

## **HU professor creates space for discussion during pandemic and racial injustice**

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(JAC 310 assignment for Prof. Waltz)

Hampton University professor April Woodard created a new livestream show this summer for her followers on Facebook to provide an outlet for entertainment and serious conversation during COVID-19.

With diverse weekly topics from racial unrest to the art of expression, the show included national celebrities like comedian Marlon Wayans and local activists like Professor Earl Caldwell, an icon during the Civil Rights movement.

The show streamed every Thursday at 5 p.m. EST and ran from June to early August. In the span of twelve weeks, ten shows were produced.

The third episode, called "Race and Unrest," caught the attention of HULU employees who hired Woodard to give a diversity workshop for their employees covering topics of diversity in the workplace and creating a place of inclusivity for employees within the company.

Woodard knew she wanted to create something that would allow deep conversations in the midst of the pandemic, by calling the series "Conversations in Chaos."

"I was initially inspired by my own personal experience, but as I continued to watch the news and consume more media I began to wonder, what outlets have been put into place to discuss what is happening around us," said Woodard.

This summer America experienced widespread hardship from violence, social distancing, unemployment, mental health, virtual learning, and police brutality, with the killings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Ahmaad Aubrey.

Episodes like, "Law and Disorder" and "Back to School" opened a dialogue with viewers to discuss the ongoing issues that many American's yearned to talk about.

The Back-to-School segment featured current preschool teacher, Alexandra Nassar and Dr. Portia Rawles, a Psychologist to discuss how teachers and students are coping with this virtual learning environment.

"This new normal is hard for all of us, and now transitioning into starting back this upcoming August, certain states are proposing that we hold both in-person classes and virtual sessions, which poses the risk of infection amongst students," said Nassar during the livestream.

While other episodes like, "Mental Health in Mayhem" with America's

psychologist Dr. Jeff Gardere tackled the reality of mentally coping with the pandemic and how to properly heal during these times.

"The pandemic has had many iterations and consequences and mental health has to be the biggest one of them all. COVID-19 has shifted the psychological state of people across the world and effected their livelihoods," Gardere said.

Although the show's main focus was current national issues, Woodard also featured lighter topics of creativity and film.

One episode included Sekou Writes, a producer and writer who has released two projects based on his experiences during quarantine.

Audience members responded to his vision and passion for creating a film about how COVID-19 forces people to "mask" themselves during a pandemic.

"We are taking off the COVID mask and figurative mask. I wanted to capture the raw reactions of people and how they felt being in this climate and be forced to endure various hardships while wearing a "mask," said Writes during the livestream.

Episode seven featured actor and content creator Zeus Campbell, who spoke on the importance of storytelling in this virtual climate.

The episode displayed his personal projects and a "call to action" for the younger generation to tell their individual stories during this time.

"Young people have such a unique and innovative mindset, and now more than ever we need young storytellers to in this industry. Their ability to create stories is beyond imagination, so why not let your stories be heard," Campbell said.

When developing the show topics and selecting panelists, Woodard prioritized her a younger audience. She invited student journalists to intern and help develop, create, and gain hands-on experience in virtual production.

"As a Professor, I urge my students to walk away from their internships with a reel, press decks and something that they can use for their portfolio. That is how I structure my internships with that main focus in mind and now my students know how to produce a live stream show," Woodard said.

Student interns were given the opportunity to book, produce, write, and edit content for the show, give ideas, suggestions, and content concepts.

In a time with cancelled internships and low employment opportunities, three Hampton University students were able to gain hands-on work to help build their career portfolios.

"I was excited to be offered the opportunity to work alongside an individual in the media industry on a project that would give me experience into what skills I should sharpen to be competitive once I graduate--especially during a pandemic where others weren't so fortunate to be as active," said summer intern Lauryn Bass.

Although Woodard invited many high-profile guests to her show, she was confident that her summer interns would remain professional and produce

quality work.

One student intern called the summer "unforgettable," describing booking guests and late-night editing as skills that will transfer into future careers, she said.

"I took a risk, and it was well worth it. Each student went above and beyond to provide quality content and represented very well. I was happy in my selection and proud of the work that they did during the course of the show," Woodard said.

When famous comedian Marlon Wayans aired his episode, the show had over 1,000 views on Facebook, the largest turnout of the season.

The smallest streams were in the 150 - 200 range, including the Art of Expression panel with Professional Dancer, Tashara Gavin-Moorehead and Producer Sekou Writes.

When deciding which platform to use, Woodard believed that streaming over Facebook Live would be the most effective, since she already had a large following there and the platform lets the audience comment live.

The streaming platform also allowed the show to be automatically uploaded to YouTube, letting viewers revisit episodes and expanding the conversations to more people online.

Conversations in Chaos produced episodes that provided households with various topics and issues to discuss. Woodard knew that creating this show would generate a buzz and have a powerful impact on those in her general following.

"This show really expanded beyond my circle of people, even taking the conversation to HULU was an honor in itself," Woodard said. "These segments were timely issues and deserved to be discussed, especially during these difficult times."