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INTRO
Welcome to the Skin You're In Podcast, where we create a space to learn about health and social injustices rooted in racism. Through in-depth conversations with experts and everyday people, we explore the issues, potential solutions, and the effects those injustices have on individuals, families, and communities. Hello, and welcome to the Skin You're In Podcast. I'm your host, Thomas LaVeist, Dean and Weatherhead Presidential Chair in Health Equity at the Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, and Principal Investigator for Partners for Advancing Health Equity. And I'm also Executive Producer and Writer of the docuseries, The Skin You're In.

Dr. LaVeist

I'm excited to introduce today's guest, the Honorable Dr. Louis Sullivan.

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Dr. LaVeist
Dr. Sullivan was founding dean and director of the medical education program at Morehouse College, which became the School of Medicine at Morehouse College in 1978. He was secretary of the US Department of Health and Human Services from 1989 to 1993. And he was co-chair of the President's Commission on HIV and AIDS from 2001 to 2006. Dr. Sullivan's illustrious accomplishments and contributions to the field are too many to list here, so listeners can check out his bio on our podcast page. We're honored to have you here today, Dr. Sullivan, or Louis. Thank you for taking this time to talk with us.

0:01:35
Dr. Sullivan

Well, Tom, thank you very much. It's my pleasure to be here with you.

Dr. LaVeist

So you're in Martha's Vineyard here today. How are things in Martha's Vineyard these days?

Dr. Sullivan

Well, the weather is beautiful. It's a beautiful fall day. I have a great view of a fresh saltwater pond and then the ocean beyond that with sailboats, so it's really idyllic. I love the island. We have been coming here since the mid-60s, so we love it and it really has a rich heritage here because there's a significant number of African Americans who have come here over the years, as well as whites and others.

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Dr. Sullivan
The culture of the island is very, very supportive. We have book clubs, discussion groups,

dance groups, theater, good restaurants, beaches, et cetera. And so we love it. And it's a great place to come both for refreshment as well as for stimulation.

Dr. LaVeist

Sounds idyllic. I have visited there a few times myself. So you've had quite an extraordinary career. Let's just talk a bit about that, about your career journey. I know that you went to college at Morehouse in Atlanta, but let's talk about before that. Where did you grow up? You know, when did you grow up? What was that experience like and what led you ultimately to Morehouse?

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Dr. Sullivan
Well, to begin with, I was born in Atlanta at Grady Hospital, the public hospital there, in 1933. That was at the depths of the Depression. My father was a life insurance salesman for Atlanta Life, a black-owned and developed life insurance company that was developed by Alonzo Herndon, who was born as a slave but became a barber and owned a barber shop. And he set up a burial society, which evolved into Atlanta Life Insurance Company. But in the Depression, my father, who had worked there for a number of years, really was quite stressed economically because people stopped buying life insurance. Because during the Depression, they were really saving what funds they had to pay the rent and to put food on the table. So in looking for ways to support his family because I was the second of two boys, my father decided that he would leave Atlanta and go into the funeral business in Southwest Georgia.

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Dr. Sullivan
Because in those years back in the mid-30s, believe it or not, there were a number of places where services for blacks were really still in very short supply. So my father moved first to Albany and went into a partnership with the funeral director there that lasted two years. Then he left Elbey, moved to Blakely, and established the first funeral home for blacks in Blakely, Georgia, in southwest Georgia. He really provided great service to the community, but beyond that, he was an activist. He formed the chapter of NAACP. He worked to have the white primary repealed because in those years, blacks were not eligible to vote in the white primaries.

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Dr. Sullivan
And that meant that voting in the general election was really less than a full exercise in participation. And so, because the candidates had been selected in the primaries. So my father joined with others, with the NAACP and others, in suing the state to get rid of the white primary. In addition, he established the annual Emancipation Day celebration, January 1st of every year, to celebrate Lincoln's proclamation. My father was a lifelong

Republican because he identified with Lincoln. For those celebrations, we would have speeches from people such as Thurgood Marshall, who's with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. John Wesley Dobbs would come down from Atlanta, a minister there in 33-degree Mason, a tremendous speaker, grandfather of Maynard Jackson, and others. So with that kind of activity, my father was really not welcomed in the white community because he was trying to get blacks registered to vote.

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Dr. Sullivan
He sued the county and the state against the school system saying that it was separate indeed, but it was not equal. For example, the white high school had a ban with instruments. The black high school did not. There's a nice library for the white school, but not one for the blacks. So, those were the kinds of conditions there. In the 30s and the 40s, lynchings were still occurring around the country, including Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi. So, that was a time of great tension in that part of our country. Fortunately for my brother and me, my parents were very dedicated to us getting as strong an education as we could possibly get. They did that by sending us first to Savannah for a year when I was in fifth grade, and then the following year to Atlanta in sixth grade to attend schools.

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Dr. Sullivan
And we lived with friends in those years. So I ended up going to high school in Atlanta, graduated from Booker Washington High School. Booker Washington High, by the way, it was the first public high school built in Georgia for blacks, opened in 1924. So it'll be celebrating its centennial in a couple of years from now. So that is a measure of the level of education available for blacks at that time. There were a number of private schools. The Atlanta University Center, the collection of black colleges in Atlanta, had a private school for blacks that you would have to have tuition to pay for that. So if you were not able to provide that tuition, really the public schools weren't available to you. So I finished Boca Washington High. And prior to that time So my father and I finished Boca Washington High, and prior to that time, working with my father in Blakely, where we would be home holidays and during the summer, I would assist my father in working in the funeral home because he provided ambulance services there.

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Dr. Sullivan
There was no black physician in Blakely. There was one in Bainbridge, Georgia, 41 miles south, Dr. Joseph Griffin. My father would from time to time take members of the black community who needed his services and needed ambulance services to go to Dr. Griffin. He would take them in our ambulance. I would help him. Dr. Griffin was a person who had a great impression on me because he had built a brick clinic there in Bainbridge. He was

respected by the black community. And I admired him because of the fact that he was so successful and he really knew how to cure people from illness and injury.

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Dr. Sullivan
When I was age five, I told my parents I wanted to be a doctor when I grew up. I want to be like Dr. Griffin. So my parents' immediate reaction was, that's great, Louis. You'll be a great physician. So there was reinforcement from the beginning. So there was never any doubt in my mind of what I wanted to do and what I would be when I grew up. I love science, nature, trees, flowers, etcetera. So that was my first role model in addition to my parents. In Atlanta, the black community was very strong because of the Atlanta University Center. There were physicians in the community, lawyers, businessmen, and others. And having those as role models reinforced the dreams that my brother and I had. So when I finished Booker Washington High, I went on to Morehouse College because Morehouse was known to have a strong pre-medical program.

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Dr. Sullivan
A number of the physicians in Atlanta had gone to Morehouse. So at Morehouse, I had my major was in biology, and the chairman of the department, Dr. James Burney, had worked for Smith, Klein, and French pharmaceutical company. He was an endocrinologist. So he was a very a strong teacher, scientist. He really challenged us as students and we responded to the challenge. But there were others on the faculty as well. So my experience at Morehouse was a very positive one.

Dr. LaVeist

So Morehouse, Dr. Benjamin Mays is well known, I think by many and probably will be known to many listeners, is a man who had quite an impact on many people, not only Morehouse students, but certainly virtually every Morehouse student that was there during that period of time. Talk a bit about Dr. Mays and what he's meant to you in your life.

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Dr. Sullivan
Oh, yes. Dr. Mays had a profound influence on me as he did on other students at Morehouse. Dr. Mays was an eloquent speaker. He carried himself with dignity and grace. He had high standards for academic achievement, as well as for personal integrity and character. He was a role model for all of us as students. He had a remarkable story himself. He had been born in South Carolina and had to work during the spring and fall because of the planting of crops and the harvesting of crops in the fall, so that his education was interrupted by working in the fields, but he was taught to read and write by his older sister.

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Dr. Sullivan
Then he went off to Virginia Union University to go to college. And he was there for a year and then went on to Bates College in Maine. He finished Bates College in 1906 as valedictorian in his class, and the only black in his class at Bates. He from there went to the University of Chicago and received a doctor of philosophy degree and a religion degree. So, Dr. Mays had outstanding credentials and he had daily chapel at Morehouse. Those chapel exercises, we would have a number of speakers, such as not only Dr. Mays himself, but again people like Thurgood Marshall, John Wesley Dobbs, other outstanding business leaders, political leaders.

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Dr. Sullivan
So in those daily chapel exercises, we were learning from people who had achieved, and we were really being told, though we were not aware of it at the time, that these were people who had set an example for us. So therefore, for us to become businessmen or doctors or scientists or other leaders, that was a given because we had the examples shown to us. And the other important thing for me at Morehouse, I think for other students, were my classmates. They were students who had come from all over the country, particularly in the South. They had finished first or second in their class. So, they were really friends and they were competitive, but it was friendly competition. So, I learned as much from my classmates as I did from the faculty at Morehouse. So, that was the environment that we had. And Mace himself would have such sayings as saying, he who starts behind in life must run faster or forever be resigned to being a number two.

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Dr. Sullivan
So he would challenge us there. He also just had to have high standards of service to the community. We should live our lives so that they were important not only to us, but to others in the community for our lives to be significant. So that was the culture that we had at Morehouse. The fact that he would have great teachers he had recruited from the University of Chicago and from Columbia and from Harvard, etc. That gave us people who challenged us as students. So I finished Morehouse not first in my class. I was second. First in my class was Vic Saunders, Ron Saunders from Mississippi. He was from Vicksburg, which is why we called him Vic.

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Dr. Sullivan
But really, we had a lot of people there in my class who were outstanding achievers. Our counseling sessions when we were in the second semester of our junior year were held to encourage us in our career planning. And they included encouraging us to apply. Those interested in medicine were encouraged to apply not only to Howard and Meharry, the two black medical schools at the time, we were told they were very good schools, but they're not

the only schools. You should apply around the country because you have been given excellent training.

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Dr. Sullivan
So in my class of 59 students who graduated in 1954, 19 of us were pre-medical. All of us went to medical school. And we were encouraged to apply around the country. So we ended up with a number of my classmates going to Howard and Meharry, but also I went to Boston University. Another classmate, Perry Henderson, went to Case Western Reserve. A third, Henry Foster, went to the University of Arkansas School of Medicine. I believe he was the third black student admitted to Arkansas. This was 1954, the year of Brown v. Board of Education. Another of my classmates went to the University of Illinois. So that is how that happened. Now, in applying to Boston University. I sent off an application there as well as to several other schools, Michigan, Minnesota, Chicago, but I heard back from Boston first. So they invited me to go for an interview there in Atlanta with an alumnus of Boston University, local physician.

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Dr. Sullivan
That interview was one that I felt was not a very good interview. The doctor didn't seem particularly interested or excited. And so I was afraid that I wasn't really being given the full attention or support. So I waited to hear. And then two weeks later, I received a letter from Boston University, and I was afraid to open it, but I opened it to see if I would be invited to Boston University for an interview. And the letter read, Dear Mr. Sullivan, we are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted as a student for Boston University. So I was quite surprised. This is not to invite me for an interview.

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Dr. Sullivan
So I did not go to the campus of Boston University School of Medicine until the fall of 54 when I entered. For me, this was the first time in my life I'd be living in a non-segregated environment. And I wondered how I would be received. And the quick answer to that is I was received very well by my classmates. I formed great friendships. I didn't have anyone in the class who seemed to really taunt me or what have you. The faculty were very open and receptive. I enjoyed Boston with all of its historical significance. I walked the Freedom Trail. I saw the Statue of Christmas Attucks, the first black to die in the Revolutionary War, statue in the Boston Commons, saw the statue of Paul Revere, went out to Lexington, saw the Minuteman statue and then on to Concord for the Concord Bridge, and then all of the universities in Boston, Harvard and Radcliffe, Boston University, many others there as well.

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Dr. Sullivan
So I had a great experience there.

Dr. LaVeist

You said something that piqued my interest. So you talked about your father. You had quite a number of quite impactful mentors who kind of influenced you, your father being, of course, one of them. And you mentioned that your father was very active politically in Georgia and that he was a Republican and that he became a Republican because of Abraham Lincoln. At that time, it was quite common. Most African most African Americans were Republicans. Can you just kind of talk about that and what was the transition that led to most African Americans now being Democrats and many fewer Republicans?

Dr. Sullivan

Right. Yes, yes, my father really identified as a Republican not only because Lincoln had issued the proclamation of emancipation to free the slaves, which really had a profound impact in the thinking and the attitudes in the black community.

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Dr. Sullivan
But also, at those times, there really, in the South, the Republican Party hardly existed. It was really a Democratic power base in the South. And so from my father's perspective, the difficulties he was really working to address really were in the power of the Democrats. So that for that reason, his political activities, he saw as really working to have the Democratic Party become really democratic and not be the party of the oppressor. So that was his attitude. The only political argument that I had with my father was in 1960 for the elections when I told him that I was going to vote for John F. Kennedy for president.

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Dr. Sullivan
So he really wasn't happy with that, but he resigned himself to that because, first of all, he did want me and my brother to have our own independent judgment, etc. And secondly, I think he realized that times were changing here. So that was the situation with him. And that's how he was really a Republican. I believe John Wesley Dobbs was also a Republican, though his grandson, Maynard Jackson, who was two years behind me at Morehouse, was a Democrat, as you know.

Dr. LaVeist

Yeah. But you remained as a Republican.

Dr. Sullivan

Well, you would say, yes, I was not active as such. But the philosophy of really industry, working to achieve and contribute to society, and to really use resources wisely, those were the things that appealed to me, but that also is coupled with the need to look for changing society and having, indeed, more opportunities for blacks and other minorities and for the poor to improve themselves by getting an education which was highly valued.

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Dr. Sullivan
I should also mention that my mother was a schoolteacher. And of course, she and my father had an influence on me. And one of the things that is not well known in the general public was the fact that there was this man named Julius Rosenwald in Chicago, who was the chairman of Sears Roebuck. Because back in the 30s and the 40s, living in the rural part of Georgia, we would get things such as refrigerators and washing machines by ordering them through Sears Roebuck.

Dr. LaVeist

That was the Amazon of the day.

Dr. Sullivan

Oh yes, absolutely. Well Booker Washington at Tuskegee met Julius Rosenwald and recruited him on the board of Tuskegee in, I believe, in 1912, and in 1915 had convinced Rosenwald to build schools for blacks around Tuskegee and those towns there, because many of those towns had no schools for blacks.

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Dr. Sullivan
That was the start of an effort that led Rosenwald to form the Rosenwald Fund. The Rosenwald Fund between 1915 and 1937 built almost 5,000 schools for blacks throughout the South, from Maryland all the way out through Texas. And he had a requirement for any community that approached him for helping develop a school, they would have to contribute either land or things such as lumber or labor, and the school board would have to commit to managing and running the school afterwards. He did that because he wanted the communities to take ownership in the schools. My mother, who's a school teacher in the 30s and 40s, taught in a number of those schools called Rosenwald schools.

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Dr. Sullivan
So, he had a profound impact in helping to develop educational opportunities for African-Americans throughout the South. But the dramatic difference between access to education back in the beginning of the 20th century and now 100 years later is really profound. And Rosenwald had a great part to play in that. So that is an example of rapport between the black community that needed an educational system and Julius Rosenwald, a Jewish

businessman, who mobilized this fund that he developed to develop all these schools that had a profound impact. Some of those buildings are still around. Most of them have been taken down, but a few are still around as historic structures. But I'm proud of the fact that my mother taught in a number of those schools.

Dr. LaVeist

Yeah, that's wonderful. I'd like to move now to talk a little bit more about your time in government. So, in the 1980s, then Secretary of Health and Human Services, Margaret Heckler, issued a report called a report of the Secretary's Task Force on Black and Minority Health.

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Dr. LaVeist
This was a multi-volume report on the state of what we now refer to as health, racial inequities, and health. Talk a bit about what was happening at that time from your perspective.

Dr. Sullivan

Yes, I'd be happy to. Let me mention a couple of things that serve as a basis for the meeting that we had with Margaret Heckler, which was in 1983. I finished my training in medicine as a hematologist at the Thorndike Laboratory at Harvard Medical School in Boston City Hospital, and then became a faculty member at Boston University, and then was recruited back to Morehouse College to form the medical school in 1975.

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Dr. Sullivan
When that happened, of course, we brought our first class in 1978. Of course, Morehouse School of Medicine is the only four-year black medical school formed in the 20th century. But in forming the medical school, we worked with Howard and Maharry, who were very supportive of our efforts and the National Medical Association which also urged the development of the medical school and so in working with them we decided we needed to form an association that was formed in 1977 called the Association of Minority Health Profession Schools. So it started with the Morehouse School of Medicine, Meharry Medical College, and Tuskegee College of Veterinary Medicine, Xavier College of Pharmacy.

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Dr. Sullivan
So we were the four schools that started the association. So the association grew to 12 programs that represented all of the predominantly black schools of medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, five colleges of pharmacy, and the College of Veterinary Medicine at Tuskegee. One of the first projects we undertook was to develop a study of the status of Blacks in the health professions we had a researcher to work with us on that, and held a report that was

titled Blacks in the health professions in the 80s, a national crisis and a time for action. This study, which was done by Ruth Hanft, really pulled together data showing the representation of Blacks in medicine, dentistry, nursing, and other health professions.

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Dr. Sullivan
So we met with Secretary Heckler in 1983 to give her a copy of the report and pointed out to her that in every health profession, blacks and other minorities were underrepresented. Further, that the health status of the nation's black and other minority populations was that the health was poorer than that of the white population. And we said that the significant part of this is the lack of health services that these populations receive. So this is really putting out the need to increase the number and percentage of blacks in medicine, dentistry, and the other health professions. But Secretary Heckler listened very carefully to us, and she thanked us for presenting the study to her.

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Dr. Sullivan
So she said she would review it, and then she would get back to us. So we left that meeting with mixed feelings. We felt that we had a good meeting. We had been received courteously. She seemed to be very interested, but we did not have any firm idea of what would happen next. So we didn't know if indeed anything would happen. Well, what did happen was she appointed her own intra-departmental committee in the Department of Health and Human Services. That committee was chaired by Tom Malone, who at that time was the deputy director of NIH. And Tom Malone was African-American. He was a research biologist, highly respected. So his committee produced their report in August of 1985, some two years later. And that report, which was the formal title was Black and Minority Health. And that was informally called the Heckler Report. And on the basis of that report, which confirmed our report that we had given to the Secretary in March of 83, but went beyond that and had some recommendations.

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Dr. Sullivan
And among them, there should be efforts to improve the health status of the nation's minority populations. And I can say that I know that Secretary Heckler was very proud of that report because of the change in the culture that occurred in the department, beginning with that report on black and minority health, because it was really a few years later in 1989, by circumstances which I had not foreseen, that I became Secretary of Health and Human Services here. So when I was appointed by President Bush to that position, when he asked if I would serve as a secretary, which had been a surprise because I was lobbying him quite vigorously to appoint one of my trustees at Morehouse School of Medicine to that position.

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Dr. Sullivan
My trustee was a Republican from Connecticut. He was not only a physician, but also a lawyer. He had put himself through law school and medical school with scholarships and working, and he was a senior executive at a pharmaceutical company, so he had business experience as well. And he was very committed to improving health of the nation's minority populations. But when I approached President Bush about my trustee, he asked me to send him the information, his CV, etc., which I did. So when I talked with him some weeks later, he said, well, Lou, I was very impressed, but I really would like to talk with you if you don't mind. So when you get a chance to come to Washington, let's do that. This was right after the election that he said that.

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Dr. Sullivan
So I went to Washington, not quite sure what he had meant. But sure enough, when I talked with him, he said, well, he was quite impressed by the person I had put forward to him, but that he really would like to have me serve in that position. So I then said, Mr. President, I'm honored and flattered that you would consider me, but I would really like to ask if I could have really a week or so to think about this, I'm developing a medical school that still has a lot to occur for it to fully develop. And I don't feel as if I've really done everything that I really hope to do with the medical school. So he said, Lou, I understand. So why don't you do that?

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Dr. Sullivan
So I went back to Atlanta, gave some thought to that. And among other things, I had a meeting with the Speaker of the House of the Georgia General Assembly. I had that meeting because he had been Speaker for about 23 years, and politically in Georgia, he was the most powerful figure. We had gotten state support for the Morehouse School of Medicine. I wanted to be sure that I did not do something that could alienate this Democratic Speaker of the Georgia Assembly, that would endanger our state support that we had developed. So when I met with the Speaker about this, I said I wanted his opinion. I said the new President-elect would like for me to serve as his Secretary. And I wanted to see how you thought about that, because we have good relations, and I want to be sure that we don't do anything that really disrupts that because it's so important for the medical school. So this speaker, his name was Tom Murphy, who was from West Georgia, and he was quite a character. He wore cowboy hats, cowboy boots, and he chewed tobacco. So when I raised the question, he took out a wad of Red Man tobacco and took out a pocket knife and cut off a corner of that tobacco and stuck it in his mouth.

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Dr. Sullivan
And this took maybe about a minute and a half, but it seemed like 30 minutes. He put the

tobacco in and so he started chewing and said, well, you know, if the president asks you to do something, I don't think you have much of a choice. So I think the president needs all the help he can get. And so if he wants you to serve in that position, I don't think you can turn down the president. That was his way of saying it was all right to go and join this Republican administration. So with that, I went to Washington, and I had spoken with the president-elect Bush. I said the things that would be important to me would be efforts to improve the number of minority health professionals in the country and to address the health inequities that exist that the Heckler Report has pointed out.

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Dr. Sullivan
And so President-elect Bush's response was, oh, I agree with you there, and I support you. We need to do something about that. So with that, I felt that I really would be able to get some things done as secretary. So that's how I became Secretary of Health and Human Services.

Dr. LaVeist

Yeah, and all the rest is history. But let's talk about that history. This was a very impactful times and several agencies were set up and some agencies that still function today.

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Dr. LaVeist
Talk about what happened during your leadership at HHS.

Dr. Sullivan

Well, a number of things that I did. First of all, I worked to improve the number of blacks and Hispanics in positions of responsibility in the department. First of all, one of the career employees of the department was Dr. William Bennett. He had worked with me in developing the Morehouse School of Medicine because he was part of the Bureau of Health Manpower. Bill, I appointed to be chairman of a committee in my, in the office of the secretary, to look for people to serve on advisory committees for NIH, CDC, HRSA, Hickforth, which is now CMS, and other agencies because I quickly learned that there were more than 250 programs in that department with 125,000 employees. And so I wanted to be sure that we did everything we could to integrate the leadership in that department.

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Dr. Sullivan
And Bill's role was to help identify people, both who are already in the federal government, as well as those from around the country, either in state government or in the private sector, who could serve in that role. So that was it. Secondly, I appointed the first woman, the head NIH, Bernadine Healy, from Cleveland Clinic in Ohio. We also created the women's

health program that was headed by Dr. Vivian Penn, who came from Howard University, where she had been chairman of the Department of Pathology.

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Dr. Sullivan
I appointed the first female Surgeon General, who was also a Hispanic, Dr. Antonia Novello. And I created the Office for Research in Minority Health at NIH that was created to really stimulate the development of minority investigators and to strengthen health programs looking at health issues affecting the minority communities. And that formed the basis for what has grown now to be the National Institute for Minority Health and Health Disparities. And also, as secretary, in my speeches to the members of the department, I made it clear what I felt the priorities of the department should include, and these were to improve the health of the nation's populations in general, but particularly that of minority populations, and to increase the representation of minorities and women in the department here. So those were things which we were able to get started, and I'm pleased that a number of those have continued and that form the basis for a number of programs that exist now.

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Dr. Sullivan
There were other things, such as strengthening the Head Start program and reform the Healthy Start program to really help those mothers who needed some extra help to have healthy babies, because our argument was if you have a healthy baby, you'll have a healthy, productive productive adult who contribute much more to our society, not only economically by earning more and paying more taxes, but also by contributing services, whether those services were in business, in law, in medicine, or other fields. So the rationale for doing that was to invest in a stronger society in the future. So, when I went to Washington, of course, I met with Secretary Heckler, who was an advisor to me, and I worked with her over the years. And so, she really helped get all of that started, and we developed a momentum that I think has continued, and that needs to continue as recent events have shown with the disparities and the impact of things like the COVID pandemic and HIV episodes and even now the monkeypox infections, where we see that our nation's minorities are affected to a much greater degree. So we have a lot of work yet to do.

Dr. LaVeist

Yeah. So as I listen to that and reflect on kind of what I know of your accomplishments, in addition to what we're talking about here, I see a pattern where your work has really been around institution building.

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Dr. LaVeist
It's creating institutions that are impactful and sustainable, things that will be able to continue to function even beyond your time in office. But not only building institutions, but

taking and bringing institutions together and bringing those resources together from institutions to be able to have an impact on health, and in particular in the case of your work in health inequities. As I understand, you have a new book that talks about that. We'll fight it out here, talking about the minority-serving institutions. Tell me about that book.

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How did that book come about?

Dr. Sullivan

Yes. This book, which was written to give the history of the Association of Rarity Health Professionals Schools, give the history of this association, which we started back in 1977. I mentioned that there were four institutions at the beginning, but it really grew to have some 12 programs in medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, and veterinary medicine. And the association's goal was to really work to get more support for our programs here by working with members of Congress and the administration and also with the private sector. I think that has been a very satisfying experience working with my colleagues, because this included Howard, Meharry, Morehouse, and Charles Drew School of Medicine, because Charles Drew, as you know, opened in 1981 as a two-year school and is now in the process of becoming a four-year school. So when that happens, they will become the fourth MD degree-granting medical school that's predominantly African American in the country, based in Los Angeles, as they are. But the colleges of dentistry, of course, are Howard and Meharry.

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Dr. Sullivan
The five colleges of pharmacy include Texas Southern Xavier, right there in Louisiana with Dr. Norm Francis and his colleagues who developed that college, including the College of Pharmacy, the Florida A&M College of Pharmacy, and the ones at Hampton University and at Howard. This association has worked to develop a number of programs that now exist, that didn't exist before. First of all, I mentioned the National Institute for Minority Health and Health Disparities became an institute in the year 2010 with the Affordable Care Act.

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Dr. Sullivan
And that institute now, with the attention being given to health disparities, that institute is playing a central role in addressing health disparities. The Women's Health Program, I mentioned, of course, is another one that when I was secretary, we were able to create and the Association of the Health Profession Schools supports that as well. There's a research endowment program for schools to strengthen their research activities, their professors carrying out research, because I believe that active research, it really is a problem-solving activity. And so in training health professionals, you want them to be problem solvers, because most health professionals are not researchers, but they can use methods of research throughout their practices, which is learning how to solve problems, how to define

them, how to address them, how to evaluate them, how to read original articles in the literature and determine how strong that article is and whether it is to be trusted or not.

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Dr. Sullivan
So that has been another activity of the Association of Minority Health Profession Schools. So, this book is being published by the Johns Hopkins Press and comes out in mid-October and will be a description of the history of this association. We had a number of presidents of the association from the various schools who are members of the association. And this association has worked with other advocacy groups, such as Research America and the Association of American Medical Colleges, the National Medical Association, in programs to increase the number and diversity of health professionals, but also to develop programs to work to resolve the problems of the high level of student indebtedness with which they graduate, which hampers the graduate's ability to pursue the career path that they may be interested in, or the communities where they can settle.

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Dr. Sullivan
That's what the book, which is titled We'll Fight It Out Here, that's what it's all about to describe the history of the nations, African-American and other minority communities and why they really should be, have their health issues addressed, because it benefits the whole nation by having a healthier society, a more productive society, one that gives goods and services to our own population, but also brings new knowledge, new strategies around the world that will improve the health of our citizens around the world.

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Dr. Sullivan
So we're proud of that book, looking forward to its release.

Dr. LaVeist

Yes, so along the same vein of that book and the work themes that I see coming out of your lights and your work is this project that we have, this Partnership for Advancing Health Equity, is designed to be a convener to bring together multiple sectors of society that are all doing things in the health equity space, but doing things separately, but to bring people together so those resources can be more focused and have more impact. One of the sectors that we work with besides government, academia, community organizations, nonprofits, is the private sector.

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Dr. LaVeist
You worked quite a bit with the private sector on some of these issues. What message would you give to people working in the private sector for why they should care about

health equity? What's the imperative for people in the private sector to care about this topic? And what can they do? How can the private sector be an asset?

Dr. Sullivan

Oh, yes. Well, my response is this. Addressing health inequities should be a top priority of our private sector, our corporations and businesses for this reason.

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Dr. Sullivan
We've seen how disruptive the COVID pandemic has been to our economy. We've had supply chain disruptions. We've had high unemployment. We have had shutdowns of schools and businesses, etc. And the reasons for that is that this pandemic's impact, the contagion that exists. Well, this epidemic is being addressed by the vaccines that have been developed. These vaccines have really reduced the mortality and morbidity from this pandemic. And therefore, by use of these vaccines, we bring people back to work more quickly. And so we have the work of our school teachers, taxi drivers, our ship workers and our box working and all segments of our society can get back to more normal activities the sooner this pandemic is addressed.

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Dr. Sullivan
The black community, the Latino community, the Native American community have been hit harder by this COVID pandemic. And another sign of the inequities because of lack of insurance so that they don't have access to the health system on an equal basis, lack of personnel or lack of facilities. Many parts of our country, so rural areas don't have hospitals or other services, and even in some parts of our inner cities. The important thing for the corporate sector to remember is that by working to eliminate health inequities, they really end up with a healthier population, a population where it is more ready to have people to work, to be recruited for your businesses, so it'll be good for business.

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Dr. Sullivan
So the bottom line is for members of the business community to know that they not only have an opportunity to be helpful, but really a responsibility if we as a country are to really recover fully from things like this pandemic. And there will be, unfortunately, pandemics in the future. We need to be better prepared in the future than we were at this time. We need to develop trust and understanding throughout our population so that people understand the products that are developed and will trust their use there, because we have been shown that there is, in some segments of our society, lack of trust in the scientific community. And that's ironic, because the science has never been stronger, certainly for vaccine developments, because I was in medical school when the Salk vaccine was developed.

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Dr. Sullivan
And I can remember it took years for that to develop. And I remember taking care of patients with paralytic polio who then, when the vaccine came along, that changed things from one year to the next. So we have to have continued development of science. We also have to have understanding and trust of the science. So that's the job that really is the job of those in government as well as the private sector, if we are to have a well-functioning economy and a society.

Dr. LaVeist

Thank you for that. And let me ask you also to address younger people, people who are early in their careers, maybe still trying to determine what will be their contribution to addressing these health inequities. What advice would you give to maybe a young medical student or some other health professional student who's just starting out?

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Dr. Sullivan
Well, these are the things that I would want to share with them. First of all, the health professions are serving professions. They're scientifically based, you should enter them with the idea that you would be working to improve our society. Now, health professionals generally earn a good income, but that should not be the primary reason that one wants to become a health professional. From my perspective, you should really enter health professions from the standpoint of wanting to improve the lot of our fellow citizens, improve health, improve access to health, improve understanding of science, increase the trust in the science.

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Dr. Sullivan
If you do that, then you will serve your community very well. Secondly, we should know that by improving the health of our citizens, they become more productive citizens. They become more independent. They become wage earners and taxpayers, and they support our society. So those are the things that I would urge young people to consider when you are considering a health profession. Secondly, always be committed to excellence, to being the best that you can be in the field that you can be. Thirdly, remember, knowledge grows every year. You must always be a constant learner.

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Dr. Sullivan
Things 10 years from now will be very different from what they are like today. So that by being a continuous learner, you'll become more relevant, more effective, more important to your society. So commitment to excellence, continuous learning, and service to others, those

are the things that I think are important. And to do it with integrity and with a commitment to improving the lot of your fellow man. If you do that, I think you will feel good at the end of the day or the end of the week or the end of the year, because you would have done something not only for yourself, but for your fellow man. That, I think, will make your life more important.

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Dr. LaVeist
So, you worked in government, and you worked quite effectively in government to establish institutions that are still functioning now and still having an impact in addressing health equity. What message would you give to people in government, people who have an opportunity to utilize the range of government power to impact health equity. You used that opportunity, I think, quite effectively to address health inequities. Others in that same position might not have done what you did, as what you did was, I think, quite bold for that era, for that period of time, and it was unprecedented. What would you say to government workers today?

Dr. Sullivan

Yes, what I would say to those working in government is this, that you have a tremendous opportunity to serve your fellow man.

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Dr. Sullivan
And that really should be a guiding principle for anyone working in government, because we have a society that is far from perfect. We have the founding principles articulated by the founders of our country, and we as a country have really never fully lived up to those founding principles. So we have work to do. We have been somewhat successful as a society in many areas, but we've had some faults and some deficiencies. So there is room for improvement. So I say for those in government, you have the opportunity to have our government become more efficient, more sensitive, more empathetic to the needs of our fellow citizens. And if you work to address the needs of our fellow citizens, to really give them a hand up and not a handout, but a helping hand so that they can become more productive. If you do that, you will be very satisfied with your life's work. Because I will say that when I was secretary, I was always excited by working with President George H.W. Bush, because he considered public service a great honor and a great opportunity to do something not only for himself, but for his fellow man.

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Dr. Sullivan
So that was the attitude of those of us who worked with him. So if you find that the things that you're doing are improving the lives of others, then your level of satisfaction in knowing that you have contributed to improving our society, to strengthening our nation, to

making our society more just, more democratic, more equitable, that indeed will be a tremendous contribution that you will make to our country and to our fellow man. Because public service is just that, serving the public, serving the individual, helping children, helping grownups, helping the aged have a better life. If you do that, you will have, indeed, a very successful, fulfilled life.

Dr. LaVeist

Dr. Lou Sullivan, thank you so much for this great conversation.

0:56:42

Dr. LaVeist
And thanks to our listeners. We hope you found this engaging, and we look forward to having you tune in for our next episode.

OUTRO

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Until next time.