

Episode 7– The conversation on race and representation in medicine

In honor of Black History Month, the UH Director of Student Recruitment asks first generation college student, Diamondneshay, to share her experience as a black female pursuing a career in medicine.

[Theme music begins]

Kriston: You are listening to the University of Houston Office of Admissions' official Coogcast and I'm your guest host, Kriston Burroughs, the Director of Student Recruitment and today we're joined by Diamondneshay Ward, A University of Houston College of Medicine student in her second year. She's here to discuss her journey to UH, medical school, and healthcare inequities. Before we jump into it, I want to mention some important facts. Black Americans comprise 13% of the United States population, but only 4% of the 877,000+ active physicians in the world. Black female doctors comprise only 2% of physicians. And with that, lets begin.

Well I appreciate you taking time out of your very busy schedule to be able to come and chat with me! We are practicing social distancing, so if y'all are listening to this, were doing this, you know, recording, so, but normally we would be in the same room together but we're trying to stay safe during the pandemic, and we hope you are as well. But can you tell me a little bit about why you chose health care and about your journey to UH.

Diamondneshay: Yes! Yes, Im so excited to talk to you today. Its crazy, but when I was a child, I wanted to do everything, right? I wanted to be a doctor, a writer, a lawyer, a singer, and an actress, all at once. But as I got older, I realized I gotta focus on one thing *[laughs]* even if I still enjoyed those other things. I actually was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. And my mom was a single mom, we experienced Hurricane Katrina. And so I just remember, during the storm, the volunteers we're just so kind and helpful. They really poured themselves out, like, to us. Like they opened their houses, they gave us clothes, they gave us food, and they gave us hope. And so I really liked the way that they made an impact on my life and, um, that combined with me you know going into school and just really enjoying science and the human body and how it works. Being able to watch the surgery channel while eating. *[laughs]* That was really interesting to me. So, all of those things combined just kind of naturally led me to want to be Dr. Ward.

Kriston: Sounds like you've had some folks in your life that have really been influential and really kind of championed and supported you through your education, could you kind of share about who those people are and how they've kind of supported you through that awesome journey to get you to future Dr. Ward.

Diamondneshay: Yeah, absolutely. So, I'm big on family, like I mentioned my mom was a single mom as she was definitely like always in my corner. She was always affirming what I could do, always telling me, you know, I have the power to do anything I want to do in the world. And so I think that was a huge confidence boost for me, just having her by my side the whole time, and its her birthday today, so happy birthday mom!

Kriston: Aw, happy birthday mom!

Diamondneshay: *[laughs]* And also my other family members as well, my brothers, my aunts, uncles, cousins, so I'm big on family.

Kriston: Throughout college and now, as you navigate your med school journey, I'm a first-generation college student, so I know all things about obstacles, and I struggled a little bit, kinda, through that journey. Did you ever experience any obstacles or struggles through your undergraduate journey or now your med school journey?

Diamondneshay: Yes. *[laughs]* Definitely! I've definitely experienced my share of struggles. So, I would say, like, you know, being a first-generation student, that's already a struggle in itself, right? Because you don't know anything! You're kinda just like out here trying to find your way, like you can't see your road. Like there's no way. Like you kinda just pick and walk that way and just see what's out there. So that in itself, being a first-generation student, that was a struggle. Thankfully I did have some mentors along the way to kinda help guide me. I would say that and I know in high school, I struggled with, I wasn't the most popular student, because I was like the nerd of class. Everybody wanted to cheat off my paper and I would really have to just protect my work and make sure nobody was looking at it. And so, people didn't really like invite me out to the parties or, you know, I didn't really have like a whole lot of friends and those things don't seem like they matter as much, but I know maybe there's a high school student listening. And it matters to some people. It did matter to me a little bit and so, that was a struggle in itself. Of

course now, I've grown into myself more, and I'm still a nerd, very much a nerd [laughs] But I'm okay with that now.

And I think when I got to college, the struggle came academically. I was so used to being the smartest one in the classroom, like not really having to study that much at all. Things just came naturally for me. But in college is where I was challenged academically for the first time. And I know like one of my first biology exams, I got a C. And I was pretty close to failing, actually! Like I barely got a C. And so that, like being like an all A's student, to barely getting a C was like a HUGE change for me. So, thankfully, I was able to get out of that, I found the person that got an A in the class and became friends with them.

And also another struggle came in college was because I was actually in a program that would guarantee my acceptance into medical school, and so I was really excited about that program, and um I did everything I needed to do and I was a pretty good student, but when it came time to take the MCAT, which is the Medical College Admissions Test, I didn't get the score I needed to get in the program. So, of course, I was removed and it was basically like 'okay, well, you're not going to medical school in our program. So, good luck getting there!' [laughs] So that was a difficult time in my life, because I've doubted myself for the first time, like becoming a doctor, and I wasn't sure how I would do it. Thankfully things worked out the way that they did, because I would have never gotten into UH, like, with that program because the school literally wasn't open at the time. [laughs] So I'm glad it worked out the way it did.

Kriston: Yeah, I think you hit on something I know I've experienced with those setbacks, like alright, well, that didn't work out, so how are we gonna figure this out. I think that's the thing that I think first generation students who are kind of first on these journeys to go to college experience are those moments where they're like alright, I'm picturing this under someone else's dream, I'm just gonna chart my own path and figure it out. And that's scary but what does that mean to kinda hold on to that identity of being a part of that inaugural class of the college of medicine here at UH.

Diamondneshay: So, for me, being a part of the inaugural class, it's indescribable, honestly. There are no words. I honestly never thought that I would be accepted into the inaugural class of UH, if I'm being completely honest and transparent. When I heard about the UH College of Medicine opening, way back when I was in college is when I heard about this school being built, and it was gonna be so great and they would only accept 30 students and they would get full rides and I'm like, that sounds really good for somebody! [laughs] It's definitely, it feels surreal but also feels like, um, there's a chance to kinda set the tone. It's really awesome, because

it's like anything that I could envision a school as, like I can have input on that. You know, like they actually care about what we think, and they know that were the first class and that we're gonna have things that we're like 'oh okay, maybe this could be done better,' or 'I really like the way this was done,' and they actually listen to us and hear us and take the feedback. And that's like, awesome. I don't know, I also thought about this, like that, in a few years, or let's say, like 30 years down the line, they're gonna look back and see our photos as like the first class of a whole medical school, like that's pretty dope to me.

Kriston: Right?

Diamondneshay: So, it means a lot, and it means establishing a legacy.

Kriston: Yeah, that's, I think that legacy is crucial, especially at a university like the University of Houston and for those of you listening who don't know, UH is actually the second most diverse university in the United States and it's really important to stress that, you know, every admitted student met the qualifications, and that includes the med school. And so, um, Diamond is a part of that inaugural class but its made up of nearly 70% of minorities. Can you kinda talk about what its like being in a class that is so diverse, and you've got folks from various backgrounds and just kind of why you think that that's really important, especially in healthcare.

Diamondneshay: So, as far as being a part of a diverse class, I love it. Everybody brings their own unique experience to the table. We do a lot of, like, team-based learning and we do a lot of talking to each other, just like we're doing right now, we do this in class. And its really cool to hear different people's perspectives and to try to see it from their lens. Sometimes I'm stretched in ways that I would not have been if, you know, the class wasn't so diverse. I love it. I love to see people from all walks of life walking down the hallways. I love being in study groups where we don't all look the same, we don't all act the same way. Again, we bring different qualities to the table that help from a beautiful puzzle, like we all have a piece. A lot medical schools honestly are not as diverse. I know compared to some of my friends, they don't feel the that way. And that's the truth. They don't. I feel comfortable, and I'm really grateful for that because not everyone has that experience. I think that it's really important that the medical field is diverse because if you look around . . . if you just look around at the store, like the next

time you go to HEB, you will see that there is people that look and act in different ways, and healthcare needs to reflect that. We need people from different backgrounds. Some people may enjoy fishing, and that could be the thing that connects them to a patient. It's not always about skin tone, which again, is very very important. We need more minorities in medicine, we need more diversity, period. But I'm saying, but within that, you need to also look at people's individual experiences that will also connect them to patients. Sometimes, minority communities have experiences that can connect them to patients automatically.

Kriston: No, that's a great point. And you mentioned, kind of, the changing nature of our society and healthcare is not immune to changes that we're experiencing. I mean, we're literally in the midst of a global health crisis right now, and literally the way the global medical community has responded . . . like I don't think I've ever seen literally the world stop and doctors from all over the world kind of put all of their resources together. But one of the cool things about being at a university like UH is that one of our main goals is to transfer health and healthcare in communities experiencing major disparities. So, how do you, in the med school at UH, how do you internalize that message and then can you share an experience you've had working on an initiative that is really working to transform healthcare?

Diamondneshay: Mhm. So, I definitely love that UH has a goal that is to transform health in these communities that are underserved. I grew up in those communities. That's where I'm from. For me, it hits home because I've seen the other side of things, I've lived. And I do think it's important that every medical professional learns things from that viewpoint as well. Since I've been at UH, you know, I have my blog Desires of Diamond and a lot of people reach out to me to ask me things about medicine or pre-med and a lot of those people come from disadvantaged backgrounds as well, just like myself. So, that's one way I'm giving back to different communities. But something that I've done within our own community here, in the Third and Fourth Ward regions, we actually worked on something in school last year doing community projects. The project that my group worked on is we created exercise pamphlets and these are exercises that people can do in the comfort of their own homes because it's not enough to say 'yeah, exercise every day' ok but if that person doesn't have a safe environment to exercise in, how will they do it? If they don't have equipment, how will they do it? If you don't help them and guide them to what they can do, how will they do it?

Kriston: Right. And I think that personalized touch really kind of resonates with a lot of patients that come out to the clinic, right? I know one thing that was kind of one of those subtle reminders that representation matters, um, I don't know if you saw the medical illustration of the black fetus inside of black woman's womb that went viral on social media, it was actually drawn by a Nigerian medical student who focusing on including black people in medical literature, which I hadn't thought about. Which, I hadn't thought about. Like, when I saw it, yeah, like the normal illustration is a white child inside a white mother. Um, and many people, like me, admitted on social media that they had never seen it before. What's your take on that thing that is so small but it means so much.

Diamondneshay: Yes, I saw that on my feed as well. And when I saw it, I sent it to one of my friends and was like, 'you know what, I've never seen this . . . ever.' That's an issue. That's an issue. You have to think about, right? Why is this such a big deal? Why is this the first. . .it's a big deal because people have never seen this before. That's a problem. I love to it, and I'm grateful for it, and I think we need more inclusion. I want to see more black skin in books because your patient will not always be a white person or a person with fair skin. To be a good doctor, or to be a well-versed doctor, then you should know how things look on different textures of skin, different shades. Because I'm learning how things look on fair skin, but are you learning how things look on darker skin? Am I learning how things look on darker skin? Why is this the first time that we're seeing this? Like, we're in 2022. Like, why is this not in the textbook? When you have disease processes, I think there should be how things look on fair skin and how things look on darker complexion. Always. I think that should be the standard. I shouldn't have to Google 'xyz on dark skin'. Everybody that gets a medical degree should have to know how things look on different skin tones.

Kriston: Yeah, no, I certainly agree. I think it highlighted the progress that we've made, but it still kind of also exposed the progress that we still got to make in terms of representation and all aspects of healthcare. On that same note, have you encountered any examples of progress and acceptance of diversity within the medical school experience that you're having?

Diamondneshay: Yeah, for sure, at UH. I think that um, I mean, my class embodies it. I think it's one thing to talk the talk, but it's another thing to walk the walk. And honestly, my school does walk the walk. Like, the school won't have to do too much talking because you should be able to see it in their walk.

Kriston: Right, and it's funny that you mention that because I'm the Director of Student Recruitment with the assistance of an amazing team of folks, and one of things we often think about are ways that we are unconsciously participating in implicit bias and trying to make sure that the staff is not letting those biases dictate their decisions. How do you think that folks can do better when it comes to listening and overcoming those biases that folks have, be that in the medical community, be that in life? How can folks be more critically conscious, and equity minded? I know that's a very lofty question (*laughs*), but any thoughts on that?

Diamondneshay: We will all have some sort of bias, period. It would be a lie for me to say that we don't. The problem is when you don't check your biases at the door. It's about doing your own research. Educating yourself on things. It's not necessarily the minority's duty to inform you of certain things. You should also want to do some of your own research and learn for yourself as a human being. First, you have to learn and discover and the best way to do that, the best way I learn is when I look things up myself, when I take my own notes, I remember it better, you know I think about what kind of connections I made, theres just different connections being made in the brain when you're more active, so I think about taking initiative on that and really learning and wanting to do better and wanting be a better person.

Kriston: It's time to start doing a little bit work and doing a little bit of your own homework, right? But also, being unafraid to kind of mess up and, you're not gunna get it perfect. So, put one foot in front of the other. We're all just trying to figure out this thing called life, right? Is there anything else you want to add this conversation?

Diamondneshay: Yeah, sure! I just want to say to any student that is out there listening: just know, there are people rooting for you. Just know that everything you are doing now is for a purpose. Whether you are pre-med or not, school can be hard; it can. It can make you question yourself. Sometimes it can make you feel like you're not going to get to the other side of it. You will. So just keep going. Keep learning. Keep striving. Give yourself grace. Stay positive. There is a lot going on in the world right now, but you're not alone. And you got this.

Kriston: Uh, needed to hear that for my own self, so thank you for that, thank you for those amazing words of wisdom. If you'd like to learn more about social justice

and equity, you can visit our website. UH really wants our community to be educated and informed and really advocate for justice, so visit our website. Thank you for this conversation, Diamond.

Diamondheshay: Thank y'all.