

Healthcare Heroes

By Marc Andrew Hem Lee

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You're listening to Health Care Heroes, a radioplay that explores what it means to be a hero in the time of the pandemic. For those new to verbatim theatre, the genre uses real topics, often from the news but the source can be anywhere, and looks at these topics from the lens of the theatrical. In this era of alternative facts, a term coined by an formerly appointed person in government, I present to you some alternative lies for your listening pleasure. At its heart, I explore what it means to be a hero and who deserves to be called one. I encourage you to listen using your headphones. We'll get right into our show after our signal announcement, coming up before this hour's news:

This is [WHRC] Philadelphia
[WNAC] 89.7 Atlantic City
[WCMC] 90.3 Cape May Courthouse
[WMHK] 89.9 Manahawkin and
[WBLN] 88.1 Berlin

Live from the Central News Agency in Philadelphia I'm Marc Hem Lee with this hour's local, national and international coverage.

-This weekend marks the 100th day of protest in Seattle, Washington. Protesters clashed with the police this time, with 5 people sustaining injuries. Seattle Police Chief Carmen Best released a statement explaining the incident is under investigation.

-In Oregon several fires are burning near Portland. There are dozens of fires burning in the state with more than 8000 acres charred and many homes razed. Recent weather changes overnight have helped firefighters battle the blazes, but residents are hesitant to get back into some areas to assess the damage. For one family, who has stocked thousands of dollars of food and dry goods for the concurrent pandemic, that's all gone. Officials say they won't know the total extent of the damage until they get to the heaviest burned out areas for a more complete search.

-This past weekend, an estimated 30,000 people marched through the streets of the Belarussian capital Minsk in opposition of their newly elected leader Alexander Lukashenko. They are calling for him to resign, amidst numerous allegations of voter fraud. Mr. Lukashenko is insisting that he won 80% of the vote in free and fair elections. Police have reported to have detained 700 people.

-Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg has died of complications due to cancer. She was 87 and surrounded by her family in her Washington D.C. home. She is best remembered for her 27 years of service to the Supreme Court as one of its liberal justices, where she was a bastion of advocacy for the rights of the marginalized. This weekend saw remembrance vigils held outside the Supreme Court in honor of the woman whose notoriety was only matched by her passion and grace. In her home state of New York, flags will be flown at half-mast until she is interred.

-In sports, football has started its regular season, with the stadium looking and sounding a little different this year due to an executive decision by the NFL that there will be no spectators at any of the games. This weekend the Philadelphia Eagles will take on the team with no name, The

Washington Football Team. Head coach Ron Rivera of the Football Team says that they're looking to rebrand themselves by their wins rather than their name, and are looking to start this season strong. The Eagles host them at the Linc this Sunday at 2:00 PM.

[est 4:00]

The Introduction – Heroism

[Intro Song Choices: In Pursuit of Happiness

Heavy is the soul of the hero. They are called to a higher purpose, and yet they must retain their humanity or run the risk of destruction by pride. Pride is the Icarus to the Sun of our desires. To start with this journey into healthcare, I seek to define the word hero. And in that definition I seek the clarity of the picture I paint of the heroes of healthcare – the people whose stories I depict on tonight’s show. There were so many stories to choose from, and so many of them are still waiting to be told. As you may already know, our style here is classic, and I still take your calls and read your letters. You wrote to me with such verve when I asked you to share your stories of heroism, and the challenges that accompany that title. The struggle for me is not only in the choosing, but in the telling. When we tell the stories of others, we risk clouding their lens with our own perspective sometimes. I will tell these stories with fidelity and courage.

The people you will hear about tonight are multi-faceted, like we all are. The burden of heroism though lies with them alone, or does it? You will hear of the Frontline worker, who worked tirelessly at one of the epicenters of the pandemic. The politician, who made difficult decisions for their small town, placing safety over the economy and vice versa. The current crisis brought another underlying crisis to a head, causing America to reckon with its racist praxes. The heroes who have emerged will get their day in that segment. There are the everyday heroes who have kept the privileged safe while risking their own lives. And finally, we will pay tribute to an artist who was the truest, real-life, larger-than-life hero for many.

And all this stems from my own curiosity of the sacrifice and the presence in communities and the real sense of power and responsibility that comes with being a hero. Will I find the answer I am looking for? Will you? Let’s turn now to our Frontline worker, the vanguard, the hero who didn’t ask for that moniker – in the Doctor’s own words – coming up after this message from our sponsor.

[Advert]
[est. 2:30]

Hero of Healthcare I – The Frontline Worker **[Intro song: HeartBeats]**

Our first segment comes with this word of caution – we bring up the topic of suicide as a point of discussion and awareness. If you find this segment uncomfortable or unbearable, you are welcome to skip to the next one, which begins at [time]. And if you ever find yourself in trouble, please reach out for help.

Our first story today comes from the Epicenter. Which epicenter you may ask? I can take you there the only way I know how – imaginatively, and by the time our story’s music is through, you may have a clue. She wrote to us earlier this year, and we have kept in touch since; so this is a snapshot in time. As always, the names are changed to protect our heroes’ civilian identities.

She was assigned one mask for the week, with the possibility of extending it to one month if the State’s shipment deal fell through. She was the frontline of the frontline, Pulmonary Critical Care. Shifts were extended – who knows who made that decision to make her and the team more tired and less sure in their judgements, but few had memory of the before times, when even exhaustion was something she could feel. Now, there was this sense of numbness when the shift was over. It might have been the tightness of the face shield, and the now-reusable, N-95 she was assigned in a brown paper bag with her name on it – Dr. C. I think the real tension has been playing out in public, because we aren’t entirely sure of how much PPE is enough to be protected. March is now April and the consensus was still out for some time. Should my neck be exposed? Should my hair? Are gowns effective? Should I burn my scrubs after each shift?

New York City is often described as the cultural melting pot in the world. If that is true of New York City, then the Borough of Queens would be the sweet spot in the middle of the pot where the melting converges. Unfortunately, it’s also the epicenter of the epicenter.

It started with mild coughers at first.

Mildly ill COVID patients lying in rows. Will they be transferred to the inpatient service by the end of my 13-hour shift? Will they be transferred at all? I shudder to think of that alternative. Oxygen assistance. The air of the hospital itself is relieved of its duties, and saved for the patients who are elsewhere in the hospital. The critically ill are on ventilators, intubated. I have intubated 3 of them myself in the last 2 hours. Queens has 1.5 beds per 1000 people, compared to 5.3 in Manhattan. We filled up quickly, with even longer wait times than usual.

I read an article that called doctors and nurses the superheroes of our age, as we risk our lives to save others. I acknowledge that, and my pushback to is that’s all we have been doing since time immemorial. It’s only more noticeable now because in the age of stories, there must be heroes and villains so society can make sense of it all. In this cancel culture, we have to cancel the virus. All this makes me wonder –if we are the heroes, is our healthcare system the villain? How is the richest healthcare system in the world managing this so poorly? And what happens when we get sick? The other Crit Care Fellow is on a ventilator on the MICU floor. I don’t know if he’ll make it. It will be the second death if... I don’t want to think about it. The first physician who died wasn’t due to COVID, but to... they did... they completed suicide. She was so strong, the strongest among us. And yet, I don’t know what happened. It was too overwhelming for all of us. I don’t feel that way. I just feel so tired, and a bit numb. Here at the hospital, she was given a small memorial where no more than 4 people were able to attend, socially-distanced. How is

that a hero's send-off? I've been asked to write my will. I am 32; how sobering is that? I have never thought of myself as invulnerable, not consciously anyway. But no one is immune. My message to your listeners is to stay home if you can and wear a mask.

I'm not the hero here, at least not in the way I want to be. I just want my bed and for someone to get me fresh PPE. The real heroes are my patients, mostly immigrants, working the jobs that are keeping the country from falling apart right now. Working from home means nothing to a cab driver, or subway train operator, or the stocker at the grocery store. I want to see them as they were, not as they are. I see no one in the streets when I walk home. I'm only here until the end of my Fellowship, and this was not the way I envisioned winding down on my learning. I bought a house in Arizona. I'm moving there this summer. Fingers crossed this pandemic doesn't follow me.

For our listeners out there - What do you think it means to be a hero in these times? Is there a hero you would like to recognize? In what way are you a hero? Drop me a line at 215-839-6542. You might hear your voice on the air. We'll be right back after a short break.

[Advert] – If you, or someone you know is thinking about suicide, The National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255 provides free and confidential support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. That's 1-800-273-TALK. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a national network of local crisis centers that provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. They are committed to improving crisis services and advancing suicide prevention by empowering individuals, advancing professional best practices and building awareness, especially now in the time of physical and social distancing. 1-800-273-TALK.

[est 5:00]

Hero of Healthcare II – Political Calculus

Politics, at its heart, is the will of the people. Democracies thrive on the rule of the majority, with the opportunity for every citizen to express their opinion. Our next hero of healthcare is the politician, and while it may seem odd at first to think of healthcare and politics as this interconnected sphere, the relationship is evident on the level of policy. And it is indeed, policy, or the lack of a cohesive, national framework, that appears to have a deleterious response to the pandemic.

While no national policy for addressing COVID-19 currently exists, local municipalities have responded out of necessity. They have been doing their own level of triage, and assessing the health of their communities. Our second story is a tale of two pandemics. We have two mayors who wrote in with different perspectives on their handling of the issue of balancing their economy and their citizens' health in a delicate dance.

We visit a small college town in Upstate New York, whose mayor has a deep understanding of that connectedness.

“If students don't come back in the fall, we're in real cataclysmic trouble.” This was his admonition, his assessment after months of data and stringent measures, in a city whose \$3M budget deficit was closed under his tenure, while lowering taxes. His re-election campaign saw him winning 89% of the vote of his community, and his work has been tireless in pursuit of the goal of service to the people of Utica. To be voted in with such a swath of support is one thing, but the real work begins when elected officials have to answer to the people for the promises they make on a campaign. Real leadership is action, and part of that action is in decision-making.

The pandemic brought some tough decision making to this town of barely 30,000 inhabitants, like many small towns across the country. How do we progress? Which way is the right way? I seek to understand this myself – the political argument of economy vs. health outcomes makes similar claims. Livelihood, the ability to make one's living, or the life and health necessary to do so. This mayor chose the latter, and the county thrived for it, with 0 resident deaths, 2 non-resident deaths and 327 positive confirmed cases as of Labor Day weekend. How though will he square with the looming budget shortfall, \$15M by his own estimation? And what will happen if the students of this college town do not return? These are real worries that weigh heavily on our hero.

In the predominantly Republican town of Ashdown a few hundred miles West and South, the priorities are different. There, the local municipality decided that it would be better to place equal value to their livelihood and their lives. Things run as close to normal as we can reason, and our response has been more targeted. There was only one infection in the last few weeks, and that person was quickly identified, isolated and recovered, a success story. The younger people in the town pump gas for the elderly to reduce contact. I work within the Department Store, and we made a tough decision to cut the staff in half for safety. It makes the work a little more challenging, but we didn't fire anybody. It's a rural, close-knit society, with the ear of their elected official who also made an equally tough decision to keep the town open. There was too much at stake in straining our economic growth.

Is it a failing of a politician if he acts on the authority of his constituents? Even if it's an action that you, as an outsider of that municipality might not agree with, if it's aligned with the will of the majority in my town, doesn't that mean democracy is still working? My constituents will probably go for the Republican candidate again as a nation but sometimes I think that national

conversation is so divided in what folks believe is “right”, while for me as a local politician I have to handle the day to day of doing what is right for the people I serve. Anyway, thanks for hearing me out.

We’ll return after a word from our sponsor. You’re listening to Healthcare Heroes.

[Advert]

[est 5:00]

Hero of Healthcare III – Viral Load [Dark Moment]

Trayvon Martin
Tamir Rice
Michael Brown
Eric Garner
Darrien Hunt
Philando Castile
Rayshard Brooks
Dominique Rem'mie Fells
Troy Hodge
Nina Pop
Tony McDade
William Green
Dion Johnson
Riah Milton
Ahmaud Arbery
George Floyd
Oluwatoyin Salau (Oh lu wa toe yin Sah low)
Breonna Taylor

The pandemic has brought to the fore another chronic virus of society. For decades, there was only one, a national underlying condition that came to the surface in the form of micro aggressions, of denials of experience. For this segment, I took to the streets in the midst of the protests in Philadelphia, where healthcare workers took a knee in front of Hahnemann Hospital. Doctors, Nurses, Medical Assistants, Medical Students, all came together, spaced 6 feet apart, and knelt in silence for 8 minutes and 45 seconds. Many brought pillows to ease their knees, and [I wondered briefly if the victim's neck was as soft as the officer knelt on it]. The protesters stretched around 2 sides of Hahnemann Hospital, all of the Broad Street and the Vine Street sides had spaces occupied.

Then came the march. One of the lead organizers of the protest made their argument against "All Lives Matter", claiming it was a form of denial.

I thought of all the lives that were claimed before their time, and the movement that now follows. They are heroes because they can be considered martyrs. If I read all of the names within the last decade, that could have been the entirety of the segment. And like martyrs their name has become the foci for the rallies and cries for justice. Danielle Butler writes in her piece published in the Hood Communist titled 'On Breonna, Oluwatoyin, & Posthumous Iconography of Murdered Black People', "In death; Breonna and Toyin are queens, they are angels, they are saints, they are cover girls and muses, they are regal and chic and beautiful, they are merchandise, they are screensavers, they are profitable. Their stylized images afford them a bizarre posthumous social capital they were denied while they were alive. They are everything, but done justice." For the protesters, for all who march for justice, one person alone is reason enough to march. What about dozens? Hundreds? The protesters that day marched for the names

they knew and the names that will forever be lost to history because their story was not made public.

What does it mean to be a Black healthcare worker? What does it mean to be a Black medical student? Black Americans have been wearing masks for centuries. They have been wearing the masks of pleasant demeanor in meetings. They have worn masks on both the giving and receiving end of healthcare in front of their non-Black peers. Their work and their burden as a hero are compounded.

We'll be right back after this.

[Advert]

[est 4:00]

Hero of Healthcare IV - The Every Day Heroes

When you think of the heroes of Healthcare, your mind's eye may conjure the most identifiable face of a doctor or a nurse, or any other significant member of the medical workforce for example.

When I think of workers considered essential, I think of the workers who get us to the places we need to go. Transit Workers, Facilities and Waste Management, Delivery and Hospitality – theirs is a heroism borne in silence, often like sidekicks to the main attraction. They didn't choose their livelihood because of the inherent risk of pandemic exposure, and yet they choose to stay. The pandemic has helped to redefine the service industry, in many ways, like hazard pay and increased scrutiny of factory practices. It was home schooling that brought the epiphany for many parents of what teachers do, compared to what they make. But has it changed the fears, and if so, in what way? What are those fears service workers currently experience?

The stress of the unseen enemy – that is the toll on our essential workers. Back in March and April, when the rush for goods determined essential led to empty shelves, essential workers were working even longer hours in re-stocking and fulfilling the orders of the privileged. We sat at home fuming that we could not go out, when in those early months going out could have indeed been a death sentence for the immunocompromised. For some, like Ms. B. who disclosed she has an autoimmune disease, she wants the work. I asked for a happy memory and she wrote to me, saying that “I love that the route was always the same. One time, there was a storm coming, and I didn't have a lot of time, but I made sure that the last child was in their home before I took shelter. They called me on the radio, Ms. B, Ms. B you have to seek shelter now, get to the nearest shelter-in-place. And I did. I want to get back on that bus every day,” she continued, “but there's no point in rushing things if it's going to kill a bunch of people”. And for school bus drivers like Ms. B., who worry equally if not more so than the teachers, which is the worse fate? To risk contracting the virus from an asymptomatic student, or to not have a job at all?

What would contracting the virus mean for their livelihood, for their life? Cities like New Haven have ensured that school bus drivers were paid through the Spring through an Executive Order. I'm curious to know now what the Fall will bring for these workers; it is no longer an expectant experience of spending time with children, an experience many enjoy and which drives their desire to be involved in their lives in this way. Now there's a creeping sense of dread, feelings of anxiety, and for many, even of hopelessness in returning to the way things were. That may never be the case now.

I hope too that these times redefine the meaning of essential. I thought the 7 PM clamor was such a nice touch. But I made a note – it was June 16 to be exact – when I could no longer hear the noise at night. It was also the weekend that there was some slight relaxing of restrictions, and people could start dining outdoors. It was no mere coincidence. With lives grasping for some semblance of the old normal, the essential workers are falling from their pedestals. And yet, I won't forget. Your lives are far from ordinary.

We're going to take a short break, but before we go here's what some of our listeners had to say about heroism.

[Include as many vm as you see fit, but not filler vm please. No advert]

[est 4:00]

Hero of Healthcare V – The Artist
An Ode to A Hero for All Time
Opening Song: Villain versus Young Hero

[Recording of him speaking at Howard commencement; 15:15 – 16:21]

King T’Challa, whose civilian alias is Chadwick Boseman, died on August 28th of this year, from complications of late stage colon cancer. He was 43, and in his short life, he played many roles for which he will be remembered.

The one in particular that I wanted to talk about today was his role as the Black Panther. We’ve spoken of the hero in many forms on the show today, but what about the superhero? I will wait for you to conjure up the image of Black Panther in your mind. Was it his own personal regality that made his performance as King so compelling? He is the ultimate measure of the superhero trope in movies and the comic series from which the movie was made. The superhero’s struggle is humanity’s struggle, magnified. These are questions I cannot ask him now, but I wondered how he bore his both his illness and the dedication to his craft both with such grace and poise.

I usually dress up for the theatre or the opera, and a trip to the movie theatre is anything goes. But for this movie, like many other movie-goers, I was very intentional about what I wanted to wear. I remember wearing a suit, with a black long-sleeved t-shirt that bore an African print down the front and on the cuffs. This movie was special. We were going to meet a comic book King brought to the major screen. And it is an identity with which I will always associate the real-life superhero that was Chadwick Boseman.

Anyone can be a hero. Wasn’t it Spider-Man that said that “anyone can wear the mask”? Well, anyone can also take that mask off, and reveal their true self. That in many ways is even more heroic. The format for this show is different partly because of this story. Usually, in talk radio it’s all about the conversations between the source and the interviewer; as for their personal opinions on air, never the two shall meet for the most part. But how often do you hear of their feelings? That sense of completeness gets lost a bit in the objectivity of news. But this is art, and art is always told from the vantage point of opinion.

Colorectal cancer is the fourth most common cancer in the United States and the second leading cause of cancer death. Screening for colorectal cancer reduces mortality. The USPSTF recommends an initial screening at age 50 in adults who are at average risk for colorectal cancer. Patients with first-degree relatives who have had colorectal cancer should begin screening earlier. It is preventable, treatable and beatable, but you must catch it in time.

The more I think about it, Boseman might even be a hero in death, because the way he died will mean something for future generations of Black men, who will hopefully take this as a lesson to be learned, the king sharing his wisdom even in parting. Both this great loss and the pandemic may be the drive now for more Black men to take their physical and mental health into their own hands even more. We are heroes too, Black men. I see you. I hope you feel seen. And to borrow from King T’Challah, let us not swallow up this moment of our life whole, but elevate our consciousness that we are our brother’s keeper.

[est 5:00]

Outro

[Upperground Hero]

Thank you for tuning in to our show today – this is Healthcare Heroes. Telling the stories of the heroes and superheroes who walk among us, in a way that gives them honor, has been a challenge and a pleasure. Heroes real and imaginary help to shape our lives and in many ways our life choices.

To end our piece today, I wanted to take a short quote from Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: The hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow[s]." And to all of you who tuned in today, I hope I have bestowed the boon of meaningful stories.

[Outro music]

Tonight's show has been produced, edited, sound mixed, directed and voiced by Marc Hem Lee. Special thanks to Laura Mullin and Julia Levy who voiced the two advertisements. The music and Foley were sourced from Epidemic Sound – a fitting name, given the times we live in. This show has been provided free of charge. Please consider contributing to the following cause by using the Pass-The-Hat option that accompanies the online billing for Healthcare Heroes. 100% of the proceeds will be given to the Okra Project, an organization dedicated to improving the lives of Black Trans people by providing culturally specific meals, therapy and resources. Their lives alone are a daily act of heroism. That's all for our show today. Thank you for listening – this is Healthcare Heroes.

End of Transcript

[2:00]