



ADA Live! Episode 108: The Confess Project: A Network for Mental Health Care in African-American Communities

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Guests: Dontay Williams, CEO for The Confess Project
Darnell L. Rice, Chief of People for the Confess Project

Host: Barry Whaley, Project Director – Southeast ADA Center

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Darnell Rice:

Hey, guys. My name is Darnell Rice. I am the CPO of The Confess Project, chief people's...

Dontay Williams:

Hi. I'm Dontay Williams and you're listening to ADA Live.

4 Wheel City: Yo. Hi, let's roll (singing)

Barry Whaley:

Hey, everybody. On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University and the ADA National Network, I want to welcome you to this episode of ADA Live. I'm Barry Whaley. I'm the director of the Southeast ADA Center.

And as a reminder, listening audience, if you have questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act, you can use our online form any time at adalive.org.

Barry Whaley:

The American Psychological Association finds that while black Americans experience rates of mental illness similar to those of other Americans in general, there's some important contextual differences. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, the Office of Minority Health, black adults living below the poverty line are more than twice as likely to report serious psychological distress compared to those who have greater financial security. The American Psychological Association finds a concern such as illness, poverty, racial discrimination put black male youth at greater risk for suicide, depression, and other mental health problems.

Barry Whaley:

Barbershop culture has always been an important fixture in black communities by serving as a refuge from discrimination where black men could freely talk about their lived experiences beyond the barbershop walls. Today, the barbershop continues to be a forum for community concerns as well as personal concerns.

Barry Whaley:

That leads us to our guest today founded by Lorenzo Lewis, The Confess Project is a peer support network of over 1500 barbers in 47 cities in 25 states who inspire boys, men of color and their families to be better emotionally and create a culture of better mental health in black communities.

Barry Whaley:

So we're honored to have as our guest today, the chief executive officer, Dontay Williams and Darnell Rice, the chief of people officer. So gentlemen, welcome, and thank you for being with us today.

Dontay Williams:

Hey, listen, thank you so much.

Darnell Rice:

Thank you.

Dontay Williams:

And I'm so excited for this opportunity to talk about a unique movement in a time when our nation needs it. So really glad to be here and representing The Confess Project.

Barry Whaley:

Well, and we are happy to have you. As I told you before we began today, Dontay, when I first learned about the project, I became very intrigued, want to learn so much more about it. To start with, The Confess Project has been called America's first mental health barbershop movement. How did The Confess Project come about and how did it get its name?

Dontay Williams:

Yeah, certainly. So The Confess Project, and was founded in 2016 by Lorenzo Lewis, who currently serves as our chief visionary officer, and his story often that he shares is just his journey through his own mental health struggles. I definitely want to invite our chief of people officer to come in and just give a little bit more about the history.

Darnell Rice:

So Lorenzo has started off as he was born in a prison and his mother was incarcerated and everything. He was sitting at his auntie's table and it came about, he was at the table and also looking in the word in the Bible, and he opened up the Bible and there it was, confession and so, that's how The Confess Project came about. And Lorenzo just wanted to start having conversations with black boys, black men about their emotions. He knew that he just wanted to help people and then, it just started growing from there. It started as going into the churches and then from there, the libraries and then, of course, the

barbershop because we knew where we need to go where black boys and black men reside, where we can go and have conversations and just be able to just talk freely and not feel judged and be in a very, very brave and vulnerable space.

Barry Whaley:

I mean that's fascinating. So as I mentioned at the beginning, barbershops have typically been a safe place. Tell me a little more about that, why barbershops and why barbers?

Dontay Williams:

So oftentimes when we look at the African American community and who has the heart of the community, we lean towards our churches, but Lorenzo back in 2016 and even prior to really recognized that the barbers and the beauticians really have the trust of the community, right? And even from a mental health, psychological standpoint men are able to open up more, right, when there's that physical contact of cutting hair. And so, recognizing that these were heroes right within our community, wanted to give them the skills and the tool sets to enhance what they were already doing, and that was being good listeners and really being there and uplifting our community as a whole, yeah. Darnell, would you add anything?

Darnell Rice:

Yeah. And definitely, honoring the barbers and stylists and being able to identify just the body language, the certain body cues, the listening skills, because we know as barbers and barber stylists that they are such essential in our communities and they have such an influence on their clients and community because as you realize with barbers and barber stylists, they have clients from all walks of life down from the boys on the block to the CEO of major corporations. So they definitely have the influence and have the love and support of the community. So that's why it's so important for barbers to be the next level advocates because, of course, we have our clinicians, but barbers are so important. When you think about our civil rights era and you think about the fact that typically, we couldn't go out in the world and fight for equality and justice. It started in a barbershop. So

that's why the barbershop is such a sacred place, and our barbers and barber stylists are very important.

Barry Whaley:

Yeah, I get that. I hadn't really thought about it, but as you say, Darnell, that people from all walks of life, people from all different socioeconomic group are all meeting together at the barbershop, so that's really interesting. So I read somewhere that The Confess Project is built on a four-tier model. And I'm wondering if you could kind of walk us through those four tiers and what the approach is for what you do?

Dontay Williams:

So the four tiers that we really stand on is access, right? How do we increase access to mental health services, to mental health care? And then, our second tier is going to be advocacy and then, the third being research, and then fourthly, innovation. I think just to kind of give some insight, really looking at the innovation piece, right, and really, I think that's something that we had at The Confess Project recognize as being important, if we're truly going to extend the life of African American males, the boys as well as their families, but access to care.

Dontay Williams:

We know that when an African American goes into a mental health system that they're twice as less likely to receive a diagnosis, right? And so then, that in its own self is oftentimes limiting access to care. And so really, again, going back to the notion of the barbershop, right, being a place and a platform to where barbers can advocate, right, and where The Confess Project assists in that mission.

Dontay Williams:

And then lastly, I would just say research. Obviously, in the beginning stages, partnered with Harvard University just to kind of really identify that, hey, the barber, the beautician really are these key figures and have a voice, right, that can be heard. And I would just

also mention that we're partnering with Georgia State University as well, really demonstrating the evidence base behind this model. Yeah.

Darnell Rice:

Yeah. And so, I want to just echo what Dontay has definitely said. As we think about barbers and stylists, barbers and stylists have generally been those therapists. They have generally been those influences in community because clients confide in their barber. If I can trust you with my hair care needs, I'm going to trust you with my business. So that's so important, too, as well to recognize the importance of the barber and barber stylist because they are the true heroes. They're the ones that put their lives on the line every day to ensure that their community, but their clients look good, feel good, but also have a sense of pride and dignity and respect.

Barry Whaley:

That's an excellent point. So staying with that, men in general, black men specifically for this project, do you believe that they tend to not seek out more traditional mental health services for fear of what, stigmatization or being seen as weak or less than, and I'm wondering if you could speak to that?

Dontay Williams:

Yeah, certainly. And I think that you're right on target with that notion in that oftentimes, there is a mistrust, right, within the system, if that's the mental health system. And really, I think we could expand that to the wider medical model, right, within the African American community.

Barry Whaley:

Right.

Dontay Williams:

And so it is important that even as I consider, again, further just advocacy, right, being able to have a place to where the barbers have that trust of the community, right, and they've built the trust within that community. And again, being those heroes, really are able then to advocate and to hopefully make change. And so part of what we're doing here at The Confess Project is really advocating, right, looking at concepts of universal licensing across states, right, because that's limiting access to services. And then also, how do we recognize that, listen, we have a group of individuals who have skills, right, and if we can provide them a deeper level of training, ultimately, could lead to saving a life, yeah.

Barry Whaley:

Excellent. Anything to add, Darnell?

Darnell Rice:

So when you think about when it comes to access, as far as us, black men, we want to make sure that we're connected with a therapist that look like us.

Barry Whaley:

Yeah.

Darnell Rice:

Because it's so important that we know that someone that we can relate to that have lived experiences, that have unique lived experiences that can say, "Hey, this is what I've experienced. This is what I have done, and this is how I'm going to overcome." So it's so important that we have people that look like us, that can relate to us and be that actual guide and that role model and also, that hero and that champion, [inaudible 00:12:17] to say, "To keep going," and saying, "You know what, you are my hope. You are my resilience." So that's important as well, too. When you talk about black men therapy, we talk about lack of access.

Barry Whaley:

Yeah.

Darnell Rice:

We got to definitely have the access and it's so important to have those therapists that look like us.

Barry Whaley:

That's an excellent point. Thank you so much, Darnell. So Dontay, I think a couple of minutes ago, you had mentioned that Confess Project is partnering with Harvard and with Georgia State, in particular, that Harvard study titled Why Black Barbers Should Be Considered Essential Workers in America. And I'm wondering if you and Darnell could talk a little bit more about the study and what the findings are.

Dontay Williams:

Yeah, certainly. So in our formative stages, The Confess Project really partnered with Harvard University to really begin the work of examining just the barbering community. And what we recognized in the onset is that there was a great sense of urgency, right, that this was a community that needed support and so forth. And basically, what the study revealed is that yes, barbers should be considered essential workers, right, and looking at just some of the information that we were able to receive from that study.

Dontay Williams:

Since that, partnered with Georgia State University, and we've just concluded a pilot study just examining our training methods, our models and seeing its effectiveness. And what we've learned is that they want more, right? And so we're looking at how do we expand this to a four-hour training` to multiple-day trainings. So we're getting a lot of really great evidence. And ultimately, we're excited about that and we're looking to even expand into salons, right, recognizing African American women are equally important. And that's really why we expanded our vision to include the family as well.

Barry Whaley:

That's interesting. So I'm curious, Dontay, how do you measure success in The Confess Project? How do you look at effectiveness?

Dontay Williams:

I would answer that in two ways. One is data driven, right? Today, having trained 1500 barbers, based off of the numbers and the amount of contact hours, we know that we've reached at least 1.5 million people to date.

Barry Whaley:

Wow.

Dontay Williams:

Secondly, I would answer that by saying it's the lived experience. I recall recently being in California just walking around, but ran into a gentleman who was struggling in that moment and considering suicide. And so being able to be a voice and to get him from that place to the hospital and being a part of our network now. So there, I think that the evidence is demonstrated on two levels, yeah.

Barry Whaley:

Yeah. Wow. That's quite the powerful story.

Darnell Rice:

And also, I want to add, too, the connection between the barber and barber stylists and being with the community, because, believe it or not, barbers know everybody. Barbers know, have connections on so many different levels. With what we're doing, with our training, we're making sure we amplify the barber and the barber stylist, but also equip them to be those suicide prevention specialists and to identify warning signs and identify where the client is at that moment, and just really understanding that the barber and barber stylist, they're a bridge, a connector that's important as well, too.

Barry Whaley:

Yep. Excellent. Yep. Thank you. So in 2020, The Confess Project Barber Coalition began a partnership with Gillette razor company as part of their The Best Men Can Be campaign to bring your State of Mind Barbershop Tour to 16 cities across the United States. That's pretty cool. Can you tell us more about the partnership with Gillette?

Darnell Rice:

So Gillette is definitely one of our biggest partners and they believe in the work of The Confess Project, especially with our barbers and our barber stylists in the communities. So they wanted to make sure that the message was spreading about access, innovation and just understanding the importance of barbering and understanding that it's important to breaking the stigma around mental illness and building a better culture of mental health and understanding that it's important for barbershops to be that social hospital. And Gillette has been gracious and been really a part of our movement, and they really honor our work and they understand that a man can be his best, Best Men Can Be campaign to be his best in those moments. So Gillette has really been a vehicle for The Confess Project.

Darnell Rice:

I remember when we, before the pandemic, and we were planning a big major 40-city tour, but when the pandemic hit, we had to pivot. So we went to Gillette and said, "Hey, let's do a virtual tour." And they said, "Yeah, let's do it." So we were able to do a virtual tour as well in conjunction with the tour with the Best Men Can Be campaign, and it went overwhelming very well, and we were able to capture barbers and train barbers as well. So Gillette has been that vehicle for us. And we honor Gillette and they honor black boys, black men, and their families, too, through their tools and products.

Barry Whaley:

Thank you, Darnell. ADA Live listening audience, if you have questions about The Confess Project or any other ADA Live topic, you can submit your questions online at adalive.org, or you can call the Southeast ADA Center at 1-404-541-9001. And now, we're going to pause for a word from this episode's sponsor, The Confess Project.

Voice Over:

The Confess Project began in 2016 in recognition of the need to equip marginalized black men and boys with mental health strategies and coping skills to help them move past their pain. In the African American community alone, suicide is the third leading cause of death. The Confess Project exists to help change that. The vision of The Confess Project is a world without stigma and shame, and one that results in a life expectancy for black boys and men increasing, and legislation that ensures it lasts. For more information about The Confess Project, please visit their website at www.theconfessproject.com.

Barry Whaley:

Right, we're back. We are talking today with representatives from The Confess Project. Darnell and Dontay are our guests today. So I want to talk for a minute about some of the other recognition that you've had. Governor of Arkansas has recognized The Confess Project for your efforts. In 2019, the American Psychiatric Association Foundation honored you with their Pioneer for Advancing Minority Mental Health Award. Tell us more about those honors. Those are pretty cool.

Dontay Williams:

We're really excited to have the recognition and having so many people, I think, kind of really believe in the work that we're doing. Even more recently as we launched and moved our headquarters to the Atlanta area, we're so grateful for partnerships with Killer Mike and also even NAMI, several local chapters throughout, and so really filling this space as it relates to just mental health. One thing I will mention, we're excited for these partnerships and future ones to come. And I think that there is a reality in doing this work and that is funding and acknowledgement. And so we're beyond grateful for all the partners that have supported us to date.

Barry Whaley:

And just to clarify, Dontay, when you say NAMI, you're talking about the National Alliance for Mental Illness.

Dontay Williams:

Yes. And so recently, they just celebrated their NAMI Con and where they did feature The Confess Project. And so that was a really exciting moment for us as we really go into the mental health space.

Barry Whaley:

Thank you, Dontay. You mentioned in 2020 that your partnership with Gillette, you had to take the tour virtually because of the pandemic, and the pandemic overall for all of us have resulted in increased mental health challenges. I'm curious what you see specifically, what are the issues that impact black men and black boys? What are their specific mental health challenges, especially as the result of the pandemic?

Dontay Williams:

In particular, what we have been observing as it relates to our youth is an increase in depression, an increase in isolated behaviors. And so we always ask the question of how do we reengage, and I think the pandemic created an additional challenge. Whereas as a society, right, used to social interaction and engagement, having now to do that on a virtual platform definitely created some challenges just in those particular spaces.

Barry Whaley:

I would imagine, especially in the early days of the pandemic when everything shut down, that included barbers and stylists that not only were those stylists and barbers closed, but in some way, reinforcing that depression and that isolation that the pandemic brought because you didn't have access to your barber.

Dontay Williams:

But also what I will say is that I think that we can also point to the barbershop and salons being a place of community. What we've also saw is that it became a center for support, celebration and how do we come together as a community. I would be remiss if I didn't mention that on July 31st, we're having a big back-to-school event hosted in the

barbershop. And so even through, I think, the depression, the isolation, the anger that has been felt across the nation, really believing in the community and the barbershop and the salons being that place of healing.

Darnell Rice:

And also, I would like to add during the pandemic, our barbers and barber stylists were truly affected. The Confess Project took the initiatives and we stepped in and we started to research resources to be readily available for our barbers and barber stylists because a lot of barbers and stylist guys, they had to revert back to just regular jobs, I mean to a point where it had to be where they had to go work at grocery stores, just different odd jobs just to keep food and keep the bills paid. But a lot of barbershops and a lot of barbers and stylists did not recover from the pre-pandemic.

Darnell Rice:

That's why The Confess Project, we had to be innovative and move fast and that's what we did. So we stepped in and we showed up for our barbers and barber stylists because the barbers and barber stylists are not [inaudible 00:24:13] to be essential. They're like doctors, attorneys, lawyers. When you don't have a haircut, you feel some type of way. It was just so important that The Confess Project showed up for the barber industry, but especially the barbers and barber stylists to let them know that we care and that we love them and that we honor them in this space.

Barry Whaley:

I'm curious, Darnell, speaking in economic terms of the shutdown, barbers having to go find work elsewhere or whatever, not considered essential, is there additional compensation for your barbers who are trained by The Confess Project?

Darnell Rice:

So we do have opportunities for our barbers to be media opportunities, but also be able to become barber trainers where they're able to go out and train barbers and also barber schools as well. It's important for the barber students that are coming out of school to

have the tools readily available because we're not just talking about mental health, we're talking about life experiences. We're talking about life, talking about credit, talking about wealth building, talking about the essential things that barbers and stylists need to know now because barbers come from all walks of life. So we got to make sure that we continue to add value to the barber and barber stylist, but add value to their life because we want to make sure that we teach them ways and opportunities to explore with other barbers in the industry because we know when you learn from other people, you will grow and be great.

Darnell Rice:

So it's so important that we understand it, too, but it was just so phenomenal to see the community building and our coalition and with just barbers and also with our trainers because they can speak the language. They can be able to go into a barbershop or go into a barber school and speak the language and talk about the history, but also talk about the business and the personal side of it and also our training, too, as well.

Barry Whaley:

Yeah.

Dontay Williams:

I would also like to just quickly add, as we do our trainings, we keep the barbers and beauticians at the forefront. Soon, we'll be in Minneapolis, we'll be in Mississippi. Encourage you to follow The Confess Project and register. And so, we also try to provide a stipend for the barbers to receive our training. And then, they become a part of our network where we engage them throughout the year.

Barry Whaley:

I'm curious, and these are conversations that I've been having with other friends of mine who are African American, that the whole issue of how is disability seen in the black community, not just mental health issues, but physical disability, blindness, sensory disabilities. Do you have a sense of how disability is viewed in African American culture?

Dontay Williams:

I think I would say from my experience is that oftentimes, these are things that are not discussed. Oftentimes, even as we relate specifically to mental illness, we do not know that it exists within our family, right, and that's unfortunate. Understanding that something like alcoholism has a genetic disposition and so having that insight within my family history could be a benefit, right? So when you go off to college, you know not to drink because that could lead you to an addiction.

Darnell Rice:

So when you think about disability, and I can speak from a lived experience 'cause I have a qualified disability, as we talk about in the black community, it is not discussed. It's not talked about. It's like shun upon. It's like, okay, well, you have a disability, but you don't have the capabilities to rise above your disability. You're not able to live, grow, learn, develop, be a business owner. And I think, and especially in the black community, you're seen as a liability and not an asset.

Dontay Williams:

And the other point that I really wanted to make is that we're changing that. As we continue to go across the United States and even casting a vision for internationally, having these conversations and being on a platform such as this begins to change that narrative. And so I'm excited for the work that The Confess Project is doing and also just for the opportunity to speak on a platform such as this, yeah.

Barry Whaley:

I appreciate that. One other thought, just to kind of get your all's viewpoint, this issue of disability, one conversation I had with a friend was if I'm 65 years old or even 45 and I have diabetes, right, and I'm an African American man with diabetes, I don't see that as disability. I see that as having diabetes and I don't make the connection with disability or that because of that diabetes, I might have protection under the ADA or other disability rights law. I don't know if you have any thoughts on that.

Darnell Rice:

I definitely want to add to that. Education is key. Awareness is key. Learning what the laws say, learning what the laws are, but also really taking the time and really just learning about it for yourself and understanding your rights under the ADA, we are protected. You matter. You're able to grow and be great. So we are defining those things here at The Confess Project because we honor our barbers and stylists, but we honor our community as well because we fight on an everyday basis to fight against the powers that be and change the narrative of negativity and change the narrative of racism, poverty, but also to be able to be liberated and understanding that we do have a voice, and generations before us and after us will continue to thrive and live the best versions of their life. Because not only are we fighting for our communities, we're fighting for black boys, we're fighting for the little boy inside of us, so that's so important. And that's why we do what we do at The Confess Project because we are fighting for respect, love, and honor as well.

Barry Whaley:

Well said. In wrapping up, I have two more, just quick questions for you. If I was someone who wanted to find a barber who's participating in The Confess Project, how do I do that?

Darnell Rice:

So you could definitely reach out to our website and we could definitely get you involved and get you connected to our barbers that are in our network that have been, definitely have been trained and that they can get in contact with that barber, but also go to our barbershop coalition page as well, too, to get connected as well.

Dontay Williams:

Yeah, and that website is of theconfessproject.com. And as Darnell's mentioning, really also following some of the social media, Facebook and so forth, we're on all those platforms. But I will tell you that you can call and we do answer the phone as well, and so we look forward to connecting. It's not something that we shy away from.

Barry Whaley:

So conversely, what if I'm a barber and I want to be involved in The Confess Project? What should I do?

Dontay Williams:

Connecting through one of our trainings, once you go through one of our trainings, you really become a part of our network. And I love our CPO just to explain that a little bit, but we want to stay connected. We engage with you biweekly, offer different seminars and workshops. We certainly want to be connected. Darnell, could you explain a little bit more? Yeah.

Darnell Rice:

So basically what the barber does is they go through our training first 'cause we also have an online, free online training for our barbers. They go through that process first. Then from there, they'll get a certificate. And then, we'll get their Facebook, Instagram information. We'll get them connected into our private Facebook group. And then from there, we have coalition calls at the end of the month. And then, we have Zoom meetings, second and fourth Mondays.

Barry Whaley:

So Dontay and Darnell, I can't thank you enough for your giving us your time today. I know that everybody at Southeast ADA Center, we wish you every success with The Confess Project as you continue to grow and reach new people in need.

Barry Whaley:

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Barry Whaley:

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Barry Whaley:

ADA Live is a program at the Southeast ADA Center, Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University and a collaboration with the Disability Inclusive Employment Policy Rehabilitation Research and Training Center. Our producer is Celestia Ohrazda with Beth Miller Harrison, Mary Morder, Marsha Schwanke, Chase Coleman, and me, I'm Barry Whaley. Our music is from 4 Wheel City, The Movement 4 Improvement. Again, have a great afternoon and we'll see you next episode.

4 Wheel City: (rapping)

[End of Transcript]

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