

MCPHAIL INTERVIEW KATHY

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Kathy Williams:

Welcome to Building Vaccine Confidence: Tell Me the Truth, the women's health awareness podcast series from the NIEHS Office of Human Research and Community Engagement. I'm Kathy Williams. We have a very special guest for this edition of our podcast, a woman who was a nationally-recognized thought leader in the higher education community, and as a result, has dealt directly with the COVID-19 pandemic. As we will learn, she has also been personally affected by the disease. She and her staff and students have all learned a tremendous amount over the course of the pandemic and she will share her thoughts on that.

Dr. Christine Johnson McPhail is the 13th President of Saint Augustine's University, an historically Black college and university located in downtown Raleigh, North Carolina. She succeeded her late husband, Dr. Irving Pressley McPhail, as Saint Augustine's president in February 2021 following his death from COVID-19. Prior to joining Saint Augustine's, Dr. McPhail served as president and CEO of the McPhail Group, LLC. She is the founding professor and director of the community college leadership doctoral program at Morgan State University and former president of Cypress College in California. She also recently served as Professor of Practice at Kansas State University. Her research interests lie in the intersection of three fields of higher education: leadership, governance, and learning. Dr. McPhail, welcome to our podcast. And if you would, please tell us about your personal experience with COVID-19, both with the passing of your husband and with your own experience of contracting the virus. I know it's been a very difficult time for you, your family, and the university.

Christine McPhail:

Yeah, you recall correctly. It was a very challenging and difficult time for the university and the family. And we're still healing. So how did we get over? We trusted God. We would have to say that first. This is a faith-based institution, so we embraced the notion that this is a difficult time and we're going to get over it. I had contracted COVID at the same time that my husband did so both of us were going through it at the time. And it was a challenging time when I came to a realization that he was not going to make it. But what we did, we turned -- my family and this university -- we turned our pain to purpose and we focused on the students here at Saint Augustine's University. And we focused on what this university can be. And we're all contributing our talents and gifts to just excel and soar high.

Kathy Williams:

How did you impress upon your student body, their parents, and your staff how important it is to be vaccinated and be tested on a regular basis in order to help tackle this serious, serious health problem?

Christine McPhail:

When my late husband first arrived on the campus, he was very, very conscious of establishing some protocols that would keep students and faculty safe. He talked regularly with the team members here to enforce masking. And so for us, the COVID was very up-front and personal to us. So we rallied around the notion of safety and welfare first. Our Board of Trustees stepped in and said, let's keep the message consistent. Let's pass a

vaccination policy. Let's make testing convenient here at the campus, regularly, our athletes were tested within the protocols of NCAA. And then, of course, our traditional policies and practices were updated to include the policy on COVID-19. I can tell you right now, it was just and continues to be a very concerned group of professionals here at Saint Aug. We look out for each other. We look at keeping this university safe. And we've been successful at that.

Kathy Williams:

Now, fast-forwarding to today, those protocols helped keep your school open all this time. Did you ever have to shut down and have the students just taking their classes online or were they able to continue coming to classes and living on campus?

Christine McPhail:

Let's look at this semester when students came back. We deferred entry for two weeks to give students a chance to get back and settle in. And that worked out well for us. Students were able to take the classes online for those first two weeks and then they transitioned fully into the university. Now I have to be transparent. After homecoming last year and we were so delighted that we had such a wonderful reunion with our alums and students were -- we said wear masks and then, of course, when they were doing their different activities I'm sure they related that somewhat. So the week following homecoming we did go online for about seven days so that we could ensure that if we had any incidents they could really transition out of that period. And we went right back to face to face after that and we had no clusters. I think that one thing I'd really like to have the listeners pay attention to is the sense of belonging here at Saint Augustine's University, the sense of caring that's a part of our history. I have never seen -- and I've been in higher education a long time -- such a devoted group of professionals looking out for students. The folks that work in our health center, the folks that work in our counseling center, the folks that work in our resident halls and in the dining facilities, those are my heroes in addition to our dynamic and fabulous faculty because they didn't hesitate not once in putting up the signs reminding students to put on their masks, encouraging students to go get your tests on a regular basis if you had an exemption, for example. Our students were able to file a religious and/or medical exemptions, you know, for the vaccination. A part of it was educating the students about how to take care of themselves and to look out for each other. It was a wonderful thing to watch.

Kathy Williams:

What are the major ongoing efforts in place to make sure that your community will continue to be safe during this time?

Christine McPhail:

You mentioned something about the students getting engaged and we did work with our students. And many of our students became ambassadors for safety. They did infomercials themselves. They helped put up signs and was encouraging each other to look out for each other. They wanted to do a dance at the close of this academic year and they sat around and talked with each other and say, we're not going to invite the other universities in the area like they had done traditionally just because they were concerned about their safety; they were concerned about the safety of each other. So what we will do is to continue to do that kind of mindfulness about our health. We won't become so relaxed that we forget about this pandemic is still here. It's not over yet. And I'm looking forward to working with the faculty when they return and the students when they return. We'll sit and talk about how can we make this work and have another safe year.

Kathy Williams:

What special messages or activities are you using to promote vaccine acceptance and to keep everyone safe and healthy?

Christine McPhail:

I would say that it's safety and welfare first. That has to be first. And we know what the basics are, you know, ABC's of how we get through this is to just be very mindful that it's not over and let's continue to practice the masking and making sure that we're tested on a regular basis.

Kathy Williams:

I understand that during this time, your student body has actually grown and your numbers have gone up?

Christine McPhail:

They have and we have to thank a lot of people for that. We just cannot sit here and gloat and say we did that by ourselves. We have to thank the parents for trusting us that their student would be safe when they got here. We have to trust the high school and community folks, alumni who referred students to us because they felt that this would be a safe environment for the students. And we have to thank the students themselves who felt that this is still a place where they can come and belong and can finish what they start. So we're very grateful for that environment that was created. And I think we became a closer-knit university team as a result of this because we had to rely on each other in ways that we had not been able to do in the past. So a combination of things, the trust that we were going to look out for them. We did not give up. We continued to offer our programs and, to the extent, we could our extracurricular activities. And folks believed in us and it's paying off for us.

Kathy Williams:

What have you found to be the most effective messages with the young people in your community in terms of overcoming vaccine hesitancy or mistrust?

Christine McPhail:

We built education about the vaccine into our conversations with students. We had external groups to come in and talk about the vaccine. My family indeed did around my husband's birthday, we did a infomercial, my two grandsons and my daughter, the four of us did our own way of saying, you have an option to take the vaccine. My husband didn't. My father didn't. My grandfather didn't. So please go and get your vaccine. So we did that infomercial because we just felt that my husband died on October 15th, 2019. Two or three months later he might have been able to have that vaccine. So we did do that from a personal standpoint. And we had many of our faculty and staff members talk to students and their families. I, indeed, and my leadership team, we had virtual sessions with parents; we had conversations with our students; and many of our students also had focus groups talking about the pros and the cons of the vaccine. So that education and awareness was a part of what we had to deal with -- being cognizant of the stereotypes about what happens with low-income people when it comes to things that are quasi-experimental. And we did talk through those things and the resistance about taking the vaccination. And we continue to have those conversations because it's not over. So we continue to train, educate, and keep people aware of the

possibilities if you don't what could happen to you. And our family certainly promotes that message.

When we first started about whether we were going to do policy or not do policy, do mandate or no mandate, our Board voted to mandate because they just had done their research and they felt that it just was not optional. We needed to be the overseers of the safety and health and welfare of our students. Now when several of the students found out about it, they felt that was taking their rights away from them. They wrote me a letter and they said, well, we're going to have a protest. I said what are you protesting? You can come and talk to me. And you can come and talk to the leadership team. Let's sit around and talk. And of course they did indeed accept that invitation. And we later opened it up to the whole student body. We had a virtual session talking about the pros and cons, how do we get the message out. They gave us ideas. And I think out of that they did some of their own informercials. You know, we have our own radio and TV station so our students are taking these courses so they know how to promote what they want to promote. And those sessions went off very well. So what we planned to do with the students is to continue to meet with them regularly, let them help frame the messages in ways that they think that the student body will receive it. And I think that is probably the best way to do it so everybody owns the solution.

Kathy Williams:

Were there any other efforts to protect the community from COVID, such as vaccination events on campus?

Christine McPhail:

Yes. We hosted vaccination events. Of course you know, we became a testing site ourselves. We had testing several times a week and the students were able to come in and talk with the health counselors about the pros and cons of getting the vaccination. Another thing that we realized early on was that we couldn't do this by ourselves. So we reached out to our local health providers and have really been consistently engaged with them about getting advice, resources, and tools that we can continue to keep our faculty and staff and our students healthy. So it's a partnership, a very strategic partnership because we care about the same things. We care about the students; we care about them being able to come to Saint Augustine's University, get a education, become global, competitive citizens; and we care about the long-term survival of the institution. So it's a partnership.

Kathy Williams:

All of that certainly fits in with the university's strong history of robust public health education. I understand that there is an effort to restore Saint Agnes Hospital, which was one of the first medical centers and nursing training schools for African Americans in the country and is located on the Saint Augustine's campus. What is the future of that space?

Christine McPhail:

You have touched upon my magnificent obsession. My magnificent obsession is to restore, reimagine Saint Agnes Hospital. We're not looking at building another hospital. What we're talking about is building up on that history and using that facility for something that we think can make a major difference in this community. Let me tell you what it is. We're looking at it as a center for the study of health disparities in the African American community and beyond. When you talk about COVID hitting African American community and if you were to go even deeper and say our zip code, 27610, had the most -- what would you call -- I'm going to even say horrendous number of cases, that would be the truth. So you can multiply

that by other diseases and health issues that impact the African American community. So we see that beautiful structure over there that looks like it's in ruins now -- coming out of that environment will be a beautiful center for the study of health disparities. How awesome is that?

Kathy Williams:

That is definitely awesome. Dr. McPhail, thank you so much for sharing with us your experiences and lessons learned for this podcast.

Christine McPhail:

Have a great day.

Kathy Williams:

Please join us for the other episodes of our podcast series, which is brought to you by the NIEHS Office of Human Research and Community Engagement. We will be speaking in depth with community leaders who've been working to protect their populations from the COVID-19 pandemic and promote vaccinations. We will hear about their experiences and the lessons they have learned as a result. And don't forget, tell me the truth.

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