations to what you can control. So that saying that, you know, you can control only what you can control and stick to that. That's, that's what keeps me safe.

**Kit Heintzman** 31:20

What was like discussing those boundaries around safety with other people in your life?

**Meeka Caldwell** 31:26

It was difficult sometimes. Because like I said, people have different ideas. So if I said, Okay, I'm not going to come to this gathering because I don't feel safe, because COVID is going round, and you will get backlash. And that's what I mean by people kind of understanding that there's differences of opinions. And if you decide to take yourself out of a particular situation or environment, it's absolutely okay. There's no reason for someone to come and say, No, for me to hear no come risk your health since COVID so you can come and eat with us. So that's what I heard. But they heard, Oh, you don't want to come over because you think all of us are going to give you COVID And we're not safe. So you have to decide, still, what you can control is only what you can control and keep them within that. But I know the conversations I had with a group of friends who were similar in thinking we were okay. Like we said, okay, we can, we can come in the kids can play and things like that, because we're okay. But people were more honest. And my personal group of friends it was like, Hey, I'm not gonna get vaccinated, like cool. Now we know it was never any backlash, but with others who I think groups, different family members or different sets of friends. It was definitely, some people just found it offensive. If you said, are you COVID free? Or are you going to get a test before you come? Or can you test before you come to this location? Or it's a wedding, you have to wear a mask and like, Ah, it's gonna be over my makeup. And it's like,

that's not the point. Like, it's just, you know, you have to stay safe. So, yeah, that's hard. I think that's even hard now. Because even as people as vaccinations are, you know, children and babies, and again, make your own informed decision. But don't judge others. Because for them that's keeping them safe. And so you're essentially telling them, don't be safe in the way that you see it. Be safe in the way that I see it. But it doesn't serve me because you don't live with like, you're not me. So how is that serving me? Those still are difficult conversations, they still are, even within the workplace. You know, even within your own circle, those are still difficult conversations. And I think we still have a stigma, even when we go out places and we don't want to cough. Outwardly in public. We don't want to sneeze in public. We don't even want to like Scratch, right? It's just something where we're thinking, Oh, no, people are gonna think I have COVID. And you can't even have allergies or regular cold. Because people think you've got covid, so...

**Kit Heintzman** 33:52

Do you remember needing to cough in public recently? And what that felt like? What you did?

**Meeka Caldwell** 33:59

Yeah, because I still, if I go into the office, I might go in once a week, and I like to take the train and feel like behind my mask like, Oh, if I'm behind my mask, I'll be okay. But then also looking out for people that are looking at me going, Okay, what is she doing, but also I've done it myself. I've been in a situation where someone wasn't masked or was, and they've had like a hacking cough. And I'm like, Oh my gosh, and I'm moving away from them. And in that moment, you don't realize that you're doing it to what you're thinking people are doing to you. You're just thinking, I gotta stay safe. So it's a thing that I feel like over the course this pandemic has put in us just this. I don't know if we want to call it judgment of people but just the assumption that you know, if anything is wrong with you, it's the worst and I don't want to get that thing when before, we were on the train like sardines. We are up we're not even asking for the train people to come and clean after we're stuck together. We're touching the same pole to hold on, we're sharing seats. And now it's different. You don't want to call on public, so you're hiding yourself. Or you do. And people say, I don't have COVID. They actually say that in public, like they actually cough and they go, I don't have COVID, I'm okay. And it's like, oh my gosh, we've gotten to this place where people have to explain a cough or sneeze or say, Oh, I just have allergies. And you have to explain it to people, because that's what people need for them to feel safe. Like, Yeah.

**Kit Heintzman** 35:27

How's your relationship to touch changed?

**Meeka Caldwell** 35:31

Um, I think slowly, I think during the pandemic, I didn't go into a store for months. And I remember when I first went to a store, and I had so much anxiety, because I hadn't been in the store in months. And so the visual of seeing the different signs and seeing things like, oh, one person to this aisle, or the things on the floor, that say stay, what is it six feet, just a visual of seeing that from being home, not even knowing kind of how the stores revamped and all that type of stuff. It was like a shock. And so slowly, it was like, Yeah, you don't want to touch anything, you don't do anything. Because you're seeing all these red flags, you see little warnings, and you hear it in your head, like don't go down that aisle, or don't go next to that person. Or don't even touch that pack of gum and put it bac. If you touch it, you got to keep it because you touch it. Like, it's way too many things to keep track up. But even now, like if I go into a store, and it's crowded I do. I'm mindful of what I touch and where. And I still, every time I come from the store, I have hand sanitizer, and I put on my hands. And that's been a routine. I

can't stop doing that. That's regular. The only thing I've done to make it nicer is to get nice smelling sanitizers. It because I have to do it all the time. But I think it's still something I watch. Because then you're you realize how much you touch. And you don't realize how much you're touching and you touch yourself. And they're just going oh my gosh. And so if you're getting a frenzy again, but it's like those things like you can't, I think that's been ingrained in most of us. You just can't help it. That's just and then you think, Well, it's good, good practice for cleanliness and hygiene. So I might as well keep doing it. Like it's no harm in it. So you keep doing it. So yeah.

**Kit Heintzman** 37:21

How are you feeling about the immediate future?

**Meeka Caldwell** 37:26

Questionable, because, again, I work with like, environmentalists, I work with scientists, and I'm thinking about climate change. I'm thinking about all the things that have changed with the weather. I'm thinking of all the things that have changed with our food, how more people are sourcing their own food, and how I kind of want to do that too. And all the recalls that we have of things that we didn't think we're going to be required. I mean, how can you recall tomatoes? You don't mean you're recalling? Um, like strawberries, like I love to go strawberry picking with the kids. Those are the best strawberries when you can pick them yourself. But then you're thinking, Oh, no, you know, if they got the seed from somewhere, or their soil is not good. So I'm thinking about all those things, especially as it relates to the generation that I'm raising. And I'm thinking, what even will the life look like? I mean, the environment, plus your social emotional life, plus your education, it seems like all of that is changing. And then especially, I think, whenever the weather is doing something wonky, I'm going oh, boy, like climate change. So you try not to think so much into the future, you just hope there is a future? Because one of those things like I would love to see my grandkids, can I just see my grandkids, and I'm sure my kids might say, I would love to see my grandkids. So it's like you, you just keep hoping that it keeps going on. And then you kind of try to understand what you have to do to at least help it a little bit, go on what part do you play in it? And how can you get educated about the things that are happening that could break us down? What does that look like?

**Kit Heintzman** 39:00

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

**Meeka Caldwell** 39:04

That we will have things put in place so that we can have a better future. I'm looking at like education, I'm looking at the workforce, I'm looking at the environment, I'm hoping that people can understand the harmful things that they might endorse or practice, could harm the future of the world essentially. I'm hoping that money won't become such a big deal, I want to say. you know, we have different classes, different, you know, privileges, different people, and I'm hoping that it won't become one of those things where that just leads into everything because I remember watching the show on one of the channels that I love like one of the educational channels and it was a life in the future. But they paid with things with the hours of their life. So they were allotted a certain amount of hours and minutes and seconds. And so they went to buy a jug of milk it will cost, you know, two minutes and 50 seconds of their life. And when you look at things like that, and you, you kind of see the world now and you might look at movies from the past, and go, Oh my gosh, some of the stuff, that movies from the past might be trickling in. And so I always think of that show, it was actually like an hour long movie. And I'm like, how do you determine what is valuable to you, when you're paying for it with your life? How do you determine what you need when you're paying for it with your life. So I just My hopes are that it doesn't get to that.

It doesn't get to where we're bartering our energy and time for the things that we need to survive. But that it's one of hope. And that people can see that we do have time to turn things around, we do have time to make things better for those living in our society. Better laws, better rules, better, better environment, better schools, better work, all those things can get better. And so when will we pay more attention to that than we do what's making us a profit? To make sure that people stay here that makes sure that people all people have access to all things that we won't have such a high rate of homelessness, drug addiction and abuse, like what does that look like? And what can we do? So I think a lot, so those are like some of the things I like, I want a healthy, happy future. And I want people to have hope in the future. But I also want people to take part in their own future. And understand that all together, we have a voice, and we can change those things that mean the most to us, and bring people along as we do it.

**Kit Heintzman** 41:37

Who's been supportive of you during the last couple of years?

**Meeka Caldwell** 41:42

Um, family, friends, like I said, I have the best husband in the whole wide world. So I feel I can argue that point, but so I feel like they've been supportive. And definitely family, you know, definitely a close group of friends. Those that don't mind you going on your rants or going on your ideas, or understanding, hey, I need you to sign up for this petition. And they're like, Okay, cool, I'll contribute. That's been most, most supportive.

**Kit Heintzman** 42:13

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

**Meeka Caldwell** 42:16

Time for myself, I think I stopped trying to be so busy. Some of it's inevitable. But I do make sure I find time for myself. So even if it's me walking without my phone, um, getting some fresh air, looking at the sun. Counting the stars, like my husband, I go on the deck like every night during the summer. And we do this because it's summer short. So we'd like we got to have our we call it our deck time. And we go and we just talk and we just talk and we just enjoy the, the bugs and the birds in the air. And that has been therapeutic. Because that time you're usually hustling bustling for the next day, let's pack lunches, what are we having for dinner. But that's the time that you can just stop and the kids are asleep. And then you can just stop. And you can just kind of sit in the time. And you can sit in the moment. And I've been exercising, and I've been making sure I put my boundaries on I've been making sure I eat better. Because I'm just trying to focus on those things. But that's how I feel I take care of myself. And also by you know, showing others what I do, because I might eat healthy. But I have a child that loves chocolate and all things sugar. So it's like really all you just kind of show yourself and show the benefits of it. But I feel like taking care of yourself is the number one priority that everybody should have and not overdoing it, not overburdening yourself, and not feeling like you're lacking if you have other responsibilities outside of work and those things that can take a moment. But place your family and yourself first. Make those your priorities. Because at the end of the day, that's where you're going home to. And that's who cares the most about you.

**Kit Heintzman** 43:53

Do you think of COVID-19 as a historic event?

**Meeka Caldwell** 44:01

I do, in this time, especially I think this is the, the only pandemic that I been in. I wasn't here during the flu. I do. And because it was unprecedented, I think because it just, I felt like anyway, it just popped up. Like what is this? And how did you name it so fast? And what do you even name it from? But it is because I think it just set a precedent for how we look at these things and also how the world has changed immediately. And I was telling my husband the other day like you don't realize how many people adapted quickly to COVID especially like if you think about I don't know certain TV shows that immediately had a digital audience like how did you even do that? That quick like this? We just announced this and all of a sudden everyone's logging in like and we have never I think never had so much computer use ever. So many zooms and teams and meetings face to face ever. But I feel like it was a point where even children learning online and things like that. Never unless that was something that you set out to do. You're used to it. But I think it was a historic event it, it was unprecedented in the reactions to it and how we're dealing with it now and how it's still going on, I think longer than the flip. How it is all still happening. Definitely one for the history books.

**Kit Heintzman** 45:20

What do you think scholars in the humanities and the social sciences, so people who study things like anthropology, or sociology, or political sciences or literature, what should we be doing to help us understand the human and social side of what we've been living through?

**Meeka Caldwell** 45:38

Um, I feel like the most is talking to people. Talking to see what like their experiences are. Realizing how much it changed the trajectory or change the platform, or even change their course of study or understanding of people. That's a hard one, because I feel like it changed a lot of stuff, I feel like, I think people gave more of themselves and were more vulnerable and transparent during the pandemic. And that might change how we look at what people really need, like, what affects them, and how much we hide what affects us and how much we just get through. Because we feel like we have to get through. And I feel like how much, it embraced the social emotional understanding that we need an outlet, like, in our reactions to things, I think that changes our understanding of you if we do have anxiety because of the pandemic. You know, where did that come about if we are afraid to go out, but I think before people were less, if they were afraid of something, or they had anxiety about something, it wasn't really said as much as during the pandemic, I think, because it was allowed because it was a snatch (inaudible) this worldwide pandemic. So, of course, people are gonna have reactions, but I feel like there's, there's people that are more in tuned to themselves and the behaviors of others because of the pandemic than they were before. I think mental health became very, at the forefront because of the pandemic when it should have been before. I think just people looking at our, our world different. Because you think that in this time of 2022, that this pandemic couldn't have taken a hold of us. I mean, my gosh, we have medical, you know, experts, we have all this, why is it? You know, why didn't we already prepare for this? Why is it taken so long to figure it out? And I think it just leads to the vulnerability of us as a people like we are still learning and still gathering information as we live. So you think about how many things we haven't encountered yet. So how are those people planning for those things that we haven't encountered yet now that the pandemic has hit us, and we're trying to figure it out as we go along? But also dealing with like how they say like, it's a changed world when people work from home? And what does that look like? Is it really good for people or it's really bad for people? It changed a bunch of stuff. But I think just the view of each of those specialties that you listed, has changed, because they're, the outcome, that what they have received from that has changed. I don't think they've thought of some of the things that need to be changed, because it wasn't something that brought it out to the forefront. So now we have it. So how do we

react to it? And how to react to it by embracing like a vulnerable and transparent community of people who are open to saying how these things affected them? How will we have that help or change them?

**Kit Heintzman** 48:49

When you were learning history growing up, what were some of the things that you wished you would learn more about?

**Meeka Caldwell** 48:57

Um, let me think, let me think back to history. Um, I definitely wish I would have learned more about black history. I think when I got to college that was and I went to a HBCU. Yeah, that's when I just learned how many wonderful black, smart scholars, educators, activist, scientists, teachers, all types of professions that we have. But that weren't highlighted in any of my history books. I think I would have wanted to learn more about different countries and how they came to maybe not like each other. Like, what is that about? Like, I'm trying to figure out all the political stuff or all the government stuff that I don't think I really learned in history, I think we learned all the things that were, everybody learned about the things that were notable, which that's why I kind of forget them. I mean, we learned that the main wars and all that but what about all the little things that happened? What about all the countries that you know, had their different things going on? What, what happened with that? Why can't we learn the history because I think it shapes their trajectory, which in turn shapes ours, because we're all in this world together. So all the things that I feel like they didn't think was important, which whoever put the books together, I feel like they should have put in, I wish to put everything in everything that happened in history. So we can be educated about, you know, how we got here, where we're going, different cultures, different understandings of different peoples. But yeah, but mostly black history. Because I think that's washed under I think the contributions of black people in America has not been highlighted. And it was a strictly taken out. And also, for the ones that were in this country for the natives, that history wasn't in there. Just those particular traditions and their life and their culture, and also how it was snatched away. That's not in there. Or things are made to seem like it was fun, or you're, yeah, I think I just would have wanted a real history, I would have wanted people to contribute to that history, just like different cultures contribute to their own history by speaking of telling their stories to each generation, I wish that would have somehow ended up in our history books, where we have stories for each generation of different peoples to tell their own story to us.

**Kit Heintzman** 51:24

I'd like you to imagine speaking to a historian in their future, someone far enough away that they have no lived experience of this moment. What would you tell them cannot be forgotten about COVID-19?

**Meeka Caldwell** 51:38

Hmm, that's a good question. Um, I feel like I would say, just the vulnerability and the care of people. I thought COVID-19 brought people together. I think they showed, kind of people who they are in those times of crisis. I think it can't be forgotten, and how we handled it. How we don't have to be in a frenzy to get things. And um, how I think we all kind of learn to try to live with more simple stuff. And to try to make connections. I feel like the connections part was crucial to people in the pandemic because you couldn't see people, you couldn't hug people. You didn't want to touch people. But you still loved people. And you tried to figure that out. So, I feel like, if I was to tell someone, I feel like I would just more give advice like, don't forget about the people. Don't forget about the care of people, don't forget about humanity and how you can come together, and how you can overcome. And don't, don't dismiss anyone's vulnerabilities or fears. See how you can understand more, see how

you can be more open? See how you can just for yourself, try to understand that things happen and how we have to react to them. But how we all might have a different way of doing it? And it's okay, as long as it's not hurting, you know, anyone else or the bottom line? But that's a hard question. Because I feel like for someone that didn't know, I would, I mean, I would have to explain like just the frenzy of it all and how you got to that calm wher, yeah, you kind of understood people and kind of understood what you needed more out of just life. I feel like from the pandemic, how you learn to pivot quickly, I had never seen so many people on bikes and walking ever, you know, so high, you have to take those moments and realize that this air was there all the time. The street was there all the time, this bike was probably there all the time, but you didn't utilize it. So, I feel like that's what it was telling us to take the moments as you have them and use them as moments that you can cherish every single moment. So even if it's you're walking to the farmers market, able to get something, that was something that was stopped during the pandemic. So yeah, that's kind of that's kind of all over the place, that's kind of just how I can explain it.

**Kit Heintzman** 54:26

I want to thank you so much for the generosity of your time today. And I just want to open some space. Those are all the questions I have. But if there's anything else you'd like to say, please share it.

**Meeka Caldwell** 54:37

I think this is this is one of I think just to get to hear, just about this time, because it was so crucial to us. And there were so many things going on at the very same time, like I said, just the racial reckoning of the country, of the world. Just understanding that damages that some may have over others just understanding that you know, clean air for someone's not a given. Health care is not a given, for some access, it's not always available to some. And to make yourself available for those who you can help. In the same time, place some boundaries on yourself to see how much you can give. So you're not giving too much and you're not being able to be pour back into. But just to, you know, take each moment and take each breath as you can and value it with the most that you can. I feel like I have an affinity to water. I love water. Water to me seems like fresh, new clean, it's peace. And so every time when I even like when a bath, I'm thanking God, like I have water, like I clean water, like that's something that people can't have and that is flowing freely, like how many gallons like am I like, you just don't realize how much you use, how much you consume, and how much maybe we don't have to so that we all can have. But also add in your voice and say we shouldn't have to ration out things that are necessary for us to live. So how do we do that the right way. So just thinking about the history and thinking about those things for people in the future to do is a value those things that don't come naturally for some and to give what you can and cherish what you have, but be grateful for it all and all the experiences.

**Kit Heintzman** 56:23

Thank you so much.

**Meeka Caldwell** 56:25

You're welcome.