

## Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Alexis McGill Johnson

JVN [00:00:03] Welcome to "Getting Curious". I'm Jonathan Van Ness. And every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by acting president and CEO of Planned Parenthood Federation of America and the Planned Parenthood Action Fund, Alexis McGill Johnson. Where we discuss the current state of reproductive rights and the politics surrounding Planned Parenthood. I'm nervous. I'm like way more nervous than normal.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:00:35] I'm so excited.

JVN [00:00:37] It's like subject matter and who I'm interviewing. So much. OK, ready?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:00:41] I'm ready.

JVN [00:00:41] OK, great. Welcome to "Getting Curious". This is Jonathan Van Ness. And buckle up, buttercup. This is gonna be an episode. Welcome, Alexis McGill Johnson, acting president and CEO of Planned Parenthood Federation of America and the Planned Parenthood Action Fund.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:00:56] Thank you for having me, Jonathan.

JVN [00:00:58] Thanks so much for coming. So tell me, this is off subject and we might as well bring in a little levity. Tell me what your morning was, because you are giving me impossibly balanced CEO fighting for equality, fighting for public health, like in New York City, like you're nailing life, I feel like. You're like, I'm obsessed with your team from Planned Parenthood, it's like a well oiled machine, like we are nailing it. I just want to hear about your morning.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:01:22] Oh, my goodness. My morning. I got up. I've got a 7 year old and a 10 year old. I drop the girls off at school. Very girl power school of town. Walk the dog, came back, walk the dog. Had a school meeting. And then I got a call from a senator, Senator Murray, who is working on Title X, making sure that it gets restored in the spending bill. So I had like a 15 minute call with her on my way down, packed my bag. I'm on my way to D.C. right after I, after I finish with you, to head into Congressional Black Caucus weekend so I can continue being CEO. But the amazing, amazing team at Planned Parenthood, like people, Planned Parenthood people are so passionate about the mission. They are so passionate about the people that we serve every single day. And so it's just such a pleasure. It's like the service gives us power, the people give us power. And that just like wakes me up every morning. Wanting to do more.

JVN [00:02:15] I mean, not that many people get to talk to senators, you know, every morning about such important subject matter and such lifesaving programs. So, you know, Title X is something that I'm blessed to have an understanding of what it is. And I'm also blessed to understand how important it is because it helps so many people. And I am able to read the news and everyone needs to read the news. But for people that are listening that maybe don't know what Title X is. Can you give them what that is?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:02:43] Absolutely. So Title X is our oldest, is a 50 year old program. Our nation's affordable access to birth control, to STI testing, to cancer screenings. It's a, it's a set of grants that helps states and providers actually offer this testing at low to no cost. And so if you walk into a Planned Parenthood health center or another provider and you're able to, you know, you need a STI screening, you're concerned about something that's happening. It's okay for our health centers to be able to say, you know, essentially what can you afford? And, and

you can be treated on a sliding scale. So it doesn't limit your access to health care, it actually encourages you to, to participate in healthcare system. So, you know, we're forced out.

JVN [00:03:30] And so really quickly, why Title X is so important now and always has been is is really if you don't have insurance and you don't have money and you, you're, "my pee hole is burning". "I am having some, I don't feel right", you know, but I also don't have insurance. Where do you go? What do you do? Like that is something or maybe I'm pregnant and I don't have insurance. Like there could be so many things that are going on. And, you know, Planned Parenthood is classically, you know, it is on the first line of defense for people that are underserved and don't have the resources to obtain proper health care. And I think that one thing that a lot of Republicans and, you know, the new Republicans, which is like the more racist fascist Republican Trump Pence administration, because I do think that Title X historically has enjoyed very bipartisan support. And in the 80s and 90s, like this wasn't I mean, abortion was never a militarized political issue until like that Phyllis Schlafly or Shay, who is she? What? This is really off sub-, we don't like her. She was like this like 80s lady. I think she's like, why there are so, people like her in this like conservative movement. It is, it has gone to like vilify and weaponized people needing health care. Period.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:04:56] Hundred percent.

JVN [00:04:56] So when you say that the Trump administration forced Planned Parenthood out of Title X, what? So and just really quickly because I got upset again. Title X is, it is a set of grants that Planned Parenthood is entitled, that has been entitled to that, that enables them to offer SDI testing, pregnancy assistance to people that have low income and no insurance.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:05:16] Absolutely. And we are actually Title X's largest provider. So we serve 40 percent of Title X patients across a number of states. And so it is kind of critical that Planned Parenthood was picked on in this way. But essentially what happened was that on August 19th, we were forced out of the program because the Trump administration decided to enforce a gag rule which essentially asks our providers or stipulated that our providers, if a patient came to us and they were pregnant and they were seeking information on abortion, that our providers couldn't refer them to information on it. They could refer them to prenatal care, but they couldn't actually tell them anything about abortion providers, where to get information on it.

JVN [00:05:57] How is that enforced?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:05:58] So it is, how is what enforced? The gag rule?

JVN [00:06:01] Yeah. I mean, so let's say that a person goes in and they want, and they want abortion services and they ask specifically to the provider at Planned Parenthood, like I want abortion services. That doctor has their hands tied and is not allow-, they're just like I can't tell you anything?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:06:14] Yes. And so that is why it's called a gag rule, because it's literally a gag in your mouth. The provider literally cannot say, all the provider can say is, I cannot tell you information about that. And so was that mean for a provider? Right? I mean when you come into a center and you come in, you know, as a patient wanting to get the best qualified information. You're not out on the Internet, doctor Googling yourself. Right? You were actually, it, you have made a choice to go to provider to get the best care, the best quality information, and then that, that provider can't give you that information. We just think that's a, you know, that's unethical. We think that is substandard care. And essentially, the Trump administration decided to bully us out.

JVN [00:06:49] What do you think the ultimate goal is of the Trump Pence administration in doing that? I mean, if there's an X amount of numbers that Title X has to use, you know, for SDI testing for people, for, for reproductive care for people. Where does the, where does that money and who is going to use that now? Like is it just going to be, go into thin air? Because it, it can't be used? Is there going to, is there enough providers to even disseminate that care to people?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:07:15] No, and the providers who are in the network have already come out on record to say that they cannot absorb the number of patients who would need access under Title X. So that's like one thing. Where they are sending the money are to groups like Obria Group. Right? Crisis pregnancy centers that don't even provide access to contraception. They don't, obviously don't tell you about, about abortion at all, but they don't even provide access to contraception. Right? So even the, the intent of the program is being undermined by these political attacks. And, you know, let's make, let's be 100 percent clear here. This is not just about access to STI screenings or birth control. This is a coordinated attack. Right? This is a coordinated attack on Title X, on the number of abortion bans that we've seen since I joined the board 10, almost 10 years ago. Right when you're talking about when, when this work started to get incredibly politicized, we've seen almost 450 bans on abortion. We've seen 26 just this year passing. So we've got Title X. We've got abortion bans in the hundreds. We've got a number of conservative judges that are making their way through the Supreme Court. I went through the circuit courts and being confirmed and we have about 15 or 16 cases that are winding their way up to the Supreme Court in an attempt to reverse Roe and to put that baby right on Justice Kavanaugh's desk so that they can essentially ban access for women. That's the strategy.

JVN [00:08:43] And in the event of that, if they did overturn Roe, it would basically be reversed to the states and state supreme courts to make their to do, to create new laws around abortion and access to abortion, access to reproductive health care. Just the whole thing.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:08:57] Yes. So we kick it back to the states. Some states have been active in terms of codifying Roe already in legislature states like New York and California, Illinois, other states still have to do that work. Right? So in Michigan, it would kick it back, I think, to like a 1930s law around, around abortion. So it's, there's a lot of work that has to be done even in advance of that being the scariest possibility of, you know, "Handmaid's Tale" being, being real.

JVN [00:09:23] So for the gag rule, I just want to take a little, I don't know if you can really speak to this, but I do know that back when the Trump-Pence administration took office back in 2017, the first thing they did was implement that kind of international gag-

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:09:35] Global gag rule.

JVN [00:09:37] Global gag rule, which basically pulled any sort of American funding from any, any sort of Planned Parenthood-esque nonprofit internationally that provided any sort of contraceptive care. Planned Parenthood-esque services. They're like, no, we're not helping you anymore. And it was even more comprehensive than the Bush global gag rule.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:09:54] Yes, it was.

JVN [00:09:56] OK, so that's that. Then you have the whole, like, first two years of the administration trying to subvertly get rid of the Affordable Care Act and make sure that we can revert to a place where insurance companies can discriminate against people with preexisting conditions. So that was like the next two years. Now in 2019, we do have, there's, I think, there is, I know like six states at the top of my head from following the ACLU that have blocked or file blocks for abortion or heartbeat bills in the states like Mississippi, Missouri, Georgia, Ohio,

Alabama. One more somewhere. So there's a few things. So, like, you know, obviously this country was founded on the idea of like separation of church and state. And it does feel like this is a very coordinated, like attack, like with a religious idea in mind that like, you know, this is like our deeply held religious beliefs, that life starts at, you know, birth because that is like a Christian fundamental like belief, because like there are other cultures and other religions that do not believe this, like and you know what if you're atheist? And so I think that there's just like a lot of areas where it's like, why is your moral compass like being legislated to dictate other people's lives? Especially when that same moral compass is like, you know, so broken in other places in these very same people's lives that are enforcing or trying to legislate what happens to women's bodies? We had Melinda Gates on "Getting Curious" and she's incredible. She wrote a book called "The Moment of Lift". And she taught us a lot about how when women in developing countries are given access to birth control and to reproductive care, often that is associated directly with them moving up and being able to have upward mobility economically. Because when families are given the power to dictate when and how they're going to have children, they're able to educate the children better, provide better lives for the children and really be in the driver's seat of planning for their life. So it's like, why is it that, and you know, Title X is a program that bene-, or that a lot of people of color and uninsured people use, so it's a, it's a grant service that that helps people of color and also people that don't make a lot of money, don't have insurance. And those aren't the same thing because there's also a lot of white people who are served by title, you know, it's, because there's low income and then there's mar-, like there's all sorts of like intersectionality to like marginalized groups. So I just keep thinking I'm like, why is it that this guy who's been married three times, is married to an immigrant, is one of the richest one percent, and then this fucking Christian nightmare of a vice president who we have, why do they want to make sure that people who don't have money and can't afford babies keep having babies? Why do they want to do that? Is it the mass incarceration crisis? Is it so that we can keep making people to put in these jail cells? Is it? It just doesn't make sense because we don't wanna take care of the babies. They want to make sure that people who can't have it. So I just I'm like, what's the end goal here? Like who? I just feel that there's a deeper, more insidious, coordinated attack here that feels like a modernized, it's kind of like the "13th" with Ava DuVeray-, or DuVernay. Like it feels like they don't want their source of people to marginalize, imprison, effectively enslave and our mass incarceration system. They don't want that tap to dry up. And that's what my worry is.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:13:11] I mean, look, I think, I think what you're hitting on is these interlocking systems of oppression. Right? I mean, because obviously we cannot ignore the, the impact that just fundamental racism that white supremacy has had on this country and creating and limiting access to, to care of, you know, whether it's health care, whether it's access to education, whether it's access to transportation, to jobs, all the things that actually impact our ability to be free, to live free. And these attacks, you know, are really when you, when you layer on race in that way and you layer on our ability to, to just, you know, to just get on, on a bus and have reasonable access to a health center that is a couple blocks away. And to be able to, you know, like you said something, something's going on down there. I need to figure out, figure out what that is. To be able to just walk in and not have to worry about whether or not you can, you can pay for a test, but you can actually get the care that you need because health care is just a fundamental freedom. It's a, it's a way for us to actually express ourselves and to live free. And so, you know, my concern and there is this young woman who spoke so beautifully in an event I was in last week, and she was, she talked about how she became Planned Parenthood activist and how when she was younger, she had, she'd gotten pregnant and she went to her, you know, luckily she could go to her mom. Her mom brought her to a Planned Parenthood. And, you know, she's recounting the story and she just keeps thinking, she, she just kept saying, you know, like, I just at that moment, I stopped dreaming. I just stopped dreaming because I didn't know, you know, what was going to come before me and everything that I thought about, everything I dreamt about, just was starting to flow to, to, to go away. And the idea that she could, that she could really

focus, you know, that she could seek an abortion, that she could restore her ability to dream and to imagine. Right? Because that's really at the core of what freedom is. Our ability to imagine what our lives-

JVN [00:15:19] Life, liberty, pursuit of happiness.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:15:20] Exactly. What it's going to be. And, you know, and I just thought like like, yes, that's exactly why we're, why we're doing this work. And that's exactly what they're trying to do, is take that opportunity to be free away. So, you know, I don't. I won't go so far as to conspiracy theories, 'cause I'm not gonna give them that much credit. But I will say they are benefiting from these systems of oppression that give them power, that give them privilege and that allow them to do all of the crazy that they're doing.

JVN [00:15:45] So we're going to take a really quick break. You're going to probably listen to me tell you about, like, gorgeous English muffins or like my cats or like God knows what's coming up. But we'll be right back with more Alexis McGill Johnson right after the break. Welcome back to Getting Curious. This is Jonathan Van Ness, and we're just really having a gorgeous conversation with Alexis McGill Johnson, acting president and CEO of Planned Parenthood Federation of America and the Planned Parenthood Action Fund. Every time you go into like an official congressional meeting, I hope you don't have to, like, do that entire intro, because that is a, it is a title and a half, honey. But I love it.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:16:27] It is, it is.

JVN [00:16:27] If you listen to "Getting Curious", you know we love titles around here, so, but that's a long one. So anyway, so I have another question about Title X. And, you know, so let's say you don't have insurance and you feel like there's something going on or you have, or you're having a, maybe you're discovering that you're pregnant. Maybe, you know, you don't have insurance, you don't have a doctor. You walk into an emergency room like you don't. What if you don't? I mean, where do you? If there's, if there's not a Planned Parenthood clinic, like is there walk-in clinics? Is there, where do people? Like, I mean, because that is where I knew to go when I was uninsured and when I was 25 and I had something going on I needed help with. It was 2012. I think Obamacare is like not available to get purchased yet, it was still all going down. And even if you could, actually maybe you could but I was still 25 so I was like under my mom's or something. I just can't remember. But I needed, I needed to get a checkup and that's where I knew to go. So where-? People just won't go.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:17:23] Yeah. And I think that's what we've actually seen is that when people don't have access to health care or when it, when health centers move, you know, close or they're too far away, you know, Title X was one of those programs that was actually really intended around kind of rural areas. Right? Or, you know, your ability to drive a reasonable distance again just to get health-, we take for granted living in the city or living in L.A. or wherever that we can actually just, you know, get down the street and it will be right there. But other people have to drive like, you know, like a hundred miles to actually get health care. And so where do people go if, if they don't have access to those places? They either will have to drive farther. Right? To find that access to the, to the, to a hospital, to an emergency room, or they will just forego the care. And that, you know, for Planned Parenthood, you know, in the, in the decade I've been around, what I've seen is that we talk broadly about sexual reproductive health care. Right? That is kind of at the core of what we do. But oftentimes that's the first point of entry into the healthcare system for a lot of folks. So they're coming to us because, you know, perhaps because they have a sexual reproductive healthcare need, but they may have other things that they are concerned or worried about, and our ability for our providers to refer them to the right places where they can get, you know, care at cost or, or, or at no cost is really such an asset and benefit

to the community, to the communities that we serve. So, you know, what we've seen, what we've seen in, in other states is that people will forego care. We've also seen is that, you know, when people don't have access to STI screenings, the rates of STDs go up in communities.

JVN [00:19:00] Yes. So let's talk about that. So this year, the Trump administration forced Planned Parenthood out of Title X, which happened in what month?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:19:07] August.

JVN [00:19:08] So that happened in August. That was like last, just last month.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:19:13] August 19th.

JVN [00:19:13] And so when we've, but they've done this in, like, state by state cases because like I-, I know that like in I-, or there's been cases where-, explain to me, like how we know that cases have shot up.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:19:23] Yeah, exactly. Because other states have been forced out and, and, or, or decide, determined that they could not comply with an unethical gag rule. And what happens in those cases-.

JVN [00:19:33] I just want to slow that down really quick.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:19:34] So sorry.

JVN [00:19:35] No, I know. I love it. So but basically, we've had, we've seen in states where, I think there were Republican controlled states. So we had Iowa and?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:19:42] New Hampshire.

JVN [00:19:43] New Hampshire, which is not Republican controlled. Isn't New Hampshire kind of fierce?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:19:46] Yeah. But that's what I'm saying like you have, yeah. There's a whole problem with the state legislatures that's, you know, the-.

JVN [00:19:52] We've covered that on "Getting Curious" too. We know how important state legislatures are.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:19:56] Yes. And so thank you for your work. Thank you for your conversations. Because it's all building to understand the impact. Right? Like the actual public health impact when you don't have access to Title X and people who are used to, to relying on a place like Planned Parenthood or another provider and they're able to go in and get tested at no cost. They will forego the testing and they will, you know, continue thinking, you know, perhaps thinking that they're OK.

JVN [00:20:23] For sure. But I want to talk about how, what has happened at a federal level with the Trump Pence administration forcing Planned Parenthood out of Title X has happened at a state level on a smaller scale leading up to this. And once those things have happened, we've seen in those states that gonorrhea rates, chlamydia rates, STI infections went up.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:20:40] Yes.

JVN [00:20:41] Also, on another level, we know that antibiotic resistance, this is just food for thought, y'all. If you live on the coast and you have family in the middle of America, like let them know. We know that gonorrhea and chlamydia antibiotic resistance is raising across the world. So when people have infections for longer and like that is not good. You want people to get treatment. You do not want people who are infected with any STI to be proliferating the STI by not getting treatment, so that is just like a really, it's just a really, really big deal. So do you know, can use to be like how state legislatures interact with funding Planned Parenthood?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:21:17] So that, the money would funnel through the state. Right? It would be granted to the state and then the state legislature would determine how it would get, get allocated. Right? So the state legislature would or go through a state agency, rather, the health care, health agency for a state would you know, an organization like a Planned Parenthood has to apply for the funds to be dispersed. Right? So they have to prove that they are able to provide the quality of care, that they can meet the caseload that they can, you know, engage in their services is as good as it can be and they're-. And so, so, you know, essentially they get accredited by the state to actually comply with the grant.

JVN [00:21:58] And this is why like knowing who you're locally affected-, locally elected leaders is so important. I mean, just like a few months ago, you had that state rep in Ohio who was talking about like LGBTQ+ issues. And she was like, really just like nightmarish. I mean, there are quotes that come out of state legislatures' mouth across the country that are just like crazy and are so identified with their religious ideologies. And they are like literally legislating with their religious ideology. It is, it is so shocking to me, but it really shouldn't be, because it's really, it's how so much racism and oppression has continued to be so pervasive in this country, because a lot of that is based in like police, people like, it's veiled thinly in religious stuff. This is another thing. I think that on a more macro scale of Planned Parenthood is, often Planned Parenthood gets reduced to this idea that it's an abortion place. And I think that that has been something that's been very effectively built by the GOP to do that. And that is just in fact like not what it is. So one thing that we know is, isn't it like the Hatch Amendment that says that like that no-?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:23:05] Hyde.

JVN [00:23:05] Hyde. The hatch is like some other. All these H Amendments. But the Hyde Amendment, and that actually, you know, we've, we've heard that like the ACLU and we've seen that a lot of the Democratic candidates have committed to repealing the Hyde Amendment because like we just previously stated, like we talked about Melinda Gates. It's like when people are given the the right and the access to be in the driver's seat of their reproductive futures, they are also given a better chance for economic betterment and for their communities. It just better across the board. And I mean another thing, I just wanted to hit really, really quickly, as long as we're talking about that, then I'll move on. It's that I think too often were quick to think that in the United States, we're not a developing country. There are parts of the United States, there are people that are in Los Angeles that are dying on the street, like literally from homelessness and complications with homelessness, from not having access to all sorts of treatment. Skid Row. There are, there are so many parts of this country that do not have access. And I think would be on par with places that we would very much consider a developing country. So I think we're of-, often too quick to think that, like, we are somehow above other people's issues. Like we are very much dealing with, with issues of poverty and developing nation esque issues right here. Depending on where you are now.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:24:19] No. That's absolutely right. And we have a global arm to the work that we do. So we are serving populations, all of, you know, and in Latin America and Africa. And what's, what's so interesting, right? Is that the lessons that we're seeing over there are

things that we're now using to get people access to care in some of the states that have gone dark for us.

JVN [00:24:38] So, ooh. Some of the states that have gone dark for us. What does that mean?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:24:42] Meaning that where there's like very, there's either one health center or no provider or no access. Right?

JVN [00:24:48] So that's like our Alabama. Like Kentucky.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:24:50] Yeah.

JVN [00:24:50] Now, that's why this is like such a big issue, when you, so I mean, obviously for reproductive health care, that is a huge issue. Another issue of public safety is STI screening and people having access to STI screenings. So for people that live in Alabama or live in Kentucky, like single, I mean, what do you do if you don't have a car or you don't have, if there's no bus? Or if it's like, there's just so many things like to getting to that access when it's made harder. And so I just guess what are? So the, the Hatch amendment-

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:25:25] Hyde.

JVN [00:25:25] Hyde. Jesus! Love us. So the Hyde Amendment is one issue.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:25:28] Right. And so the Hyde Amendment, right? Which means that like no public money can be used to fund abortion.

JVN [00:25:33] So would that mean that basically like this whole time, like if someone did get an abortion at Planned Parenthood, they had to pay for it themselves?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:25:40] It depends.

JVN [00:25:41] Or they had to get some sort of different grant or something?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:25:43] Yeah. And it, it depends on what the, what the state is and where they can get access. But with the Hyde Amendment, does it force Planned Parenthood or, or any provider to separate its funds out. So any, any reimbursement that it's getting from Medicaid or other, other programs like Title X are not used for.

JVN [00:26:01] And basically just to not ruffle the ultra Christians feathers and-. Just so you know, you guys can't see this, but. Yes. Yes. Body language. Yes. But so. Or you know. Or whatever. Which is what your body language said. So. But what are-? Really quick break, you guys. I want to get into more about what Planned Parenthood does. But we're going to have to hear more about something gorgeous, I'm sure. Welcome back to "Getting Curious". This is Jonathan Van Ness, so really where we were picking or leaving off from is what else does Planned Parenthood do?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:26:41] Yes. And I want to come back to, I mean, because you said that it's not all that we do, abortion is not all we do. And that is a misconception. But we do provide abortion. Where we can and we do it unapologetically. And I think that sometimes people try to put the well, it's only 3 percent of what you do. So, like, why do you talk about it all the time? I mean, we're not going to be, you know, apologizing for doing the work. [CROSSTALK] Right? So it is a, it is a portion. It is, abortion is what we see in a full range of reproductive health care. What else we do is we offer STI screenings. We offer education about about sex and our, and our bodies and our identities. We offer cancer screenings. Some of our clinics are, health



centers are working on offering transgender care. Some of our clinics are offering primary care. So it is, it is a full spectrum, certainly, of sexual reproductive health care, including abortion. But other areas that we're, we're actually building out as well.

JVN [00:27:35] Yeah. I want to go back to the abortion stigma because I think stigma is just like a huge issue across the board. You know, abortion is health care.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:27:42] Yes.

JVN [00:27:42] Period. When it's not treated as health care like people die and it's, it's not OK. I mean, it is absolutely health care. Period. So, but I do notice that when I was trying to explain that, you know, just now, it's like, like I've almost been conditioned to have a little bit of shame around it because it's like, well, it's only 3 percent. It's like, so I think it's really important that you brought that up. And I want to kind of expand on it a little bit because I am someone who does not have a uterus and ovaries. I am not able to get pregnant despite my years and years of efforts. And I think that it is really important for people that do not, that do not have the ability to be pregnant, can really think about what that stigma is to accessing health care.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:28:27] Yeah.

JVN [00:28:27] Because it is health care. So when we think about the, like that conversation, because I think what the GOP has done, they have militarize the, or weaponized the idea of abortion and created that as like this like moral issue. So when we're trying to talk to people about Planned Parenthood and just about abortion being health care, like how can we not do what I just did with you? Which is like when we're talking about it like how can we take-? Yeah, I asked the question. I'll stop talking.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:28:54] No, no. Absolutely. No. Take the stigma out of it. Right? I mean, the stigma essentially is shame, right? That's what we, that's the concern that we are grappling with. You know, the way I talk about it is I talk about the number of, of women who have had abortion. Right? So 1 in 4 women in their lifetime will have had an abortion. Right? 1 in 3 women, I think, or 1 in 3 Americans will have heart disease. Right? So you think about things that are normal issues that people deal with in the course of their health care. To me, the number alone suggests that we need to be treating this as a normal, one of the safest medical procedures in, possible. And, and yet we are targeting people who access abortion. We are targeting providers who offer abortion. Organizations that support abortion. All of that, that together has created this incredible shame, this incredible stigma. So I think we have to you know, what I've seen over the last few years is just people telling their stories, telling the whys, giving more context to it so that you're actually putting a, you know, you're just, you're, you're humanizing the experience and you're not just listening to, you know, some person's perception of, a moral perception of what they believe. You know, they, they would do in a particular situation or what should be done. You're actually giving more context to, to the experience. And I think that actually, you know, storytelling is one of the most amazing ways of actually combating stigma and allowing people to understand what's operating.

JVN [00:30:36] And like, I just felt like when I was asking you about it, like I almost was like baking in an apology for, for Planned Parenthood, like providing abortions, period. And that's really what I want to, like, pull that away from, because really, it's like, it reminds of like when my therapist, like when I have to set a boundary with my mom and my, and then my mom will like respond to me having set the boundary and then my therapist was like, yeah, but you don't have to pick that up because like that's their issue.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:31:00] Yeah.

JVN [00:31:00] So really it's kind of just like, you know, it's like someone's grappling with someone else's decision to get health care or receive an abortion. It's their issue to grapple with, like their own moral issue. It's not the person getting it and it's not Planned Parenthood. It's like the people that are trying to like. So I just, I guess I mean, I obviously don't have all the answers, but I just. Yeah. I just really noticed how, like when I was talking to you about it, my, almost feeling like I need to apologize for abortions from the people that are so moved by it was like baked into our talking about it. It's like you can have all the feelings you want to have about health care, but like that doesn't change the facts.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:31:34] Yeah. I mean, at the end of the day, you know, our position is, you know, we need to let that decision be in the domain of the person seeking the abortion, their partner, their provider, their, you know, their God, their family, whomever they want to invite into that conversation. Or they could just make the decision by themselves. Right?

JVN [00:31:48] Yeah.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:31:49] I mean, like, that's, that's where it where it is. And so, you know, I think it is nice to be able to say, you know, it would be a luxury to be able to say, let's not care about how these other people feel. But, but because the stigma is so present and because it does impact that internal decision making. Right? So instead of, you know, like, do I deserve to be free? Right? I mean, like where, like, like I should be able to make that decision about my, what, what I consider to be my access to dreaming or imagination based on, you know, what I need to do in that moment. Like, who else should be in that decision other than the person?

JVN [00:32:28] So how do you think we can, we'll get to the other stuff, I swear. But how do you think we can get to, how can we de-stigmatize and de-weaponize the conversation around abortion in this, you know, not to quote hideous Sarah Palin, but this mainstream media day, like with how that they have weaponized it? And with Roe being under the threat that it is, like how can we de-, because we have to escalate it. But at the same time, like de-escalate these people who are so fiery and passionate about like imposing their deeply held religious beliefs on the rest of us?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:33:01] So, again, I just keep coming back to culture. I mean, and, you know, as a cultural storyteller, as someone who's living in, in, in and the popular culture world as well, like you just can't discount the impact of seeing those stories. Like I think about Kerry Washington on, on "Scandal". Remember when she's pregnant with Fitz', pregnant with Fitz?

JVN [00:33:22] Oh my god, I think I left that season.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:33:24] Oh my god.

JVN [00:33:24] I think, honey, this is the thing once that president got shot in the head and then was like literally running the country two weeks later in Season 2, it was really hard for me to get over his, like, recovery from that head wound so fast. I love Shonda so much. But, like, I need to, like, jump back in on, like, Season 5 and, like, just cleanse my palate from that Season 2. That was, I just had a little Season 2 issue, but I did continue on Season 3. But I think what-. Sidebar.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:33:47] But what was so important about that moment, and I love Shonda too. And I mean, I'm like-.

JVN [00:33:50] I've never met her. Like, I don't know her like that. But like I also love all of her work. So, like.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:33:54] Well, she's actually a proud Planned Parenthood board member. So.

JVN [00:33:56] Which we love.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:33:56] Yay! So I bring that up also because, because the story that she told, and spoiler alert, you know, essentially she did not tell the president, she just made the decision. Right? With her provider, with whoever else she consulted internally that we saw off camera. And she came home and she sat on her white sofa and she had her glass of wine. Right? That, that, that to me, the normalization of a, you know, safe legal procedure, medical procedure. And her ability to, you know, to engage with the rest of her life, to me, was, was what was so important. Right? It wasn't this-. You know, back in the day, we used to do these roundtables with storytellers all the time and show runners and they would say, do you how hard it is to get an abortion on, you know, on mainstream TV? Because the minute you add it to the script, it goes up, you know, through the directors all the way up, through the producers, all the way up to the head of the network. And then you have to justify it. So it's got to be, you know, the abortion, plus the plane crash, plus the crazy terrorist shooting. Yeah, exactly. And so it has to all make sense. Right? And what you're doing is actually you're further creating the stigma. Like, it's got to be this incredible, you know, in, you know, insane experience to justify. And no. No justification needed.

JVN [00:35:14] Yeah.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:35:14] It's safe. It's legal.

JVN [00:35:15] Yeah. And it just needs to be kept as such.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:35:20] Yeah.

JVN [00:35:20] So moving on from that. There's so many other things that Planned Parenthood does that are so important to keeping everyone safe and to keeping everyone able to keep dreaming and to keep, you know, realizing like all of their potential and what they want to do in life. And I think that part of, you know, why even, we just had the previous conversation around like abortion stigma is because the incredible job that people have done in making this a stigmatized issue. And just like that, there are so many other issues that Planned Parenthood deals with and helps to fight against and helps to protect people with that we really don't even get to hear about because of the noise around, you know, this, around abortion. And I think that it's really important to talk about that because we were just starting to. And then I interrupted you to go back to talk about abortion stuff. So so tell us more about everything that Planned Parenthood really does?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:36:10] Well, no. I mean, I laid out in terms of, you know, we offer STI screenings. We offer cancer screenings. You know, we have community education programs. Many of our Planned Parenthood affiliates, they work in, in schools. So, you know, so the education, really starting young. You know, we have some states that actually, you know, only teach abstinence. Surprisingly.

JVN [00:36:35] Which is really dangerous because-.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:36:37] It is incredibly dangerous. And we see increased teen pregnancy.

JVN [00:36:42] Ooh, is that going up in those places?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:36:43] Yes, absolutely. There's, of course, there's a direct correlation.

JVN [00:36:46] No, we've been doing so good about, thinking about teen pregnancy kind of going down.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:36:50] Well, teen pregnancy is going down. I'm saying in the states where abstinence-

JVN [00:36:53] But that's what I'm saying. I know. I know. I know. .

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:36:54] Yeah. Yeah.

JVN [00:36:54] But so you're, we're able to create like the reverse of what we want.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:36:57] Yes. Because we're not giving access to basic information about, about health care, about how our bodies work. And, you know, we can talk a lot about abortion stigma. But, but there's, there's stigma around sexual and reproductive health generally, right? Around, you know, and it starts like very, very early, all the way up to like, you know, my mom a couple of years ago was saying something like, you know, I need to deal with something down there. And I was like, down there? What is down there? Like your toes? Your knees?

JVN [00:37:25] Yeah.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:37:25] I was like, down there? And she like, she just could not bring herself to say the word "vagina". And it just struck me like how much we, we take in this stigma about our bodies, about how we function. That is so challenging and problematic. And so Planned Parenthood has been, you know, working on the frontlines of making sure that stigma broadly is, is something that we address and tackle with. Because if you cannot talk about your body and what's happening to it, then you can't seek the right treatment, which means that you can't, you know, get better if you need to. And you won't feel like you actually own your body. Right? And I think that's at the core of it. Right? Ownership of, of, of, of our, our bodies. Of our identities. When people come to us at Planned Parenthood, they're coming to us because they know they're going to get nonjudgmental care and they're going to get care that affirms their identities, that affirms who they want to be and gives them the options to do that. And so, so all that to say, that's a lot of what we do. But that's the spirit also in which we do it.

JVN [00:38:24] How does Planned Parenthood train its providers across the country to be able to give that care to like LGBTQ people or LGBTQ+ people that have like different experience with gender, have different experience with sexuality, which when you have a different experience with gender and sexuality, you're going to probably have like a different experience with like STI exposures, means of having sex, different needs for, you know, ways of protecting yourself, etc. How does Planned Parenthood train its people in like-? You know, because I mean, I would assume aren't there probably cities where like there's only like a Planned Parenthood? Like for like, or even states where that's like the only place for a long way and there, there is a really big misconception that like LGBTQ+ people are like only on the coasts and only in big cities, but there is like a thriving, gigantic, beautiful population of LGBTQ+ identified people that do live in rural America and are often faced with no care or really highly stigmatized care at other places. Like even when we were in Atlanta, like I'll share, like I went to a walk-in clinic because I had an issue and I was so shamed by the nurse at this place because I was like, well, you know, like the show's about to come out. And there was this like and I was like, you know, I was like, I probably won't be able to have like, a gorgeous, like, you know, experience with two other couples that

wanted to. So, you know, so I did. And so then I told this fucking lady because like a week later I felt a little weird. And she was like, well, you know, you could have just like not done that. Like, you could have just like not had that experience with those people. Then you wouldn't be here visiting me. And I was like, so I was like, here's the thing, fucking blond lady. I told you what I did so that you would have a clear picture of what I was exposed to, because I want you to know what I think I was exposed to so that we can, like, test accurately and I didn't really share my experience with you so you could shame me fucking deeply about, like, the decisions I made with my body. So how do we do that? Or how does Planned Parenthood, like, train people to be able to give that sort of, provide that care for people that have like different sexualities and gender experiences?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:40:20] So. So I totally appreciate, I think that, that the care is, is, is actually the same. The experience may be different in terms of what people are bringing in and needing their identity affirm. But the care is actually the same and it is the same high quality, nonjudgmental care that we provide. You know, everyone who is straight and cis or gender nonbinary or LGBTQ. Right? I mean, with, most people, not most people, but, but what we see is that a lot of, particularly our younger populations who are LGBTQ, are coming in also for education. Right? For education in a way that they can affirm their identities or kind of reconcile what their experiences are. But the care, you know, it's, it's the same. Pap smear, it's the same. You know, you know, cancer screening, STI screening, those sorts of things.

JVN [00:41:09] And just to be clear, like in places like where the gag order is instituted, like on a statewide or national basis, like if you were in, if there was a Planned Parenthood in a place like Ohio or Alabama that wanted to have like, let's say, like a thing at one of their locations to have like an LGBTQ+ like sex education night, would they not be able to have that anymore because of the gag order? Like or can we still provide that? Like if the state legislature really teaches abstinence, like can Planned Parenthood still serve that, that community of LGBTQ+ people?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:41:36] Oh, well like to be clear. Planned Parenthood actually was forced out because we decided that it was more important for us to do that work and to allow our doctors to offer the, the, the information, the full range information on abortion. But that doesn't limit us from being to do the work that we need to do to serve LGBTQ.

JVN [00:41:56] Aw. So literally-.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:41:57] So yes. Our doors staying open. We're fighting to keep them open. We're, you know-.

JVN [00:42:00] Well, keep your, keep your racist, oppressive money.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:42:04] Exactly.

JVN [00:42:04] Pence.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:42:04] Yes. And, but, you know, we're also on the phone, right? With Senator Murray and Senator Schumer. And we're saying, you know what? You need to restore Title X because we still need to continue to do this, at, at that, you know, to serve capacity. It's the public health issue.

JVN [00:42:15] Because if we could, if we could pass that at a federal level, wouldn't, would that usurp the states that have, like, opted out, or that would-? Or could Congress and Senate like overrule that Trump Pence order?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:42:25] Well, not overrule it. They would put it in the spending bill, right? And the appropriations bill. That's the vehicle that we have currently right now. It still would have to be signed by the Trump administration. So we have to fight.

JVN [00:42:37] But they could basically use this as a bargaining chip to do a government shutdown.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:42:40] Absolutely. Yes. Absolutely. And that's the question like, will, will this health care actually be, you know, be the chip that they take?

JVN [00:42:49] OK, so we have a few minutes left. But I just want to, I will share this and I'm going to not cry doing it, but I might cry. So you read my book.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:43:02] I did.

JVN [00:43:03] And you are one of the first people outside of, like four of my closest confidant people who have read it. And part of why I wanted to work with Planned Parenthood is because when I was diagnosed with HIV, I was tested, I was rapid tested at Planned Parenthood and was given a preliminary positive at Planned Parenthood and was referred to my first doctor from Planned Parenthood. And for what would have been, you know, the worst possible day that you could imagine as a young person. You know, there were people that cared for me and were compassionate with me and made sure that I had an appointment a week later where I was able to have an incredible doctor who gave me a full panel. And I was able to figure out like what medicines were gonna work on me, what, where my, where my virus was. I was immediately in the right care. I immediately had access to the medication and the information that I needed to know that my life wasn't over and that it actually wasn't the worst day. And actually that day was like the beginning of the rest of my life. And had I not had access, I mean, I, I don't think I had insurance at the time. I could not have gotten tested in my hometown. I lived in St. Louis. And having that access literally saved my life. And it also probably stopped me from unknowingly giving it to other people, because that's the whole thing. I mean, 1 in 7 people who are HIV positive don't know that they are. And when you don't know that you're positive and when you're not on medication, that's when you're the most likely to spread the virus. And we know that because of cultural stigma, that men who have sex with men, and specifically men of color, black men and Latino men also are, have a higher risk of contracting HIV. And also because of that, women of color, specifically black women, are the highest rate of HIV infection and they have been for a long time. I mean, that has been an issue in the in the African American female community for and it's, the amount of information that we cannot and do not share is proliferating the spread of this disease. And actually, I do think it's really getting worse under the Trump Pence's administration, because for the first time since 1992, we don't have an HIV AIDS advisory council because they left in protest, like in 2017, because of the defunding of Planned Parenthood and because of the constant attack on information by the Trump Pence administration. So all that to say, I wanted to work with Planned Parenthood and I wanted to meet you because Planned Parenthood has meant a lot to me in my life. And so I just want to say thank you.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:45:40] Well, thank you. Thank you so much for your story, for being so open and being so candid for, I'm so glad Planned Parenthood was there for you. You know, as I was, as we were walking in, I was telling you that so much of your book resonated for me. It was just like everything from like to your experiences with HIV, but also, you know, every other pop culture reference in the world. I don't know if we are even remotely the same age. But but there was so much that I kind of connected to. In large part because of my cousin Cathy, who was diagnosed in 1985, a black woman, who was I.V. drug user. And my dad found, you know, found her. We'd heard that she might be sick, but we didn't really know what, what was, and there was a lot of stigma. Right? My father is a, you know, a provider and could not, you know, brought

her home and she took a shower. She cleaned up and then, you know, scoured the shower with, with bleach. I mean, so we, like we're like practicing stigma constantly. And I remember I gave her, like, my favorite, I want to say like maybe Jordache. Jordache feels too young, but it was like I gave her my favorite jeans to put on, we're about the same size. And I remember she took them off and she wanted to give them back to me, but she didn't know if she could. And there was this moment in our eyes, and this is probably one last times I saw her, there was a moment in her eyes, where she was just grappling with the stigma and we didn't know how to respond. And I remember saying, "Oh, it's okay, you can keep them", kind of thing, just like, and it's still like this flood of memories kind of came back when I was reading your book because she live with that stigma for so long, she'd never got treatment. And then she died in 2007. And at a time where she actually could have, you know, where pro-T inhibitors had come out. And so the stigma I also worked on this book called "Boundaries of Blackness" with Cathy Cohen that talks about how the white gay community responded to the AIDS crisis and AIDS differently than the black community because of the stigma around not just sexuality, but also drug use. And so the layers on, again, of oppression, the, the-

JVN [00:47:39] Is that because the, did the black community struggle more with drug use than?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:47:42] Both identities. Right? So, so there were both identities.

JVN [00:47:45] I kind of thought that like everyone was just doing lots of drugs in the 80s and 90s.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:47:49] Well-.

JVN [00:47:49] Still are.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:47:50] Well, yeah. Probably. I mean.

JVN [00:47:52] Yeah.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:47:52] Yeah. But but it wasn't, it was, it was I.V. drug use and it was also and, and sexuality. So it was both of those identities. So if you'd said, you know, this person had, was HIV because of drugs. It's still because of the stigma associated with sexuality. And so it was all wrapped up into a bunch of things. But they couldn't, they couldn't separate any of it out. But the reality is that stigma and again, these are layers on these structural barriers as well. So you're, you're adding stigma. You're creating, you know, less access anyway because you literally can't get to, get to the, to the health center. All of that compiled becomes such a huge barrier. So I'm so grateful for you sharing your story again. I think storytelling is the way to really combat stigma around HIV and any number of issues. I do believe that, you know, that's the work that we need to continue to do and to continue to tell our stories to congressional members. Right? To, you know, to allow people to feel the freedom to get tested, to feel a freedom to know their status so that they can go and they can be, they can live free lives.

JVN [00:48:57] And I know, we'll wrap up soon, but I know that 740,000 HIV AIDS tests were given by Planned Parenthood last year. That is an incredible amount of work. It's an incredible amount of important work, of keeping people safe and able to dream, which I love that idea. So I just I think that that is, we had Masha Gessen on the show a few months ago. And she was, you know, excuse me. We had Masha Gessen guest on the show a couple of months ago and they were telling us about how, how important it is to realize that immigration is an LGBTQ+ issue. And I think, again, when we hear Planned Parenthood, especially in the LGBTQ+ community, I think that we think, OK, well, like, how does that really affect me? And just to be so clear, it affects us so deeply and it affects us so across the board to such a fundamental level. So it is so important to

communicate your support of Planned Parenthood to your congresspeople, to your elected representatives, to talk to your family members about it, to talk to people about it whenever it's uncomfy. Lean into that discomfort, Queens, we've got to really get a talk in. I know that you have got meetings to get to. And, you know, Title X to protect. Alexis McGill Johnson, thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it. Actually, did I miss anything? Do you have any, like, yoga teacher training, like at the end of the practice, you know, and it's like I really wanted to do headstands and like, this fucking teacher didn't teach triangles or headstands?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:50:19] No, yoga actually makes me angry.

JVN [00:50:21] Does it?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:50:23] It does, total opposite effect on me.

JVN [00:50:24] You just haven't found your one.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:50:25] Oh, OK.

JVN [00:50:26] There's like a million of them.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:50:28] There probably is. And there are other things I, you know.

JVN [00:50:29] I bet you, maybe you, have ever done like a power, like a power vinyasa one? Like to music?

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:50:34] I promise I will try. I will seek that. That will be the thing I will use to balance myself within the next year.

JVN [00:50:39] 'Cause really quiet ones really make me like kind of crazy. Like I have to do like a power yoga. Like it's like athletic. It's like there's music. There's like fun people. It's like, it's fun.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:50:47] I'll find my practice. I have other practices, but I will find my practice.

JVN [00:50:49] I know you got some self care.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:50:50] And I thank you so much. Exactly. Yeah. Because I need it.

JVN [00:50:52] Yes. You're doing the most.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:50:53] Exactly. All the things.

JVN [00:50:55] Thank you.

ALEXIS MCGILL JOHNSON [00:50:55] Thank you.

JVN [00:50:59] You've been listening to "Getting Curious" with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Alexis McGill Johnson. You'll find links to her work and Planned Parenthood in the episode description or whatever you're listening to the show on. Follow us on Instagram and Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ. Thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend, a family member, anyone really. Show them how to subscribe. "Getting Curious" is produced by Emily Bossak, Julie Carrillo, Rae Ellis, Harry Nelson and Colin Anderson and yours truly. See you next time.