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**PODCAST**

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## **African Americans, allies confront racism, health disparities**

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**Ken:** As police brutality against African-Americans airs on videos across the globe, as protesters continue to take the streets across the US, and as African-Americans continue to die of COVID-19 in disproportionate numbers, our country is at a tipping point. Today on See You on the Air we discuss this important subject and the University of Colorado's role in contributing to the solution with Theodosia Cook. Theodosia is CU's new chief diversity officer. Thank you for joining us today.

**Theodosia:** Thank you for having me, Ken.

**Ken:** You started your job just over a month ago, and I can't imagine a stranger time to start a job. First, COVID-19 that didn't allow you to come into an office and join colleagues,

but then George Floyd's death. What's it been like for you joining CU at such a strange time?

Theodosia: I consider myself extremely privileged at this time to be a black person in an executive position who can work from home, keep my daughter at home as my partner and I balance our work, and keep food on our table when there are so many in our community do not have this privilege. And I remember as a child growing up seeing my parents cry as they dealt with financial hardships and the lasting impact that that has had on my life. My heart first and foremost goes out to our community members who are struggling at this time. Starting at CU, knowing that our community has been impacted has put a fire in me to ensure that I meet their needs. It exemplifies why diversity equity inclusion work is and always has been important to focus on.

I've seen CU really put a lot of energy behind tackling these issues, and I'm happy to be working at an institution that acknowledges the importance of a chief diversity officer by ensuring that I'm at the executive level to provide the wealth of information needed to consider making decisions that will impact our community. So thinking through all that we are going through as a community, although I am really being pushed into the fire at this time, I am really feeling privileged as well. And so struggling with that privilege and balancing the needs of our community.

Ken: Each of CU's four campuses has a chief diversity officer and pretty robust diversity operations, but you're the first chief diversity officer for the CU system. So what will your job do?

Theodosia: Yeah, there are currently 16 standards from the [National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education](#) that can truly sum up the role of a chief diversity officer. And I encourage all of you who are listening to go to that site, the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Ed, and really review that. One of the standards that I think really sums up the role of a CDO well, but is not inclusive of all the responsibilities of my work, from NADOHE, states, "Chief diversity officers work with senior campus administrators and, when appropriate, governing bodies like our region to revise or remove the embedded institutional policies, procedures, and norms that create differential structural barriers to the access and success of students, faculty, and staff who belong to marginalized and oppressed groups." That is the work that I hope to embody in this role. And I hope to really be looking at all the ways that we can create a sense of belonging for all of our constituents at CU.

Ken: We'll talk a little more about the George Floyd murder and COVID-19, but other than those, what are some of the issues that you're anticipating working on in the coming year?

Theodosia: So I think you hit on one, really broadly it's race in America is going to be a huge one. As we can see right now at the national level, people are advocating for equity for black people, which requires us to change some policies, practices, and norms to provide the black community what they need and what they've been promised, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Ken: We saw that the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and countless others before them have heightened awareness of the pervasive inequity in the treatment of black Americans. Are these recent incidents more prevalent than before? Are we just seeing more of them on our video screens than before?

Theodosia: You know, Ken, I think a lot of people in our community are currently asking this question. In the last decade our society has become more aware of the murders of black lives in this country, but the disheartening truth is we still aren't doing justice to teaching about black lives being taken for granted in this country or being valued as chattel instead of humans. Last fall my husband and I had the opportunity to visit the [Equal Justice Initiative national memorial](#) for peace and justice. This memorial includes a square with 800 six-foot monuments to symbolize the thousands of racial terror lynching victims in the United States and the counties and states where this terrorism took place. EJI has documented more than 4,400 lynchings of black people in the US from 1877 to 1950.

And when we look at just last year, we've seen about 1,000 people killed by the police, according to Mapping Police Violence, a research group. And out of that 1,000, 24% of those killed were black people while they only make up about 13% of the population. We've had an issue in the past around black lives being taken [inaudible 00:06:57], and we have it currently now. And so to answer your question, it's just more visible for some of us to see.

Ken: Numbers are horrifying. Do you feel like people in general are horrified by them?

Theodosia: I think people don't know. I'm not sure we're sharing these numbers as much as we should. These numbers are not embedded into our K through 12 curriculum or even required at the higher education level. And so the more we can get these numbers out, the more we can get the facts and data out, I think the more our country will hopefully empathize and make changes.

Ken: As of late May it's reported nearly 23% of COVID-19 deaths in the US were African-Americans, even though they only make up 13% of the US population. Why do you think that is and what can be done about it?

Theodosia: This is where I'm going to share with you all to really look at the recent [April 2020 McKinsey Report](#) on black lives during COVID-19. The report does a great job of showing that black Americans, although, yes, there are worse health outcomes, it is not just because they are black. It's because of the systemic issues surrounding under resourced communities, poor environments for investment, lower rates of career advancement, and over-representation in lower wage jobs that really have impacted this community disproportionately. And so when we think about that, 39% of jobs held by black workers, about seven million, are vulnerable to reductions in hours of pay, temporary furloughs, or permanent layoff. And looking at the prison population that has also been impacted, 33% of those in prison are black, but like you said, only 13% of the US population is. I, as a child, although I was born in South America, I grew up part of my life in Brooklyn and Queens.

And the epidemic there is so harsh towards black people, black immigrants, in New York. And that has a lot to do with the lack of health care that's accessible towards them, the food deserts that exist that don't allow for people to eat healthy foods, which then impacts their diet, which then creates these underlying health conditions. If we really date this back, I would be wrong not to state that my other peers in diversity and inclusion would say this is a root cause of the reality of, when black people in America were freed from slavery, although they were promised land and economic opportunity, it was never given to them. And it has continued to place black Americans at a disproportionate advantage when it comes to health, education, and social mobility in this country.

Ken: You mentioned you're an immigrant, as am I. Do you think that being an immigrant and a woman of color gives you an additional perspective on some of the issues we're talking about?

Theodosia: Absolutely. You can definitely read the research on the things that immigrants must navigate to become a citizen of this country, as well as the nuances that we encounter, whether we have an accent or not. And so I think it does allow me to empathize even more with our constituents who are going through the immigration process in our country, and it adds another voice, lived experience to the leadership table.

Ken: Mahatma Gandhi famously said, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." And I know that African-American and many other underrepresented communities have lots of allies and advocates who just don't know where to start with helping with that change. Can you offer some suggestions?

Theodosia: Absolutely. I would say do like Gandhi did. And what I mean is, Gandhi did a lot of good words, but good doesn't equate to being an ally. We must check our thoughts regarding black people. In 1903, when Gandhi was in South Africa, he wrote that white people should be the predominant race. He also said that black people are troublesome, very dirty, and live like animals. But by the end of his life he began to highlight the inequities between different races. And I would hope that our allies could take the journey that Gandhi did to reflect on their thoughts and opinions, and then shift their action to do good work for everyone, including those most impacted by racism.

Ken: Do you think the kind of protests that we're seeing now bring about the kind of change that we seek and that we need?

Theodosia: Absolutely. From our history of the Boston tea party and the way protests have created and allowed us to create this democracy, the United States of America that we have currently, to the protests we saw during the civil rights movement that allowed civil rights law to come into place, protests in our country have always brought about change, and change in creating a more inclusive environment for all of our country and our country people. And so yes, I do think this will bring about change. We are already seeing that right now.

Ken: Martin Luther King, Jr. is renowned for his peaceful approach to protests, but his thoughts evolved at the end of his life. How so?

Theodosia: Yeah. So I cite this in my statement recently around George Floyd's death. And Martin Luther King's thoughts at the end of his life was very clear. He was concerned that he brought his people, and when I say his people, I mean the African American, the black community in America, into a burning house. And that burning house symbolized America. And the reason why he said that was because he was concerned that this home wouldn't be a home to them. And similar to the bombings that he encountered in his own home with his family, he was concerned that black people would never truly be accepted even by those who were moderate, because it would require us to really evaluate the privileges we have and the things we own and really identify a way to redistribute the privilege and the wealth in this country to really create an equitable environment for those who were enslaved for hundreds of years in this country.

Ken: You wrote a powerful and passionate essay in CU Connections recently reflecting on race in our time, and we'll link to that in our show notes. But in it you wrote, "We must challenge ourselves to learn more and place value on the lived experience of communities of color and not rely solely on our limited experience and opinions." So where do we start?

Theodosia: I will start with what John Jemmy, an abolitionist as well as an educator, shared with us years, years ago. We start with ourselves, we start with reflective thinking. We start with thinking about really noticing the thoughts we have about different populations in our country and evaluate, where do those thoughts come from? We've heard so much in regards to what news is credible. We need to really evaluate what thoughts are credible that we have. If we do that, that will be the strongest tool that we have to fighting racism in this country, really reflecting on where our thoughts come from. Because those thoughts manifest into actions, whether you're a leader in your community, a leader for an organization you work for, or just a leader in your home, shaping the minds of those that are around you. It is absolutely important that we critique what we think with data and with facts. And so I think that is the most powerful tool at this time, because then we will see actions that come about that are truly indicative of what we need.

Ken: These are times of heightened sensitivities, which is certainly part of the point, but do you see mistakes that well-meaning people make when confronting racism? And if so, how do they avoid them?

Theodosia: Yes. For all my well-meaning people out there, one, I want to thank you for caring about this issue. I encourage you to use [our library resources](#) or the public library resources to first read up. After you've done your reflective thinking that I mentioned before, read. Read up on what our history states around racism in our country. All of those secrets that we think doesn't exist, it exists in a book. And if I can encourage us, especially those of us who work in this higher education landscape, to read, it will definitely enlighten us around how we can better really show up for people as allies or show up in understanding our own history. And I do not blame our constituents for not knowing the history. I blame our systems, especially our K through 12 system, that does not do justice to teaching our history.

I was an eighth grade teacher for several years, and I had an entire term that I taught on the Holocaust for several months. I never did that with the genocide of indigenous

people in this country or with slavery in this country. And those two things happened on our land. And if we cannot highlight those in our history, then we really are prone to repeating the past instead of moving forward. And so please read up on what we have already overcome and the things that are needed to make our country more equitable.

Ken: Universities like CU have a special obligation to be places where ideas are talked about and where issues like equality are furthered. How can we do that here at CU and beyond?

Theodosia: Yeah. So the first thing I would say is, let's look at where we put value to things, whether that's looking at where we spend most of our time or most of our money. So identify how we can really use our resources that we have to build a nation that's really fighting for equality. And so with looking at that, CU has already made the wonderful decision of hiring me. I can say I've created this role.

Ken: [crosstalk 00:18:07]. They are so smart.

Theodosia: Right, right. But there's way more to be done. I cannot do it all alone. That means we need to come together as a community, regardless of what campus we are on, and strategically collaborate with one another to make this country better and to make CU better. And so we need to look at how we're recruiting and retaining underrepresented minorities specifically and actually create programs to support retention of faculty, staff, and students. We need to look at what we're teaching, how we're teaching it, and ensuring that our students have access to the education that will make them transformative leaders as they go out and move forward in their lives. And most importantly, we need to continue having conversations like this and bringing it to a national level, to let people know that we are thinking about this and we are moving forward with tangible actions that will hopefully allow us to see a change.

Ken: June is pride month, and CU has been a sponsor of Denver's Pride Fest event for a number of years now. And of course this month it'll be a virtual event. And I know you're involved in a lot of the planning, so how does CU plan to celebrate?

Theodosia: So I encourage you all to go to [cu.edu/pride](https://cu.edu/pride). We have an amazing site that we've worked on with our faculty to really highlight what you can do. The first thing you can do is, if you're in a space where you feel safe, you can decorate that space and really use it as a moment to celebrate your pride whether you identify as a part of the LGBTQ community or you're a supportive ally that would like to highlight the work that has been done to really create a space for this community to thrive. You can also read. We have some books that we will put up on the site that you can go to and read and learn about not just the successes of the history in getting us to this point where we can openly celebrate pride, but also the moments that have been the hardest for the LGBTQ community. You can also engage in the 5k. You can walk it, run it, whatever pace would best suit your need. But I encourage you to join us as we commit to that 5k with Denver Pride.

Ken: You can also get these colorful and creative Zoom backgrounds like you and I have right now.

Theodosia: Yes.

Ken: ... Created for that.

Theodosia: Yes, you can. Yes, you can.

Ken: How can CU's faculty and staff and students best support efforts toward equality and inclusion?

Theodosia: Very good question, Ken. I would say that our faculty, staff, and students can first start with their own constituent groups. Our faculty, we need to do work within that faculty circle, staff similarly. I think we owe it to our students as leaders in their space, in higher education, to show up and hear them as well as act on their recommendations. So many movements in our country dating back hundreds of years have been started by young people. Just because they are young does not mean they don't know the future that they want for them. I think we need to hear them and we need to support them in building a future that they will live in that we may not be able to live in, because we would have passed, would have passed on at the time.

And so I think listening to our students will help us better support the effort, as well as providing guidance to them. As we know the history that has come, a lot of us were alive during the civil rights movement, a lot of us have seen different movements happen. And I think we can add voice to what we saw happen before and provide insight into strategies that can help our community move forward.

Ken: I know when many people start a new job they do so with a mixture of hope and ambition and excitement. As you start your new job, what's your best hope for the CU community?

Theodosia: Collaboration. Strong, authentic, genuine collaboration is my hope for the CU community. We are in a country that is entirely too divided. Divided by politics, divided by gossip, divided by inaccurate information. What we need as a community is to come together and collaborate with the facts and data at hand so that we can truly work to create opportunities and to create impact that will have a lasting effect on everyone in our community.

Ken: Well, Theodosia Cook, the University of Colorado's relatively new chief diversity officer, we appreciate you joining us today on CU on the air and sharing your insight. And we wish you all the best in your new position.

Theodosia: Thank you, Ken. I appreciate it.