



Fall 10-16-2024

## Tajay Ashmeade

Mark Naison

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### Recommended Citation

Naison, Mark, "Tajay Ashmeade" (2024). *Oral Histories*. 369.  
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Mark Naison 0:00

Okay. Hello everybody, today, this is an interview for the Bronx African American History Project. It's the first live interview we've done since the COVID-19 pandemic. So we're honored to have with us Tajay Ashmeade, who's had an amazing life as an athlete, as an entrepreneur, as a professor, and who grew up in the Bronx as a child of Jamaican immigrants and has a great story to tell. With me are Lisa Betty, who is a doctoral student and teacher at Fordham and who's an expert on Caribbean immigration and cultural development, and Stephanie Robinson Ramirez, a doctoral student in history who is the graduate assistant of the Bronx African American History Project. So, TJ, why don't you start off by telling us a little bit about your family and how they ended up in the Bronx?

Tajay Ashmeade 1:05

Yeah. So, thank you all for having me here. I'm very appreciative of the opportunity to speak about my upbringing and how it has definitely shaped me into the woman that I am today and continuing to be so. I am Tajay Ashmeid, but everybody does call me TJ or my students call me Aunt Viv, you know, so which, which I welcome and appreciate all in the same, I was born in Jamaica, and I like to consider myself a Jamaican born hustler from the Bronx, New York. So, I always tell individuals that the Bronx definitely did play a heavy role into building a certain type of trajectory in my life. My mom and my father were born in Jamaica. They came here in an interesting story. Nonetheless, my father came with his family and left me, my sister in Jamaica, my brother at the time, he wasn't born, and when he got here, he sent for us so usually, when a Jamaican family or a member makes it to the states, they usually kind of get settled, get some a little bit of coinage or money, and then they send for the remaining family members. That said he sent for my mom, and the story is he was in Canada, so he sent for her in Canada, she came to Canada, and then they snuck her across the border. They snuck her across the border, where now she's a citizen, so you can blast that out everywhere it is okay. They snuck her across the border in the trunk of a car from Canada. And when she got here, she was here illegally for a period of time, and at that point, my father either had his visa or his green card, or his green card was being registered. I'm not quite sure certain, but my mom, she had to take up, you know, jobs to just make ends meet, and those considered being a nanny for a more wealthier family in White Plains, New York or Westchester, or whatever the case may be. And then, she was actually able to get a job at the Millennium Hilton Hotel, where she is still currently at, and she got her green card through her job. So the story of her job was she got it by accident. It wasn't even for her. A friend mentioned it to her. She went down for the interview. They called her. She started to work a couple of days, here and there, and then she got the job full time, and then it ultimately helped her get her Green Card and her citizenship. My my dad, on the other hand, he was not necessarily. He passed away last year in March, and he was not necessarily one to work. He had his own endeavors as an entrepreneur. He was an entrepreneur in his own right. He was definitely someone who sold drugs, but it was more so to just help us in a space where it was hard for a Jamaican family to be here and trying to figure out their their way of navigating things. So he was actually the first entrepreneur I still to this day consider, and a very good one, to be honest, because he made sure that his family was taken care of in the best way possible, not always the best way or honest way, but we always had

food on our tables, and we weren't starving. So I'm always forever grateful to my father for that. After his duration in New York, he went to Florida and, where he passed. And my mom is still currently living in the Bronx, and we currently live in White Plains, New York.

Mark Naison 5:05

Okay, so where in the Bronx was your family living when they moved here first

Tajay Ashmeade 5:10

So many places, but a lot of it was South Bronx. So we lived predominantly on in 2258 Grand Avenue, the Bronx, New York. I don't remember the zip code, but it is currently probably 10 minutes to 15 minutes on bus from Fordham University. So that's how I got familiar with Fordham University, because it was so close to my home.

Mark Naison 5:34

And what element did you go to elementary school in the Bronx?

Tajay Ashmeade 5:37

I went to elementary Well, I went to, I don't remember the name, but I remember my PS MS school. So I went to MS, PS MS 95, which I was in special education, in PS MS 95 then I went to DeWitt Clinton High School, where I was still in special education. But I ran track actually for DeWitt Clinton High School, and I did shot put and discus, where I made it to the made it to pen relays for shot put and discus, and I was like, I'm gonna do track all my life. And then I stopped because I loved what track has I loved what track did for my culture. But I was not necessarily attracted to track for myself. So, I transitioned over to basketball at that time.

Mark Naison 6:27

Did you have any teachers who had a positive influence in you in middle school or high school?

Tajay Ashmeade 6:33

I said, That's a good question because, No, I can't really, um, think of think of any teachers that were in school with me in academia, in elementary or middle school or high school, that had a strong influence on me. But I did have a mentor, and her name was Bonnie Henderson, and she's still my mentor till this day

Mark Naison 6:53

And how did you meet her?

Tajay Ashmeade 6:55

I met her playing basketball in Harlem. So I was in Harlem playing basketball at one of the many basketball courts that Harlem has actually Milbank. I actually remember the name.

Mark Naison 7:05

Milbank Center. Yes, I played there.

Tajay Ashmeade 7:09

Oh, okay, in Harlem, yes, Milbank Center I played. That's where I met her. And she came, and she said, She's, she's, she said to me, she was like, your height is going to be your way out. And when she said that, she never let go.

Mark Naison 7:23

And how old were you when you met her?

Tajay Ashmeade 7:24

14?

Mark Naison 7:26

So, this was before Clinton?

Tajay Ashmeade 7:27

This was before Clinton, or around that summer of because my birthday is in September, so it was, and I started late, so it was the before or around that summer, or ending of the summer, coming in.

Mark Naison 7:40

Now, in terms of, okay, you're from a Jamaican family. Did you socialize with other Jamaican families when you were in the Bronx?

Tajay Ashmeade 7:50

Not by choice, but yes, not by choice. I just kind of was attracted to whoever was kind and whoever gave me a type of comfort and cover. So that's where my life kind of took a toll because I was gang-affiliated. So that's where I had friends who were Jamaican, but I also had friends who were full gang.

Mark Naison 8:14

Okay, so talk a little bit about, you know, how you became part of the gang world in the Bronx. What years are we talking about here?

Tajay Ashmeade 8:22

Oh, I don't even remember.

Mark Naison 8:24

Is this in the 90s or

Tajay Ashmeade 8:26

Well, I'm all, I'm about to be 35, so no later. So the ages probably was around 15, 16 17ish, I'll say predominantly 16 for sure, because you want to be a part of, I wanted to be a part of what was cool. And not only what was cool that wasn't like my main it was more so again, who was supporting me and covering me. And I was always, again, I left track at that time. So now I left

track. So I was always considered, oh, Yo, that's TJ. She played basketball. Leave her alone, that I was always the covering, like, Don't bother. TJ she play basketball. She's gonna make something herself. Leave her alone. So when I had people that were looking out for me in that aspect, I just felt like, okay, they got my back.

Mark Naison 9:14

Now, was this gang multi-ethnic? Did it have Latinos, blacks, a little bit of both? Or was it more homogeneous?

Tajay Ashmeade 9:23

Well, they, they, it was very diverse in the sense of it all. And I try my best not to mention what gang I was a part of because of information wise. But it was very diverse in a sense. But for me, in that space, it were my neighborhood; it was predominantly black, yeah, so, but it was very diverse, for sure. So, and I'm for until this day, I'm still fortunate to the type of added awareness of mindset that gang life has given me, and I say that in the sense that I have learned. So much in a positive way when it comes to gang life, and people don't necessarily say that, and that'll mean to run out there. No, no, look in the camera. Don't young adults; please avoid red flag. Okay, but for me, it taught me how to be again aware. Taught me how to, as I say, look at people in a not in a rose-colored glasses type of sense. To know how to read people, not just listen to what they say, but also read their body language, their movements, their eyes. It taught me how to build a certain type of cover over the people I care about and be there and be attentive for them, and, um, it just gave me a certain type of mindset where I'm and I am unbreakable. You know, along with being Jamaican and being familiar.

Mark Naison 10:55

Now, were you recruited for this in school or in your neighborhood?

Tajay Ashmeade 10:59

It just kind of fell in place. It really wasn't my storyline when it comes to gang wasn't something that was horrific again. So that's why, most time with gang life, I always say it's not good, you know. But I'm never someone that's publicly out here, if I'm not asked, I don't express, you know. So, for me, it just kind of fell into my lap. And for me, it it was. It helped me help protect my brother as well. So, it was an extension of safety.

Mark Naison 11:29

Okay, now, were you living at 183rd Street at that time?

Tajay Ashmeade 11:33

183rd. Yes yeah.

Mark Naison 11:35

No, because I've, you know, we've interviewed a number of people in this project who are very involved with gangs, one of whom, Benji Melendez, helped organize the famous gang truce that

led to the rise of hip hop. So this has been a major subject here. So, you know, it's and he had a fairly positive experience of his, you know, particular gang membership.

Tajay Ashmeade 12:01

So yeah, and for me, it wasn't bad, and I think that's why I don't necessarily remember it in a strong context in my head. Because even though I was aware I was gang-affiliated, I didn't feel I wasn't asked to do any crazy sort of anything

Mark Naison 12:17

Right, now were women and men in it together? Were there women separately organized in this?

Tajay Ashmeade 12:22

Again, I have no clue. Well, again, in that space, I don't have a clue because I was always seen as that's TJ; leave her out of this. She plays ball. That's TJ, leave her alone. She plays ball. The most I was I did was be lookout for one or two things in my space. But I was always like, again, that's TJ, you good. You need anything that was really it.

Mark Naison 12:47

Now, you know, some of these are neighborhood-based, and so protecting your block, protecting your building, is it more like that?

Tajay Ashmeade 12:56

I would say it was more like that. I would say, once you came, when you came into that territory, you came in our space on 183 you knew. You knew what it was. You knew exactly who you could speak to. You knew exactly who was, quote, unquote, running the block. And you you were familiar with the authorities in that space.

Mark Naison 13:18

So if there was a problem, you didn't go to the police you went to...

Tajay Ashmeade 13:22

Um, if there was a problem, fortunate for me, I didn't have many, um, but if there was a problem, I would actually go, not even I would be honest, I wouldn't even go to them first the I would actually go to my Jamaican uncles or, you know, father first, because I was more intimidated by their strength, and I was more I felt more protected by them.

Mark Naison 13:45

So, your father's business was neighborhood-based, or out of the neighborhood.

Tajay Ashmeade 13:49

My father's business was everywhere, basically. Anywhere there was a good sale, anywhere that was a good sale. So, um, but there's a certain level of protection that Jamaicans have that

Jamaicans give you, even the women, not just the men. It's a certain level where you feel extremely covered.

Mark Naison 14:10

And this was true known in the Bronx at that time, that if you're Jamaican, you know, mess with that person. Was it that specific or not?

Tajay Ashmeade 14:19

Well, it depended if you're a Jamaican. You knew that you were covered in my in my area of Jamaica. But then on top of, if you had any type of Rastafarian type of alignment, you were even doubled covered, you know, because it just kind of based off of who you were aligned with. And I was fortunate to be aligned to my Jamaican family. But then I also had extra protection because I was gang, gang-affiliated, but then I also found another family in sports. So I don't know if you see, there's like a trifecta happening, finding family and mentors and learning very quickly. And I'm not knowing I'm learning, but I'm picking up knowledge.

Mark Naison 14:56

Now, did anybody in those three worlds encourage you to read?

Tajay Ashmeade 15:01

Yes, in my basketball world, of course, um, just and not necessarily read, and that's, again, an interesting question, not necessarily read books, but when you're playing basketball, you have to read plays. So I was learning how to read, and I would, again, I was in special education. So now that you actually said that you're ringing something in my head because I wasn't someone to pick up a book, but I would pick up my stat sheet, or I'll pick up the playbook, you know, um to learn other players, their styles and other schools as well. Um, but I also want to say that DeWitt Clinton wasn't my last stop. I actually transferred because I was in special education in DeWitt Clinton. I transferred out of special education to Mother Cabrini because you have to go to a Catholic school to get out of special education, and then from Catholic school, I transferred to Frederick Douglass.

Mark Naison 15:54

Okay, so where was Mother Cabrini located?

Tajay Ashmeade 15:57

Mother Cabrini was in Spanish Harlem. So it was in Spanish Harlem, the Heights, Washington Heights.

Mark Naison 16:03

Oh, wow. Okay

Tajay Ashmeade 16:06

And my mentor, who I met at Milbank when she met me, she said, I'm gonna help you, basically save your life. And she did. She definitely did.

Mark Naison 16:15  
And what's her name again?

Tajay Ashmeade 16:17  
Bonnie Henderson

Mark Naison 16:17  
Okay, because we should look her up.

Tajay Ashmeade 16:19  
Yeah

Mark Naison 16:19  
She's probably done this for several other people.

Tajay Ashmeade 16:21  
Yes, yes, she has.

Mark Naison 16:24  
This is a New York hero of sorts.

Tajay Ashmeade 16:26  
Yeah, yeah. She is. She is a definite um angel. I call her my guardian angel.

Mark Naison 16:32  
So, were you playing AAU ball?

Tajay Ashmeade 16:35  
I did.

Mark Naison 16:35  
And what was the name of the team you played for in the AAU?

Tajay Ashmeade 16:37  
I don't remember it was her team, so I'm pretty sure

Mark Naison 16:42  
It was out of Milbank, so a Bonnie Henderson team out of Milbank

Tajay Ashmeade 16:45  
Yes, yes, but I don't remember what Miss Henderson's team was, but I do remember the teams we played against, which, of course, is the Exodus and the Gauchos, but we were not as good as the Gauchos



Mark Naison 17:00

Um ,so uh Frederick Douglass, did they have a basketball team?

Tajay Ashmeade 17:05

Yes. And I was on the basketball team there at Frederick Douglass Academy, and um, it was a great experience.

Mark Naison 17:12

That's in Harlem?

Tajay Ashmeade 17:13

That's in Harlem, the Frederick Douglas Academy on Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard. So there's so many now out there. So I want to say I went to V the first um and it was, it was actually a good experience again. I really was learning. I felt like, as I'm speaking and as now I'm a professor, I felt like I was always a student, and even now, I still am a student because I had to get out of special education. So that was a whole meeting with a board that I had to make sure I articulate myself in a certain manner to show that I don't need to be in special education. Because they placed me in special education because I was Jamaican with a very deep accent, and they felt that I would succeed more, quote, unquote, if somebody was more attentive to my my need, my culture need.

Mark Naison 18:03

Well this is very interesting because middle-class families fight to get their kids into special education.

Tajay Ashmeade 18:09

Oh, really? I didn't know

Mark Naison 18:11

And get uh test exemptions, you know, untimed tests. So it's, you know, there's not as the same stigma as but um so when, when did you find yourself losing the accent?

Tajay Ashmeade 18:28

I didn't lose it, and I still have it to this day

Mark Naison 18:31

Become bicultural.

Tajay Ashmeade 18:35

But I, that was another, again, if you see the the path here, that was another space of learning. So when I came to see and Hall University, this is a huge jump. I would have to step back. But when I came to Seton Hall University, we have media training. You're an athlete on the court that's traveling and speaking to media first. Before we put you in front of media, we have to train

you how to speak properly. So that's where I was able to learn how to project myself in a certain manager manage, set myself in a certain image, and public speaking and impromptu and all those things from Seton Hall University,

Mark Naison 19:12

Okay, but you didn't get that at your high school

Tajay Ashmeade 19:15

No, no, I didn't know I was a Caribbean black girl in high school; I did not get any type of media training.

Mark Naison 19:24

Were there any coaches that other than Bonnie Henderson that took an interest in you?

Tajay Ashmeade 19:28

At that time in high school? No, I had a I had a good coach, Coach Johnson, at DeWitt Clinton High School, but meaning take interest, and you know, Bonnie, She sacrificed her finances. She sacrificed her car her home. She sacrificed, you know, clothing, sometime when I didn't even have sports bras. Um, no, I never had no one like that at that time, until I got to Seton Hall where I met the legendary Ann Donovan who took a very strong interest in me.

Mark Naison 20:01

So, what um you went from Frederick Douglass to junior college?

Tajay Ashmeade 20:06

I went to Frederick Douglas Academy to a junior college because I had a very low GPA. I failed a lot of classes, and I didn't pass all my regents. Um so, at that time, I was ineligible to get a full scholarship to college. Um so, Bonnie, she shared this avenue that I didn't know about and said, Hey, you can go to a junior college and transfer up or get recruited up to a massive, bigger college, right? And when she gave me that opportunity, I grabbed it.

Mark Naison 20:40

And where was it?

Tajay Ashmeade 20:42

But again, um in that space, I'm still young, I'm still ignorant, I'm still dumb. In the space, you know, I was in special ed, so I was called stupid a lot, um and all these things. And when I got to junior college in Kansas, I went to Independence Community College in Kansas, and it was in bubble, nowhere. I don't even know where I sat, but I didn't listen, and I got kicked out. I actually got arrested there because I went I was just stealing a lot out the Walmart. Like, I know taking stuff out of Walmart is like, a thing, but I was like, stealing, like, iPads and iPods. Like, I was just like, you want to listen to Apple Music, you know, like, so, um, and I got arrested and still didn't learn my lesson. So I lost my scholarship, and here comes Bonnie to the rescue again and she

helped me get into Trinity Valley Community College, which was even better than Independence. I didn't know why they...

Mark Naison 21:41

And was that in what state?

Tajay Ashmeade 21:43

Texas.

Mark Naison 21:45

Part of the reason I asked this is my son was on a baseball team, of almost everybody else was Dominican. And a lot of these young men ended up, if they weren't drafted, going to community college in places like Oklahoma, Texas, they weren't strong enough academically to get the full ride to a D1. And so the junior college, I know exactly about that junior college route, so you know, it's, you're in Trinity College.

Tajay Ashmeade 22:12

I'm in Trinity Valley Community College, which was the national champions in women's basketball for years. Um, so that if you go to Trinity Valley, you're going to go to a Kentucky, a Rutgers, a Seton Hall, a Texas, and I was one of those players.

Mark Naison 22:28

And so you were really putting a lot into basketball to get into Trinity

Tajay Ashmeade 22:32

I don't think I was putting nothing into basketball. I think my height, and that's why I owe I I am so grateful to my height. I'm so grateful to my height, and not to be egotistic or have I am like, I'm like, whole-heartedly, have a special place in my heart for my statuesque um because it really was the blueprint of the building block of me starting to build the life that I have right now, and that's because I took advantage of it. Because all these places up to this point, as I'm sharing the story, I was not there mentally. I was not; I didn't know the capabilities of what my statuesque was able to do. But she she knew, you know.

Mark Naison 23:21

Does it, Bonnie, know what you were capable of, intellectually as well as athletically

Tajay Ashmeade 23:26

Everything and when I got to Independence Community College, horrible, I wasn't taking basketball serious. When I got to Trinity Valley Community College, horrible. I was not taking basketball seriously. It wasn't until and when I got to Trinity Valley, just like I lost a scholarship to Independence, I went to Trinity Valley and stole cheeseburgers, like just random stuff in Target, I don't even know, supermarket, and lost my full-ride to Rutgers University for theft. And it wasn't until that point where I was behind the football stadium at Trinity Valley crying and just disappointed in myself, that let my family down, let my brother down, let my mom down, that

Ann Donovan, the next woman who took strong into her interest in me, called me and she said, it is going to be okay. You're going to have a full ride and a home at Seton Hall University, and I welcome you here with open arms.

Mark Naison 24:21

Now you must have showed some skill as well as height along the way.

Tajay Ashmeade 24:26

You want to. You want the honest truth. No. I went to, I went to Trinity Valley, and I sat the bench the whole time, the whole time; it really was my height. It really was that thing that you cannot teach, height. It really was that, and I'm being so honest with you.

Mark Naison 24:47

So you didn't have particular skills at that point.

Tajay Ashmeade 24:50

No, I probably, I probably was getting recruited, if I look back at it now, at Rutgers to be a six-man off the bench for one of their starting players to give her a resting break. When I got to Seton Hall and seen finally realizing what this height can do for me, is when I said to myself, Oh, wow, like I can make a living out of this. And from that day on my first year, because I only had two more years transferring from JUCO, I took it seriously, and I started to study the plays. I started to study players. I started to see who can I align myself and what kind of asset can I be to this team. So now I'm going into that Bruce Lee mentality, being a master of one and not trying to be a master of many. And when I locked into that, I said, I can rebound very well. And I mastered that to the point where I was called the Dennis Rodman of rebounding, and I became the number one rebounder in the Big East and the number two rebounder in the country. And that's how I got that's how I started to get noticed to play professionally.

Mark Naison 25:56

Right now, at any point, did Seton Hall, did you get immersed in your classes? Was this an intellectual awakening as well as a sports awakening?

Tajay Ashmeade 26:08

So at Seton Hall, a very strong moment happened for me because now I'm hit from all angles, like now I was in special ed, I was gang affiliated, and now I come to Seton Hall, and I was diagnosed with ADD. So at this point, Coach Donovan has taken over now, and Coach Bonnie, she's just supporting me, but Coach Donovan has taken over, and she comes to me and she says to me, she's like, TJ, I think I want to get you evaluated for ADD. And I was like, why I'm not stupid? You know, again, very aggressive and feeling like someone is trying to put something on me that doesn't belong there. And she was like, because when I say, I noticed, when I say, Look at the look at the play. And in basketball, or look at the floor, sorry, look at the floor. And in basketball, when a coach says, look at the floor there, meaning, look how the floor and the players are set up on the floor. Where did I look the floor every single time? And she said that there's a space where you're not connecting as quickly when it comes to the plays. So

she sent me for testing, and low and behold, it came back that I had ADD, and I was placed on Adderall for a period of time, which I was selling Adderall once you once you give me an opportunity to make money. Okay, that Bronx is gonna come back real quick. And I started to sell my Adderall, but I started to be on Adderall and go to therapy, and again, that's where I say that space started to really teach me, like, really start to elevate my mind in a space of like, you are bigger than these moments that people said you were, um you are stronger than these things that people called you, And you can really be a force to be reckoned with if you really hone into your talents and traits. And from that day on, ADD has been one of the most positive things that has happened to me because it allows me to lock in into a certain area, field, and niche to master, and it has allowed me to be again in that space, the prominent rebounder who was able to get opportunities to play professional basketball.

Mark Naison 28:25

Were there any courses you took that had an influence on you when you were at Seton Hall?

Tajay Ashmeade 28:30

No, no, because, again, I was catching up to my mind, or my mind was catching up to me or my body at the time. It wasn't until I got to Georgetown that I started to study classes that really started to resonate with me, and that was in my second Masters so now at this point, I went to Seton Hall. I was fortunate to play basketball professionally for over seven years, both abroad, both in the league, both through Olympics, everything. I was fortunate to play basketball. So now, again, the pattern you see is basketball was offered to me in high school, but I didn't catch on until college. And that's when I caught on and said, let me start to use it for my benefit. But I didn't catch on to academia until my master's.

Mark Naison 29:16

Wow. Now, of your professional experiences, I recall you played in Spain for a while.

Tajay Ashmeade 29:22

I played in Spain for a very prominent amount of my duration. So actually, all my years, I played in Spain for seven years, and then I would always play in other parts of the world, but Spain was always home-based right

Mark Naison 29:40

Right, now, did you become fluent in Spanish?

Tajay Ashmeade 29:44

Yes yes [Spanish] perfecto. Habla Mario, mucho valentes, espania si. Yes, I'm fluent in Spanish to my normal non-Spanish people, but when I start to speak Spanish to people who are from Spain, it gets real tricky, real quickly. Um.

Mark Naison 30:13

Now, when you are having all these experiences, are you going back to your family in the Bronx

Tajay Ashmeade 30:19

Yes so yes I'm going back to my family in the Bronx, but also I am staying on campus in the summertime because I'm also. I didn't want to get distracted because now I caught on, and I'm like... I have a little brother who was my he was a he was a direct representation of me growing up and he got shot and

Mark Naison 30:43

He got shot?

Tajay Ashmeade 30:44

Yes, and I experienced a similar incident as well, and um I seen that he was following the route that happened to me in life and I said, if your gonna follow this route, let me, follow it out as well. And fortunately enough, he got looking at me, and me putting in me putting him in his first basketball camp at Milbank, he got a full scholarship to Robert Morrison on University

Mark Naison 31:10

Wow.

Tajay Asmeade 31:11

In Pittsburgh. And he graduated, and he's okay with his bachelor's, which we're fine too, you know, young men, we just wanted him to get out, and um, but it was hard. Even now, as I'm speaking to and doing this interview is hard because the mindset that an athlete needs to get out of the game is one of the toughest and hardest things to cope with when it comes to leaving basketball behind. So he's going through that right now, trying to find his footing. Umm, because he didn't have necessarily a Bonnie Henderson. He didn't have an Ann Donovan. Um, he had me, and then when I was helping him, I was helping myself as well. Um, he had few people of representation, but still, he's a black man in America, which is an endangered species, and he is being told by these white men to quote on quote be a slave of the game, you know. And, um, that's the same thing for my partner. You know, he is, as I am speaking to you, he has to transition out of the NFL and is not by choice; he shattered his hip, so it was one of the hardest transitions for him. And then my ex, the same thing, he was another slave of the game, so these, I feel like Black men in sports have one of the toughest jobs when it comes to transitioning out of the sport um because they've been they've been slaves quote on quote, of the game for such a long time, and when they are in it, it looks so so beautiful because quote on quote, they slave is getting or I don't want to say, slave, the person, is getting everything they need but once that person is not um an asset no more, and quote on quote a liability, you just kind of throw them to the waste side. Um, and men treat men differently in sports, then women treat women differently in sports. I was nurtured my whole entire duration all the way to my professional and my, um, even my doctoral process; my coach was by my side, she passed away, but I remember even telling her I was starting a company, she gave me my first thousand dollar check which I never cashed and I have it still.

Mark Naison 33:18

This is from Ann Donovan?

Tajay Ashmeade 33:20  
Ann Donovan. And um she

Mark Naison 33:23  
That's not male coaches. No no, I still remember a very famous coach at Fordham um who I used to play racket ball with, and he said, first you lick their ass, then you kick their ass.

Tajay Ashmeade 33:36  
So you understand it in fullness. But if you, in that same space that Ann Donovan gave me a 1,000 dollar check, um Michael Jordan's coach in North Carolina gave him a I think it was a \$300 check when he passed away. So there's a certain nurturing sport, but there's also a certain um I'll use you for all that you got and throw you to the waste side because I don't need you no more. There's another Black young man that's coming up that's going to replace you easily. Which in that space, that has hurt my brother, that has hurt my partner, and that has hurt my ex as well. Mhm. Mhm. So umm. It's definitely something where I have learned, and I'll say that clearly that I'm so aware now that that's what launched me to start Nurture Sport, which is my full tech company, which is a recruitment platform to help level the field for all athletes to not only get the nurture that they need but also get recruited properly as well. And, um, with that all said, it also has taught me how I want to raise my kids when I have kids, and I always say I love basketball, and I love football, but my child is not going to be a slave to the sport, they will understand that sport is just another level for you to obtain your education as the main route yeah.

Mark Naison 34:55  
Yeah no, it's interesting because for me I guess having gone played sports in the Ivy League, that is what I held out to my children. Is you know, you enjoy the sport, but then this prepares you for your career.

Tajay Ashmeade 35:08  
Yeah, but we see with a lot of the coaches that are teaching specifically these young black men, they're athletes too that just made it out, just made it out of the of the "hood" or poverty and they became coaches so it's like you're having someone that is, you're having someone to teach a young Black man how to make it out, but they don't necessarily teach them how to stay out, how to continue to build, how to continue, how to find sustainability outside of the sport when the sport is all said and done. And Donovan, she made it out, settled, she was she was she probably wasn't even in you know, like she was a white woman at 6'8" and she was one of the first, she was the first one in women sports for so many things under title nine, first in the... like she wasn't even in the W but she was older like she coached Olympic teams so she taught me, as a Black woman, how to not only get out but build something outside of sports. And that is I feel like the icing on the cake that I got, that my little brother didn't get necessarily, that my partner didn't get, and that my ex didn't get but specifically my partner and my little brother because now, from being a black woman, I see they feed off of that from me and I try to give it as best as I can but I also have to preserve myself as well.

Mark Naison 36:34

Yeah, now when did you decide to get your masters, first masters?

Tajay Ashmeade 36:39

Ann Donovan. My first masters, again, teaching me after the game, having strong conversations with her while I'm in Spain, and she's like, on your free time, what are you doing? And I was like, I don't know, eatin, sleepin, takin a nap, you know, and she's like, you should look into getting your masters online, and one of my teammates at the time DD, N DD Madu, who is a Nigerian um coach and basketball player, um she was doing her masters in Spain, we were both playing abroad, and she said to me, I'm going to University of Phoenix online and at this point, I didn't research no schools no nothing, I just said alright, I'm going to register, and I got my first Masters online from University of Phoenix, and it was just a regular MBA, and I never thought I would need it or utilize it in any way and then when I again because I'm learning late, I came back to the states, I said, what do I want to do. What do I want to do? Um because a lot of people don't know when you play professional sports now, same thing, when you're done playing professional sports, a lot of athletes either go bankrupt, A lot of athletes either fall into a tear of some domestic violence something, because of that lack of lesson from their coach. And I said, what do I want to do, I had a conversation with Coach Donovan, she said I know you don't want to be a coach because you don't like to coach young girls on the court, but I see you as leadership potential outside of the court so if you go to my website it says I'm not the coach on the court, but I'm the coach off the court and I went to Georgetown, I applied to Georgetown, got accepted, and I did my sports management degree.

Mark Naison 38:22

Now, was that online or in-person

Tajay Ashmeade 38:25

Oh no, everything was online. I can't. Um, but also because I was still abroad.

Mark Naison 38:31

Oh, so you got the first Masters from the University of Phoenix

Tajay Ashmeade 38:34

And then started my second Masters

Mark Naison 38:37

At Georgetown

Tajay Ashmeade 38:38

Yes. And while I'm playing, so this is all while I'm playing, and then when I graduated from Georgetown I was I finished my duration overseas, and I said I'm done, but this was all while I'm playing so that's why I'm a big advocate as a leader in uh uh as a sports management thought leader but just a leader in leadership roles as well, I'm a firm believer in that excuses are real



but we do not have to be defined by them. I'm a firm believer of that. If you live by your excuses, there they are always going to be something of prominence in your life because they are real; we all have disturbances in our life, but how are we do not have to be defined or allow them to lead so, yeah.

Mark Naison 39:19

And uh when did you enroll in a doctoral program?

Tajay Ashmeade 39:23

When did I enroll ooh? Oh geez the weez um, I enrolled in my doctoral program in uh 1898 no, I don't know it's been a while. Um, now it's probably been like four years ago, um, I literally, the doctorial degree for me is personal. It has nothing to do, at that time it had nothing to do with a job, it had nothing to do with opportunity, or anything future-based. It had to do with my mom and my dad. My mom never graduated from high school, my dad could barely read or write, and I said to myself and my sister she got her doctorate, she is a dermatologist,

Mark Naison 40:06

Oh wow.

Tajay Ashmeade 40:07

And I said that and then I said to myself that there has to be some divineness that allows God to allow these two parents to deliver specifically these types of children. Um, and I said to myself that I'm going to get my doctorate for my mom and my dad, for my mom and my dad to show them that your sacrifice that you made coming across the border in a trunk, and not learning how to read or write and selling drugs, paid the way for me too

Mark Naison 40:34

Now is your sister older or younger

Tajay Ashmeade 40:36

My sister is older, Sasha is older. Sasha, Keyvon

Mark Naison 40:40

So, this is fascinating I mean, her path was more academic, I assume?

Tajay Ashmeade 40:47

Her path was nursing. She just wanted to try something that was going to be simple and help pay her bills. Um, then she fell into medical care, and she loved it. She fell into medical care, she loved it, and from there on she just kind of leaned into it more.

Lisa Betty 41:48

So when you were in the WNBA, cause I think that's one of the things, I don't know if Naison knows about me, but I love basketball, and I wanna be in the NBA, that's why, and you being

Jamaican, everything just connected me, gravitated um your story is just so brilliant and beautiful

Tajay Ashmeade 42:04

Aw, thanks, Lisa. I feel like it was boring.

Lisa Betty 42:05

No. So, what team were you on in the WNBA?

Tajay Ashmeade 42:12

So I want to clarify that my duration in the WNBA was very short, and it was because of Ann Donovan that I had that roster, and it was the Connecticut Suns, and um, I was able to be under her wing again in that space um but my longest duration was playing abroad and for my Jamaican National Team.

Lisa Betty 42:34

What year was that?

Tajay Ashmeade 42:37

So my Jamaican National Team was 2011? 2010, 2011, and 2012, right, and um, we made the final qualify for the London Olympics in 2012 on a very very very small budget, and actually our team captain Simone, who I definitely want to give grace to, passed away from ovarian cancer and um she was such a strong presence in implementation into the program and into my life as well. Uhh she, she was just a stand-all great representation of a very strong Jamaican athlete and woman for our country. Uh, going after that is when I started to say okay what am I going to do next. So yeah.

Lisa Betty 43:24

And so I know you did a small stem in leadership with the WNBA

Tajay Ashmeade 43:30

Yes, yes, so I actually worked, so that's how I feel that I've mastered being a sports industry thought leader, um, because I was a student of the game, a player of the game, and I worked in the game, and actually now I'm a professor in the game as well um so I literally covered every single angle of a person, not just a woman but a person that could've really thrived through the through sport as Nelson Mandela would say sport. Sport changes the world; it has the power to change the world, and it really does and bring people together uh, but I was I started off as the equipment manager of the liberty, and then I moved up to the assistants general manager, and I moved up from there consistently and then I left, I actually left because I was, micromanaged um by my boss and it made me feel very uncomfortable and it make me have very sleepless and restless nights that I have never had in my life. And um, I just had a space where I said this is not something where I want to um, but yeah, so I felt micromanaged in a space where I felt I thought black women should be safe because my CEO, um, who Kia Clark who is a who is

amazing um made me feel safe but I was on the other side of it uh and I the person who was my um manager um at the time did not make me feel safe, I felt very vulnerable. So yeah.

Lisa Betty 45:21

I get it. So what, so what was the trajectory after that? So LIU? Was that the LIU Roc Nation was that the...

Tajay Ashmeade 45:31

No, so oh so now we gettin' fancy. So the trajectory after that was I knew at that point I didn't want to work for no one. Um, and I, and if I was going to work for somebody like I'm a professor now, I wanted to have freedom, and I wanted to be apart of a community that I felt supported. Um but at that point, I seen how I was treated and not only in the liberty just come how I was treated in my life, like how I had great support a great support system, and I wanted to offer that I felt like it would've been extremely selfish if I did not offer that to the next generation of athletes coming up specifically minority athletes but athletes as a whole no matter your minority, religion, race, anything, I feel like you should be nurtured. Looking at my little brother, looking at my partner, I felt like there should, looking at me, looking at my friends, I feel like there should be some type of nurture to protect these athletes who are trying to get recruited from college. And that's when I created Nurture Sport. And got our first investment from um a great investor, I don't know if I can mention him yet, and now we are actually closing our one million dollar round for to, yeah we're actually guaranteed to close this year our one million dollar round to help level the playing field for athletes. For high school athletes specifically in the now. Yeah. So that was I turned my um experience at the Liberty, and I said no I got to go, And I left, and I made something out of it for myself. But I feel like that's I really want to hone in on I feel like that is from my experience, Jamaican women. I just feel like we can lemon out of... we can make lemonade out of stone I just i just its magic it's yeah. We have a certain magic, and I spoke to you about it from Nanny tribe of The Maroons we have she was a warrior from Ghana um, and she came to Jamaica, and I always say she just embedded or planted something in the grass or the greenery in Jamaica that just allowed me to know that um any adversity and I always say, adversity adds versatility and ADD meaning adds versatility and that's what I speak on when I public speak because I always say when I was called stupid as I grew up now stupid turned into me for strength, toughness, understanding, persistence, identity, and determination like I changed the narrative of it for me and I think like as Jamaican women we have a certain type of gen ne se quoi that allows us to just stand out from the rest. Out of many, we are one people. So yeah mhm.

Lisa Betty 48:13

And now Roc Nation

Tajay Ashmeade 48:15

And now Roc Nation yeah so

Lisa Betty 48:19

Cause I didn't even know that there was a Roc Nation LIU

Tajay Ashmeade 48:23

So I am a proud proud um member of the Roc Nation School of Music, Sports and Entertainment at Long Island University of Brooklyn and I am the first woman, Black, White, Asian, I am the first woman in the sports department as a professor.

Mark Naison 48:45

Wow. When was this created

Tajay Ashmeade 48:46

This was created. We are in our fourth year, I'm in my second year, and it was created our graduating class this year will be our first graduating full four-year class at the university. And they're phenomenal; our students are amazing, yeah. So and we are only getting better and bigger and brighter, and I'm so proud. I always say, um, that I was ordained for this job. Um, because I had a situation that happened with, um, gun violence in Brooklyn. And then I was placed in special ed in the Bronx and I am literally working in the middle. If you take the arrows and pull, I am literally working in the middle of the Brooklyn borough as a professor. A space where so many people told me I would've never successful in sports I would've never been successful in academia, I would've never been successful as a student being in special education and going to junior college as an athlete. And now I am a sports professor.

Mark Naison 49:46

Now are your students undergraduates?

Tajay Ashmeade 49:49

Masters and undergraduate

Mark Naison 49:50

Masters and undergraduates are any of them student athletes at LIU?

Tajay Ashmeade 49:54

Yeah. Well yeah yes I have a few who are basketball players at Long Island University yes yes, shout out to them. You know, and then I have some few students in my master's program who graduated from football, and I even last night I was speaking to one of my students Kareem, I won't say his last name, but Kareem and I tried to make sure they always know that that door is open that they always have that reach to me

Mark Naison 50:15

Now do you teach online, or you teach um in person? Or both?

Tajay Ashmeade 50:19

I teach both. So, we have a hybrid situation for our masters students. We understand that they are living real lives, um, so we have a hybrid situation, and then for our undergraduate, it is in person, so but our graduate students, you know, pat myself on the back, my my class fire. No,

my class is amazing, and my syllabi is amazing, and I teach them real thing like we have three projects; one of the them is the player contract project, which is how to build a sufficient contract for a player that is either trying to get on a team or trying to get a brand deal or a partnership. And that is something I created. I teach them their brand portfolio, which is another project that allows them be selfish build. I always tell them resumes are garbage, throw those away, build out a full brand portfolio explaining who you are or what you've done, include three testimonials um um, include your LinkedIn, include a CV, a very short snippet, but keep your visual but showcase who you are and your brand portfolio that is that you are your brand. Sell yourself.

Mark Naison 51:23

Now with NIL is this even more important?

Tajay Ashmeade 51:25

Yes yes brand image is very important with NIL and then our last project actually leads into creating a type of organization for an athlete. So if you want to do SKIMS, youd have to do a sports version. But that's our three main projects that I do in our sports management class. Yeah. We are trying to make sure we level the playing field between St. Johns and the Georgetowns and the NYUs. Yeah.

Lisa Betty 51:50

And so my question also is okay, so in general, whats now and what is the dream or what is the vision for expanding? Not the next because you are in the next but what does the expansion look like?

Tajay Ashmeade 52:07

Alright for me the expan- I'm a very content, humble person, but I'm very hardworking in the same breath. So, um, I'd say for me, I'd literally am completely fine being a full-time professor and running Nurture Sport and all the blessing that God has in between that as well. Um, I don't I'm a big person in now that I'm learning recently like I don't control necessarily my path. My path is aligned by the most high. So i just love to walk the road that he has he placed in front of me because every obstacle that he has placed in front of me, nobody wanted that but every obstacle led to a blessing every single time. So, anytime I have a hardship, even now, I am healing internally. Um, I'm like I'm going to come out of this ten times stronger than even when I went in. Like I don't doubt that because that's always been the trajectory of my story. Yeah so.

Stephanie Robinson Ramirez 53:14

Um how would you describe your Bronx story?

Tajay Ashmeade 53:18

I didn't even mention the fact that I used to come down to Fordham University. Um, my Bronx story is significant because Bronx, and specifically Fordham University, was, um, the first vision of women's basketball that I've ever gotten. Um, so and the first vision of sport allowing me to be free within self that I got um, so I am very fortunate for Fordham and my Bronx story because Fordham and the coaches here, I want to say Coach Gaitley, but I am not quite sure, allowed

me to experience what freedom was in such a harsh and heavy community in the Bronx. So it allowed me to find fresh air in the Bronx so my Bronx story, I will say, is a, I don't know, I want to say clouded rainbow. Uhhh yeah. You know there is there is cloud, but I've always been able to see the rainbow every single time. So, I am a blessed person from the Bronx, yes. Or I am a Jamaican-born hustler from the Bronx, okay?

Lisa Betty 54:31

That's wonderful. I don't have anything. I think this is like the encapsulation of your story that I heard from just in our conversations, and I think this is if there's anything specific that you do want us to delete, we can do that, okay wonderful

Tajay Ashmeade 54:54

No I am an open book

Mark Naison 54:50

Now, is there anything you would want to say in conclusion?

Tajay Ashmeade 54:54

Uh, I will say to allow your, like I always said, adversity adds versatility. Allow your adversity and allow your difficult times to... lean into those moments. If you lean into those moments, you will definitely strike gold for sure and then you know, as the common things will always say you know, don't give up really, it sounds cliché, but it is so true consistency leads to great reward. It definitely does.

Mark Naison 55:30

Yeah. To me, the other thing to come across is the importance of mentors

Tajay Ashmeade 55:33

Yes

Mark Naison 55:33

Bonnie Henderson and Ann Donovan, two people, ya know, stood out in seeing but also being with you, you know, the hard times and

Tajay Ashmeade 55:46

Pillar women. Yeah and and definitely in two women, two different races, two different backgrounds. Two different you know, demographics as well.

Lisa Betty 55:57

So what was what was Bonnie?

Tajay Ashmeade 55:58

Bonnie was African American from North Carolina. She would tell you herself

Mark Naison 56:02  
And she is still alive?

Tajay Ashmeade 56:03  
She's still alive

Mark Naison 56:04  
And Ann Donovan passed away?

Tajay Ashmeade 56:05  
And Ann Donovan passed away. Coach Donovan, I think Coach Donovan was from New Jersey. She was from New Jersey, and she played at Old Dominion College and she was a prominent like if you look her up, they will say she's the face of women's sports not even basketball. Um, and I am fortunate and blessed that I was able to learn under her like that was something life-changing I will never forget. Mhm. And I want to be that pillar like they were for me.

Mark Naison 56:34  
Yeah well, I think that's that if you've had that kind of mentor, you want to be that for someone else.

Tajay Ashmeade 56:40  
Yeah yes yes. So that is my story, and when this goes out, and I continue to grow I hope I am able to return with a bigger edition to the storyline.