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Charles Boykins III, Oral History Interview, 2022

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Oral History Interview with Charles Boykins III (TJ) conducted by undergraduate Kennedy Boler (KB) on November 23, 2022 via Zoom for You Li's Journalism 313 course.

Transcribed by Kennedy Boler

KB: Cool. All right, so give me the rundown again. About your background. Your name, age, school history and work history, as well as family history.

TJ: All right. My name is Charles Boykins III. Family history? I come from a two-parent background. Both parents were in military, and they've been there for me pretty much my whole life. We moved around a couple of places, but mainly resided in Michigan. As for my work history, I've been working since I was around 19; did some volunteer work when I was 13 or 14, and mainly have been in childcare. Between the time I was doing childcare, I did stint at FedEx.

KB: And your school history? Where did you go to school for high school and then your colleges career; things like that?

TJ: So, I did all my grade schooling in Michigan. When I graduated (high school), I went to Illinois to attend Nazarene University for roughly two years. I unenrolled from that school and came back home to Michigan. Muskegon, to be specific. Then I went to Muskegon Community College, which is also in Michigan, and it was back in my hometown. I was there for about two years roughly and was there during the pandemic. Then I transferred from MCC to Eastern Michigan University fall 2021. And I've been there ever since.

KB: And you were born in Kentucky, then moved to Michigan around three or four years old, right?

TJ: Probably around that age, maybe two or three.

KB: Okay. And you've always been in Muskegon.

TJ: For the majority of my life. Yes.

KB: Got it. All right. So, to start on the mental health questions, how would you say your mental health was before the pandemic? How would you describe your mental health status?

TJ: My mental health was okay. It was a little back and forth. You know, just growing up, you wrestle with some things, but nothing was too serious, at least for me. Besides, my sophomore year. My sophomore year was rough. Referring to high school pre-pandemic. Also, sophomore year of college as well. Those were some of the harder years of my life. You know, you go through some things-- you go through trying to figure yourself out as a young adult, trying to develop yourself, figuring out who you want to be, who you are separate: friends, family, titles. All those things. So those things took a little bit of a toll on my mind, but overall, I was able to handle it decently well. Before the pandemic, I would say.

KB: Got it. So, you did not struggle necessarily, but you had a few issues with your mental health starting sophomore year, all the way up until your sophomore year of college?

TJ: Yes, ma'am.

KB: Got it. So once the pandemic hit, how did it effect you? I know you mentioned in a previous

interview that you were a single child, so you were used to being isolated and that's how you usually dealt with your problems.

TJ: Yes, ma'am.

KB: If the isolation didn't affect you mentally, what did?

TJ: The thing about the pandemic that probably affected me the most was being moved online to school because that was never really a thing before the pandemic. They always had in-person classes. You always had, you know, in-person lectures and instruction and all those things. So, getting used to that was really the biggest adjustment, especially in my biology class. Once I had to move online, my grade just dipped, dipped, dipped, and dipped. That put a strain on my mental health because it made me stressed out; trying to improve my grades. It was a negative. But overall, I guess the other thing that hurt my mental health was not being able to: experience life, see my friends, go out, enjoy times together, go to concerts. All that kind of stuff that you would like to do as a young adult. So, feeling restricted after a year and a half of being unrestricted in a way, it could put you a little bit of a burden on your mental health. That was kind of where I was at, but nothing too crazy at that time.

KB: Got it. How would you say your mental health is now post-pandemic? Although we are still in a pandemic, how is it now that quarantine has lifted? We're back on campus. Has that affected you? Positive? Negative?

TJ: I would say overall, it's been positive. To, you know, feel like you're unchained in a way.

Being able to go where you want to go, be where you want to be, do what you want to do. Of course, you have the option to wear a mask, which I still do in some places. Like on campus where I know majority of people are vaccinated, I still like to wear my mask. You know, you don't know what other decisions people have made, and that's their prerogative. But in order to protect myself and my family, that's what I choose to do. But not being isolated as much can be freeing to your mental health. There were also more things outside of the pandemic that took some strain on my mental health. But that's separate from the pandemic itself. Mostly the pandemic hasn't bothered me too much because I previously said, the isolation doesn't bother me. But learning to reintegrate into society and how interact with different people can be a bit challenging because pretty much everybody is two years behind on social experience. So, being able to move through different rooms and interact with different types of people, I noticed that I had a better handle of it pre-pandemic than I did post-pandemic. Or at least at least in terms of this interview, "post-pandemic".

KB: Could you elaborate more on some of your triggers that you had before the pandemic and how you deal with that post-pandemic? How or did you equip better tools to deal with your those? And how did you just adapt and deal with, you know, a new way of life?

TJ: Yeah. So, a few of my triggers (in terms of conversation), would be yelling, swearing, or demeaning other people. Those things kind of gave me a little riled up. Therapy, at least for me, has been one of the biggest helps. Personally, it gives me a space to express myself without having the possibility of a relationship becoming strained or affected. So being able to fully express how you feel without it potentially negatively impacting a relationship that you care about or you still want to work out. Being unrestricted when it comes to expressing yourself can has been a very beneficial thing. Within the tools that I've learned during therapy are; I've learned to notice triggers. I've learned let things be instead of having to feel

like I must have some level of influence or control over the situation. Just accepting situations more.

KB: Nice. And when did you get enrolled in therapy? Was that pre-pandemic or post-pandemic?

TJ: Post-pandemic. I wanted to go earlier into the pandemic, but me and my family didn't know the necessary steps to take, nor did we believe that it was too big of a need at the time. But as I got older, I realized that there are things that I need to address, or you could say skeletons in my closet. For myself, I chose to enroll in therapy.

KB: Got it. You said that you made the choice to get into therapy for yourself. What was the turning factor? Was there a certain event or did you just come to the point of "alright, I need therapy"?

TJ: I was wrestling with the idea for a number of years. I would say a breakup was the catalyst. While I was in the relationship, I knew I wanted to go into therapy. So, I think it just became time and it just so happened around that time. I ended up losing a relationship or two, but the desire or want to engage in therapy was more of a culmination of all the things that I've been doing and all the things that I've unknowingly instilled within myself that I would like to get a professional opinion on instead of having to unpack it all by myself.

KB: Got it. It's definitely understandable. So, what has been your biggest takeaway from the pandemic? What advice would you give your past self, knowing that the pandemic was coming?

TJ: That's a good question. I would say one of the bigger thing would be to just buckle down.

There's going to be this period of solitude and isolation that you're going to have to engage in. Don't run from it. Don't try and find distractions. Don't try and ignore the feelings and the thoughts that are going to bubble up. Address them. Understand them. Understand that you are not those thoughts. Those thoughts, aren't you? You're just having these thoughts. They're an aspect of your brain that just pop up. Pay attention to them and decide whether you feel that you're capable of handling this or be open to the idea of seeking professional help. There's nothing terrifying. There's nothing scary about therapy. It doesn't mean that you're crazy. It just means that you are someone who wants to be able to express themselves. Not only should want to express yourself, but you deserve a platform in order for you to express yourself. Everybody does. So don't run from the thoughts that you have. They're valid and they're understandable. Start breaking them down. You don't have to do everything by yourself.

KB: Nice. That was really good. So, my next question I have for you is, what has been your biggest takeaway from therapy specifically?

TJ: Honestly therapy is just a place to decompress. A place to feel what you feel without restriction. Say what you've always wanted to say without restriction. Not in a way to tear others down or be disrespectful but being transparent and honest with yourself about the things that you've been through. Like, my life has been better than a large percentage of the population on paper, but that does not mean that the things that you experience were not real. That doesn't mean that the feelings that you now have because of those experiences are not real as well. You have a right to have those things addressed and (a space) for you to feel vulnerable, safe and cared for with the help of a professional. Just as much as anybody else. You don't need to put yourself in more traumatic situations to justify the reasoning behind getting extra help. You just deserve the extra help because you deserve the extra help. You

don't need to do it alone and you don't need to, not burden other people with it, but there's certain kinds of help that you can get. I'm not a doctor. My friends aren't a doctor. If I break my arm, I'm obviously going to go to the hospital. It's the same thing with your brain. You've experienced things that people around you may not be able to help you with. Which is okay. No matter the degree of it, just go seek professional help. That's really what it boils down to.

KB: Great advice. How did you adapt or deal with your mental shortcomings during the pandemic, when you didn't have therapy vs. now? Did you notice a difference?

TJ: Well, I've been through different stages of my life where I would do different things if I got emotional. So, I guess as a child, I would just be emotional. I would cry. I would get whatever that feeling is out and I would express it openly. And then as I got older and became a teenager, I started to become more reclusive and go into my own little turtle shell to either stop feeling the feelings, stop feeling the pain, stop showing the embarrassment. As I grew older, I was able to get to a point to where I was able to explain the deep feeling that I was feeling. I was able to rationalize it away. Analyze it. But I couldn't necessarily feel it in the same way that I could as a child. There was a mental block or an emotional block that was there that didn't allow me to feel what I was actually feeling. I believe post-pandemic has been a culmination of that mental or emotional block existing and now it's almost like my body is now allowing me to get teary eyed. Be able to cry. Be able to feel different feelings. Feel different levels of feelings. Whether it's level one or level ten. I wouldn't say that the pandemic is a direct cause of it, but I do believe that it's almost a reflection of how I've been unchained. The same way society has become a bit unchained from the pandemic. As society has become more free, I can say within myself, I've been able to become more

free as well. Not only being able to explain how I feel but feel how I feel. If that makes sense.

KB: It makes perfect sense. So that was it for my interview. Thank you tuning in and answering all my questions so thoroughly. It was great.

TJ: Oh trust me I had I needed that. It was great.

Recording stops