

Transcript: Can racism make you sick?

dw: Hey there. We're doing something a little different this time. This story is not about the cost of healthcare, not in dollars and cents, and it's actually not about doctors or hospitals or medicines, but it's a story about health and about sickness and injury and about how people can care for each other and help each other heal.

And, I will tell you, it is a tough story. This is a story about racism, violence, and ongoing intergenerational trauma. So, you know, however you might need to take care of yourself around a story like this, I want you to do that. But this is a story I've been hearing about and looking forward to talking about for years.

Cara Anthony is a Midwest correspondent with our partners at KFF Health News, and she's been working on a documentary and a podcast about this story since 2020. And now her work, *Silence in Sikeston*, it's out in the world. PBS aired the documentary in September and the fourth and final podcast episode came out just last week.

They connect the stories of two young Black fathers who were killed in the small town of Sikeston, Missouri, almost 80 years apart. Cleo Wright was lynched by a white mob in 1942. They dragged him from the jail to the Black section of town, and they doused his body with gasoline and lit the fire in front of a church on a Sunday morning.

In 2020, Denzel Taylor was killed by Sikeston police, he was unarmed. Police fired at least 18 shots. So the podcast *Silence in Sikeston*, it explores racism, violence, and systemic bias as public health problems, literally making people sick across whole communities and across generations.

And it asks, among other things, can breaking silences be healing?

This is *An Arm and a Leg*, and usually it's a show about why healthcare costs so freaking much and what we can maybe do about it. I'm Dan Weissmann. I'm a reporter. I'm thankful to get to talk with Cara Anthony about her work. Cara, thank you so much for joining us.

Cara Anthony: Thanks for having me, Dan.

dw: My pleasure. How, how did you become aware of these stories and how did you decide to pursue them?

Cara Anthony: In 2020, I was sitting on my couch, watching the world erupt, you know, watching what was happening to George Floyd in Minneapolis. And I really wanted to join the conversation that was happening. And I decided, you know what? While the world was paying attention to Minnesota at that time, I knew that there were other stories out there. And so, I'm a Midwest correspondent for KFF Health News. And I thought I should take a look at what's going on in Missouri. And I decided really to look at rural Missouri and Black communities in rural Missouri and kind of stumbled upon a part of the state known as the Boot Heel. That's Southeast Missouri. It's called the Boot Heel because that part of Missouri kind of sticks out like a boot and um, ended up in Sikeston, made a call in 2020 to the city's first Black clerk there. And she said, look, if you want to know what it's like to be Black in the Boot Heel, you need to have a conversation with my grandmother, Mabel Cook. And I said, okay, you know, pitched it to my editors. I thought it would maybe be a 900 word story and it ended up being a four year journey. And here we are now.

dw: Wow. Okay. How did you pitch this story initially? I mean, you are working then as now for KFF Health News. How did you pitch this story? 'Like, well, so here's a health story.' How was that part of the pitch?

Cara Anthony: Yeah, I mean, I told my editor, look, the whole country is looking at police violence and police killings, but also I knew that our country had lived through a lynching era, and I just said, look, I want to write a story about racial trauma. You know, at the time I was looking for signs of like PTSD and people who were still living there and had witnessed this lynching that happened in 1942. And my editor you know, at first she was like, okay, you know, go ahead. Why don't you go down there and see what you can find? And the more I started talking to people, the more I realized that this informed their lives, how they related to each other, how they related to even law enforcement today, and that's when I decided, 'you know what? This isn't just a story about history, but rather we need to look at police killings and police violence today.' And that's when I decided to look into the story of Denzel Taylor.

dw: And so his story, his death had happened just a few months before you made your first phone call to Sikeston. It didn't become part of your reporting project until later.

Cara Anthony: There were a few local news headlines about what happened to Denzel, but mostly, you know, people ignored it. There was a lot of silence around his death as well. And that's largely because, Dan, people don't – and still today – people don't feel comfortable talking about this stuff. It's hard. Um, for some people they feel as though their, their lives could be in jeopardy. A part

of the reason why we call it Silence in Sikeston, you know – at first I was calling it, you know, Black in the Boot Heel. I thought that's a clever name. And then I thought that's, that's just wrong. This is deeper. People are holding in stories and I'm getting more no's than I am yeses. And I said, you know, I just told my editor, I said, we have to call this Silence in Sikeston.

dw: Like, what reasons did people give for not wanting to talk to you? Why, and, and beyond what people said, like, why do you think so many people didn't want to talk to you?

Cara Anthony: You know, I think there's a huge fear still. You know, Sikeston is a town of roughly 16,000 people. And, I mean, if you know small town politics, you understand what it's like to be in a smaller city. Everybody knows everybody, right? Also damage had been done there before I arrived and decided to start, you know, asking questions and wanting to tell stories. People really feared retaliation because of racial trauma and because they didn't want their family member to be next. You also have just the weight of what happened to Cleo, right? You know, this is a Black man who was lynched on a Sunday morning in front of the entire community. You know, they drug Cleo Wright to the Black section of town to make a point. That is something that sticks with you. So Black people had their reasons for not wanting to talk other stories, you know, um, things that had happened within the Black community that made them fearful, but also, you know, white residents in town didn't want the city to look bad. Every town has secrets and, um, some of these secrets need to be unearthed and discussed because, um, they can make you sick if not.

dw: Yeah, we'll get right to that. What did you learn about the health costs of living with violence in silence?

Cara Anthony: In episode three of the podcast, we talk about something called anticipatory stress, which means like you're always waiting for the other shoe to drop. So maybe you know, the next generation, they're like, okay, we're okay. Y'all are, you know, we're new here. Um, but then you have your mothers and fathers and grandmothers who are worried about, well, we want to keep you safe and that is stressful. And we know that, uh, stress can wreak havoc on your body. You could start to see the physical manifestations of that show up as cancer, show up as diabetes, show up with heart issues, anxiety, depression, the list goes on and on. You can even become suicidal. That is hard to say, but when you feel like you have no one to talk to, it's a terribly isolating feeling, Dan. And as I kept talking to people in Sikeston that anticipatory stress, that kept coming up.

dw: The anticipatory stress kept coming up. Like what did people say?

Cara Anthony: I mean, mothers were genuinely concerned, genuinely concerned about their children, especially when we think about police violence and police killings. Now in 2020, Denzel Taylor was a young Black father who was shot and killed by Sikeston PD. And even though people really didn't talk about it openly, the body cam footage appeared on Facebook. People did trade around the video and saw what happened. People whispered about it in the same way people whispered about what happened to Cleo Wright when he was lynched in 1942. And so, they were concerned. I don't want that to be me. I don't want that to be my child or grandchild. and this is not just a story that is unique to Sikeston. And let me say that, you know, police violence is everywhere. Police killings occur across this country. You know, and back in 2020, there was a stat out there that said that Black men had a one in 1000 chance of being killed by the police. And so yeah, anticipatory stress is a huge issue that kept coming up in the reporting and one that we should be talking about even more.

Dw: Coming up: As Cara Anthony reported on Silence in Sikeston, her dad broke a long silence of his own. That's next.

An Arm and a Leg is a co-production of Public Road Productions and KFF Health News. That's a national, nonprofit newsroom that produces in-depth journalism about health issues -- including Cara Anthony's "Silence in Sikeston." Now, back to my interview with Cara Anthony about her work.

dw: One thing you do in the podcast is you, um, explore how some of these questions have come up in your own family. And you bring us some intimate conversations and some really tough conversations. Um, what, especially, as you were reporting this story, your dad broke a silence of his own to you. Um, it turned out that years before you started this reporting, he had looked into the death of his own uncle, Leemon, because he'd had a sense, your dad, that the stories he'd gotten from the family weren't the whole story. And after you had started reporting the story, he showed you what he'd found. You sat together in his home office, and he showed you his uncle's death certificate saying Leemon Anthony was shot by police and lists the cause of his death as homicide, but nobody was charged with a crime.

Wilmon Anthony: It says, shot by police or resisting arrest. Well, no one ever, I never heard this in my, uh, whole life. Then item 21 enlisted causes of death: accidental suicide or homicide? And enlisted that item as homicide.

Cara Anthony: Okay. Okay. Um, that's a lot. I need to pause.

dw: So you let us hear your response to that and saying 'that's a lot.' And then you let us hear the click of a tape recorder stopping. Can you tell us more about that moment and what happened next for you?

Cara Anthony: Yeah. I mean, look, my uncle was killed by the police in 1946 in West Tennessee. For most of my father's life and also mine we were told that he was killed in a wagon and mule accident. You know, and so hearing the facts around what happened to him seeing my dad pull up what I would call almost like a pain diary that was just sitting on his desktop of his computer, where he was just filing away things, collecting things, newspaper clippings, Leemon's death certificate. Um, there's a lot to take in in that moment, and I'm still grappling with that and what that means, and how I will even share that story with my daughter one day. But yeah, it's a ton of process and our family is still processing it. You know, I think the next step for us is trying to go and find where Leemon Anthony is buried in Tennessee for some closure now that we know what actually happened to him.

dw: Why do you think your dad chose that moment to share what he learned with you?

Cara Anthony: He saw me, you know, diving into these stories in Sikeston and I don't know if he always thought that I was particularly interested in our family story, if I cared, you know, um, we would go to family reunions and I was a kid, you know, so I would want to go out and go bowling or go to the arcade or do whatever my younger cousins were doing. And I heard whispers of people talking about Leemon at family reunions, but I never really stopped to pay attention. And I think as he saw me traveling back and forth to Sikeston and bringing home these stories – because we lived together while I was reporting this out– I think he really saw it as an opportunity for us to have a difficult conversation about our family's history and our family's story. And I'm really glad that he did because it changed even my reporting approach once I realized what my dad was keeping to himself for all these years.

dw: Has there been a change in your relationship with your dad?

Cara Anthony: Yeah we're talking about more and same goes for my mom. You know, my mom just called me last night with a story, because she, we took a family trip down to Sikeston, um, about a year and a half into my reporting and my parents grew up in the rural South. And so I said, well, let's stop at a cotton field, you know, wouldn't that be fun? And they're just like, 'okay.' You

know being a Black American, I understand that cotton was weaponized and, you know, my enslaved ancestors received nothing for their labor. Now I'm totally aware of that, but I had never been to a cotton field and I thought it would be a good field trip for my daughter and, you know, my mom and I were talking about that last night and she said, well, did you know that, um, sometimes my grandfather when it was cold outside, he would chop down the entire stock of cotton and bring it inside of our home and place it in front of our wood burning stove so that we could pick cotton inside of our house so that we wouldn't be too cold, you know, um, during the winter months and I'm just like 'what?' It's like she's been working like she was a grown woman since she was an elementary school student. And that was really hard for me to think about, to process. I was really sad when she shared that story with me. I realized that it informed how she raised me and my siblings and even how she interacts with my daughter. And so, I was grateful, but also just emotionally devastated because these are absolutely necessary conversations and I always think about now, like, what if I hadn't raised my hand to go to Sikeston? Would I have missed all of this? So I'm really grateful and thankful that they're now opening up and sharing these stories as tragic and as horrific as they may be. These are necessary conversations.

dw: You've mentioned here and you mentioned in the podcast that you have a kind of ongoing inner conversation with yourself about as a parent, how do you share and when do you share, um, these stories with your daughter. You hear a conversation that you have with your daughter that's, you know, I think an example of aiming to, um, create space for closer communication. I'll play it here.

Cara Anthony: Sit over, come over here, come over here, seriously, do you remember a couple of weeks ago when you were crying and I told you to fix your what?

Lily: Face.

Cara Anthony: That wasn't very nice. I want you to know that we. Can talk about things, because when we talk about things, we often feel better, right?

Lily: Yes.

Cara Anthony: Can we keep talking to each other while you grow up, in life, about stuff, even hard stuff?

Lily: Like, doing 100 math facts?

Cara Anthony: Sure. That's the biggest thing in your life right now, but yes, all of that. We're just going to keep talking to each other. So can we make a promise?

Lily: Yeah.

dw: It's such a lovely conversation and you choose to end that second episode with that. Why is that the end of that episode?

Cara Anthony: First of all, I just want to point out that I hope everyone heard like the hesitation in my daughter's voice when I said, can we make a promise, like building trust is like so important and I think we ended the episode that way, partly because Lily represents the next generation that will come up and, and lead us, but also because it's just raw and real. And I don't want my daughter to 'hush and fix her face,' but rather to express her emotions, say what's wrong if something's wrong. And so we wanted people to feel the authenticity of that moment and to have people understand that it starts young and it starts now. And I'm not going to get it right all of the time, but a professor who's in that episode. Her name is Aiesha Lee. She's at Penn State University. And one of the quotes that she gives us is so profound where she says, and I'm paraphrasing a little here but she says like, each generation has like a piece of the work to do because these issues and problems have compounded over generations, over time. And so, you know, even a small conversation like that and what we're doing now here, Dan, this is a piece of the work, you know, and if we think about it like that, that really gives me a lot of peace, knowing that, okay, I can't fix it overnight. I can't do it all, but I can at least do my part and that's what we're trying to do.

dw: Near the end of the documentary, right, there's -- there's a ceremony, essentially in Sikeston of people filling jars with soil-- to the kind of museum and Institution that Bryan Stevenson created in Montgomery, Alabama. It's called the Legacy Museum, is that right? It connects these hundreds of years of history from enslavement, mass incarceration, including lynching. And there's an exhibit there, hundreds of jars filled with soil and each one is from a place where lynchings happened. And so here we see people from Sikeston filling jars to send there. As I saw it, you know, in the documentary, the way that scene is presented. You see people smiling. Um, you know, you see people experiencing some kind of satisfaction. Satisfaction is not the right word. I mean what is behind those smiles...

Cara Anthony: It's redemption. It's redemption. You know, it's like, um, early on in the process, I was watching a lot of different, um, TED talks about communities that had similar, you know, racial reckoning experiences. And I ran across one that talked about The three R's of history, which is, you know, the three R's are recognize, repair, redeem. You have to recognize what happened, you know, in order to repair it. So you have to say, yes, you are wounded. Now let's figure out how to fix the wound so that you can have days of redemption and move forward. And that's really what you saw in that particular scene but that doesn't mean the work is complete. And there are people that don't want a marker for Cleo Wright in the city, even today. So let's not, you know— I just don't want to paint a picture of perfection or that everything is fine now, because there's still so much that needs to be done. that's my biggest thing with this, is that this is a starting point. Um, we're not at the finish line yet.

dw: Cara, thank you so much.

Cara Anthony: Thank you.

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Dw: Cara Anthony is Midwest Correspondent for KFF Health News. You can find the documentary Silence in Sikeston on the PBS app, or on YouTube. Silence in Sikeston, the podcast, is available -- wherever you get your podcasts.

We'll have a link wherever you're listening.

We'll be back in a few weeks with a story I think you'll definitely want to hear. Holden Karau has been building a tool that'll let you use artificial intelligence to write appeals when health insurance denies a claim. Her tool is called Fight Health Insurance, and the slogan is: Make your insurance company cry, too.

That's next time. Till then, take care of yourself.

This episode of An Arm and a Leg was produced by me, Dan Weissmann, with help from Emily Pisacreta -- and edited by Ellen Weiss.

Adam Raymonda is our audio wizard. Our music is by Dave Weiner and Blue Dot Sessions. Gabrielle Healy is our managing editor for audience.

Lynne Johnson is our operations manager. Bea Bosco is our consulting director of operations.

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Zach Dyer is senior audio producer at KFF Health News. He's editorial liaison to this show.

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