

Introduction: The Health Disparities podcast, a program of Movement is Life whose mission is to eliminate health disparities across race, ethnicity, gender, and zip code. For this episode of the Healthiest Disparities Podcast, three members of the LaSure extended family gathered at the annual Movement is Life Caucus to discuss their tradition of working in service to the greater good, a tradition which goes back many generations.

Aaron LaSure has served as a naval officer, police officer and held senior leadership positions at the FBI. Sharon LaSure-Roy has held senior positions with Florida Blue and VyStar Credit Union and served on the Movement is Life steering committee for many years. Allyn Brooks-LaSure has served with the EPA as a senior DEI advisor to the Biden/Harris transition team and is currently vice president for communications with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The discussion touches on aspects of diversity equity inclusion that these family members have witnessed in different spheres of service, but where similar patterns rise to the surface and reflect ever evolving norms in the context of racial diversification, inclusion, and advancement. Sharon LaSure-Roy leads the discussion.

Sharon LaSure-Roy: Well, I'm Sharon LaSure-Roy and I'm here as the vice president of social marketing for VyStar Credit Union, one of the largest credit unions in Florida. I am also a part of the steering committee for Movement is Life

and have been a part of it for eight years and I'm excited to be here at the national caucus meeting, which is two years in the making, in person.

Allyn Brooks-LaSure: I'm Allyn Brooks-LaSure, Vice President of Communications for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the nation's largest philanthropy focused on health and wellbeing. Pleasure to be here.

Aaron LaSure: And I'm Aaron LaSure, I'm retired senior executive with the FBI and I'm part of Mirror Project currently. Glad to be here.

Sharon: You know, we're kind of excited about this session that's totally off the cuff because we realized this is like LaSure's on equity. We could probably have our own podcast, but we're here today to talk about the caucus and why equity was important even in our family. You know, I think, Aaron, you probably have a really great story about our mutual grandfather, Alfred LaSure and what he did it to serve the country and all the things that we do as well. Share a little bit about that.

Aaron: Yes. A little-known history fact in our family, the LaSure's, our grandfather, Alfred LaSure, went into the Navy during World War II. He was going to be a CB, which is a part of the Naval battalion and they did construction during World War II. While he was at Camp Perry, they singled him out because he was a good swimmer and asked him if he wanted to do anything

special and from Camp Perry, which used to be a part of a three-letter agency at the time during World War II known as the OSS, he went on to become a UDT Seal. So, one of the first African Americans to do so. And that was one of the great stories that I heard from him prior to his passing and try to keep that legacy alive.

Sharon: Yes. It's really cool though about the serving. Allyn, you went to the Citadel. Tell a little bit about your history of serving and then we really can get into Aaron. I think sometimes I'm underachieving in that regard, because these two maybe have actually saved the world.

Allyn: No, I'm like the slacker, the surfer of the family. You know, I'm just chilling. You know, when you go to the Citadel, if you're a slacker surfer, that persona works perfectly at a school like that. No, I think the idea of service has always been intriguing to me even as a young age. And I think when you think about service sometimes, you think about doing it one way. And what was, I think pretty important to me in my development was seeing that there were a lot of ways to serve the nation and you can do it in uniform, you can do it out of uniform. But serving either in defense of the nation or in defense of the nation's values, that is something that has always been important to me for a young age.

Sharon: So Aaron, 22 years in the FBI. Talk about service.

Allyn: He's the oldest here.

Aaron: Yes, I'm slightly older, a little bit. But yes, 22 years in the FBI. I worked six years on Orlando Police Department prior to that as a police officer. And prior to that, I was a naval officer. And so, all I know is service to my country and protecting the citizens. I think what drove me there was I knew I wanted to serve. I knew I wanted to be in the military, which my father was, our grandfather was, our great-grandfather was in World War I. So, if you go through the history, we can go back on both sides of our family. Everyone has served in every war on both sides of the family. So that's something that we're proud of to protect the values of this country. And I think that's very important. And in the FBI, I always wanted to work espionage and counterintelligence. I came in, they put me on violent crimes and major offenders my first rodeo, but I had done that previously as a police officer. Eventually, I finally got to work counterintelligence and espionage. And I learned a language along the way, which helped me in that particular task. But in that endeavor, you do go through a career where equity and trying to find diversity is certainly a challenge because in the FBI academy, I ended up being the only African American walking around the academy when we had classes every two weeks. I was the only African American in my class and every office I went to, I was the only African American in that office until I went to Miami. Being the only African American executive at a

field office. I was in Washington field office. I was the only African American executive there at a particular point in time. Either was two or one. I was there when it was two and then I was the only one at that field office, but we deal with those things. I think from an equity standpoint in all of us we are a standard bearer, and we deal with those pressures in a different way when you know a thousand eyes are upon you all the time, every second of the day, every minute of the day and you comport and carry yourself in a different way. But it has a side effect too, as well.

Sharon: Now that's interesting that you say that you carry yourself in a special way. And Aaron tries to say that he's the oldest, but we are actually twins and I have four minutes on him. Literally, he was kicking me out the womb because I probably talked too much for him.

Aaron: I got tired. It was time to come out.

Allyn: She was hosting a podcast in the womb.

Aaron: Yes, she was.

Sharon: In the womb. It's like get out. But you know, we talk about carrying ourselves and how important that is to equity. I like to say it's about being in the room, even if you are the only one. And when it comes to, you know, I've

worked for an insurance company for so long and you talk about health equity. We talk about doing things that's right. I mean, I had the pleasure of even hosting Allyn and Aaron on different sessions for some seminars we were doing called Living While Black. Sometimes it's uncomfortable conversation but being in the room is where you can actually make things happen. I know being on this steering committee for Movement Is Life has really driven that home. I've been able to learn even techniques when I'm the only one in the room, where you have to address things. We were doing a commercial and when you're able to look and say, hey, let's take a look at the talent for a brand. I've been the one that went the corporate route from the beginning. So, I've taken what I think that level of service, because I think I'm serving the reputation of an organization the best by protecting it. So, it might not have been with the gun or overseas, but I still feel like being in the room where it happens really makes a big difference. And it's important too, to talk about the issues so people understand what's going on.

Allyn: And to be clear, I was a diplomat, so I didn't have a gun. I had a pen. But there was like a lot of ink in that pen. Like, there was like really a lot of ink in the pen.

Sharon: Now you know James Bond had some pens. Come on now.

Allyn: Oh no, these were like Bic. This was no James Bond kind of pen.

Sharon: There was no Q.

Allyn: No, I didn't like signal an Aston Martin. No, there was none of that.

Aaron: He signaled me a couple of times. I knew his handwriting.

Sharon: One thing about being at the conference, Allyn was speaking today. I mean, and he's on a panel about activism. Is there a way what we're doing, even in our own individual level of activism or activating for health equity or racial equity. So, even in the nonprofit world or corporate world or working for the Department of Justice, how do we make sure that there's equity? Like how do we on an individual level make that happen? Is it about activism? Is it individualism? You know, how do we do that?

Allyn: You know, I think a lot of people of color and women, when we find ourselves at work, there's sort of two struggles. There's the internal struggle and then the external struggle. So, trying to get our organizations, whether it's government, whether it's nonprofit or for profit, they all have a variant of the same problem. Really, thinking about how getting an organization to be better on the inside will help them be better on the outside and also making sure there's consistency between what they say to the outside and who they are on the inside. And I think the first step on this is you have to

notice. You know, I've had conversations with people where I say, there was only one person of color in the whole room. And they said really, like, I didn't even notice that. Just think about all of the rooms and meetings that people are going, that they don't even pick that up. So that's a service just to point that out to people. You know, even if you don't write some grand plan, but just to say, this can't be who we are. I thought we were better than this.

Sharon: That's powerful. You know, you should talk about the mirror project in reference to that. What a great connection.

Aaron: So, while in the FBI and Allyn brings up a great point and all of us at this table, we have always, at some point been the only one in the room and people don't understand that and I can bring up two examples. I can remember at the Washington Field Office, and we had all of the supervisors, the special agent in charge, assistant special agent in charge, where I was at the time and all supervisors. And there were approximately 50 plus people in this room having a bag lunch with Former Director James Comey. And I can remember I was sitting at the end of the table and we were talking about equity and the room became very silent. And I just raised my hand because I put on my pants just like the director does and I worked my behind off to get there. I told him, I said, it's very difficult for me to recruit people and to mentor people to come into the supervisory roles of the FBI,



because they don't see people who look like me. And everyone looked and then they started putting their heads down at the table. And I said, I need help. I can't be the only one speaking about this, even though I may be the only one at this table. And I can remember the assistant deputy agent in charge coming down after Comey. Comey said, "You're right. We do have a serious problem." And he told me, "Aaron, thank you for bringing that up today at the meeting." I said, "Well, look someone has to, and if I'm in the room and I don't bring it up, nothing's going to happen." Everybody says, "Hey," and everybody comes up, "Oh man, that was brave to say." Well, I'm the only one in the room that has to be brave to say it. Why can't my peers look at who's sitting at this table and recognize the same thing. That was one of the things that really struck me but, also, what strikes me and why I got involved in the Mirror Project, which we advocate for diversity within the FBI. These are retired senior executives formerly of the FBI who see a problem because the FBI right now, you have close to 14,000 special agents, but less than 5% are African American. So, that's 500 to 600 agents throughout the world who are African American in the FBI, which if we don't mirror the community that we serve, the world that we serve, how can we get better? But more importantly, how can we objectively look at challenges that we have in the organization, if we don't bring that diversity of thought, that diversity of background into a room, i.e., the summers protests, Black Live Matters.

Well, at that point in time, there were nothing but white males who were on the seventh floor in the FBI making those decisions. What if you would've had someone, a person of color to could bring a different perspective from their life into that room, to bring that conversation to the table. Could you have had a different perspective, could DOJ have reacted in a different way because you had different individuals at that table bringing forth the frustration of the community that we serve and understanding where we should be and where we should pivot to actually address those challenges. So, I think those are the things that really strike me.

Sharon: Yes, you know that's so powerful when you talk about being a mirror of the community. In some ways, whether health equity, financial equity, it's about being filled with people that mirror the community. I think one of the things, it's about policy too, right? Daniel Doss said something so important to me that we can't return to normalcy today earlier about after COVID. Oh, well let's to normal, but what was normal in equity? Like, look what it exposed. COVID did a few things and not only sadly killed almost a million Americans, but it exposed all of the inequities in society from who actually takes out the trash. Who's driving the bus. If these people are exposed and they're dying, who else is going take care of that? Like, let's look at the supply chain now. Is it because these people are no longer there? You know, you hear all these stories about the great recession or the great resignation during COVID. Maybe these people aren't alive.

They're not there anymore. Like, are those things that, you know, have been uncovered? The people that are living below the margins or under the margins or off the grid that are just surviving and now look what COVID did for that. So, it exposed so many inequities. Allyn, what do you think about that? I mean, gosh.

Allyn: Yes, I think that the advent of Ahmaud Arbery, Brianna Taylor, George Floyd tethered with an economic downturn, tethered to COVID, I mean, it's inescapable the inequities in our systems, in multiple systems. You know, I reread something that I wrote about a year ago and I was skeptical about how long this goodwill, I mean, you had incorporations that couldn't spell Juneteenth the week before putting out Juneteenth statements and giving their employees off. And I mean, all these feel-good things that don't do anything to infuse economic viability and stability in certain communities, don't do anything to really narrow the gaps that we have in so many of these sectors and weren't really long lasting. It felt good, but it didn't last. My view a year ago was that we were entertaining the idea of changing. We weren't actually changing anything and unfortunately that's bearing out. I think that we still have a moment, we still have a time I think what we can try to push changes forward. I don't think this moment is going to last forever. We're already seeing backlashes to much of the conversations. Many of the conversations that we were having even a year ago we're seeing swing in the opposite direction. You know, and I think that we have

to decide as a nation who we are. I feel like the movements throughout American history, abolition, suffrage, civil rights, immigrant rights really essentially put some critical questions in front of this nation. Are you who you say you are or should you be something better? And I think that's a question that we have to pose to the nation again. And I think that we can't be satisfied with just a day off throughout the year. We need to really pursue lasting policy and changes in statute that can alleviate a lot of the pain and a lot of the hurt that's happening throughout this country.

Aaron: I feel for me that everything that my country, that I truly and deeply love and that I wanted to protect my entire life and have done so that others within this country do not want to recognize that or respect that from a person who looks like me because people in this nation really disparage me as someone who was in the military, disparage me as someone who was a police officer, disparage me as someone who was an FBI special agent and retired. Everything that I've done calls into question about what this country really stands for and is willing to stand by, to say, we are all accepted in this country. Your service, your sacrifice is accepted in this country because you are a citizen, because you stepped forward and volunteered to serve and I believe there are a lot of individuals who do need to look in the mirror at themselves to say, what have I done to serve my country. Not ask what does my country owe me? That's not what it's about. But a lot of people are thinking that the country owes them

something. And I like to say, well, it doesn't owe us anything. What our country and our government here is to protect us so that we have the freedom to pursue and to reach or exceed our potential in any way that we can. And that government is here to protect you and that right to give you that freedom to do so, but not to harm others while you're doing it. Not to put shackles on the rights of others who don't look like you in you pursuing that opportunity. It's supposed to be fairness about it. And I think that was one of the things the last years that really put into questions, especially in the FBI, when I thought about it seriously that any organization can be usurped and it only takes a little tip for people to not take action where they have taken an oath to take action, to protect the least of these. And I think for me, that's the thing that our country has to face is that, are we protecting the least of these? Are we respecting the least of these? And we're not going tribal in it that power matters the most. And I think that's where we and we have a reckoning in our country we have to face.

Sharon: You know, Aaron, when you say stuff like that, it's almost like it gives you kind of chills because it is a reckoning but when you think of events like this, or even this caucus or this steering committee where you got to be a catalyst for change, but Allyn was right when he said, you got to uncover it. You got to talk about it. We got to say, are we okay with this? And it is interesting how that pendulum kind of is going back and forth. Okay, everybody's going to move this way. We are uncovering things that we

need to change. But how do we keep going? Like, how would you keep going? You know, Allyn, how are you going to keep going even though the pendulum's changing. It's got to be more than just, oh, let's go attend this conference and learn from people that are kind of thinking the same way you think. How do we make that change? I know for me it's when I get up to go to the office and I may be one of the only few when I'm in the room and I have an opportunity to say something, even though it could be uncomfortable, I've got to say it, and I'm going to address it. Hey, these are some things that we need to look at. You know, why don't we do this? And I'm blessed enough to be in a place where they appreciate that and it makes some change that you can see. Like on the television, or you can see in the room or at the building. So, I think for me, it's going to be, I get up every day, I see where I can make a difference and then talk about that and talk and help other people, too because you know, you guys are both big mentors. I know you are Aaron, because I went to your retirement ceremony. It was full of people that he had mentored and it was amazing. And so Allyn, how do you see, even though the pendulum goes back and forth, how do we effectively keep being a catalyst for change?

Allyn: Well, so first off I'm trying to be retired like Aaron. I may not have mentioned that he's retired and that feels like the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I've been to the mountaintop. Look, I think for me two things other than my family sustain me during difficult times; my faith and history.

When this nation has gone through really difficult periods, I try to get more rooted in my faith and history. The important thing about history, I think it shines a light on what's possible for the future and it tells you how previous generations endured, but it also says that it is a relay race and there is a baton that we are holding and there is work that we have to carry forward. I think that it's important for us to stretch out the timeline, right. You know, America looks different if you start the clock at 1776. It looks very different when you start the clock at 1619. When you think about, we were told stories about Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, and I love Benjamin Franklin. I think he was gangster. He is my favorite so-called founding father. But you have to look at the role of Blacks from the foundation, from the pre-foundation of this nation, economically. I mean, when you think about the wealth that was created from industry, and if you think about planters as being modern day corporate CEOs, which is what they were and how that wealth built on top of it, Blacks building the Capitol, the White House, the actual wall that was on Wall Street, and I think that when you stretch out that timeline, what that says to me is that I have as much say about this country's trajectory than anybody. And I don't care if your people were on the Mayflower, like mine were on a ship, too. It was a different ship. We didn't have to pay. That was the up side, but you know, that means that I have a stake and I really feel deputized by my ancestors to say like, it's my job to continue to try to push this for working in partnership with other people.

Sharon: I love that deputize by my ancestors. I mean, what do you think Aaron?

Aaron: I agree with everything Allyn's saying and it's going to take courage for people individually to step outside of their comfort zone and take risk. I had a buddy who retired 20 days after I did and he is big into politics, but he's big into his faith. He wrote an article that really a lot of people read, and it was about Walt Disney and, "*The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*." The program that Disney was at. And he went on a rant. I don't want to be preached to. Disney has gone too far. I shouldn't be told what to think and I don't believe in what he was talking about. He was talking about the last episode where Mackie is in front of the cameras talking about how this country doesn't love me. But I'm a Black man and every time I put on this uniform, and I wear it, I'm here to protect it, even though you may not think about me in that way. So, I read this article and I knew him, and we were connected on LinkedIn, so I hit them up and I said, hey, very interesting article that you wrote. I'd love to speak with you about it. And we were good friends and he got back with me. We made a date and time, I called him up and he said, first thing, "Aaron, I know you're going to grill me, and I know you're going to get on me about this, but let's be faithful about it." But I said, "No, I just wanted to have a conversation, because I wanted to understand where your thought process was with this article." We got to talking about our backgrounds. And when I told him about my background



because he didn't know I was a police officer, he didn't that I was in the military previously. I told him, I said, when I was young and Sharon and I, my dad was in the military, and moved around, but we had to go to school in Alabama one semester. I can remember in Alabama we were bussed. And that was the beginning of busing. And at the bus depot, we saw KKK and the confederate battle flag and shots were fired and we had to be evacuated out of the back of the bus by Alabama state troopers finest. Okay. And I had to explain this to him. I said, but that wasn't the first time we were bussed because dad moved again because he was in the Navy as well and we moved to Jacksonville, Florida, and we had to be bused again. And yet again, we go through those same things.

I went through my history and I told him this one story. I said, when I first came out of the academy and I was assigned in Louisville, Kentucky, I was doing a background check on a presidential appointee. I went to a home, it was an elderly woman, she came to the door, and I showed her my creds. I was in my finest blue suit. I thought I was it. I'm a special agent with FBI. I'm great. Oh, this is great. Right. And the lady looked at me and she said, "There are no 'n word' special agents in the FBI." And she just kept repeating it. And I'm, "Ma'am, here's my creds. Here's my card. You can call the office." Sure enough she gets on the phone to call. "I have this 'n' sitting at my door claiming to be a special agent with the FBI." And it happened to be the radio operator that I knew and told him I was going out

to conduct this background. And he said, "Well, ma'am describe him for me." She described everything. "No, no, ma'am. He just arrived here in Louisville. He is an actual special agent with the FBI. You know, you can have him show you, his creds." I showed her my creds again. "And does he have this number on the bottom of his creds?" And he had the number of my badge number. "That would be him ma'am. Yes, yes." And she said, "Well, there aren't any 'n word' special agents in FBI." "But there are now ma'am." "Well, okay." So, she opens the door. She goes and she makes coffee in her finest China, because I was in a well to do neighborhood. She had coffee. I conducted my interview and at the end of the interview, I said, "Ma'am, you know what," I said, "You were absolutely, right. If you don't believe that someone is a special agent, we have a lot of people here impersonating and trying to be a special agent. You should call them." And we said our goodbyes and I walked out the door. Now, I don't know if the woman went and threw all her China out. I don't know if I was the talk at the country club saying I actually met a Black FBI agent. Right. But you know, I thought about this in the future that my interaction with her could have gone any number of ways. I could have just walked away and not even completed the interview. I could have said other things. That's the box in the top of your head, that's silent that you're saying those things. But I think about this in the future. The next person that she meets that's an African American male or African American female, will she give them a chance to speak to them? Did that make a difference in her life?

Maybe it was a difference because she talked about it at the country club that she was in or her neighbors. "Oh, I met this person." Maybe that was a change. I don't know. However, we are kept to a higher standard than others. And if we're talking about equity, that was one of those moments where we have to go above the fray to change whatever narratives she may have thought about and how she thought about African Americans at that point. Maybe that helped in the future.

Sharon: But that showed me in 1997 that this country still had a long way to go, and that even though I thought I may have reached a pinnacle of law enforcement and counterintelligence, that hold on one second young buck, there's still some things that have to be worked on. I was in Louisville, Kentucky and that wasn't the first instance and I have many more, but I just remember that because that was my first instance out as an FBI agent and that always will leave an impression upon me about my country and about individuals and how they think about people.

Allyn: So Aaron, she didn't throw away the China. She saved it for the next time a Black person came by her house so she could use the same cup and saucer. Yes, I mean, that's just plain sense and I need to correct something you said. You said you were in your finest blue suit. I don't know that anybody in government service is known for wearing fine suits. They usually don't fit and sometimes they don't match.

Aaron: I was just out of the academy, so I was in shape at that time. So, I did feel pretty good about myself.

Sharon: You guys are funny. I think in closing, I just love this conversation about LaSure's on equity. You know, whether it's equity in a boardroom or equity running down a suspect, being in the Department of Justice or how we even help our nonprofits. I think it's about being in the room. From our grandfather being in the room, actually being in the ocean, but being in the room was important and it was pivotal when a few years later our dad who looks so, you know, Aaron and our father who looks so similar to our grandfather, we were at this pretty cool event where they were bringing a Black church and a synagogue together to talk about how we are together and how all of our struggles. They had the pastor speak and they had the rabbi speak. We ate collard greens and matzo ball soup. It was just this whole thing. There was like this 95-year-old guy and he's in the room, like you go after service and you have snacks after, and he comes up to dad and he's like, "LaSure, what are you doing here?" Like he's 95. He's real old. Our dad's like what? He's like, "Alfred." Like this guy knew grandfather. He said we served together. And then finally he said, "Oh, that's my dad." Because he looks so much like him. So, we talk about equity. He said, "Yes, we used to do that, you know, go do those bomb things but they told us not to talk about it." What's interesting, we talk

about equity, and we talked about, we need to talk about it. Our grandfather never really told all those stories about him. He just said he was in the Navy and that's what he did. He never talked about how much he served. And so, for me it was kind of full circle for that story, that random guy to come up to talk to Aaron and our father, because he looked so much like him.

Aaron: Well, you know, granddad used to take the shrapnel out of his legs and throw it at us, so you know.

Allyn: I'm glad I missed that.

Sharon: But it's just an interesting thing about being in the room. So, thank you for this conversation. I'm so glad you're here at the caucus and we're able to talk about this and really connect. You know, it's almost like a family reunion because we're like, oh we're all here and we all kind of look similar so people would know us. See, this is a podcast. So, you will not know us to see us, but you know, it's good.

Aaron: We'll have matching shirts next year.

Sharon: Yes, a big LaSure on it and then other stuff. All right. Thank you everybody for joining us for this episode of the Movement is Life health disparities podcast. Thanks for having us. All right. Thank you.

(End of episode)