

Emily Laff Interview Transcription

February 10th, 2021

EMILY LAFF:

My junior year of college, so it was Shanel's sophomore year, and I walked into that class on the first day and was blown away because I was one of maybe only a couple of white people and I thought, wow, this is kind of uncomfortable, like, this is a little weird. I wasn't used to that in my classes, and it occurred to me that every time a Black student probably walked into a room, that's how they felt at TCU. Like they were usually the only person that look like them in that room. So that was a humbling moment for me, that whole trip it was very humbling. And on that trip, I got very close to Shanel, I got very close to Deonna and we formed a friendship which was spring of 2016, I wanna say. So. over the summer we stayed in communication, we face timed, we would talk just regularly because at the end of that Civil Rights movement class we all knew we wanted to do something to make change, but we weren't exactly sure what we wanted that to look like. Obviously, like a list of demands have been brought up. I mean, we studied that whole semester, we were studying how people make change, how they make grassroots change.

So, over the summer, I think one of the biggest catalysts was Philando Castile being killed in 2016, summer 2016. And I was talking with Shanel and Deonna, we faceted and they were explaining to me how heavy everything felt. And, you know, at TCU at the time around the same period, people had wanted one of the flags to be lowered to honor those that were basically, the victims of police brutality, and there was a lot of pushback from that. I think Shanel and Deonna from what they told me, it felt like they weren't being heard and it was something that I couldn't relate to emotionally on a very personal level, but because we were friends, it was impacting them and it impacted me too. And I think, I get asked a lot about allyship and what that really means, and I think it's very easy to look at a textbook and try to read facts or formulate an idea of what it means to be an ally. But what it really is to be an ally, I think allyship is the extension of friendship. And I think it's very easy to fall into, when you love people and relate to them and empathize with them, and you see their pain and you know there's something you can do to fix it, you're gonna do what you can do to fix it. And in this case, obviously it's so deeply rooted, and it's a part of TCU's history, and it's part of the United States history.

So, it's not something that you can band aid over. And we knew that, but we did want to do something that would kind of, you know, rattle some cages. And I think that other schools had done things similar along creating list of demands. So, we were on face time, we all got together, we kind of opened to Google Doc, we were all looking at it, and just started compiling a list of things that other schools had done, a list of things that we thought should be done at TCU. We change things up. We changed some wording and then we just sent it to the Chancellor. And I don't think we really knew it to expect. I don't think I realized at the time how much pushback there would be because in my opinion, I saw how much of my friends were hurting. I felt like there was something that we could do, so why not do it? It's not like we're doing anything illegal. We weren't, in my opinion, doing anything wrong. So, I don't think in that moment, I thought

this was gonna be more like, “hey, this is what people are experiencing here. It's time to make some change.” I did not expect the pushback that was received by any means.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

So, you came to that conclusion and you came to that initiative because of your friendship with people of a racial group other than yours. Do you think that the way the institution is designed right now and is structured, do you think that it encourages, favors, or fosters those kinds of multiracial friendships, or do you see that the system is still very divided in terms of opportunities for people to socialize with other ethnicities?

EMILY LAFF:

I definitely had to seek out those situations for myself. And that is only something I say because I've always been interested in civil rights. And I think it took me being in an uncomfortable situation like being in that civil rights movement class to engage with people that weren't like me, that didn't look like me because I don't think would have happened on its own. And I unfortunately think that that is just again, that's the work of years and years of people are grouped differently, and that's how they wanna spend their time. And unless you're in a classroom environment or in situations where you're organically having conversations, that doesn't typically happen. On the first day of class Shanel stood up, we were doing introduction, she stood up and said, “I'm Shanel and I wanna get arrested.” And I was like, “whoa, this girl is really cool, but I don't think she wanna be my friend.” And then we ended up being roommates on the bus tour, and I was like, this girl is gonna hate me. Like, I felt like we had nothing in common, but fast forward now 5-6 years later, she's one of my best friends in whole world. We both live in the same state. I see her all the time when I can, we keep in touch, and you know, I think Deonna and I have also kept in touch, and we've been held together more so our passion for social justice. But there's a friendship and an allyship there that would not have happened on its own. And almost if I can try to seek it out in any other sort of context, it probably would have been forced. So, I feel like that's so delicate because I'd love to interact with more people that don't look like me and have different backgrounds from me to be able to celebrate that, but the system isn't a really designed for that in an authentic way. Unless you're gonna force groups together in giant forums to talk about race, and I think that's really messy. And that's hard for people to do. And it makes people uncomfortable. It makes white people super uncomfortable, and it made me super uncomfortable. And I think I'm the one that chose to take that class because I wanted to grow. And I think TCU's mission about fostering growth and encouraging personal growth, that played a role in me wanting to push myself. And the opportunities were there, I just needed to take initiative and take advantage of them, and I think it's a lot easier for people not to do that if that makes sense.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Yes, absolutely. Were there any other students involved besides the three of you?

EMILY LAFF:

There were few of us that got involved. I think Shanel, Deonna and I obviously really wanted to do the list of demands, and we wanted to bring back the chapter of NAACP at TCU, which was a lot harder. We didn't get a lot of support doing that from any faculty members on campus. I think everyone wanted us to do it, but there was no one that was like, alright, this is who you need to talk to, this is how you file this is. So, I think we felt a little bit lost and were basically told it would make more sense to start a new organization. So, we started the Students of Color Coalition and there were people who would join that, be part of it from time to time. I don't have a list of names on the spot, I could maybe get one, but there are people that were involved and were really passionate and felt like they had a voice and representation. And you know, I think when the football game started and people started, you know, doing more at the games, there was more involvement then. I wasn't a part of that because I worked for the football team. So, I wasn't even physically in the stands for that, but it was all something that was part of the same movement.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

So, you say that you didn't have much faculty support, maybe that would explain why the demands went straight up to the Chancellor. There was no chain of command that you followed.

EMILY LAFF:

Yeah, I think that there were faculty members that probably were on board, but weren't vocal about it. And I think one of the things we also had to take into consideration was this is people jobs and their livelihood. And it's very different as a student to speak up than it is for a faculty member. I think there's a lot of pressure there and I probably wouldn't have understood that till I was in the professional world, but it sounds good to speak up and wanna be the one to hold the torch, but that also means taking a risk, especially in a more conservative school where I think that faculty members would have been facing a little bit of scrutiny and pressure. And so, we really did kind of do the whole thing by ourselves. And in terms of just, you know, getting it to the Chancellor, I don't even- that whole thing went so quickly. It was like we emailed it off and then all of a sudden, you know, Chancellor Boschini's assistant was reaching out, wanting to schedule a meeting. And we were like, oh, this is happening, okay. So, it felt very serious, very fast.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Do you have any recollection of anyone who actually stood in your way, or do you see it just as people? Is there anyone in particular or any people in particular, any group in particular, organization?

EMILY LAFF:

I mean, I think there are obviously several obstacles, I think more than anything, they were unspoken. There were different organizations, there was a really conservative organization on campus that brought a conservative commentator, Ben Shapiro, to campus right after the list of demands came out. And he said some really interesting things about me, and Shanel, and Deonna, and I don't think he even knew that I was white. So, I don't know how much research he

really did before he came to the school. But there were, I know, there were professors in there. I know there were tons of people on campus that day that went to hear him speak, and basically denounce everything that we were trying to accomplish. So, I think there were groups of people that were unhappy with it, and I see them all as the same type of person with the same mentality. They probably had different faces, some were students, some were professors, but at the end of the day their belief system was a little bit different. And I think they didn't really recognize their privilege, and I think they didn't really understand what we're trying to do, or they felt like we were coming off as entitled for asking for things on campus for People of Color.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

TIME: 10:33

Yeah, because there was this article that's said, "Black student group makes demands," and clearly it was not a Black student group, it was mixed?

EMILY LAFF:

It was, I mean, I think it was majority Black, but I think people really wanted to miss the point on that. And I think they wanted to frame it that way, despite I mean I'm obviously not Black, but I don't know how many people really realized that. So, I think it was easier to just make it a black student group it as just Black students, instead of recognizing, "hey, there are a lot of people that feel this way, including some white students on campus as well."

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

So, what was Chancellor Boschini's reaction when you actually met with him?

EMILY LAFF:

I think he was nervous at first. I think, which then made me nervous, 'cause I was like, oh, wait, he's nervous about this. I think he really, I will say he was very swift to act and sit down with us. He wanted to ask a lot of questions. I think he really wanted to know what was going on and I think that's what makes him great at his job. And I think that's why a lot of people respect him. I think he was genuinely very surprised that I had said, "you know, look, I went through a large majority of my classes at TCU not having a lot of Black students in them," which was the truth and he was really surprised by that. So, I think it was for him realizing, "gosh, the experiences that even these white students are having, there is a lack of diversity and representation." Where we where could we be improving, what could be doing, maybe doing differently. And that's what led to that Race Relations Board that was created, by my senior year of college.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Now when I look at his memo, which I know that you're very familiar with. The memo says several times that you came up with ideas, but when I'm looking at it from your angle and from the terms that you used, they were more demands.

EMILY LAFF:

It was titled "List of Demands". Yeah, I think it's his job to mitigate conflict and to keep things under control at the university in a way, that's a lot of pressure I would never want that pressure, and I think he did incredibly well with it. They were ideas and concepts and I think we have listed them as demands because verbiage is important. And I think people have asked and had ideas for so long, but nothing's changed, so we wanted a term that was a little bit more aggressive and would incite more action more quickly.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Did you expect those demands to be fully addressed?

EMILY LAFF:

We knew when we were writing them that this was not, this was a reach, right? But I think that's important because it set a high standard. And I think it was what we needed in terms of putting ideas out there, there were some things that really weren't that far off base, like wanting a multicultural center, you know. Panhellenic fraternities and sororities take up quite a bit of square footage on this campus, but there aren't houses for some of the other fraternities and sororities for, you know, the multi-cultural groups. And I think for them, they don't really have a place. I guess occasionally it could be Jarvis, but there was never really a spot where I think people felt safe and celebrated, and so that was on the list of demands. I mean, there were several things that we felt, you know, like having the flags lowered. We put a lot out there hoping that maybe something would stick.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

And how satisfied are you with the initiatives?

EMILY LAFF:

I think in retrospect, you know I think creating a board, it's double-edged sword. I think it can be helpful because you're getting a lot of great minds together, but it can also be, you know, I think by the time we actually met and we were talking about plans, things that sort of fizzled out, and I was about to graduate. So, it was pretty- I almost was worried that that was created just to appease us as a group without creating too much attention or anything too, you know, monumental, too fast, which I understand. I was glad that Critical Race and Ethnic Studies became a program after I left or as I was in the process of leaving TCU. I think that opens the doors for more diverse classes and with more diverse classes, you're gonna attract diverse individuals. And you know, for me, like, I wouldn't have opportunities I'd had I not registered for the hours with the class. And that for me was my opportunity to find growth and I would encourage and help the other students recognize that and try to do the same thing for themselves, that's how I met some really important people in my life. That she thought whole trip changed my eyes, like it just changed my view on so many different things.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Where did you go?

EMILY LAFF:

We went through Mississippi. We went through Tennessee. Basically, everything that we talked about all semester, we then went saw those same places and spoke with activists. And it just, it really wasn't all that long ago, and I think we forget that. To be in the same church where Martin Luther King spoke and wanting to come back onto something that was paying tribute to him and trying to leave this place a little better than we found it, that was our goal, that was my goal. And I was doing it not for myself, but it was for Shanel and Deonna and everyone else that I felt didn't feel represented, it really was just for them and I don't see that in a white savior way, I don't say that in a "woe is me kind of way." I recognize my privilege. It wasn't something I did for credit. I think I got in more trouble than I did anything else. I, you know, at the time I was interning at CBS News. They wanted to cover it, and you know, I was also working for TCU through 360 and Jean Brown said this is something, "you're supposed to be writing the news, not making the news." Not in, I mean, she was very supportive of what I was doing, but you know, I as a journalist, it was really hard for me to ride that line because I told all these stories and it changed the way I view things, and then I wanted to go and change it too. So, that was kind of an internal struggle, I think. But at the end of the day, it's something that didn't have anything to do with me directly but everything to do with what I can be doing to make a difference so.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

So, I have spoken with Shanel. I have spoken with Deonna. Shanel has agreed to do an interview. Deonna has not. She believes that it may not be safe to speak about this openly. What trouble do you think could come from you doing this interview? And since there are risks, according to you, why did you choose to participate anyway?

EMILY LAFF:

I can see where Deonna is coming from for sure. I think my situation's unique. I'm still a white student. I had a very different experience. I still, at the end of the day, loved my experience and I love this institution and I love the strides that were made. And it's not so much to me, it was the people in the experiences, right? So, people like Shanel and Deonna made TCU for me. I've already graduated and I don't necessarily feel like I'm in a position where I'll get too much criticism. I think I'm being honest, and I think that my honesty and Shanel's honesty and Deonna's honesty has made this place a better place, not just for white students, but for students of color, and that was the goal. So, I don't really worry so much about that. I would love to stay in good standing with the people that I care about at the school, and I still talk to them all the time. And I know how they feel about me and I know the conversations that we have, I don't really worry about that. I think at the end of the day, it's important, you know, even though I don't work in journalism now, it's important to tell stories, and written word lasts forever. And you know, in these interviews, and if you go back in history and you see things written down. I mean, it's important not to repeat them. So, I think it's my mission and my obligation to tell what I know from my experience and kind of go from there. So, that is ultimately my goal is just to speak my truth, not for Deonna or for Shanel, but my truth and how they impacted me and moved me to be a better person, and hopefully make this a better place.

But I can also see how, from a political standpoint, or even just from a race relation standpoint in the way that things are in the world today, where there would be a level of feeling unsafe speaking up about it. And you know, Dr. Hampton is a professor here and she always talks about brave spaces, right, like safe spaces are important, but so are brave spaces because that's where the learning happens, that's where they're growing happens, that's where the vulnerability happens. And I think that leads to seeing the world in a new way and being honest about the way things are and what we do to fix them. So, that's kind of where I'm coming from. And ultimately, at the end of the day, I love this school and I want it to be great, and I think this is a step in the right direction in doing that. So, that's what I'm doing it because I love to wanna, you know, send my kids here one day knowing this is the type of place where they'll get a diverse education and be surrounded by people that do and don't look like them. And it's a place that accepts and celebrates cultural differences, and recognize the social injustice, and tries to work for social justice.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Very good. Tell us a little bit about what you're doing now, what you've done since graduation, and how your experience has helped you in your professional life and in your personal life, if you care to share that.

EMILY LAFF:

I think working for this football program is very important to me. I ended up building amazing relationships with people there, so I was Director of Football Recruiting in Colorado State. So, I facilitated trips for families to come out to see the campus and eventually some of them would end up going to CSU. So that was really fulfilling. I did something similar at UCLA, out in California, helping with the football staff, helping families. And I do think a big part of my job then, you know and why I'm so grateful for my background, is I had a better understanding of where a lot of our players were coming from. A lot of our players are men of color and have different backgrounds and very different life experience than me. But at the same time, I was able to relate to them because I have relationships with a lot of different people that taught me a lot, and I think authentic relationships are the most important thing. So that's what I carry with me always. Now I work for an NFL sports agency, so we represent, you know, NFL players that play in the league across every team. We have about 250 players and with that said, I think especially with everything that's happened this past year from the social justice perspective, this is not new. This has been happening and I think although the NFL has taken some time to catch up, this is very much an issue that's been a long time coming. And sadly, enough even though NFL players make the billions of dollars, they still deal with the same type of stress and prejudice and the weight of the world when they are person of color and they have family, you know that are experiencing those things and they experience those things. There's no amount of money that can keep you from experiencing discrimination. So that's something that I've seen. And I love our players, I protect our players, and I love their wives and their families, no matter what race they are. But I think you know as a sports agency we've started an initiative called Agents of Change where our goal is to do better with education and you know to represent our players of color, make sure they understand that we're in their corner. We wanna help them from

the social justice perspective, whatever that looks like. And it means educating our staff and that's something that we've been in the process of doing, that's something that I'm a part of. So, I'm proud of that.

And I think that the experiences I've had with social justice has stayed with me because it is just kind of ingrained in who I am. I think I'll always be passionate. I think it's my responsibility to have those conversations with my white friends that are maybe uncomfortable or don't know how to address it. I think it's my responsibility to check on my Black friends because it's not their job to be the spokesperson when these things happen. And you know, I might have questions or I might be uncomfortable or whatnot, but it's not their job to answer those all the time. So, I think the biggest thing as I've got older is trying to encourage people to reach out, do your research, form real relationships because, like I said, allyship grows out of that first, if it's gonna be genuine. So, I carry it with me every day. And I think in terms of my personal life, it's made me just a better and more compassionate person. And I see situations for what they are. I see things the way they're playing through media, and I've seen the way that our last president handled things and how, you know, hopefully change of reform is coming. But outside of it being a political issue, I think it's a humanitarian issue. And I think that there's always room to treat people better and open your heart and be honest about what's going on. Especially, you know, recognizing my privilege, knowing that celebrating and making room for people does not take away from me. And I think that's the biggest thing people don't know how to do. I think they're defensive and they're ignorant and they are scared when they don't need to be scared. You have to have the conversations and that tough. And you have to take ownership of some places where, yeah, maybe I have more privilege there than I realized, but it's a privilege to not realize you have privileged. So, it's just a really poignant experience for me and I'll talk about it every chance I get 'cause I feel like if you talk about it, it won't die and we can't let it die. It's an ongoing issue and that's why it's important for me to have a conversation about it.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

That's beautiful. So, now what word of advice do you have? And that's my last question. So, you talk about white privilege and testifying to your white friends, how do you approach someone who does not have that knowledge, that they are privileged, or that there is injustice going on that, you know they do not necessarily relate to the issues of racial injustice because they're simply unaware that it's there or it does not affect them personally. How do you testify or how do you even start a conversation on that topic with people of white privilege?

EMILY LAFF:

I usually start a conversation based on the literature, it's like *The Knapsack*, basically like, it's pretty much all about white privilege. I don't know if you've ever heard of it before, but basically like a list of all privileges you have as a white person. So, I'll typically start by saying like when you go to the grocery store, when you look for makeup, how hard is it to find your color? How hard is it to find people in magazines that look like you, how hard is it to see someone in your dream job doing that job? Because nine times out of 10, that's pretty easy to find, right? And that in it of itself is a privilege for someone like my mom, that is of an older generation doesn't really

understand race relations the same way because she's really, probably, has never been exposed to that a lot in her life. The way I tried to explain it was, I have a younger brother, and I said "okay, mom, if David, my brother, if David got pulled over by the police, would you be worried?" And she said, "yeah, I mean, I would be concerned." And I said, "well, would you be worried that he would lose his life?" And she said "no, I wouldn't." And I said, "well, that's a privilege." And I think that hit her a little bit differently. I think it's the things that we don't have to think about because we don't see it every day. I think, I know that my friends are going to have to explain to their children someday how to have those conversations with police and the way that the world is going to see them. And I won't see them that way, right? But there are a lot of people that will. So, I think it's really important to recognize the trials and tribulations that people color deal with when they're raising their children, even that wouldn't occur to anybody else. And I'm trying to be really sensitive to that and I try to be very aware of that, no matter who I'm dating, you know, race, color, creed, any of that. Like, there's a different type of safety that you have to take into consideration for a Black man, and that's something that is not lost on me. And I think Black women need protection and that needs to come, not just from Black people but from white people too. So, you know, I've been blessed enough to build really special sacred relationships through sports and through school with people of color. And I would I'd run through a wall for them, you know. So, I think it just comes out of love and compassion and, you know, wanting to be loyal to them and that allyship comes out of friendship.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Well, Emily Laff, thank you so much for sitting with us and being willing to share your story. You made an enormous contribution to this cause, and I just want to let you know that the Race & Reconciliation Initiative is very grateful for your participation.

EMILY LAFF:

Of course. Thank you for thinking of me and for reaching out.

DR. SYLVIANE GREENSWORD:

Thank you.

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