People to Know: A conversation with Dr. Cleveland Francis, Episode 01

Introduction:

Welcome to People to Know, a series of conversations with the diverse people who contribute to the medical profession.

In this episode, Dr. Quinn Capers talks with Dr. Cleveland Francis about his career as a distinguished cardiologist who also happens to be a Country music recording artist. Join them in Part 1, as they revisit the Jim Crow South of Dr. Francis' youth.

Their conversation was recorded during the second week of Black History Month.

Dr. Capers:

It's a real pleasure on this. The beginning of the second week of Black History Month for us to have a conversation with a very, very accomplished individual. And it's a real honor to me to have this conversation with someone I only recently met. And that's Dr. Cleveland Francis. Dr. Francis is a cardiologist who has spent many years practicing in the state of Virginia, most recently with the Inova Heart and Vascular Institute, but also is multidimensional, and really, as you'll see, a true renaissance man because he is also a musician and recording artist and has not only blazed historic trails in medicine and cardiology, but also has blazed some historic trails in music and the recording industry. And we'll find out a little bit about that. So, thank you, Dr. Francis, for having this conversation with us. Welcome to our conversation.

Dr. Francis:

Well, thank you very much. It is quite an honor for me to be here for this interview and thank you for asking me.

Dr. Capers:

So let's jump right in. And what we'll do is we'll cover several important phases of your life. We'll talk about really both of these important contributions you've made to the world—as a physician and as a musician. But let's start, if you would, telling us your early background. Where were you born? Tell us a little bit about your family in the house that you grew up in.

Dr. Francis:

Yeah, I was born in Jennings, Louisiana, in 1945, so I'm old. And I was born on 300 Pearl Street (I think I sent you a picture of that) and very proud of that. We were in poverty. My mother and father both were uneducated formally. They had between them maybe a third-grade education (so we didn't have a lot of bedtime stories) and they could do simple mathematics, but we were happy. We were a big family. I had five sisters and we you know, coexisted in a little small town of Jennings, which had about 700 black people. The town was completely segregated in terms of high school and elementary school and whatever. And most of the people there were domestic workers and there were, of course, our teachers and the preachers and the store owners but it was a nice place to grow up in for me.

Dr. Capers:

And so when you talk about the segregated schools, I imagine the schools weren't the only things that were segregated. Since this is Black History Month, can you share any memories you have about, you know, Jim Crow was still ruling during that time?

Dr. Francis:

Oh, it was quite apparent. We had we had separate rooms at the train station. There was a railroad track actually in our town—it was a perfect square—and it was a track that went straight across it. And blacks lived on one side and whites lived on the other side. And you could not go up, what we call it up town, after dark. It was a movie theater where blacks set upstairs, whites were downstairs. And, you know, you had to wait until they could give you concessions, and wait in line to get in, the bathrooms were never cleaned up there. I remember my high school teacher got thrown out of the public library. He decided to try to check a book out. And so you couldn't check books at the library. And medically, it was interesting. The nearest place that we could get medical care was Lafayette, Louisiana, which was about 40 miles away. And my father had severe asthma, and they looked as though several times he would die. And we had to put him in the car and drive 40 miles to Lafayette, to the charity hospital. And you could not, you know, I was actually delivered at my grandmother's house, which was next door. You couldn't use OB services and we had a midwife and it was completely separate.

Dr. Capers:

Can you talk about how that made you feel, particularly your ego, your self-esteem. At times, paradoxically, we've read about, others have talked about, even though the world around you was saying you're not good enough to drink from this water fountain, to eat in this restaurant, stay in this hotel, that people growing up in that were ensconced in the black community and they didn't feel inferior. Can you talk about that?

Dr. Francis:

Yeah. In the black community was a whole different thing. I mean, the guy who would be called boy and was cutting grass was a prominent deacon in our church, you know, and he had, we gave him all the honors there. But a very strong factor in my own life was my mother and the community. And, you know, we were treated like kings. We were told we were something, we could be anything we wanted to be. I don't know if they believed that, but that's how we really grew up—thinking that. And my mother happened to be a very special person. She was sort of just sassy. She didn't buy into all this thing. I think my father was overwhelmed by it, but my mother was not. And she taught us, you know, your clothes may be ragged, but they they're clean. That's all you need to be. You can be anything you want to be. You know, opportunity will come for you. You have to be ready. Although she couldn't read and write, she made sure that we were doing that in school. She was almost at the school a couple of times a week, checking on our grades and looked over report cards, and she understood what an A and an F was. If you were near the other end, you were in trouble. And you couldn't come back from school without books. You know, you came home without books, she'd say, well, do you know what everything in these books means? And I said no. She'd say, well I want to see a book in your hand when you get

here. And then the mentors in our school, the teachers, I was very close to my biology teacher, my science teacher. You know, they taught me to play chess, they taught me that elementary photography. You know, they were building you. I don't know where we would go from that, but we had a sense of something in our community. And the whole community took care of you, really. Because if we were doing something not right four streets down from your house, the lady could come off the porch and wipe you out and spank you, and you would be praying they wouldn't call your mother because there was a sense of community there.

Dr. Capers:

And so at each phase of your life, we're going to talk about the Cleve Francis that's the future physician and the Cleve Francis that's a future musician. Let's start with medicine first. When does that Cleve Francis, in this very warm and nurturing environment—though segregated—get the idea that I want to be a doctor when I grow up.

Dr. Francis:

Well, you know, I grew up not with that in my head 'bout being a doc. I was always the soft-hearted kid. You know, I couldn't kill a fly. I couldn't kill a roach, even. And I was always, you know, petting things. I was a softy in a way. I was interested in science, but I didn't really get into the doctor mode until I got to college. And we can talk about that later because I didn't even think you could become that. I had no, I didn't grow up thinking I wanted to be a doctor. I didn't even know that was possible. That's the whole point about this mentoring. You know, people need to see who see who we are because some people were not exposed, you know. All the doctors I knew when I grew up were white and we couldn't even see those doctors. So I didn't really get into medicine. I was into science. So that's sort of a bedrock for all of this stuff. I was into science and I loved biology, but I had nothing in my head that I wanted to be a doctor when I was in Jennings.

Dr. Capers:

And I'm still sticking with the high school and pre high school years. When did you fall in love with music?

Dr. Francis:

Well, I think I was always in love with music. My family, we were a musical family. My sister sang. We grew up in the Baptist Church, in gospel music, and a lot of people who played banjos and guitars and harmonicas on my street, and guys formed these bands. I fell in love with the guitar, and I actually made a guitar out of my father's King Edward cigar box and some window screen wire from our home. And I was tearing up the windows, so my mother said this kid is tearing up the windows. She said to my father, I think he wants a guitar. So she saved quarters for about a year in order to make a down payment on a Sears and Roebuck Silvertone guitar—a six-string guitar. And I remember I got that when I was about 9 years old. And she said, now, if these grades go in the tank, the guitar goes in the attic. So she made that commitment. And then I started—I taught myself to play the guitar. I had five sisters, so I spent a lot of time by myself, it wasn't playing with the dolls. And you know, I had other people learning to play guitar along with me, but they were picking the guitar. They were like learning how to make notes and do lead guitar. I was more interested in chord structure. I taught myself chords, playing sort of

like Richie Havens and Open D style, where I could sing and write songs. I spent a lot of time writing songs, and I didn't do a lot of singing, either, while I was in Jennings because my sister sang so well. I wouldn't even sing in her presence. So some people are still surprised that I turned out to be a singer because my sister was the star singer, who lives in Texas at the moment right now. She and she went on to become a music teacher.

Dr. Capers:

OK, so many musicians have this story that they really took an interest in music due to a music program in school. In your elementary school or high school. Did you? There probably was a choir, but was there a music program? Was there somebody around who taught you how to play guitar?

Dr. Francis:

No, I taught myself to play the guitar, learned all the notes myself, mainly chord structures. And I had a capo where I could change the keys so I'm not a really an accomplished guitarist, but I played enough to make some money in graduate school to buy food, so I could play a little bit. But actually I was interested in music. I played the tuba in high school and I played in our marching band. And I also was the student choral director, so as far as that was concerned, I was always interested in the music. And when I was in high school, my mother allowed me to join a traveling gospel group. There was a group called the Mid-South Spiritual Singers, and we would travel all over southwest Louisiana and probably western Mississippi singing at revivals. And I played guitar and sang lead for about a year with that group.

Dr. Capers:

Tell us, if you will, just a little bit about those tours. This tour bus are we in cars? How are you going to the different concert venues?

Dr. Francis:

Well, we were traveling by car. And when I was in high school, by car. And there's a song that I recorded called Baloney Again. And, you know, you saw this movie about the "green book," and I experienced some of that myself. We traveled by car, usually about five or six of us in a car. And you couldn't stop at hotels and service stations and to use the restroom. So we actually would pull beside a stream and, you know, wash our faces. We slept in the car. So I experience some of that stuff personally. Traveling with this group to do these different revivals.

Dr. Capers:

OK, so now it's your senior year in high school. Tell me about your thoughts about college as you're going off to college. Do you have a major in mind and what are you thinking about music as you head off to college?

Dr. Francis:

Well, college, my last year in high school was very transformational for me because I had to make some decisions at that time. Most of the of the black males in our class either went to the military when they finished high school or they got married and stayed around and continued in domestic work. The

women got married, very few went off to college. So what would happen is that the principal would herd all of the male students in the library and then a guy from the Army, a recruiter, would come to the to the library, and administer a test. And you really couldn't flunk this test. Even if you didn't put your name on it, everybody would pass. And a couple of weeks later, people would go off to New Orleans for some kind of physical. Then they'd go to boot camp and they'd come back all dressed in their military khakis and shiny buckles and shoes. And sometimes it was the best shoes you've seen or you've worn in your life. And I was the one guy who decided not to go. Like, I decided that this was not going to be for me because my uncles and my father, everybody had done that same thing. And there they were sitting under the tree, you know, playing cards or drinking a bottle of wine or some beer. They still couldn't go in the restaurants. They still couldn't go to the hospital. They still couldn't go to a doctor's office. So I decided, not knowing exactly what would happen. Even my mother told me, you need to think about going to the military and getting the GI Bill. As I found out, that wasn't working either, if I had even done that. And I decided, no, I'm not. So I didn't take the test. So I remember my principal calling me over the intercom, saying Cleveland Francis, come to the office. So I went there. He said, the captain said you weren't in the library this morning. I said, well, I…. He said, you forget? I said, no, I'm not going. And he said, I remember the last word he said to me, he said, son, I think you're making a big mistake. As I walked from his office, and I just sort of turned the corner and sort of slid down the wall thinking maybe I did make a mistake, but I stuck with it. And so when I got out, I started cutting lawns and trimming trees. I bought me a metal suitcase and bought some clothes, some underwear, and, you know, I didn't quite know exactly where this was going to lead me because, unfortunately, my counselors had not discussed college with me. And it was interesting that sometimes the discrimination came from within your own group. I think the blacks were separated into more of an elite class, and then there were the worker class. I was among the working class. But I think the school teachers and principals, their kids were going to go to college, and they had a whole different attitude about them. But I found out just by writing letters and word of mouth about Southern University and Grambling College and the Land-Grant College Fund that every black who graduated from a negro approved high school was eligible for. So I wrote off and got a national defense loan. And by September I was enrolled in Southern University in Baton Rouge.

Dr. Capers:

Do you remember the day you left Jennings for Baton Rouge—and I'm not sure geographically how far a trip that is—but you remember that?

Dr. Francis:

That's about 150 miles. Yeah. I was just, you know, it was almost like a dream come true. It was like I had, after that conversation with the principal—that was in my mind. I said, no, I think I made the right decision. I'm going to college. And I was the first one, you know, in our whole family, probably from the time of slavery, to go into college. So I was very proud of that. My mother was real proud of that as well.

Dr. Capers:

And I imagine along with your suitcase of things, you've got you've got your guitar with you as you're heading to Baton Rouge.

Dr. Francis:

Well, I tell people I carried three things: I had my guitar, my science book, and a Bible. At one point they thought I was going to be a preacher. I was a youth leader, and I was speaking to groups, Sunday school teacher, and actually, I did a lot of that. When I went to Southern University, I became sort of like a little campus minister. So I even thought I might go into the ministry until I joined a fraternity in college and that sort of turned that around.

Conclusion:

We invite you to join us again on March 3, as Dr. Capers and Dr. Francis discuss the next phase of his life, when he completes his medical training and builds his practice.

That's next on People to Know.

Dr. Quinn Capers IV is an interventional cardiologist and professor of Internal Medicine at UT Southwestern Medical Center. He serves as Associate Dean for Faculty Diversity and Vice Chair for Diversity and Inclusion in the Department of Internal Medicine. The opinions expressed are his own and do not reflect those of UT Southwestern Medical Center, the University of Texas System, or the State of Texas.