

## Sawbones 214: Dr. Joycelyn Elders

Published 31<sup>st</sup> July 2020

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**Intro (Clint McElroy):** Sawbones is a show about medical history, and nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion. It's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour and not try to diagnose your mystery boil? We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax and enjoy a moment of distraction from that weird growth. You're worth it.

[theme music plays]

**Justin:** Hello everybody, and welcome once again to Sawbones: a marital tour of misguided medicine. I'm your cohost, Justin McElroy. It is—

**Sydnee:** I— I'm Sydnee McElroy.

**Justin:** It's such a thrill to be here, Sydnee.

**Sydnee:** You tried to cut me off before I got to introduce myself.

**Justin:** Do you know what's sad? Do you know what's actually sad? Do you know why I did that?

**Sydnee:** Why?

**Justin:** In my head, I was thinking, "This is sounding good." That's what I was thinking to myself, like, "I'm in fine voice today." That's what I was thinking, and that kept me from letting you introduce yourself. And I feel guilty about it.

**Sydnee:** Maybe you need to think a little bit more of others than yourself.

**Justin:** You know, this is a great time to be thinking of others, Sydnee, and one of the great ways that people can do that is by thinking of the others that make the podcasts that they love. It's Max Fun Drive right now. We just have one more week, so you're running out of time. If you wanna support the shows you love, [MaximumFun.org/Join](http://MaximumFun.org/Join). We are funded— we have advertising, of course, but the main source of our funding is you, the listening public. We would never be able to make it on

just advertising dollars alone. We need you to support these shows. They've allowed us to make this a full-time job, allowed us to make other cool stuff, buy audio equipment, feed our kids, you know, et cetera, et cetera.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] Feed them, clothe them, put a roof over their heads.

**Justin:** They've gotten so spoiled. [laughs] And we're only about to do that through your support. If you can pledge five bucks a month, ten bucks a month, it would be huge and you'll get some cool gifts, like bonus content at \$5 a month, over 200 hours of it. Sydnee and I made a whole new podcast called Fast and Furious and Justin and Sydnee that, uh, at least four episodes are up now. There may be more by the time you listen to this. We've recorded six, so they're there, it's coming, it's happening.

**Sydnee:** And two more will happen.

**Justin:** \$10 a month gets you a cool pin. Ours is a picture of a unicorn that says "homeopathy means pretend", it's a— or "homeopathic means pretend". Designed by Megan Lynn Kott. And there's pins for all the shows, but really what you're doing is supporting the stuff you love. So, please.

**Sydnee:** Thank you if you are a member, thank you if you're thinking about it. This is a great time because you get a gift while you're becoming a member.

**Justin:** Wonderful gift. [MaximumFun.org/Join](http://MaximumFun.org/Join). But Sydnee, we're not here to just talk about our desperate need for funding. We have another topic too. We couldn't fill— well, we could probably fill 35 minutes with begging, but let's not.

**Sydnee:** No, please. Please no. Although I was just begging there, so, begging you. You know, usually I name who gave me the inspiration for this, for each of my topics. And I guess this time I have to give the credit to Penn & Teller.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** Justin and I were rewatching old episodes of— I can't say the name of the show on our show, because it's—

**Justin:** BS.

**Sydnee:** BS. It's got a bad word in it.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** It's got a curse. And it inspired me, one of the episodes inspired me to do a show about Dr. Joycelyn Elders, former surgeon general of the United States.

**Justin:** Can we talk about BS for a second, before we move on to Joycelyn Elders?

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** We realized, we'd been rewatching old episodes of this show and, um, while obviously not everything has held up wonderfully in the 15 years since the show was made, we did realize how much a big part of watching this show before we did Sawbones, many, many years ago, was part of Sawbones itself. That thinking critically and challenging things, and there's even some episodes that are, you know, going after alternative medicine, stuff like that, and you know, sort of foundational roots of— I don't typically use the word skepticism. I think, like, practicality, logic-based, science-based is a little more...

**Sydnee:** For me, it's about preventing people from being taken advantage of. And when you're talking about, um, usually you try to lay off of people's beliefs, as long as they're not harming anyone. And the problem with medicine is that sometimes they are very directly harming people. And I feel like that's when things become fair game. When you're doing harm. Because that's the opposite of what we do. And I think Dr. Joycelyn Elders would agree.

**Justin:** Oh yeah?

**Sydnee:** Cause she appeared on an episode. [laughs]

**Justin:** That's true! That's true. Where she was lauded, heartily.

**Sydnee:** Yes. Yeah, appearing on an episode for being anti-BS.

**Justin:** Yes, right.

**Sydnee:** Which is the same reason I'm celebrating her on this show, today. Because usually on Sawbones we're talking about, like, if we focus

on a person it's because they were like a snake-oil salesman, or they did something really wacky. In this case, I like to think that Joycelyn, Dr. Joycelyn Elders, was in the midst of a lot of—

**Justin:** You were about to just use her first name like you guys were bros.

**Sydnee:** I know. We're not friends. I wish we were friends. But we're not friends. She's still with us, thankfully.

**Justin:** Yeah, finally a Sawbones episode where Sydnee doesn't get to announce their death!

**Sydnee:** [laughs] I like that.

**Justin:** She's putting her large obituary stamp that she stamps on every episode, putting it back in the comically oversized drawer it fits in.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] She was the voice, and continues to be, the voice of reason in the midst of a lot of medical history ridiculousness, I would say. So, I wanted to focus on her and celebrate her as, I think, a figure in medical history that is certainly celebrated and talked about, but should be more so.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** So, I was alive during the time that Dr. Elders served as Surgeon General to the United States. I don't remember much of it because I was pretty young. This was in 1993, 1994.

**Justin:** Yeah, can we actually, real quick— what is the Surgeon General?

**Sydnee:** Like, in charge of... I mean, in a sense, you help, like, guide administrative policy, executive administrative policy in terms of all matters health and medicine and that kind of thing. You're in charge of the US Public Health Service, officially.

**Justin:** That would be a good episode some time.

**Sydnee:** Yeah.

**Justin:** Surgeon General.

**Sydnee:** We could talk about that.

**Justin:** I'll add it to the list.

**Sydnee:** But it's, I mean, it's a big deal. It's like, top doctor, you know.

**Justin:** Top doc.

**Sydnee:** That's an easy way to think about it.

**Justin:** America's current top doc.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] America's top doc. You get the ear of the president when it comes to issues medical, and that's a big deal, right? I don't remember a lot of the controversy around her dismissal. Obviously, she was only Surgeon General for a year, so there's more to this story. You may already know it, you may not. I don't remember a lot of it because I was pretty young, so it wasn't something that even though it happened in my lifetime, that I knew.

When I look back at it, reading about it now through the lens of 2020, it's amazing to me to see how ahead of her time Dr. Elders was in a lot of her positions. How much of it makes total sense and would be widely accepted today by many, not all, but by many of us. But at the time, it was very controversial for her to speak out about these progressive ideas. And then I think something that remains true, unfortunately, to this day. Because not only was she progressive and spoke out about the things she believed in, she is a black woman. And she was speaking out about things in ways that made people uncomfortable, and challenged the white power structure that still has not been dismantled in this country.

And so, I think that her refusal to be silent would still be a challenge for her, and still is a challenge for her. But anyway, so let's get into her history. Dr Elders was born in Schaal, Arkansas, which I guess is not too far from Hope, Arkansas, which is going to help determine, I think, the course of events as we move forward. Cause as you may know, probably know, Bill Clinton is from Hope, Arkansas.

**Justin:** Right, right.

**Sydnee:** Yes. She was born in 1933. She was the oldest of eight children. Her birthday's actually pretty soon. I believe— what would that be? 87<sup>th</sup> birthday? Yes?

**Justin:** Good for her.

**Sydnee:** August 13<sup>th</sup>.

**Justin:** Crushing it.

**Sydnee:** Yeah. So, you can celebrate that with her. August 13<sup>th</sup>. Her name was Minnie Lee Jones when she was born. She would later add Joycelyn herself in college.

**Justin:** So cool.

**Sydnee:** I know. [laughs] I think it's very cool. Her parents were sharecroppers. They did not have a lot of money. She reports that she actually never saw a physician until she was 16 years old. That was the first time she went to doctor.

**Justin:** God, imagine.

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** Sheesh.

**Sydnee:** There's a great interview with her from back in 1994 where I read a lot about her history from her own, in her own words. And she talks about that when she was younger, she wanted to be a laboratory technician because it was the only thing she'd heard about. She said she didn't know that you could be a doctor because, as she says, you can't be what you don't see. She didn't know that as a black woman she could be a doctor. She didn't even think she could be a clerk in a clothing store cause she'd never seen a black clerk in a clothing store, so she assumed it was not an option for her.

**Justin:** That's really— I mean, that's...

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** You can't be what you don't see is, like, I think that's that's really— you know, it's funny, for me growing up as a young white boy in West Virginia, I didn't see podcasters.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] This is the same.

**Justin:** And so, I'm sort of equally, God, I'm sort of equally inspirational. This is already a very uplifting episode, Sydnee. I feel great about this.

**Sydnee:** Right.

**Justin:** Let's hear some other parallels about me and Dr Joycelyn Elders.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] So, she excelled at school, she would go on to become valedictorian of her class and receive a scholarship to Philander Smith College, which is a private, historically black college in Little Rock still going to this day. She tells a story about when she went, her brothers and sisters had to help her get together enough money to get some clothes to wear to go to college and the bus fare. They actually had to help her, they were, like, picking cotton and what did she say, like trapping raccoons, to raise enough money for her to go. So, I mean, really worked every step of the way to get to where she is today, still.

So, she went to college there, she got her bachelor's in biology, and while she was there, she met a female physician, the first black woman to study at the University of Arkansas Medical School, Dr. Edith Irby Jones, who she to this day says was a huge inspiration to her. Because she saw that this was a viable career path for her as well. She could do this, too. And she decided after meeting her that she also wanted to be a doctor, specifically a doctor that could help kids. That was her number one goal when she was young, was "I want to grow up and be a doctor who can help children."

So, her pathway wasn't direct. She spent some time first as a nurse's aide in a VA hospital. She would go on to join the army herself. While she was in the army, she trained to be a physical therapist. And then finally, by 1960, she was able to enroll in medical school at the University of Arkansas and get on her path, on her chosen path to a residency in pediatrics, a fellowship in endocrinology and an MS in biochemistry as well.

So, once she had all those credentials, her expertise as a physician, the respect she earned from the community with her knowledge base and with her skillset and her ability to affect change, she was named eventually Director of the Arkansas Department of Health. And as soon as she got into that position, she began to, well, she was already doing this, but she continued her stated goal of helping kids. Making a difference in children's lives. And one of the big things she wanted to combat was teen pregnancy. Which, I would say, in many rural areas you see this as a larger problem. It's a problem everywhere, but you can see this especially

in some rural areas, and it was in Arkansas. I would echo that sentiment in West Virginia.

And she saw this, in her words, she saw this as a form of slavery that still existed, especially for young black women. Because they, black women, disproportionately did not have access to contraception the way that white women did. There were many— she talked about a textbook that said, um, white women's— and this is from the textbook, I should say that a more exact form of this would be "white people who have periods" have regular periods, whereas black people who have periods have irregular periods. Now, why would it say something like that, that isn't true?

**Justin:** I don't know.

**Sydnee:** Because white people had access to contraception and birth control pills that can regulate cycles in a way that black people did not have access.

**Justin:** Wow.

**Sydnee:** So it would seem that white people's cycles were more regular, when really it was just an access to contraception difference. And so, one of the things she really wanted to do was combat the teen pregnancy rate by providing access to contraception and talking about it. Creating, like, school-based health clinics where you could talk to somebody about sexual health, where you could access contraception, access condoms, you know. Get the information and the stuff you need to protect yourself.

**Justin:** I think people who— I feel like we have a lot of listeners to this show that are maybe a half a generation behind us. I don't think you can really appreciate, and maybe even we're kind of a little young to appreciate, what a big battleground this was in the, like, early 90s. Early to mid-90s. This idea of, like, should kids be taught safe sex was the, *the* presuming question. Like, *the* sort of overarching question, moral question, I think, of the era. Like, it was a massive, massive, battleground. Maybe even more so than abortion at that exact moment. Like, I remember hearing, at least, a lot more about it in that moment. This idea that, like, we should be teaching kids safe sex. It was, like, a huge, huge, huge conversation.



**Sydnee:** And it wasn't, I mean, I think part of it is our area. Abortion is not talked about in this area of the country much.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** I know that seems like an odd statement to make, but it's not because it's still so, it's so taboo to even discuss here, that certainly in our schools it wasn't talked about. And I would say there are probably other rural areas where that's true. And I think that the thing that Dr Elders really understood is the intersectionality of this issue. The fact that it's not just, it wasn't just that all teens weren't getting access to contraceptive services and, like, sex education. Because, as she said, there were a lot of young white people who were on birth control pills to, quote-unquote "regulate their periods", because they do that. Now, were parents sort of accepting this is also going to keep you from getting pregnant but we're not gonna talk about it or acknowledge it? Was it like a massive self-deception? We'll all pretend this isn't for sex, even though it is definitely...

**Justin:** Definitely, definitely for sex.

**Sydnee:** For sex. I mean, I feel like I was part of that. I was put on birth control pills when I was 14 years old to regulate my period. Nobody ever said it was for prevention of pregnancy, but it would have done that had I been in that situation. And when Dr. Elders said was very true, black people were not given this option. They were not being given the option to start contraception for those reasons. So, you know, again, there's more to the issue than just all young people didn't have access. So, she spoke out about this.

These school-based clinics that spread throughout the state of Arkansas made a huge difference. They saw a huge decrease in the teen pregnancy rate under Dr. Elder's leadership. Just speaking, honestly, a lot of it is just sex education. Talking about it. Which, again, like you said, was totally taboo. The idea that somebody would honestly talk to you about the fact that, like, there is sex and it happens. That was a big deal. I had a Health teacher get fired for talking too openly with us about sex back then.

So anyway, she addressed other issues as well. A lot of it, like I said, was focused on teen pregnancy. Even as Surgeon General, she would later say that was her number one thing she wanted to help combat, but she also saw, like, a 24% rise in the immunization rate for two-year-olds, so she

was a huge advocate of getting kids preventive health services, even in rural communities that weren't getting, necessarily, the kind of attention they needed. Let's get kids their immunizations. Expanding the availability of HIV testing and counselling, she was a huge advocate for expanded HIV treatment and testing early on, especially if you compare that to previous administrations lack of response at all to HIV. Dr. Elders was a huge shift in that, to let's talk about this, let's head-on confront this, let's diagnose it, let's treat it, let's do this. Let's actually address the problem.

She was a big advocate for breast cancer screenings, expanded that, better hospice care, so like, lots of other issues. It wasn't just teen pregnancy. But she did promote sex education, hygiene, prevention of substance abuse, things that would become, were and would become hot button issues as she progressed in her career. And it seems inevitable, because here she is in Arkansas, she's making all these differences, she's in this position of state leadership, we're at a point in history where, as you may or may not know, the Clintons are about to inhabit the Whitehouse. It seems very obvious that when he would be elected president, one of his first appointments would be Dr. Joycelyn Elders as Surgeon General.

She was loved by the left. Progressive organizations were very excited by this appointment. She was an advocate for the LGBTQ community, for better HIV education and treatment, abortion rights, sex ed, she'd be the first— she was, she is, the first black Surgeon General. The second woman Surgeon General. So, it was a good pick from both qualified to do the job well perspective, and for Clinton, from a political perspective.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** She was a great pick. What could go wrong?

**Justin:** Noth— I dunno. Nothing?

**Sydnee:** I'm gonna tell you. But first, let's go to the billing department.

**Justin:** [laughs] Let's go.

[ad break]

**Justin:** So Syd, I'm ready. I've girded myself emotionally. What could go wrong with this amazing person?

**Sydnee:** Well, as you may imagine, it wasn't an easy battle, the appointment to Surgeon General. The confirmation of Dr. Joycelyn Elders was not smooth. It was not a smooth confirmation process. I feel like I understand a lot of this just from *The West Wing*. [laughs]

**Justin:** Yeah. There was also, um, her being from Arkansas was a thing when he came into office. Like, it was— remember they talked about this on... I think it was on *Fiasco*. The idea that he was just filling the Whitehouse with people from Arkansas.

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** That he was just basically bringing his— I think they called it the "Capitol Hillbillies" was like the joke, like we're loading up the trailer and bringing everybody from Arkansas to fill out the— which is a lot of, like, rural bias in there that, like, people from Arkansas can't also be, you know, national leaders.

**Sydnee:** And so, you can imagine how much harder—

**Justin:** We never get that in West Virginia.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] Yeah. I've no connection to that. But you can imagine though, whatever connection we may have on that level to the, yes, as people from a rural state, everyone assumes we're dumb. But even more so, here she is, she is from a rural area of the country, she grew up poor, from a, you know, a very rural part of a rural state, of a poor state. She is black, she is a woman. And the beating she got in the confirmation hearing, I think she said, "I came in as a steak and I left as hamburger", or something like that were her words. But the Republicans at the confirmation hearing were just terrible to her. They called her "unimpressive and foolish".

**Justin:** Hmm. Some very, some very thinly-veiled language there.

**Sydnee:** Yes. She was belittled as a person, as a physician, everything about her was called into question. It's amazing, knowing all this, that she was confirmed. But she was. After she was, members of the American Medical Association tried to pass a resolution, because they were so upset by this, tried to pass a resolution saying that only doctors could be appointed Surgeon General. Now, what would they do that?

**Justin:** I don't know.

**Sydnee:** They didn't believe she was a doctor.

**Justin:** Who didn't?

**Sydnee:** These members of the American Medical Association. Couldn't fathom that this black woman from rural Arkansas could be a doctor. So they tried to pass this, which was meaningless, because she, ya know, is a doctor, but they just— and they didn't even do the research. I mean, I know this was, like, pre-Google, but you could have asked anyone. They just assumed that there's no way she could be a doctor, let's pass this resolution so this never happens again. Well, ridiculous, cause, you know, she's a doctor. Anyway, as you, if you were alive at this point in history and old enough to be aware, as you may know, this... the "Capitol Hillbillies" coming to the Whitehouse and this progressive revolution that she could have been a part of, was very short-lived.

**Justin:** Yes.

**Sydnee:** Because the 1994 midterm election would kind of spell the end of whatever Bill Clinton's progressive plans actually were. I don't know what's in his heart. Whatever he really wanted to accomplish, the end of that was spelled in 1994 with the Republican revolution.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** Newt Gingrich led a group of Republican congresspeople and senators in his Contract with America to victory. They unseated 54 members of the House and eight of the Senate, flipped all those seats red, and basically that would really change the course of, like, Clinton's policies, what he was able to get done, because everything was a compromise with Newt Gingrich and the GOP at the point. And many of his politics would start to shift to the middle from the left. Which, I would say, they weren't nearly as far to the left as I am, anyway. But they definitely shifted further to a conservative perspective, and this would include medicine. As you may imagine, and as I've alluded to with the confirmation hearing, the GOP establishment did not like Dr Elders.

**Justin:** Yes.

**Sydnee:** They were not a fan. They liked to call her "the condom queen" because, you know, she advocated for birth control for those who needed it.

**Justin:** What a wild woman.

**Sydnee:** But she reportedly, this was a big thing that was made a lot of, like, media heyday out of, she had a condom tree on her desk. Now, what it was actually was someone had fashioned a bouquet of roses out of Lifestyle condom wrappers that were red, and she did have that on her desk.

**Justin:** That's cool. I am disappointed that she did not at some point plant a condom and a beautiful condom tree emerged from it.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] Well, that's not a thing.

**Justin:** No, but what if it had been?

**Sydnee:** Certainly would make... man, that would make safe sex a lot easier, if you could just tell teenagers, just plant this condom tree in your closet. Grow this.

**Justin:** Grow this, get a grow—

**Sydnee:** Next to the secret marijuana you're growing. [laughs]

**Justin:** Yeah, get a grow light. Yeah.

**Sydnee:** Grow your condom tree. [laughs] No, I'd advocate everybody talk to their parents, but anyway. So, she was an advocate for abortion rights as well. I don't think we've talked as much about that yet, but at one point they asked her about it and she said, "We really need to get over this love affair with the fetus and start worrying about children". You can imagine how—

**Justin:** That did not go great. [laughs]

**Sydnee:** Right, the conservatives in Washington felt about that statement.

**Justin:** If you've never heard Joycelyn Elders speak, she gives... we're not allowed to curse on this show. She gives no Fs. [laughs] She is a pretty direct woman.

**Sydnee:** Well, she's very matter of fact, because a lot of what she says is, I would say everything she says, is evidence-based, and when she

says that, "Well, I'm not sure about this," it's because we don't have the evidence to say yes or no on this yet. So, "I would say that this is possibly a good idea, but we need to study it." I mean, it's all very, I mean, it's good science. It's good medicine. It's the way someone who believes in the scientific method would speak.

And so, obviously she already had a lot of people against her, and beyond that, she also advocated for the legalization of marijuana. She said it was something that should be studied. She at that point said we don't have enough evidence to know all the effects of decriminalization, or legalization, or whatever we were deciding, of marijuana. We don't know yet. She said we need to study it because basically our current plan of arresting everybody and spending billions of dollars to keep all of these people in jail is a failure. And why are we continuing this war on drugs that is failing? How about we study something that might actually work?

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** That was all she said. Which, again, today is not that controversial of a position, I would say.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** But at the time, was very controversial. Actually, after she made these comments, her son Kevin was arrested for allegedly trying to sell cocaine to an undercover police officer, very shortly after she made these comments in favor of decriminalization.

**Justin:** Oh, I bet the right had a heyday with that.

**Sydnee:** Yes, and it was— in the trial, his lawyer said that it was entrapment. That was never proven. He ended up, I think he was sentenced to ten years, but only served like four months or something. And in more recent years she has spoken more openly about his diagnosis of, you know, substance use disorder and about how he has been sober for, I think, when I was reading the article, it had been 15 years and he works every day to maintain that. And so, she's been very open about those things. But as to the timing of his arrest and the circumstances surrounding it, it's obviously very suspect. For sure. So, all of this, once the conservatives took—

**Justin:** Wait, what is suspect? I wanna clarify, what is suspect?

**Sydnee:** The fact that just within, like, it was two weeks after she made these comments supporting possible legalization—

**Justin:** You're saying it was suspect in terms of like, the charge. Like, going after the son was pretty sketchy, considering.

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** In the wake of what she had said.

**Sydnee:** It seemed very politically-motivated. The timing.

**Justin:** Got it. That makes perfect sense.

**Sydnee:** But I don't— I think it's like a lot of things, there's nuance. Did he use drugs? It seems from the history that yes, he did. But at that moment was that actually what happened? Did he actually try to sell? I don't know. It all seems very convenient for people who wanted to make her out to be a bad person. So anyway, people wanted to attack Clinton for moral reasons. Certainly, Bill Clinton could give them many.

**Justin:** Got him a little bit.

**Sydnee:** On his own.

**Justin:** [laughs] They handled that.

**Sydnee:** He certainly didn't need help from this amazing human, Joycelyn Elders, but the GOP in Congress at the time felt that she was a good target because of all these beliefs and this landslide victory in '94 gave them the footing on which to do it. And all she had to do was say the wrong thing.

So, on December 1<sup>st</sup> of 1994, and this was, I mean, again, this was a month after the midterm elections. So, on December 1<sup>st</sup> she was at a UN AIDS conference in New York, and a psychologist there, Dr. Rob Clarke, asked her a question basically saying should we have a more explicit discussion and promotion of masturbation when we're talking about different methods we could use to stop the spread of HIV? And in response to that, Dr. Elders talked about how she is a big advocate of sex education and her quote was, "As per your specific question, in regard to masturbation, I think that it is something that is part of human sexuality, and it's a part of something that perhaps should be taught, but we've not

even taught our children the very basics.” That was her response. Now, what do you think the headlines were after Dr. Elders said this?

**Justin:** Uh, “Elders endorses teaching children how to masturbate”.

**Sydnee:** Yes. That was exactly what her opponents needed. So, not only did they say she wanted us to teach our kids to masturbate, but that we should teach our kids in school how to masturbate.

**Justin:** Which is, if you think about, if you parse what she is saying, it is actually, like, three different ideas. She’s saying that like, yeah people masturbate, yeah we should teach people that that’s part of normal life, but we’re not even teaching children, our children who could be any age, don’t have to be like little kids, we’re not teaching them the basics of sex education. We’re not teaching them anything.

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** But they have, like, conflated those into one damning, sort of, thing. And yes, I did use that word. I don’t think that was profanity in this sense.

**Sydnee:** Okay, okay. [laughs] So, this was exactly what people needed to use against her. This was the fodder they needed, because they could make headlines out of it that could confuse everybody and upset everybody and inflame everybody who already was against her for a million reasons. And Clinton had distanced himself from her positions before. When she talked about legalization of drugs, he had kinda said, “Well we don’t really see eye to eye on everything, but I support her autonomy in her position,” and those kinds of, like, vague political stances. But this was the one, apparently, this was the hill to die on. He had to deny her for this.

So, he asked for her resignation and the administration made it clear in press releases that if she did not resign, she would be fired. So, this was not— they wanted to take a very strong position against masturbation in this moment in history. And I think it’s very clear that obviously this was part of Clinton trying to move further to the right because of this election, but also, she is a black woman who arose to this position of power, and this threatened white supremacy in many ways. And so, removing her from that position was very important to her opponents and they found a reason to do it.



There was a lot of outcry from more left-leaning organizations. Planned Parenthood was very upset about this, a lot of LGBTQ and abortion rights groups were upset, HIV activists were upset, because they saw in Dr. Elders someone who could really address all these issues, who could really move things forward in a scientific way, in an evidence-based way, and give a lot of, like, scientific legitimacy to these groups that were kind of seen as fringe left at the time, but were actually speaking about critical medical needs for many members of our country.

**Justin:** There is a West Wing episode that is obviously inspired by this.

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** And it's so hilarious, it's hilarious in hindsight because what the West Wing episode is about is the Surgeon General, who is white, by the way, so it's not getting all the nuance, but the Surgeon General endorses legalizing marijuana, or at least studying it, I think, and there's such an outcry that she resigns. And then the President says "No, I won't accept her resignation," and it's just like, wouldn't that be a fun world? Like every West Wing episode, the fundamental question is, wouldn't that be a cool world to live in? [laughs] Imagine if things were like this. Oh well, they're not.

**Sydnee:** Which again is why, I think it highlights why the intersectionality of these issues is so important to discuss. Because I do think that in the West Wing world, because you have made the Surgeon General white, it is more realistic that she would be given a pass than a black woman who is being held to a standard that nobody else is, unfortunately. So, before I get into where she is today and what she is still doing, because obviously that was not the end of Dr. Elders' good work, she had a lot more to do. And she's very matter of fact about the whole thing. She wouldn't change a thing. She doesn't regret any of it. She was right, she knows she was right, and she's glad she did what was right at the end of the day. And she was.

Abstinence education only and refusing to offer contraception or talk about contraception, refusing to talk about STIs or HIV or how to prevent it or all that thing, just telling kids don't have sex, all it means, the evidence has shown that the kids who get this kind of education are more likely to not use protection when they have sex. That's it. They're not, I mean, they're either gonna have sex or they're not, all you're doing is ensuring that they're not gonna use a condom or some other form of

contraception when they do. So, she was right. It doesn't work. Banning abortion does not stop abortion, it just makes them more dangerous for the people, largely non-white people and poor people, who are getting them. What I mean by that is white people and rich people who are getting them, it is not necessarily more dangerous for.

**Justin:** Yes.

**Sydnee:** And masturbation's normal. And obviously she didn't mean—

**Justin:** Thank you!

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** This is what I keep telling everybody, anybody who'll listen. The guy at the post office. I hope he's listening.

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** It's normal! It's my car!

**Sydnee:** I certainly don't want—

**Justin:** I do what I want!

**Sydnee:** I certainly don't want school teachers teaching children how to masturbate, but that was never—

**Justin:** I don't think anybody was suggesting that.

**Sydnee:** Well, exactly. That is not what Dr Elders was suggesting, or anyone else is.

**Justin:** It's a mir— I'm sorry, I was a, you know, a pre-teen boy. By some miracle, I figured it out. It's incredible. It's a miracle of biology!

**Sydnee:** Well, as a lot of scientists will tell you, like, the human animal will figure this out on their own.

**Justin:** Monkeys figured it out. [laughs]

**Sydnee:** As part of, like, a sex-positive education, telling your children that this is a normal thing and encouraging them to maybe do it alone in their room and not in the living room, I think is fine. [laughs] But anyway,

all these things are a lot more accepted now. Not by everyone, of course. And who isn't talking about legalization? I'm sorry, but we have an upcoming election where for a while in a primary how many of the candidates were supporting that? You know? I mean, none of these ideas are so far to the left that they're outrageous. She was just saying them—

**Justin:** But they were far enough to the left that we still haven't done them some, you know, 25 years later.

**Sydnee:** Well, that is true. All she did was say the stuff that people have believed for a long time, but she was unafraid to say it out loud. She was ahead of her time. She was a progressive when many of the quote-unquote "progressives" were not.

**Justin:** And I think you could draw a parallel there between what she said in public and seeing someone like her say that in a public forum gave permission to the other people who would come after her, who heard her say it. And without, you know, attaching too much narrative weight to the thing, I think it's a parallel of her growing up and not seeing any doctors that look like her. If she didn't see it, she couldn't be it, and I think that that goes for saying these things in a public forum. Like, once she said it, other people could, you know, start to say it out loud too.

**Sydnee:** And she said things like, I was reading this, there's this great interview from the New York Times magazine from 1994 with her, where you can read a lot of her ideas. And again, like, as you read these ideas, she is speaking the truth that we need to hear now, in 1994. She says we can't legislate morals, we have to teach them, kids, how to take care of themselves. I mean, she is saying the things that are true to this day. And it's very frustrating. She also talks about her husband in such an adorable way, but anyway, she didn't stop. Even though she wasn't Surgeon General, she became a professor at the University of Arkansas for Medical Science, then a Professor Emeritus. Still works lecturing all over on preventing teen pregnancy, on sexual health, she's spoken out since more in favor of legalization, as well as speaking out against the military ban on transgender members. She's spoken out against that.

**Justin:** She, like, led the commission, right?

**Sydnee:** Yes, that spoke out against that. She's worked with Changing the Face of Medicine, which seeks to ensure that we have a higher percentage of black doctors in America, because, as we've talked about

on the show before, our numbers of doctors in this country, our percentages of doctors in this country who are not white are ridiculously low and not representative of the population as a whole. And again, reflect the systemic racism that she talks about, by the way, in this interview. The white power structure. Again, in 1994, when these things, I think, were not— I know that they were being talked about by the black community at the time. I know that. When I say they weren't being talked about, they weren't being talked about by a lot of the voices in power, because a lot of the voices in power were white. And they were one, ignorant to them, and two, refusing to acknowledge them because they were part of it.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** But these things that I think we are, as white people, coming to accept as having been true for years and we've been ignoring it, she was talking about on a large stage in 1994. And I'm certain that is what made so many people uncomfortable. Because it was the truth. She said, I thought this was a great— oh, by the way, she has an autobiography you can read. Joycelyn Elders, M.D.: From Sharecropper's Daughter to Surgeon General of the United States of America. So, if you wanna learn more, I would say get her book. Read about it from her.

And she, in one interview with US News & World Report— no, in one interview with New York Times, they said, "US News & World Report described you as, 'She's intolerant, preachy, judgmental and overbearing. She's bright, articulate, passionate and kind.' Is that an accurate description?" and what she said in response to that was, "It's pretty good. I'm only overbearing to the people I need to be overbearing with. You've got to get people's attention before you can achieve change. As Surgeon General, you have to take a stand. People are either going to love you or hate you." This was right before she was removed from office, too.

**Justin:** You know, that's... a lot like being a podcaster.

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** People are either gonna love or hate your podcast and you still gotta... you know, podcast.

**Sydnee:** All I'm saying is, I would love— she's a hero, I would love to meet her.

**Justin:** Put her on a stamp! Put her on a coin. Put her on the dollar bill.  
[laughs]

**Sydnee:** Yeah, we should be celebrating this black woman physician as a country, as a progressive leader, in a way that I just don't feel like she's been elevated enough.

**Justin:** We couldn't figure it out. Sydnee literally had me do, um, to try to find out why Joycelyn Elders [mispronounced] is not, excuse me, Joycelyn Elders [correct pronunciation] is not the, like, a massive figure in the American landscape. I did, like, opposition research on Joycelyn Elders. [laughs]

**Sydnee:** Which I think the problem is that, like white people don't know...

**Justin:** Surprise!

**Sydnee:** Any history that isn't white. I mean, that's our problem, right? Like, I call us out, It's our privilege, it's the white supremacist power structure in this country. We don't learn these things. But, she's amazing. Her birthday's next month.

**Justin:** It also made Clinton look bad. And I think that they have continued to be so influential in the American political landscape that, like, that narrative can't, could not, gain as much traction.

**Sydnee:** She also never held it against him either. She never spoke out against him.

**Justin:** Well, I do.

**Sydnee:** I know, I know, why. I mean, I do.

**Justin:** [laughs]

**Sydnee:** Obviously, that's not— there's a list, when it comes to Bill Clinton. This is on it. But yeah, she was very, she just went on about her good work and, "Okay I'm done with that chapter, what's next?" Which is very admirable for her.

**Justin:** What's next.

**Sydnee:** But anyway, learn about her, read about her, read her book. Put a poster up on your wall of Dr. Joycelyn Elders. I want one. And I want a condom tree.

**Justin:** A condom tree coming right up. Thank you so much for listening to our podcast. Reminder that we're entering the last week of the Max Fun Drive. If you could support our show, it would just mean the world. [MaximumFun.org/Join](http://MaximumFun.org/Join). \$5 a month, if you can pledge \$5 a month, you will help keep our shows going, help us make the things that we make and help support the things that you love. So, it's a great time to do that. But you are running out of time if you want cool gifts, et cetera. [MaximumFun.org/Join](http://MaximumFun.org/Join).

**Sydnee:** Thank you so much to all our members, everyone who's joining, who's upgrading their membership, who's sharing, tweeting our show, everything. Thank you.

**Justin:** And thank you so much to The Taxpayers for the use of their song "medicines" as the intro and outro of our program. And thank you to you for listening. We'll be with you again soon, but until then, my name is Justin McElroy.

**Sydnee:** I'm Sydnee McElroy.

**Justin:** And as always, don't drill a hole in your head.

[theme music plays]

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