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[00:00:14] 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.

[00:00:38] Intro: Why do Black Americans experience poorer health outcomes and shorter life expectancies than other groups? That question is at the center of the documentary *The Skin You're In*, a film that weaves together history, public policy, and lived experience to examine how structural inequities shape health in America. This conversation was recorded live in December 2025 at the film's premiere in Montgomery, Alabama, a city at the crossroads of our nation's history and its ongoing journey towards equity and justice.

The premiere coincided with the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of Rosa Parks' arrest and the Montgomery bus boycott, highlighting critical moments in civil rights history that continue to shape today's conversations about justice. Following the screening of the film, Spectrum News NY1 anchor and criminal justice reporter, Dean Meminger, moderated a discussion with the filmmakers and the men whose stories shaped the documentary. Together, they reflect on how storytelling, community voice, and structural realities intersect to influence health outcomes. This is Part 1 of that conversation.

[00:01:54] Dean Meminger: *The Skin You're In*, you know what I'm saying? I can bring out my New York now because we had a great documentary. Thomas LaVeist, I love it. The voice, I mean, he did it. I mean, you narrated that. That was wonderful. All of the folks involved, start making your way up. You know who you are. Come on up, all of you. Come on. As they come up here, let me just ask you, and I guess I can call you Dean. You earned that. I was born with the name Dean. Dean LaVeist, how does it make you feel now that it has premiered in front of these folks? Take the far seat. I want you to take the far seat.

[00:02:36] Thomas LaVeist: The worst part was listening to my voice for an hour. That was pretty painful.

[00:02:42] D. Meminger: Okay, yes. Let's go. It was actually, I do this. It was wonderful. Wasn't the narration wonderful, folks? I thought it was on point. All right, so we know Thomas LaVeist. Let's go. I don't know if he's the favorite son or the better-looking brother, but his brother, Wil LaVeist, producer of the film. Give it up for him.

[00:03:12] Wil LaVeist: Thank you.

[00:03:16] D. Meminger: You saw this young man. He's a little older now. Sheron Bryant Jr. one of the subjects in the film. My dog.

[00:03:28] W. Laveist: My man.

[00:03:29] D. Meminger: The man behind the camera, Alejandro Orengo, director of photography. I told him I was going to walk a little bit. This is the man here. I saw you playing a lot of dice. Did you win the game or what?

[00:03:44] Teyvon Robertson: I don't remember.

[00:03:45] D. Meminger: You don't remember. Teyvon Robertson, aka Tey Mack" another Tey Mack" another young man spotlighted in this docuseries. "Tey Mack" I'm going to have some fun with you because you made that docuseries with your stories, man. You are a storyteller. Let's jump right into it. Folks, if you have questions, we have mics set up, so please jump in and help us out with some of the questions for the men up here. I know this is also streaming. A lot of people watching it at home or on your phones. You will have the opportunity to also send in questions, and we can ask the panel here about that. Wil, let's go to you. Producer, how long have you been working on this docuseries? Because some folks may think, "Oh, no, you work on it a few months and it's done."

[00:04:37] W. Laveist: How long? Way long.

[00:04:40] D. Meminger: I know.

[00:04:42] W. Laveist: No, actually, as Tom shared when the concept came together, I think in terms of years, we were talking about it, I think it's, what? 20--

[00:04:53] T. Laveist: The first computer file that I have for this project was-- I opened that file in 2011. [crosstalk] We didn't really start working on it until 2013.

[00:05:05] W. Laveist: One of the scenes there was at the Brownsville Library. I think that was the first thing that we came when we were filming it. Then we just started filming things along the way. I think the concept of actually, we're going to move forward with a documentary, came later.

[00:05:22] D. Meminger: Why, though? Why this documentary?

[00:05:26] W. Laveist: You want me to tell on him? You want me to tell on him?

[00:05:29] D. Meminger: Are you the tattletale brother? Tell it.

[00:05:33] W. Laveist: First of all I want to say that I'm extremely proud of this moment and proud of my brother because-

[applause]

[00:05:49] W. Laveist: -I know the pre-story of this journey, I know the journey, and I even know the pre-story that predates me about this journey. One of the things about it is that this is very personal in terms of connection for the family and connection for his life. I, as a former journalist, storyteller, I know a good story when I see one as you do. I'm trying to convince him that you're the protagonist of this story. Now, of course, he is

the trained academic and a humble man as he is, and all of you that work closely with him, you know that about him, he wanted to keep himself out of it and be objective.

I'm trying to explain, "You're the protagonist." We even had a good friend of mine, Booker T. Matson, who's a filmmaker. Very early in the stages, we sat down with him, and he was telling us that he agreed with me. "Yes, you're the protagonist, and yes, you can make this film." Booker T., I think he teaches film at--

[00:06:52] T. Laveist: Hampton, right?

[00:06:54] W. Laveist: He was teaching at Norfolk State at the time. I think he's at Georgia Tech now. He's done several films. He worked with Tim R. and others. He's very good. He said, "No, you all can make the film. Your brother knows how to tell stories, and I will help you all. If you give me some rough cuts, you got Alejandro, I'll look at it. I'll give you some feedback." He was reluctant to put himself in the story, and you just confirmed that I was right.

[00:07:22] D. Meminger: Yes, he sounded wonderful. It's hard listening to yourself. A lot of people hate listening to themselves. Alejandro, I want you to jump in. What was your role here? Because I understand your role, you're not just the camera person, the director of photography. You really put this together. You're a part of the glue. You found these two young men.

[00:07:47] A. Orengo: I met them through Clifford, a guy that I enjoy his photography, his film work. He has an amazing eye. He's from Brownsville. Actually, we were shooting in Brownsville, and I seen him. I was a fan of his online. I was like, "Hey." He's a much younger guy. I connected with him, and then we talked, and he connected me with **Sheron and Teyvon** here.

[00:08:21] D. Meminger: That's it. One thing led to another.

[00:08:22] A. Orengo: Yes.

[00:08:24] T. Laveist: Actually, the scene where he's telling me about it was actually in the film. You saw that we was on FaceTime where "Tey Mack" had the phone. I was talking to him. It was when he called me up and said, "I think I finally found the right vehicle to tell this story, the right people to help carry this story forward." Then he called me on FaceTime, and I got a chance to talk to him. That's how it happened. That's why it takes so long. You have to find the story, and you have to find the storytellers and the right people to tell that voice. It took a lot of time.

[00:08:56] D. Meminger: Sheron and Tey Mack, you guys were featured in this docuseries. How have you changed, Sheron over the last 10 years? I look at you, it's a different person from up there. You may have the same story. Even in the back, you shocked me. You can tell whatever you wanted to do in the back, but you shocked me. People see you there, you're a different man today.

[00:09:22] Sheron Bryant: The film changed my life, actually. It helped open my eyes, open my perspective on my stress levels, how I conduct myself, how I live my life, the type of food I eat, the type of things that I put in my body. Just how I view life in general. That film put my whole perspective in a new light. Put your perspective in a new light comes change.

[00:09:52] D. Meminger: Look at that smile on his face. You see that? That's a different person in that documentary, but the same story. All right, Tey Mack he's a storyteller. He's walking on the roof. My mom's and my grandma. What does your grandmother say? She hasn't seen this yet. Is she still with us, grandma?

[00:10:09] Tavon: She passed away not too long after that.

[00:10:11] D. Meminger: Oh, man, I'm sorry to hear that, but grandma will always be with you. How does it make you feel? [crosstalk] Because he's been on his phone, FaceTiming all of his friends all the time in the back. How does it make you feel knowing you are a part of something that hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people will see, and this could change their lives?

[00:10:32] Tavon: Oh, it feel good. It's like a gift and a curse because I'm watching somebody that I'm not no more, but I had to be. A lot of other people see who they is, not who they have to stay. What you go through and grow through. You've got to go through them steps. You've got to eat the same food. You've got to know what's wrong to face it. It's a gift and a curse, but I'm happy I was a part of it.

[00:11:04] D. Meminger: One of the issues, and we can talk about the making of the film, but there's also the research behind it. I want to jump to maybe the solution part right away because you spoke a lot in this series about a lot of issues in the Black community. A lot of folks face these issues, but you're talking about the Black community in Brownsville, Brooklyn. What's the answer to get rid of some of the stress, get rid of some of this negativity, some of this violence in our community?

[00:11:38] T. Laveist: The silver bullet? There isn't a silver bullet, but what it is, is-- I think what's important here is that people understand what are the real underlying causes for these disparities. So many people, when I talk to them about it, they immediately go to biology, genetics. There's something about being Black that makes you hypertensive and makes you have diabetes. When you just think about it, it's a ridiculous concept to believe that any of this is about biology, because what does it mean to be a Black person? Barack Obama's black. He has a white mother and he has a father from East Africa, which is not where most African Americans get their African ancestry, but he's African American, right?

Colin Powell was African American. He had two grandparents from Ireland, two grandparents from Jamaica. He was born in the Bronx, like you, I guess, but he's African American. Tiger Woods is African American. He's got a Chinese grandparent, a Thai grandparent, a white American grandparent, a Black American grandparent, and somehow he's African American too. If we're all African Americans, how is genetics the

answer to this? The answer is the environment. The answer is the way that we've organized society and the stresses and the pressures and the risks that we put people under as a function of where they live.

That, I think, is the solution. Understanding that these are choices. These are decisions that are being made. These are policy decisions that people are making that create these communities and the communities that are designed to produce ill health. That is the solution. Stop doing that. Where is it happening? It's happening through policy, through government policy and through corporate policy. There's no government saying that this community is going to be a food desert. No, it's corporations deciding they're not going to open a supermarket in that community. It's understanding where the problems are, which is, I believe, policy is where most of the solutions lie.

We ourselves need to understand that we are not the problem. We are simply living in environments that are going to produce bad health outcomes for anybody who lives in those environments.

[00:13:48] D. Meminger: They can change. You said in the documentary, we heard disparities can be corrected or changed. Is it the folks in those communities that have to put more pressure? Is it also asking for that outside help from other communities to help the fight? Then you jump in after he answers this.

[00:14:07] T. Laveist: Yes, it's both. It's the people in the communities have to have agency also. You certainly have to do what you can do to advocate for your community. Ultimately, we are the richest society in the history of humanity. No society has ever been as rich as this society is. We're really good at generating resources. We're not good at distributing those resources in a way that produces the best outcomes.

Then that's about policy. That's outside the community. That's beyond what you can do within your own neighborhood, but it's got to be both. It's got to be people doing what they can do wherever they sit, and it's people are using their access to impact policy to make the way that we've organized the society a little better.

[00:14:50] D. Meminger: Sheron

[00:14:52] Sheron Bryant: Me personally, I feel like the attention of the youth got taken away, and that's why society is how it is. Everything that's glorified is what we don't want to be glorified. The things that's glorified in our society today, I feel is the cause of why our society is the way it is. Instead of the common man being glorified like how the common man used to be glorified, I want to say back in the day, now the wrong representatives are glorified as far as drug dealers or someone who's causing mayhem and havoc. They are being glorified over the barber who's going to work every day, cutting hair, and making sure every child is ready for school and look they best on the first day of school.

That man is no longer glorified. The man that's bringing you your mail every day to making sure that you get your bills on time and you get all your notices on time, that man is no longer glorified, but the man that's on the corner selling this or that because

they feel he have this or that, he's now glorified. To our youth, that's who they want to grow up and become, opposed to growing up and becoming a doctor or a lawyer or someone who's actually accomplished something that's worthy to be glorified for.

[00:16:23] D. Meminger: Right. All of us have social media. We can start glorifying and highlighting positive people in our communities, and that's something each one of you can do. All right, come on up. Tell us your name and where you're from.

[00:16:38] Ashley Burnell: My name is Ashley Burnell. I am from New Orleans. First, I wanted to say thank you to the young men for your storytelling. That takes a tremendous amount of courage and introspection to even share your story and be vulnerable for the world to see. That was very, very instrumental in how I process and enjoy the film. Thank you, first and foremost. To my question. I saw the academia, right? I saw the rigor. What were your learnings of translating something that would be a manuscript or a journal article into something that is expressed in film?

[00:17:23] T. Laveist: Can you give me the question again?

[00:17:25] Ashley: How you talked about earlier is like, "Okay, I'm going to write a book, but no, I'm going to now do a film to make it more accessible for people to understand." Were there any learnings or were there any troubles of translating something that's academic into something that's more accessible.

[00:17:41] T. Laveist: That's an interesting question because we were just in the moment and hadn't really thought about it, what we were doing and how. When you look at the experts, the researchers that were in there, they were all people that-- well, they were all friends. They were all people that I know to be excellent storytellers and people who talk about these issues often. I know that they've all found ways to express these complicated ideas in ways that the general public can understand. We were selective, Alvin Poussard, David Williams, Kamara Jones, people like that that I know are good storytellers and who have the science behind them.

I think the point is, if you really listened, you heard a lot of research in this documentary without us ever citing an article or showing you a reference or anything like that. We just talked about it. I think that's how I think we need to show up in community, because people are not looking to read journal articles. They don't have the training to read those articles, nor do they need the training to read those articles. It's to us to be able to express what we are learning in that science in a way that the public can understand. I think that's part of the job and we all should be doing it.

[00:18:53] Ashley: That is excellent. Thank you.

[00:18:54] D. Meminger: Thank you.

[00:18:55] W. Laveist: I think I could add to that is that that's where the role that I played or that Alejandro played in terms of how people are shown and the questions that were asked. That's one of the things that I'm very proud of how the film developed. As you saw, is that these are all experts up here when it comes to public health and

their context and what they understand. That was one of the things that we were trying to show as well, is that there's not all of these different levels because he has a doctorate or I have a doctorate. We are detached. This is our community that produced us.

One of the reasons why I have a doctorate is because of my experience in Brownsville. We wanted to show that all of us are experts in our context. That's one of the things that I hope that people take away from this, is that you need to understand your expertise and your experiences matter. Advocate for yourself, but also to be able to trust the science that goes into it and see how it comes together, see how it plays out. I think that was something that we were able to show.

[00:20:06] T. Laveist: Let me add to that. A lot of times when I talk to academics, especially academics that work in community a lot, they talk about community-based participatory research. What they often do is they subsume their expertise to the community. The community knows best. That's not right. That's not true. Stop saying that. The community knows what they know. You know what you know. You're an expert too, and so are they. They're not more knowledgeable than you are. They know what they know. You know what you know. Your expertise together helps to understand it.

If you look at how-- this was subtle but intentional, the way we shot everybody, we shot everybody the same way, the same lighting, the same-- everybody, whether you were a community resident or you were a doctor or whatever, you were all an expert, and we treated everybody like that. The other little, subtle thing that was in the film that you may not notice is that in the beginning of the film, you see me coming into the community, and I'm coming in on the subway. If you know Brownsville, you know that's the way to come to Brownsville. You don't drive into Brownsville. You come in on the subway.

I came in on the subway, but there was no shot of me leaving, and that was intentional because that was a symbolic way of making that statement that I never really left. Mentally, I'm always going to be a Brownsvillian. You continue to be a part of the community, although you don't live in the community, and you do what you can to have an impact in whatever ways you can do that.

[00:21:27] D. Meminger: You have a question?

[00:21:28] Audience: My question is that, why did you start a nonprofit organization for this film, and what's next? What's your next project?

[00:21:39] T. Laveist: What's my next project?

[laughter]

[00:21:41] T. Laveist: Well, I'm hoping that I can raise money. If you notice, we call it a docuseries. It's a part of a series, and my hope is that this will be the pilot for that series, and it will feature other communities and other health issues about the communities. Maybe that'll be the outcome, if we can find the monies to do that. Otherwise, I'll finally

write the book that's supposed to go along with this, that was supposed to have been to my publisher many years ago. I'll eventually get that book written.

[00:22:16] D. Meminger: I want to thank the people who are watching at home, streaming, and we do have a question. Karen, if you can tell us what that question is, please.

[00:22:23] Karyn Bell: Yes, this is from online. Sheron actually started to speak to this, but they asked what practical steps can communities take to address the health inequities highlighted in the film?

[00:22:38] Sheron Bryant: You want me to continue?

[00:22:39] W. Laveist: Yes.

[00:22:40] D. Meminger: That's a heavy question, go for it.

[00:22:42] Sheron Bryant: In my opinion, the steps that the community could take can be creating more safe havens for children. In my opinion, that's how we could come out of this, is by attacking the youth. I feel like, in my opinion, our society was damaged with the attack of the youth, because the youth that they were attacking is us now. We are now the adults. We were the youth that they were attacking. If you look at how we made the society today, in my opinion, speaking from my generation only, is worse than how we got it. It's now today, in my opinion, is worse than the crack era back in the '90s.

I understand that that was real traumatic. It was a pandemic with the crack era. We are the products of that crack era. We are the supposedly crack babies. We are the broken home babies. We are the products of that depression. In order to, in my opinion, fully come out of that depression, we have to now do the same thing that was done to us, which is attack our youth for the better now. Attack our youth and make our youth better, so when they become the adults and they become us, they have a better world to live in. Like I said in the film, we only have one gym. We only have one vegetable stand.

Let's create more safe havens. Let's create bowling alleys, swimming pools, just stuff that children can escape and go to and grow in. We don't have those too much in my community. It tends to have a re-occurring cycle, because we don't have none of those things that can help uplift and empower us. We only have the things that held us down. We only have our depressors, our depression, the things that we used to cope with the depression. We still have all of those things. We don't have nothing new. We don't have nothing that we can be proud of or that we could feel confident in.

It's to the point where even when someone tries to bring something to our community or just our society, it gets mistreated, it gets tarnished, and it goes away just as fast as it arrives.

[00:25:23] D. Meminger: Bring more things into the community. We hear you.

[00:25:26] D. Meminger: I'm going to come to you next with what you're doing in the community now as a young man. Right here, your name, where you're from, and your question or statement, please.

[00:25:39] Cynthia Gonzalez: Hi. Sorry. Hi. I'm Cynthia Gonzalez. I'm an assistant professor at Charles Drew University. More than anything, I'm a proud product, daughter, current resident of Watts. Dr. LaVeist, I was a little nervous about the documentary because I felt it was going to trigger, for lack of a better word. I can relate on so many ways. Being an Indigenous scholar in my community, the practice of humility while also the binary between community expert versus academic expert, and being both, is quite tough. Thank you for that. I also really like the question around what's next, because I was wondering, this docuseries term, can you come to Watts first?

Second, as a Latina growing up in Black Watts, my commitment to Black liberation, social justice, and solidarity to the Black community is ingrained in me. My parents were gardeners to the home they became owners to, to a Black family. It was just really embedded in me by my family that our solidarity to the Black struggle is essential to our well-being and to our journey in life. With that said, there's a lot of monolingual Spanish speakers in Watts now. Watts is about 80%, 90% Latino. I saw what we call raspado in Mexico in the film, which is in Puerto Rico, I think they call it, piraguas.

The monolingual Spanish speakers, if they could see this, they would see themselves in it. If we had it in Spanish, Black folks could see themselves in it. One of my biggest struggles in my neighborhood is Black and Brown solidarity. We're fighting for the same resources that were created. That fight was that systemic thing. That's one piece. How do we build solidarity out of what you're doing here across experiences? Because we have shared struggles. That's one. Two is accessibility. I hear that there's a website and such, but I don't know if a Netflix thing, getting into popular culture and this docuseries being the skin you're in and the neighborhood or community, but I'm **[unintelligible]**
00:28:20]

[00:28:20] D. Meminger: That's right. Get on Netflix.

[00:28:23] Cynthia: All of that. The next steps being that level of possible solidarity and possible access into pop culture and folks who can get it just in their TV screen.

[00:28:33] T. Laveist: There was so much in your question.

[00:28:34] Cynthia: I know.

[00:28:34] T. Laveist: I wanted to respond to you. I don't know which part of this to take on. First, I'd love to talk to you and know more about what's happening in Watts right now. I've been there. I've been to Charles Drew several times. You basically still work and live in the same community that you grew up in because Watts is where they are. The Latino and Black solidarity, it's an interesting question. Maybe we should think about something. I'm Dominican. Alejandro is Puerto Rican. We did this film on Black health. I don't think of myself in a bifurcated way. I think of myself as a Black person

who is Dominican. I'm both is how I think of it. I hope that's how other people think about it.

I'd love to know more about what's happening in Watts right now and if there's a story there. We're always trying to find stories. I have a number of stories that I've found out about in other cities. I'm not aware of what's happening there right now. I'd love to talk to you about that. As far as the distribution part, where we are now is I've had opportunities to sign it with a network, but I decided not to. I wasn't convinced that they would air it often enough, and they wanted exclusive control, so I decided not to go with that.

Right now, what we're doing is we're going to shop it around. Do some of the streaming services and see what'll happen there. Early versions have been in a number of film festivals, and it's done really well, but we're going to now put it in some of the bigger film festivals now that it's complete, and we'll see if we get a distribution deal. If all of that fails, I'm going to put this thing on YouTube and put up a study guide, and other people just download the study guide and use it in class. That's what I want.

[applause]

[00:30:28] T. Laveist: I did not make this film to get an Academy Award or anything. That's not my thing. I made this film for it to be seen, and if I can't get it into a place where I know it'll be seen, it'll be on YouTube or it'll be on a website, and we'll just make it available for free for anybody who wants to use it in their classes or in any other way they want to use it.

[00:30:52] Outro: In Part 2, the dialogue widens. You'll hear panelists and audience members share personal reflections and explore how trust, connection, and collective memory shape the path towards health equity. To learn more about *The Skin You're In* and upcoming screenings, visit tsyi.org.

[00:31:25] Outro: Thank you for joining us for this episode of *The Skin You're In*. Be sure to visit our websites, tsyi.org, and partners4healthequity.org. That's partners4healthequity.org. Follow us on your favorite social media platforms, and be sure to subscribe wherever you enjoy your podcasts. This podcast is brought to you by Partners for Advancing Health Equity, which is led by Tulane University, Celia Scott Weatherhead School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. It's part of the Tulane Health Equity Institute and is supported by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Until next time.

[00:32:11] [END OF AUDIO]