

Speaker 1 ([00:00](#)):

In this episode of Tim Talk, we celebrate Black History Month with Dr. James Fullwood, who recounts his own family history in North Carolina.

Speaker 2 ([00:10](#)):

Welcome, dear listeners. Thank you for spending your time today listening to our conversation, a very personal one today, and opening your with gratitude at Northern Light Health. We celebrate and practice diversity, equity, and inclusion every day. And for our February, 2023 episode of Tim Talk, we wanna spend time experiencing Black History Month appreciating an opportunity to explore issues of social and medical justice for people of color. My special guest today is Dr. James Fullwood, a podiatrist with Northern Light SBAs Hook Valley Hospital in Pittsfield, Maine, a member of the Northern Light Health Board, as well as a Northern Light Council on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and happens to be a returning guest to Tim Talk. Dr. Fullwood, I'm so glad to have you with us and have you back.

Speaker 3 ([01:13](#)):

Thank you for having me. Tim.

Speaker 2 ([01:15](#)):

Let's start with your story, Dr. Fullwood, in your own words, tell us about you, your family, what is important to you, and how you connect all of that with Black History as an essential part of American history, and what's personal important about that connection for you?

Speaker 3 ([01:36](#)):

That's, uh, you know, uh, a heavy question, Tim. You know, um, you, what I will say is that, you know, since the time of a a, a small boy, my grandfather, uh, Charlie, uh, Fullwood was, um, you know, he's my hero. And so, um, Charlie Fullwood is my grandfather, but we belong to what they call the Benjamin Fullwood line. This goes all the way back from us getting off the boat, um, from Africa, you know, and being enslaved. And one of the things that my family has tried to do and has done fairly well is to, uh, remember our oral history, um, from generation to generation, and recently that's been compiled by, uh, a number of different historians. Um, it's, it's interesting that, you know, on this Black History Month, we all have our own stories, right? We all have our own family stories, and we assume that everybody's family story, if they're black or white or and other, they're the same, but they're not. People have taken many different journeys, and one of the special things I'm grateful for is my family being able to keep a strong oral history and now written history and, and that can be passed on. Um, and, uh, I, I think it's important, you know, we also recognize that, um, you know, black history is, is, is Black American history is American history, and we celebrate that together and, um, and trying to get to hear everyone's story.

Speaker 2 ([03:12](#)):

Yeah. You know? Absolutely. Just a, a, you know, a couple of things that really struck home, uh, with me, Dr. Fullwood, when you, when you mentioned that first of all, you know, uh, as a grandfather myself of three beautiful grandkids, I can only hope that one day they'll be saying, they'll be talking about Granddad Tim Gentry and say that I'm their hero too. So it's beautiful that you're referring to your grand grandfather, Charlie Fullwood as your hero. That's something all of us, um, can really aspire to. Yeah. And, and when, and when you mentioned, you know, get off the boat, you know, for <laugh>, high

number of us get off the boat means something that had promise it. They chose to get on the boat in the first place mm-hmm. <affirmative>, um, and they got off the boat thinking that they left things that caused them fear, uncertainty, or, um, uh, disunion with their family, with loved ones, and they were getting off the boat to embrace something that they kind of knew what they were getting into. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. But the experience you talked about, you referenced is just totally opposite that. And I just hope many of our listeners really think it through that way from, you know, from, from your lens and your family's lens and, and the like.

Speaker 3 ([04:45](#)):

Yeah. I, I, I appreciate you bringing that up, Tim, because I feel like, you know, sometimes when we don't hear another person's story, there's some assumptions. You know, I've met some great families here in the state of Maine, especially Bangor, um, where their family's story is much different, where they never experienced slavery. They chose to come to Canada, the United States, um, prior to institution of slavery, and their families had never experienced that, but they experienced other hardships of, of developing, um, you know, their part of the United States. Uh, whereas my family came through both the Trans Sahara and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. And so, um, but their, their journey, um, as an interesting journey because, uh, it's not an isolated journey. It's a journey of both, you know, two, uh, families, black family, and a white family going to an area of the United States that was unpopulated, no roads, no hospitals, no infrastructure, and having to survive together in southeastern North Carolina. And so that's where the book, uh, two Faces of Dixie, um, they try to highlight. And, uh, what's interesting is that s they get, you know, she gets some of the, the, the history correct. But again, it's about each individual telling their own story. And, uh, in sharing that story,

Speaker 2 ([06:19](#)):

Let, let's, let's go with that for a second. You, you just mentioned the book, two Faces of Dixie, and, uh, I guess the subtitle is Politicians, plantations and Slaves by Christie Judah, for our listeners, if you'd like to get that book, um, you just touched on that and touched on what it means to you. How does your family history connect into that or into that larger context? What, what makes you think of that book really appealing to you and your family's story?

Speaker 3 ([06:50](#)):

So, the Southeastern, um, portion of, of, of North Carolina is the Brunswick County area is the second largest county in North Carolina in one of the, the last truly to be developed. And so, um, you know, slavery and, and, and, uh, plantations and, you know, it was all business, you know, it was all business. And when my family migrated, uh, from the, uh, what they call the pudding swamp areas right outside of Charleston, South Carolina area, uh, with, um, with the, the Fullwood, the Fullwood family, unfortunately, they were on the side of the British and they were, you know, disposed Depo disposed from their plantation, and the family was dispersed. And so, um, that white family had, uh, with, uh, several sons, and my family went with Charles Vfo Wood. And so Charles Vfo Wood sat out with his, uh, his slaves, and, and really and truly, uh, we're still in, we're still connected with the family, even though they were slaves, they had all grown up together.

Speaker 3 ([07:59](#)):

Charles Forwood and my great-great grandfather were the same age, and they were stuck together from the history because my great-great-grandfather could read and write, but the slave master Charles could not from all the documents. And so business, um, you know, and trying to go to southeastern

North Carolina, trying to open up a rice plantation, because that was the, the, that's how they made their money. So my family coming from West Africa was heavily involved in, uh, in rice and rice production. So, you know, that area and having those types of slaves, you know, uh, that was the business. And so this area of southeastern North Carolina was called the new Barbados because it was hot, because it wa had snakes and alligators. It reminded a lot of the, uh, the colonists, the former colonist of, of Barbados, unless, and I still call 'em colonists because we, we, we still weren't fully developed, you know?

Speaker 3 ([09:05](#)):

And so this is, you know, um, late 17 hundreds, early 18 hundreds, and so they had to survive. Tim, there's alligators and snakes, there's no roads, there's trying to plant these fields and build a house, and, you know, this stuff didn't, they didn't just magically go to, you know, the real estate.com and, you know, and buy a home, you know, so for, for well over a hundred years, both families tight to this day, even after slavery and all these years that we even have, we even together as some of the same family reunions, and the story is, was survival surviving together? Um, and, and, and, and in the book, two Faces of Dixie, they, they try to point that out, you know, that this was, um, a time where, you know, it wasn't the Hollywood slavery that we see, you know, it wasn't the Hollywood picture, it was survival.

Speaker 3 ([10:10](#)):

And, um, and Christie tries to bring that out. And so, you know, a lot of my extended family, my personal, you know, my close family grandfathers and grandmothers, they're, they're mentioned in the book. Um, the, the last thing I wanna say, Tim, is that how the story ends, you know, my, uh, not ends, but basically really begins for us, my great, great great grandfather who was the son of Smart Forward, which was the slave that came from Africa. He was sold at, at five years old. Both him and Smart could read and write. Brilliant. Benjamin is well known because Benjamin wind up leaving, uh, slavery and becoming a multimillionaire. Think about that being a slave, leaving slavery, becoming a multimillionaire with thousands of acres of land, um, and, and, and having this well documented within the courts, um, leaving inheritance to his family. And out of that generation of slaves and shareco farmers came, CEOs and doctors and, uh, educators and, and, uh, you know, um, people in government. And, uh, it's just amazing how their hard work, their survival, um, and relentlessness, you know, their, their, their ability to tell the story and keep the story alive. It still connects us, you know, and it still connects the, the good, the bad, but it's our story. And, um, and, and I'm proud to tell it, Tim, so

Speaker 2 ([11:40](#)):

Thank you. You know, um, again, some of the chords, uh, that you just really struck with me, uh, when you said, you know, that their shared story is, uh, survival together. And I just hope our listeners, you know, um, as you're listening to Dr. Fullwood, explain this very personal story in such an eloquent way that you think of what it means to you and your life and the people and your circles and, and, uh, the like, and how you feel about thi topics such as diversity, equity, and inclusion and, and, um, black History Month as part of American history, wherever your mind goes, I just ask you to think of a, of your own personal meaning of that sentence that Dr. Fullwood shared. The story is survival together. And in a way it would be way too dramatic to claim that this era that we're in right now is one of survival.

Speaker 2 ([12:41](#)):

When you think about it in the way that Dr. Full had just said it, going to places that had, had never been lived in before, going to places where you had that kind of, uh, total separateness in, in a, uh, a forced

kind of way. Um, and all those other aspects of, you know, he didn't start, uh, Benjamin didn't start as a millionaire, for sure. He started as a slave, as James said, as Dr. Fullwood said. And so I just, so, so I'm, I'm not trying to over dramatize to today's context. What I'm asking the listeners to think of is if that story of survival together really can have such, such positive, you know, this isn't a story as I listen, that makes me feel bad. It makes me feel really, really good <laugh>, it makes me feel like I'm gaining greater understanding. It's makes, makes me feel that I'm having a deeper connection to one of my great colleagues.

Speaker 2 ([13:42](#)):

And, cause I don't know the story of all so many people that I work with, uh, but I know a bit more about Dr. Fullwood and Grandfather, Charlie and smart, et cetera. If everyone can just pause when you've, when you've finished listening to this podcast, and just ask yourself that question of, in this era that I'm in right now, are we part of a greater story? And we are we part of a greater story together? My hope is, and that's why we are doing all this, that's why we are opening up the dialogue and discussion. That's why we're listening to each other, because maybe in what we consider to be a real challenging, difficult time right now in our country, for many, many reasons, maybe right now, we can actually bring us all together better by having, by listening to this kind of beautiful story. So Dr. Forward, back to you. Uh, you had mentioned the importance of your family going to Jamaica and West Africa to trace your heritage. What was that like and how has it changed your personal perspective?

Speaker 3 ([14:55](#)):

Um, yeah, you know, it's, it's, it was interesting because, um, we had a great oral history and one of the things, you know, we talk about his story, right? But we're talking about our story right now, right? Our story. And sometimes when, when one person is giving the story, they get it wrong. And so we were looking in Barbados for some of our relatives because the area of North Carolina was called the new Barbados. So we, it was passed down that, or we assumed that, you know, the connection was in Barbados, but after, you know, um, we were, um, blessed to be able to, to get with some great historians, geneticists from Howard University, other people. This is back in the 1990s, like 95, 96, uh, because we had such a strong family history, we hadn't migrated across the United States. We started realizing that, that if we connected the slave master's story to the slave story, we can find out some information.

Speaker 3 ([16:03](#)):

So when you look at the business records, they don't go back to Barbados, they go back to Jamaica, okay? They go back to London, they go back to very, so following that story brings us all the way back to West Africa, uh, to the Benin Kingdom. And, uh, and we are able to trace that trans Sahara through London and Trans Atlantic to Jamaica and Barbados. And we have family members who are, uh, genetically related to us that we've reunited with, uh, in both areas, uh, not just myself, but other family members have been visiting and reconnecting. And, and it's a beautiful story. And so if you don't know someone's story, if even the slave master story, it'll be hard to connect the dots for your own story. Um, if you think about, you know, I think about sometimes, uh, Mainers and, and the story of, of many of our Mainers here, and, uh, if you can connect the dots, you start seeing, um, where there's relationships that are not even from Maine, you know, they're from, you know, uh, Europe, they're from, you know, uh, the French areas, you know, that of French population in Canada.

Speaker 3 ([17:24](#)):

They, everybody has their story. And, um, and, and that's kind of our story, how we, how we, uh, worked our way back to West Africa. And I've been going as, you know, 10, four to five times a year sometimes, and, you know, helping out back there. But if it had not been for another person's story, right, the Slave Master story, we wouldn't have been able to connect the dots to get back to our own, um, uh, heritage and story. So we have to be open to listening to other people's stories.

Speaker 2 ([17:58](#)):

Yes, that is absolutely true. That is absolutely true. The new Barbados, that's really interesting. And, and that correlate that connection of, of the dots. Um, I'm oversimplifying, I apologize, but you know, we talked about Gen Jamaica and you mentioned London, Barbados, and just really amazing that you all went to that, um, that effort, you know, because you, why did you go to that effort? Why, why is it that you think, what were you, what were you searching for?

Speaker 3 ([18:31](#)):

We had a, again, in, in my family, at least in the Benjamin Line, um, there's a, there's a place called the, the, the old folks used to call the old field, old field where they're trying to say old field. And so that was the one of the original establishments of after slavery. And you would bring your children to the old field and you would teach them the parcels of land. You would teach them their history, and you would teach them where the grave sites were. There was the old grave site where the slaves were buried, and there was the new grave site where the free men or the free men and women were buried. And as a kid, I grew up with my grandfather teaching me the old field and that the, the, and the old stories. And so it was, you know, as, as, as our family grew and people became, you know, more, uh, we have family members who, um, who work in, um, historical records and, you know, New York City and other places, and they just became curious, are these stories that we've been telling true?

Speaker 3 ([19:40](#)):

Are they factual? Are there any records to back this up? And, you know, my wife is, she's a, you know, with the onset of ancestry.com and records and all these things over the years, people are amazed at how, how accurate these stories, you know, uh, have been. And it is not just my, my family, but there's, there's Native American cultures, different cultures that pass down these stories. The last thing I'll leave you with, Tim, is that the United States even got involved. So the United States Marshals came into the old field, this is like, I would say about 10, 12 years ago. And there were so many unmarked graves of the slaves, right? And so they used the, the, the dogs to figure out where the bodies were, where the slaves, so they could have proper burials, uh, down in North Carolina. So, um, you know, again, this is a, a American history that is happening right in front of us. It's just, you know, my little small piece of American history. So we're still continuing to learn more about the people here overseas and, and, and, and building that so we can continue that. Um, heritage of passing down the information,

Speaker 2 ([20:52](#)):

I'm just one, I'm just thinking you as a, as a father and either things that, um, you're trying to share, uh, with your children or maybe as, as they get older, you would share, you know, different, you know, qualities of that, different stories, et cetera. But when you think of, uh, you as part of that continuum, not not just the listener, but the conveyor <laugh> of stories as you're conveying right now, what's, what's important to what have, what have you taught them, what have you taught your children or your hope to teach your children? And almost as as important, sometime in some ways even more important, what have they taught you?

Speaker 3 ([21:36](#)):

My children, you know, I have two in college, uh, well one about to go to college, one is a junior in college and two in high school. They have taught me the importance of what my grandfathers and grandmothers were teaching me because my kids know these stories since they were small, they were brought to the old field because that's what we did. And it's different when a child, my grandfather would bring me into the old field cuz he was an urbanist. He always wanted to be a doctor, but he couldn't. So he, he, so he became an hers and a, and a and a pastor. And he would say, that's St. John's wart. Then I would touch it, I would feel it, I would smell it. And I used all my senses. I never forgot that. And so bringing my children to the old field and showing them, you know, where people used to live, what a June pair is, strawberries, this is where this creek goes. And they remember the stories because they can touch it, they can feel it and they can smell it. And it's always, I think it's important that what I learned from them and my grandfathers were my grandmothers were, you know, you have to continue the traditions and expand upon the traditions cuz that's how they stay alive.

Speaker 2 ([22:53](#)):

Dr. Fullwood, are there any other thoughts that you'd like to share with our listeners right now? Anything whatsoever?

Speaker 3 ([23:00](#)):

I would say, you know, continue to have dialogue with your colleagues, your friends, your community members. Get to truly know their story. Don't give assumptions, you know, don't think that you know a person until you really have sat and sat down and, and listened to their story. And, and em embrace your differences, right? Embrace your, not just your differences, but your commonalities. You know, we're so, we're so much alike, you know, and, and in so many different ways, but we wouldn't know it if we didn't hear each other's stories. And, uh, black History Month is American history and, and take the time to, um, to hear each other's stories. I think that will be my takeaway.

Speaker 2 ([23:47](#)):

Thank you. It it made me flashback to my, uh, earlier days and, uh, it was a young gentleman that had a t-shirt on, said Viva la <laugh>. And he was a, he was a, it was in high school, he was, uh, a a black young man. And in my high school, admittedly, we, you know, it was a couple of families of, um, of individuals with, uh, you know, from, from black families and I that for some reason it stuck with me all these years that Viva la and <laugh> and he was a great guy. He was a really good friend of mine and, and the like. And I, I think too, that's a, a different, uh, a variation on on the term that, that you just used. You know, let's appreciate and embrace our differences and we should, we absolutely should be stronger because of it and better people because of it. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, Dr. Fullwood has been a pleasure to have you as our guessers, our colleague here. Thank you so much.

Speaker 3 ([24:46](#)):

My pleasure, Tim.

Speaker 2 ([24:48](#)):

And thank you to our podcast listeners as well. Until next time, this is Tim Gentry encouraging you to listen and act, to promote our culture of caring, diversity, and inclusion that starts with caring for one another. Thank you.

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Speaker 1 ([25:04](#)):

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