

Shmanners 504: Dr. Alexa Canady

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Travis: Hello, internet! I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.

Teresa: And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy!

Travis: And you're listening to Shmanners!

Teresa: It's extraordinary etiquette...

Travis: For ordinary occasions. Hello, my dove.

Teresa: Hello, dear. [chuckles]

Travis: You don't like the way I'm moving around?

Teresa: You're doing the little posey. [chuckles]

Travis: With each one. This is me.

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: And this is me. I'm over here! Look at me. Hey! Hi.

Teresa: Hi.

Travis: It's warm outside!

Teresa: Finally.

Travis: I've got—it's spring. When a young man's fancy turns to posing.

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: Yes!

Teresa: Well, but don't forget, I told you this earlier, March in Ohio, they say... comes in like a lion and out like a lamb. So, we still have a couple—

Travis: Six more weeks of winter.

Teresa: [chuckles] At least a couple more weeks of where it could get cold again.

Travis: You don't know that!

Teresa: You're right, I don't.

Travis: Nobody knows anything!

Teresa: Only Punxsutawney Phil knows.

Travis: And he's not telling. Except in his biography. You can read it here first, Groundbreaking: The Punxsutawney Phil Story. It's being published on this podcast.

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: We'll be reading it today. "I was born a baby groundhog—"

Teresa: No, we won't.

Travis: Okay. "I'll never forget the first time I saw my shadow."

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: "My father came home from work angry. I saw my shadow, it scared me."

Teresa: I don't like—I don't like where this is going.

Travis: No, see, it's a metaphor, because he was living in his father's shadow.

Teresa: Oh...

Travis: And he saw his shadow, and it reminded me of his father, so he— I'm trying to give some backstory as to why he's afraid of his shadow.

Teresa: Okay. I thought it was just because it was big.

Travis: His shadow was big?

Teresa: I don't know...

Travis: You think Punxsutawney Phil's stupid, he doesn't know what a shadow is?

Teresa: [chuckles] He's a groundhog.

Travis: Wow...

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: I apologize to all of our groundhog listeners out there.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: That was off base, Teresa. And that's what we're talking about today—

Teresa: [chuckles] No, we're not!

Travis: No.

Teresa: That's not what we're talking about. Today, we are talking about Dr. Alexa Canady.

Travis: I feel like I know that name, and I don't know why!

Teresa: It sounds a lot like Kennedy, but with "can" instead.

Travis: No, I know it's not that—I know it's not that.

Teresa: Oh?

Travis: But I'm trying to figure out why I know that name. I don't know. Go on.

Teresa: Oh, okay, all right—

Travis: Tell me!

Teresa: I will, if you'll let me!

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: [chuckles] Let's see, she was—is alive.

Travis: Ooh.

Teresa: And the first black neurosurgeon in America.

Travis: Excellent.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: I thought you were gonna say she was and is alive.

Teresa: [chuckles] I mean, she had to be.

Travis: I mean, yeah.

Teresa: From the moment that she was born—

Travis: She was born, and then she continued to be alive for many years.

Teresa: [chuckles] Yes. She was born November 7th, 1950.

Travis: So close! One day off my birthday.

Teresa: I know, I know. But not everybody can be so special as to be born on yours and Justin's and my sister's birthday.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: And a bunch of other people, apparently.

Teresa: And a bunch of other people. [chuckles] In Lansing, Michigan.

Travis: It's really fun, because me and Justin share a birthday, and from several birthdays, my children could not comprehend that we were not twins.

Teresa: Yup.

Travis: And then they found out that your older sister, Aaron, and I were born on exactly the same day.

Teresa: Mm-hm.

Travis: And they're like, "So, you guys are twins?"

Teresa: [chuckles] And they're like that's—

Travis: And we're like, "No!"

Teresa: Not how that works!

Travis: "No, no, but you were born on the same day?" And we're like, "Yes."

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: And they're like, "So... twins."

Teresa: Twins. [laughs] No. And let's see, so, her whole family is extraordinary. Her father, Clinton Canady Jr, was a dentist, a WWII veteran, and a graduate of both Fisk University and Meharry Medical College, both located in Nashville. Her mother, Elizabeth Hortense Canady, also had plenty accolades, she was an educator and civil rights leader, also served as the 18th national president of historically black sorority Delta Sigma Theta.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Yeah. So, a prestigious family.

Travis: I've never done any of that.

Teresa: I haven't either.

Travis: Okay, there's still time. I could still be the president of—

Teresa: To be a dentist?

Travis: Or WWII.

[both chuckle]

Travis: Time travel, who knows? I don't know.

Teresa: Okay, so, she was also from a third-generation college family, right? There are a lot of people, especially in the United States, who only have like a couple of generations that have been to college, but even at this point, to be the third-generation college educated, not unheard of, but certainly fantastic, right?

Travis: Yeah, I'm trying to think, I honestly don't know if my grandfather, on either side, went to college. I don't know!

Teresa: Neither of mine did.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Yeah, so, that's pretty awesome. So, her parents expected a lot from her, let's just say that. And she has a brother as well.

Travis: Did they expect a lot from him, do you think?

Teresa: Yes, I think they did.

Travis: Okay!

Teresa: I think that they did.

Travis: You don't know! I mean, look at the three of me—like me and my brothers. Let's just say my parents expected a lot from two of us. No, that's not true!

Teresa: *Ah...*

Travis: Did I ever tell you about the story—I want to tell a story about my dad real quick.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: Like my whole life, right—I started doing children's theater when I was like six or seven—was doing theater my entire life. Sometimes like two or three shows a year, sometimes more, you know, acting and everything. And talked about it, right, that I was going to be a theater major in college. And my dad, it's important to note, did a lot of theater, still does, right? Taught theater in—like at the college level for a few years recently. And then two weeks before I left for college where I was going to be a theater major, he was like, "Are you sure that that's what you want to do like for a—" And I was like, "Where is this coming from, Clint?!"

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: "What, now?!"

Teresa: It's a bit late!

Travis: "Now you bring this up?!" Yes.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Yeah, and he was like, "Okay, okay." And I was like, "What's wrong with you?!" It was fine. Just a bump in the road.

[both chuckle]

Teresa: Okay, so, one of the favorite things that Alexa recalls is that their dinner table conversations were very academic and lively. So that if they asked something of their parents about like how or why, they were actually expected to go and find it out by looking it up in an encyclopedia or a dictionary. For our younger listeners, encyclopedias are lots of volumes—

Travis: They're books! Big books!

Teresa: Volumes of leather-bound books.

Travis: They used to sell them door to door, and then later on TV, and you can order them.

Teresa: Troves of information, that's pretty much obsolete the second that they print it. But a lot of that stuff lasts a little longer than that. Anyway, she would sit by her mother's side and watch her do the Reader's Digest vocabulary tests and, "It really irritated me, because she always got them all right, and I couldn't." [chuckles]

Travis: This is—it reminds me of, not exactly the same, but Bbebe and Dot like to look over my shoulder when I'm doing like the Wordle.

Teresa: Mm-hm.

Travis: And my favorite is Dot is always like, "Try Dottie! Put in Dottie!"

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: And I'm like, "I don't think it's your name, but I'll try it."

Teresa: And so, Canady's parents instilled the values of perseverance, discipline and education into both of their children, which Alexa would need on her journey through academia and medicine. She started college at 16, which is young for college—

Travis: But old for Sheldon.

Teresa: I guess so.

Travis: I think he started college when he was like eight. I haven't watched the show.

Teresa: I haven't watched the show either. [chuckles] Thinking that she would be a mathematician, saying that she loved the orderliness of arithmetic, but she realized that she didn't enjoy it by her second year of college. And that really put paint to it, because she often recalls that time in her life of her being pretty adrift, like without a goal. To the point where like she was actually placed on academic probation, like she wasn't going to class and doing her work and stuff, because she—her heart wasn't in it. You know?

Travis: It just feels like such a big jump from like mathematics to neuroscience, you know?

Teresa: Well, I mean, she obviously really wasn't into mathematics, so she had to find something else. She credits her father with pulling her out of this kind of rut, right? And she says that he really got her back on the game by getting her to go back to class and getting her involved with the school newspaper. And that summer, her brother told her about a program for minority students interested in studying medicine. This is how we get on the road to her becoming a doctor.

Travis: Yeah. I like—I can see almost a connection between like, she liked the order of math, right? But didn't find it like challenging or interesting or

whatever. And then went, "So, in fact—and so what I'm going to do instead is try to make order from the chaos of the human mind." Right?

Teresa: I like it.

Travis: "I will take the challenge of the human mind and try to solve it."

Teresa: The brain.

Travis: The brain. It's the mind. The mind and the brain are the same thing!

Teresa: Yeah, no, but I mean so like, when you say it like that, it sounds like she was a psychiatrist or a psychologist, but she's not. It is a— neuroscience.

Travis: I mean, it's all the same thing, it's all in there.

Teresa: I mean—

Travis: I mean, it all happens in there.

Teresa: Yeah, but she's—

Travis: I'm not a brain expert, but I'm pretty sure the mechanical and the mental are the same?

Teresa: Well, but she's doing the brain surgery, she's not doing like therapy.

Travis: Yeah, but she can poke a part and be like, "That's where math is." You know what I mean?

Teresa: I suppose. [laughs]

Travis: I mean, I don't know how good she is, but we're talking about her, so probably? She'd have been like, "That's math, that's their favorite ice cream, that—" Right? I—

Teresa: But you can see it all in little pictures—

Travis: I'm just reiterating that I'm not a brain expert, because people are probably confused now, because they're like, "You said he wasn't a brain expert, but he knows so much about the parts of the brain!"

Teresa: [chuckles] The ice cream part?

Travis: The ice cream part, the math part.

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: Favorite movies.

Teresa: All right—

Travis: Fear of clowns. It's all in there. It's different wrinkles, baby!

Teresa: She—

Travis: Read the wrinkles!

Teresa: She graduated with a Bachelor of Science from the University of Michigan, continued on to medical school. And so, this was where she really like fell in love with learning, right? In medical school, she—

Travis: And she married learning.

Teresa: No. She said that she became obsessed with medicine. So, during a two-year course on neurobehavioral sciences, Dr. Canady fell in love with neurology. And she studied more, she loved learning about it, she talked to her community about it. She had a friend in St. Louis who knew a pediatric neurologist, and so Alexa went there to shadow them.

Travis: Which always sounds like the person stalking them. I know that's not it, it's like "I want to learn from you." But if someone's like, "I shadowed them for days," that sounds like something like a PI would say in a noir, you know, book, like—

Teresa: I mean, I guess so.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: And so, she was a brilliant doctor there. She was always in like, in a collaborative type of environment. And that's what she really credits as being kind of like her strength, as far as a, you know, being a brain surgeon goes.

Travis: You know what else she loved? When we take a break for a word from another Max Fun show!

Teresa: Oh, okay, okay. [chuckles]

[theme music plays]

Austin: Howdy there! So sorry to interrupt whatever amazing show you were listening to, but it's time for an ad! I'll be so quick and you can get back to your show, don't worry. I'm host Austin, one half of a podcast called Secret Histories of Nerd Mysteries, that I make with my good friend, Brenda. We talk about the pop culture stuff you like, like Thunder Cats and Yu-Gi-Oh! Did you know that the Thunder Cats are cousins with Farrah Fawcett? Or that Yu-Gi-Oh once caused a riot? You probably want to know more. You can find us at Maximum Fun, or wherever you get podcasts, every single Tuesday!

[break]

Griffin [in a wizardly voice]: The wizards answer eight by eight. The Conclaves call to demonstrate their arcane gift, their single spell. They number 64, until... a conflagration! 63... a 62 they soon shall be. As one by one the wizards die, 'til one remains to reign on high.

Griffin: Join us for TAZ: Royale, an Oops All Wizards battle royale season of The Adventure Zone! Every other Thursday on maximumfun.org, or wherever you get your podcasts.

[break]

Travis: And you know, she's still alive, so she probably still loves it—hi, we're back.

Teresa: Yeah, maybe she does.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Who knows? And so, Dr. Canady moved on to Yale.

Travis: I've heard of that place! They make the locks!

Teresa: [chuckles] What?

Travis: Yale locks? It's a kind of lock—it's a brand of lock.

Teresa: Oh. I didn't know that.

Travis: Well, I'm something of a lock picker, so...

Teresa: [chuckles] Okay.

Travis: I'm a rogue, a rascalion, I know about locks.

Teresa: She took a surgical internship in New Haven from 1975 to '76, which was extremely beneficial for her career, but it didn't come without like racial prejudice and you know, stupid pettiness from dumb idiots.

Travis: Well-said.

Teresa: Yeah. Because that's how it works. She says, "I think as a black woman, I was really prepared more so than other people. I'd had experiences in the past where people didn't like me or were unpleasant to me, and I had learned to see it as their problem, not mine. So, I had the tools to handle it. I didn't really care if anyone liked me or not, I just cared that they signed the certificate at the end of my training."

Travis: Well done.

Teresa: Yes, I love that. And so, she went on to complete her neurosurgical residency at the University of Minnesota in the early '80s, thus becoming the first black woman in the United States to train and qualify as a neurosurgeon.

Travis: Incredible!

Teresa: Yeah, awesome! And this is where—

Travis: I'm thinking I might know the name, because we went to COSI in January for Dot's birthday, because she likes space, and they have a great planetarium there. And they had a layout of like groundbreaking like women in STEM.

Teresa: Oh, do you think she was on there?

Travis: I think she was on there, and I think that's why the name sounds familiar to me. Because the second you said the name, I pictured that board.
Teresa: Mm-hm. Maybe we need to do some research.

Travis: It would be wild. I can't remember what I had for breakfast yesterday, so if just looking at that board for five minutes, that jumped out at me, I'm incredible.

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: I'm like Sean Spencer on Psych here, just pulling information from everywhere. A sponge! They could study my brain and point to it be like, "That's the amazing part."

Teresa: Mm-hm.

Travis: And they're just pointing at the whole thing.

Teresa: The whole thing. [chuckles] In 1984, she became the first black woman board certified in neurosurgery, and in 1987 she was appointed to the chief of the neurosurgery department at the children's hospital there.

Travis: It's always exciting to me—

Teresa: Children's Hospital of Michigan.

Travis: It's always exciting to me when we talk about people either that are still alive or that are more current, because now we've hit the point in the timeline where I was alive.

Teresa: Yeah!

Travis: And I can be like, okay, I'm familiar—1987, that's when Griffin was born. I've got—now I've got touchstones.

Teresa: So, she was doing her thing as the chief of neurosurgery, until her first retirement in 2001.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Her first—

Travis: Yeah, that jumped out at me.

Teresa: First retirement.

Travis: Uh-huh.

Teresa: So, she was doing really great stuff.

Travis: She was born in 1950?

Teresa: Mm-hm.

Travis: She retired at 51?

Teresa: No, sorry, 2001.

Travis: Yeah? So 1950 to 2001 is 51 years.

Teresa: Oh, yeah.

Travis: She retired at 51, okay.

Teresa: Yeah, well, her first one, because she would go on and do other stuff.

Travis: Okay! Like when Michael Jordan retired from basketball—

Teresa: And went to do baseball.

Travis: Did she go to do baseball?

Teresa: No.

Travis: Oh, that would have been a huge twist! [chuckles]

Teresa: Let's talk a little bit about some of her work there at the children's hospital. She focused on congenital spinal defects and hydrocephalus, which is a condition where spinal fluid builds up around the brain; brain tumors, and head trauma. Even co-inventing a device that could treat hydrocephalus without extra surgical invention, which was patented in the year 2000.

Travis: I'm just gonna say, like once again, can't stress enough, not a neurosurgeon or neurosurgery expert, but those are not like light specialties to have, those—like, it takes, I think, a certain fortitude to be like, "I'm gonna deal with like a pretty tough thing for children and parents of those children to go through, in order to find a way to help."

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: I think that's really cool.

Teresa: She did go on to say—she said about that, "People underestimate the value of joy in your day, and children, even if they are very ill, don't know there are very ill all the time. And so, there's still joy and playfulness, and you got—I got to play every day, and get paid." She's pretty cool.

Travis: That's so—I'm tearing up just a little bit, trying to hold it in so I can be tough. You know, be a cool person, not cry in the middle of the podcast, not cry in the booth, you know what I mean? Okay. I just think that's really sweet and it was really cool of her to do that.

Teresa: My sweet, tender man.

Travis: Okay, go on.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: Don't look at me.

Teresa: [chuckles] So, over the course of her tenure in Detroit, Dr. Canady was dedicated to creating a collaborative care environment. And that I think is—she definitely like had like pioneering medical expertise, but I think that the idea that patients and the parents get included and seen in the treatment, I think that is really one of the more like things that patients could actually see happening. Not just the research, which is great, because like you're saving lives that way, but it being a collaborative effort really like helped people's lives.

Travis: I also think it's really cool, once again, not to like make connections, but for someone who talked about like being dismissed and having people like not like take her seriously, and not see her as like worth, you know, working with or paying attention to, to then turn that around to be like, "I'm going to create an environment in which I will listen to people and take in like their opinions and suggestions and their ideas and their feedback to incorporate into like a way of forming a bigger solution to the problem," I think is really inspiring.

Teresa: Yeah. She did a great job there in Detroit, at the children's hospital. But then she, you know, she worked very hard, she needed a break. Her and her husband moved to Pensacola.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: And she still attended pediatric conferences during the weekend "for entertainment."

Travis: What a nerd!

Teresa: I know. [chuckles]

Travis: Parentheses, lovingly.

Teresa: [chuckles] And while she was at one of these conferences, she was approached by another doctor attending, because there was no pediatric neurosurgeon in the entire Florida Panhandle. And that's about 400 miles, right?

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Of land. So, if a child needed specific neurological attention, they'd have to go to Jacksonville, which is five hours away by car. And so, she said yes, that she would—she would do it. She spent another eight years at Pensacola's Sacred Heart Hospital.

Travis: Wait, isn't that the name of the hospital—Sacred Heart, is that the hospital in scrubs? I think it is.

Teresa: Oh, I do—

Travis: They do call it Sacred Heart, yeah.

Teresa: Yeah, I think you're right.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: That doesn't take place in Florida, though?

Travis: No, I think that that would have been more I think obv—I think there would have been more beach scenes.

Teresa: I think you're right.

Travis: I'm almost certain it's like Seattle or Portland, or somewhere weird like that!

[both laugh]

Travis: Parenthesis, lovingly.

Teresa: She officially retired in 2012 when she had—

Travis: For real this time?

Teresa: For real this time.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: When she had established their department and it could run without her. And so, she says of her time in Pensacola, "I wasn't the chairman anymore, but I got to be in the purest form of the practice, just me with the patients."

Travis: She's so cool.

Teresa: What a sweet lady, right? So, her legacy, in her own words, because a lot of these are actually direct quotes from her, she saved thousands of lives, right? Mostly the lives of children, during her 20-year career. She was then inducted to the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame, was named Teacher of the Year by the Children's Hospital in Michigan--

And her Wikipedia page hosts a list of accolades and outstanding service awards for her patents and her publications and her countless leadership roles. And like I said, she's still alive. Alive and actually retired now. But she continues to go on speaking engagements about her career and as an advocate for women of color in medicine. She loves to talk about how—she calls on modern medicine to return its true calling to improve public health at large.

Travis: Yes.

Teresa: Talking about how she is very anti corporate medicine and doesn't like the whole thing about algorithms choosing people's fate, right? Not a fan. So, she really wants to continue to be an advocate for listening to the community and valuing the patients. Amazing. She told the American Association of Neurological Surgeons, and this is the understatement of the century, "Who cares whether other people notice how good you are or not? If your focus is being famous and not on the work, then you've lost focus. If your focus is to be famous, then I'm a little skeptical of those people."

Travis: *Oah!* Get 'em.

Teresa: Pretty humble.

Travis: Also, I'll be like, "If you're trying to be famous, get out."

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: "Get out of here."

Teresa: I think that that quote in particular shows that it's a dedication to the work, right? And that even though she's got, you know, a Wikipedia page full of accolades, she's more about the idea of helping people.

Travis: I do think that it's kind of bitterly ironic that, I'm not gonna say all doctors—I mean, we have a pretty well-known doctor in our family.

Teresa: Indeed!

Travis: But there are *plenty* of people who I would not trust for my medical treatment, who seem to live for like the limelight and stuff. And then there are people like Alexa Canady who are doing the work and are—and like live to make things better and help people, and don't seek the limelight, and so aren't the people who are being praised and celebrated.

Teresa: Yeah. But I was very engaged by this, and I hope that she continues to get some great recognition, not just from Shmanners, but from other sources as well.

Travis: And Alexa, if you're listening—

[both laugh]

Teresa: I doubt it.

Travis: Hi! Nice to meet you. I'm flattered. Oh my god.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Hey, everybody, thank you so much for listening! We want to say thank you to our researcher, Alexx, without whom we could not do these episodes. Thank you to our editors, Rachel and Gino, without whom we could not do these episodes. And thank you to you for listening! You are the wrinkles in our brain that make us able to do these episodes.

Teresa: Ooh! Deep cut.

Travis: You, right there, I'm pointing at you, you're my ice cream wrinkle. [chuckles] That's the weirdest—that's possibly the weirdest combination of words I've ever said.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: And I've said some real doozies. Make sure you go to mcelroymerch.com to check out all the cool merch we got going on over there. Follow the McElroy family on Instagram, on YouTube, all that kind of cool stuff. I've been streaming mystery games on our YouTube channel, every Wednesday at 12 Eastern, called ADHDetective. They're very fun. What else, Teresa?

Teresa: Well, we always thank Brent 'brentalfloss' Black for writing our theme music, which is available as a ringtone, where those are found. Also, thank you to Bruja Betty Pin-up Photography for the cover picture of our fan-run Facebook group, Shmanners Fanners. If you love to give and get excellent advice from other fans, go ahead and join that group today. And as always, we are taking your topic submissions, your questions, your idioms. If you have someone that you would like us to do a biography on, we'd love to hear from you—

Travis: I'm gonna push again, if you want to know the history of like specific like accessories?

Teresa: Oh, yeah.

Travis: Or like practices? That would be great.

Teresa: Send all those to shmannerstcast@gmail.com, and say hi to Alexx, because she reads every single one.

Travis: And that's going to do it for us, so join us again next week.

Teresa: No RSVP required!

Travis: You've been listening to Shmanners.

Teresa: Manners, Shmanners. Get it?

["Shmanners Theme" by brentalfloss plays]

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