



Special Podcast with Charmaine Lawson.mp3

Audrena Redmond: Hello and welcome to Radio Free CSU, the official podcast of the California Faculty Association. My name is Audrena Redmond and I'm your host for this 10-part series, "Stronger Together," here on Radio Free CSU. This series is inspired by the intentional anti-racism and social justice transformation CFA began in late 2016. In each episode, will discuss one of our 10 guiding principles with a CFA leader activist. Our hope is that you too will be inspired to engage in anti-racism and social justice work and join us again for more conversations about why an anti-racism social justice transformation is necessary. However we have something special for you today.

Audrena Redmond: We're joined by Charmaine Lawson, the mother of David Josiah Lawson who was a student at Humboldt State University until the fateful morning of April 15th 2017.

Audrena Redmond: Charmaine thank you for joining us today.

Charmaine Lawson: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Audrena Redmond: Absolutely.

Audrena Redmond: So let's jump right in. We we've heard the name David Josiah Lawson. Maybe some of us have even heard a little bit of the story, but tell us first: Who was your son? Who was he? What were his dreams? What were his aspirations?

Charmaine Lawson: So many things. DJ was my son. He was an Afro-Jamaican young man with a bright future a beautiful smile. A smile that could lift up the world. He was fearless. He was compassionate. He was loved. And he had his sight on higher education. And that was his dreams. That was his dreams. DJ wanted to be a helper. He wanted to head off to college come back and help his community. And he said what better way to do that than criminal justice. And that was his major; was majoring in criminal justice. He wanted to speak for those that were unable to speak. The voiceless. And that's what he was doing. That is what he was doing. Back in June of 2015 he was a recipient of a speech, of a scholarship excuse me. And his speech was a man of integrity. And he talked about becoming a lawyer and a politician. He wanted to change the world.

Charmaine Lawson: That was my son. That was my son.

Audrena Redmond: Why did he pick Humboldt State?

Charmaine Lawson: So he called me and he said "Mom there is a recruitment, a college recruitment going on." Alright I'm there. I am a supportive mom, I am involved in everything that my children are doing. I was there in the gym talking to all of the recruiters. DJ was on the football field because he's a football player. And as he walked in I was standing at a Humboldt State recruitment desk. He came over the recruiter was telling him all about Humboldt, there are

redwoods, the outdoors, just a beautiful place to be. DJ loved to be outdoors. He loved the outdoors. He was a skater, outdoors. He skied, outdoors. He surfed, outdoors.

Charmaine Lawson: So when he heard all of the activities and everything that you could do in Humboldt, allowing him to be himself in the outdoors, it was "Hey this is where I'm going to school!".

Audrena Redmond: It was a sell.

Charmaine Lawson: Yes it was a sell. That's why he chose it.

Audrena Redmond: Did he know about... Did he know anything about the community of Arcata with the community of Humboldt State before he went there and had he heard anything about hostility toward people of color or from the community at all?

Charmaine Lawson: He hadn't. I hadn't. As his mom, once DJ got accepted, I went online and I checked out the, you know, archive what's going on in Humboldt, where am I sending my son and \ all I saw was positive vibration. There was nothing of concern. But I think I wouldn't have sent him sent my son to Humboldt if I knew that he was going into a climate of discrimination, microaggression. I would have not done it. But I believe DJ would have still went because he wanted to change the world, and he felt like he could of say "hey, we bleed the same blood right?" Let's sit down and talk. I think he would have done that.

Audrena Redmond: Did he at any point, did he ever say to you that he felt unsafe in Humboldt or Arcata?

Charmaine Lawson: DJ got a job at TJ Maxx, maybe about eight months into being at Humboldt. And I remember he called me one evening, probably around 9 and he said "Mom, stay on the phone with me." "Why what's going on." He's on the bus heading back home and he was just getting stares. He just didn't feel safe. He didn't feel safe and he didn't feel comfortable. And I stayed with him. We talked, (he) got off the bus, he skateboarded home and then he kind of told me what kind of, what he experienced on the bus. Which was he was called the N-word. "What are you doing here? You students keep coming here and think you're better than us." And this came from a person, a white person, on the bus on the bus.

Audrena Redmond: And was that the only incident that he had or that you know of?

Charmaine Lawson: That's the only thing he shared with me.

Charmaine Lawson: But then his roommate, Analisia, she shared with me after DJ's vicious murder, she said that again he was coming home coming home on the bus and he still felt that discrimination and whoever on the bus was, it came from a white person said something to him that was not OK. And DJ said something back, and the bus driver actually told DJ he had to get off the bus. And I just found this out. And I know he didn't want to worry me. I'm a single parent. He's my oldest son. And I know he's like "I'm not going to tell Mom certain things because if she does, she knows, she might say 'Come home.'" And he wanted to finish his education.

Audrena Redmond: Charmaine tell me about getting that early morning phone call from Humboldt.

Charmaine Lawson: I was asleep on the couch. It was about it was in the 3:00 hour and it was DJ's phone (number) that rang and I answered the phone "DJ what's wrong?" That's my first instinct. 3-

something in the morning. His friend Analisia was screaming and she said that Josiah has been stabbed. And I'm calming her down.

Charmaine Lawson: I'm thinking a stab? OK, stab he's taken to the hospital. He's OK. If she would have said, you know, gunshot. I mean I don't know how I would have reacted. But she said he has been stabbed and has been taken to the hospital. "We're here, they're not telling us anything. Call Mad River Union." By this time, I'm sitting up, walking up the stairs.

Charmaine Lawson: I said "OK give me the number." She gave me the number. I called and spoke to a nurse. I said "I am David Josiah Lawson's mom. I was told my son was taken to the hospital. His friends are there. Can you tell his girlfriend Renlyn, just I give you permission to speak with her." And the nurse said, "It's over 100 students here. I don't know who is who." And I said, "OK can you tell me how is my son?" "He's in surgery. They're working on him." OK. "Can you give me anything else?" "No. Once they're done the doctor will come and we'll give you an update" I said OK. I walked to Anthony's room, my other son, woke him up. I said get dressed. We're heading to Humboldt. I call my sister that lives in Philadelphia. Hey I'm going to pack a bag. This is what's going on. Getting Anthony and myself a ticket, leaving from Ontario, LAX, wherever the next ticket I need to be on the plane. Then my mom called me. She said that she received a call from the police in Humboldt, that DJ was taken to the hospital. So I said "Yep I just talked to the hospital. He's in surgery." I'm on the phone with my mom. My phone, my phone rang. I clicked over, it's a (area code) 707 number. It's the doctor. I merged the call in and he said, "Miss Lawson, we worked on him..."

Charmaine Lawson: "And we couldn't save him."

Charmaine Lawson: I think I had an out of body experience. And my son Anthony just fell to the ground. And I screamed. I don't think that scream. I don't think I'll ever scream that scream ever again.

Audrena Redmond: Do you have a sense, Charmaine, of what the HSU administration has done to aid students in their relationship with the city of Arcata?

Charmaine Lawson: I can't say because I haven't seen anything being done. My son is not the first student of color that was murdered at HSU. And fighting now for him, fighting with not necessarily fighting but, demanding that they make changes.

Charmaine Lawson: Going to the (CSU) Board of Trustees and trying to speak with the head of the institution, which is Dr. Rossbacher, I haven't seen any changes. I have not seen it. If it's been done I haven't seen it. And students of color have said to me Miss Charmaine, and lots of them refer to me as mom, nothing has changed. We can't even go and talk to our president and let her know that we don't feel safe.

Audrena Redmond: The university president?

Charmaine Lawson: The University president, which is Dr. Rossbacher. We cannot express to her our concerns for our safety when we walk off that campus.

Audrena Redmond: What about the conversations that were organized, what was it, the interracial conversations that were organized in the city of Arcata?

Charmaine Lawson: Well yes so we started a dialogue with students, the community, Karen Diemer the city manager, Sofia (Pereira) the mayor.

Audrena Redmond: Who's the we?

Charmaine Lawson: I started.

Audrena Redmond: Not the university?

Charmaine Lawson: Not the university. No, absolutely not. This was my starting. My cousin and I walked to get a petition signed throughout my neighborhood — Walmart, business places — to have the city of Arcata put my son's name on their agenda to discuss and update what's going on, so students know that, you know, this is being investigated and know that city council, we vote for you here as students, we need to make sure that you're working alongside with us.

Charmaine Lawson: Dr. Ross showed up once. She showed up once and the students were outraged and they were trying to express to her what they have experienced. We've invited her back on several occasions and she has referred us to Equity Arcata.

Audrena Redmond: So far as you know, students and others in the Humboldt campus community still feel unsafe?

Charmaine Lawson: Absolutely, absolutely. At the same, one of the dialogues that we had, which we had about six or seven sessions, a student showed up and said he was stabbed a few months after DJ. He was stabbed off campus. He called Arcata police department, APD, and he reported it and nothing. They didn't call him back to do a follow up. Nothing was done. Nothing was done about this. And here they are expressing their frustration to their president, Dr. Rossbacher, and no empathy, no compassion. What can we do.

Audrena Redmond: So what do you think needs to be done to improve campus safety? What have you heard from other students? Because your Justice4Josiah campaign has a lot of students, both present and past students, involved in it. What do you hear from them?

Charmaine Lawson: The Arcata Police Department is very racist. (Students) don't feel safe calling on them if they are out and the situation should arise. They call them but they're not coming, or if they do come, it's "What did you do to provoke the situation?" So blame is automatically pushed onto the students. I feel like we need more campus police because the campus police will be working with the university rather than... They need to work together — obviously Arcata PD and campus police — but I think the students will feel more safe knowing that campus police are there to protect them. I think they need to patrol more. I think monthly newsletters need to go out to students and their parents.

Charmaine Lawson: Parents have to get involved. Parents have to get involved and talk to their student "Hey I received this in the mail. What's going on?" A buddy system. You know, that is how we are going to keep our children safe. We send them to college. We want them to come back.

Audrena Redmond: Basically you're saying be honest about the environment that these students are walking into. And once you're honest, then you can set up the systems to provide some sort of protections.

Charmaine Lawson: Absolutely. Absolutely. If you know what you're walking into, trust me, you're going to be careful. You're going to be careful.

Audrena Redmond: Yeah. So do you think that from the work that you all have been doing, the

Justice4Josiah campaign, y'all have done enormous work. I keep saying the campaign, the Justice4Josiah committee.

Charmaine Lawson: I have an amazing committee.

Audrena Redmond: You do, of 50 strong or so. Do you think that what happened to your son, and I'm going to say his name because I need to say his name — David Josiah Lawson — do you think that was something just confined just to Humboldt State? Or is that a problem in the Cal State (system) period?

Charmaine Lawson: Oh absolutely not just Humboldt State. Our committee, like you just mentioned, they're amazing, they're amazing. We have a media committee and they ran some stats to show all of the students of color within, you know, maybe 20 years from now probably two decades back, has... what incidents have taken place, and there's over five from Humboldt State University. Chico State, San Jose. So I'm seeing more of incidents regarding students of color in the Northern California rural areas.

Audrena Redmond: And it's African-American men.

Charmaine Lawson: Yes African-American men.

Audrena Redmond: Stabbed.

Charmaine Lawson: Stabbed.

Audrena Redmond: Burned.

Charmaine Lawson: Mhmm. Hate crimes.

Audrena Redmond: Hate crimes, yes.

Charmaine Lawson: Yes.

Audrena Redmond: Bicycle locks wrapped around their necks.

Charmaine Lawson: Yes.

Audrena Redmond: Words.

Charmaine Lawson: Yes words. Words, absolutely. My son was lying, dying on the ground and he was... "I hope it dies" as he lay there dying on the ground.

Audrena Redmond: Someone said that.

Charmaine Lawson: Someone said that.

Audrena Redmond: So we haven't asked you in this in this interview to tell us what happened that night. And I'm going to encourage those who are listening to read about it, because Charmaine repeats this story a lot, and it takes the heart out of you. And so I want to encourage, and we'll share a little later before we end where you can give more information. But just tell us Charmaine, what would justice look like to you? What does justice look like?

Charmaine Lawson: Wow. Justice for me.... Justice for me is that the state diligently executes their duty to identify my son's killer and put the person on trial. And that he or she is prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law by competent attorneys and the person responsible for his death be called to account for their actions. And be held responsible. Some of what I would see as justice in DJ's situation, some of what I have not seen as justice in DJ's situation has already been denied and cannot be recovered.

Charmaine Lawson: Arcata Police Department hasn't worked diligently in the past to identify and build a case against DJ's killer or killers. And the state's first attempt to prosecute that person was very poorly executed. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Martin Luther King.

Audrena Redmond: Yes. Given that over a third of Humboldt county's, I'm sorry Humboldt State University's students are Black and Brown and come from the L.A. metro area, I think that I agree, and many others may agree, that there is some attention that needs to be given if in fact there have been five murders in Humboldt, of Humboldt State students. That represents a problem.

Charmaine Lawson: Big problem, big problem. And this cannot continue. And the way that we're going to fix it is to talk about it.

Audrena Redmond: Yes.

Charmaine Lawson: We have to acknowledge that it is happening and we have to take a stand and we have to say enough is enough. We're not going to do that anymore.

Audrena Redmond: The light of day.

Charmaine Lawson: The light of day. Yes yes.

Audrena Redmond: So thank you Charmaine Lawson for sharing with us who your son, David Josiah Lawson, was as a person, a student at Humboldt State University, and in fact a student of the California State University system. You started a peaceful quote that I had to have on my notes. I'm going to read the whole thing. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." That's a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his letter from the Birmingham Jail dated April 16th 1963.

Audrena Redmond: David Josiah Lawson was a student of the CSU. Listeners who are faculty, students, staff, and members of the public are urged to get involved in the call for just resolution of this murder. The Justice4Josiah campaign organizes each month, around the 15th of the month, an action. We encourage you to get involved there. The 23 chapters of the California Faculty Association located on the Cal State campuses will be engaging in a week of action October 15 through October 19. For more information www.calfac.org. You can visit the Justice4JosiahLawson.com. You can hashtag #Justice4Josiah on Google. On Facebook you can go to Justice-for-David-Josiah-Lawson. And on Instagram, check out @diversityisnotinclusion. That's the end of our podcast for today. But do join us again for more conversations discussing the 10 Guiding Principles of CFA's Anti-Racism and Social Justice Transformation, and for special podcasts like this one. Remember, transformation is an action verb, meaning a thorough or dramatic change in form or appearance. For Radio Free CSU, I'm Audrena Redmond.