

Date: June 18, 2021

Interviewee: Semaj Vanzant

Interviewer: Gillian Demetriou

Transcriber: Rev.com

Editor: Gillian Demetriou

Location: Second Baptist Church of Asbury Park

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Okay. Hi.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Hello.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

My name is Gillian Demetriou. I'm a researcher with the Paradoxical Paradise: An African American Oral History and Mapping Project of Asbury Park. Today's Friday, June 18th, 2021. I'm here with Reverend Dr. Semaj Vanzant. He's agreed to be interviewed for the oral history portion of this project. This interview is being recorded with the permission of both parties. Thank you for meeting with me today.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

It's my pleasure.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Thank you for hosting, as well.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

I really appreciate it.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

You're welcome.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Can you tell me a bit about your early life? Where were you born and raised?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah, so born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana. Had a pretty wonderful childhood. Grateful to be raised with both my parents until...my father passed.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Lived in one of the greatest cities in the world and was exposed to a lot of culture. Had a middle-class life, had a family of educators and they're still in education.

I got a chance to do a lot. I was exposed to a lot. My father was a policeman, my mother in education. So between those two, I was also exposed to a lot of community work and did a lot of great things.

Had fun in high school. Played football and got to be the class speaker at the graduation. So, all those things were just great.

I have one younger brother, who is two years younger than me. I'm just super proud of him. We had a lot of great fun growing up and grew up with a lot of cousins.

So yeah, it was just great. We traveled a lot, which I still do. I'm grateful for that.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Any favorite travel spots?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Ooh, from my early life or my childhood? What would be my favorite travel? We used to go to the west coast every other year. So Las Vegas, I think when I was younger, was my favorite travel spot because we would stay at Circus Circus.

It was newer then. It's trash now. I mean, it's horrendous, but it was newer then. We would get the day pass or the bracelet, because we would stay at the hotel.

My mother and my family, my father, they would just let me and my brother run wild through all the roller coasters...while they were eating and just hanging out, sometimes gambling. Not much gamblers, but yeah. So, Circus Circus, Las Vegas would have to be my favorite childhood spot. That's not a favorite anymore.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That sounds like a lot of fun.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Can you tell me a bit about your educational background?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. Since you asked about high... Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. You already [crosstalk 00:03:27].

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Jean Gordon Elementary School, which was a great time. Got a chance to meet a lot of people and who I'm still friends with today.

I went to F.W. Gregory Junior High School for a year. That was a interesting year. I was a teenager. It was a brand new environment, different set of expectations. Plus, my aunt was the music teacher there. So, that was just a fun time.

Then I went to St. Augustine High School, which is this nationally famous high school. We have one of the high schools with one of the number... We're in the top three high schools that have sent the most players to the NFL.

Our band has been in, what is that, the Day of Roses parade in Pasadena, multiple times. First band that integrated the rights parade in New Orleans, which was the all-white parade before segregation. So, great high school. They had great history.

And then I went to Gannon University in Erie, Pennsylvania. That was a transformational time for me. It's a medium-size Catholic and because of its location, I guess, it was predominantly Caucasian.

One of the joys was, I was there on a political science degree. I ran every year for some type of position in student government. I was always the first black. So, I was always the first black freshman representative, first black vice president of academic affairs. Then, I was also the first black student government association president of the university. So, just a great time academically, graduated magna cum laude.

Also, it was a great time spiritually, because I was introduced to Shiloh Baptist Church and there several things happened. I met just some of the greatest people in the world. I also met who is now my wife.

Also, I was licensed there. My ministry began there. So, I definitely had a lot of spiritual formation at Shiloh Baptist Church in Erie, PA and am forever indebted to them.

That was while I was at Gannon. Then left from Gannon, went to Princeton Theological Seminary. There, I got introduced, actually to Asbury Park because while I was there studying for ministry, I pledged my fraternity. I was introduced to some fraternity brothers who attend this church.

While I was in seminary and after, I preached here several times. And then as the Lord would have it or deign it, ended up being pastor here, which is pretty cool.

After Princeton, I went to Saint Paul School of Theology, where I got my doctorate degree.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Okay. That's a lot of school. [laughter]

**Semaj Vanzant:**

[Laughter] Yeah, I know. I'm glad to be done. I want to go back, which is strange, but yeah, I'm not done yet.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

What else can you get?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Huh?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

What else can you get?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

I want to get a MBA, to focus on the business side of things and to really run that. Yeah. I just see a lot of opportunity there.

I have a lot of focus on leadership. My doctorate was on leadership. So really, my thought is, if I can combine the knowledge of MBA with the leadership focus, I could really create a niche and create another stream of revenue for training and coaching and development program managing.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Definitely.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Got to keep learning.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Got to keep going.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Got to keep learning.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Love it.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That sounds awesome.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Let's backtrack a little bit.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Go for it.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Why Gannon in Pennsylvania, if you're from New Orleans?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Thankful I had the example that all of my family left for college. So, I already had it in my mind, okay, I'm leaving for college. Got accepted into six... No, I got accepted into eight colleges, got scholarships for six.

30 days before I graduated high school, my father passed. So, in that time, I was also trying to... I was mourning and grieving and also trying to make the decision for college.

I was like, I'm about to go the furthest away as possible, just to escape just all of that stuff. Just trying to deal with the grief in that moment.

But not only that, the president of Gannon University was Dr. Antoine Garibaldi, who also went to my high school and was from New Orleans. Really, when I met him, when he was visiting his family in New Orleans, we really had a great connection. This was even before my father passed. After that, he called and just really became a nurturing and father-like presence in my life while I was in school. So again, it became the great choice, in addition to the money.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Obviously, that's a big factor.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Absolutely.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Any [crosstalk 00:09:45].

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Absolutely.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

You talked about it a little bit before, but going a little further back throughout your life, what was your relationship like with religion and spirituality?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

I grew up in the church. The church knew me before I knew the church. My grandmother was the music minister of the church we grew up in, and she was that for 50 years. My mother was the children's choir director for as long as I can remember.

They were always involved, and so there was always choir rehearsals. My mother ran several ministries in the church.

My aunt was a music minister too. So, she was in church. My grandmother was frequently a speaker in different churches. My aunt was the same way.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. We're all in church and my daddy sang in the choir. So, church was just in us. That's what we did.

However, I can say that while I grew up in the church and knew of the church and what have you, that it was at Shiloh that I understood that there was a difference between the church and with God, having this personal relationship with God.

My relationship with God increased and developed. Of course, my love for the church remained, and I want to say got stronger because I started knowing the God of the church and who God was. Really developed a strong relationship, reading the Bible, praying.

It all just started making sense to me as, "oh, this is what it's about and life got better."

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That's great.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That's so cool. What ultimately made you decide to become a pastor?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

I didn't want to become a pastor. I was forced in this thing, and praying everything else. It was like, if I could have chosen to be anything else, I would have done that.

Of course, just going throughout my spiritual journey, this was something that... Oh, that's right. I have glasses similar to... Well, they're-

**Gillian Demetriou:**

I just got these a week ago.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Oh, you did? Yeah. It's like, I can see now.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

I can see now.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Those are cool.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Thank you. Thank you. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt you-

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Nah, it's cool.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

... but while you were talking, I was like, I'm missing something on my face. [laughter]

**Semaj Vanzant:**

[Laughter] Right. That's funny.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

I took them off to put my [COVID] mask on.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

This your first time wearing glasses?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

No. No, no, no. These are just new frames, but I didn't like the glasses I had before. So, I was just like, well, I don't want to wear them. They don't look good.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt you at all.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

No, that's fine. That's cool. I was talking about, oh, becoming a pastor.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yes.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah, so interesting call story. I didn't want to do this for sure.

I had this, it was a nighttime encounter. I was asleep one night. I just taught vacation Bible school for a week. I had a great time doing that. So, it was the nighttime encounter, and then I heard God.

I felt like I heard God audibly saying, "It's your time to serve." Woke up, thought it was my mother or somebody else just calling. So, I checked. No, she was knocked out asleep, sprawled across the bed.

Then went back to sleep. I heard it again, thought it was my brother. So, I went to his room. He was still snoring and drooling.

Then, I went back to sleep and heard the voice again. I realized that this was God speaking.

After I realized that, I just fell back to sleep with this tremendous peace, this unshakable feeling. Went to sleep and woke up with the same peace of confirmation, that this is what God had called me to do.

I talked to my pastor, who was the Reverend Charles Mock at the time.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

At Shiloh?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

At Shiloh. Yeah. Because this happened in July and I went back... I really didn't like, "Oh, this is great." That was a Saturday night into Sunday morning. That Sunday morning, went to church and professed my faith before the congregation. Just an amazing time.

And then I went back to course, a couple weeks later because I didn't really understand, but God was kind of revealing that to me, what this was all about.

When I went back to Erie for my senior year in school, I talked to my pastor, Dr. Charles Mock and explained that to him. He just listened to me while he's talking, then his response was, "Well, it's about time."

I mean from that, just went through the process, under the watch care of the pastor and the deacons.

I was licensed in April of 2006. Yeah. Then I was ordained. Of course, I went to school. Went to school in June, started Princeton in June 2006, taking summer Greek. Was ordained and served in New York City, right in Brooklyn for two and a half years, which was another amazing experience, and then applied and became a pastor in 2011. So yeah. So from 2006, the call, into 2011, became a pastor. Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Sounds like a really powerful experience.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

It was. It was and still unreal at times.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

You're just telling me, I can't even fathom. That sounds just so powerful.

My next question is that, from my own experience with the church, I know that some churches move around their priests and their ministers. So is that the case for the Baptist church?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

It is not. In the Baptist church, we have, it's a call ministry, a call appointment, depending on how you - essentially, there's a candidating process, and then the church votes on who they



believe God has called to be the pastor. As opposed to the mainline denominations, most of them... I don't know. Are you in a church now?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Greek Orthodox, loosely.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Okay. Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Sometimes, I go for the bread.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah, I hear you.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

It's different.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

There's some beautiful sanctuaries, though. I love-

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Oh my God. The architecture is fabulous.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. It is phenomenal, phenomenal. I spent a month in Greece when I was in college. So, I got a chance to just visit a lot of Greek-

**Gillian Demetriou:**

[crosstalk 00:17:17] a lot of monasteries there, they're fabulous.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Oh my gosh. Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Some of the ones that are high up in the mountains [crosstalk 00:17:23].

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Those were phenomenal.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

There's one I remember going to, it's like a cat sanctuary, with all the lone cats running around. It was the best experience ever. I might've been eight.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Oh my gosh.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

I was having a ball.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

It was fantastic.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. I might not have liked that one with the cats, but I did [inaudible 00:17:44].

**Gillian Demetriou:**

I'm a big cat person.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

I got you.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

It's not for everybody, though.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

No, it's not.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

But, yeah.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. I mean, Presbyterian and United Methodist and some of the other... Catholic, definitely, they're under diocese... or Presbyterian and of course, they appoint the ministers to the different churches.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. It's like a big hierarchy system.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

It is.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

This sounds so much more like a community involved, though.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

It is.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

It sounds better.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. I would agree. I would agree because it's mutual. You enter into it mutually, the pastor and the people. It's a mutual relationship that they have with each other. So, I just think it is much more... It makes it easier.

You're not thinking of transition. And then moving forward because it's like, "hey, we agreed to get into this thing. So, even when we hit difficult patches, we're not trying to find another minister. We're going to go and we're going to stick this thing out."

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. Some other churches, they're just disposable.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Right.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That's ridiculous.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. You might've read, so I served the United Methodist Church. Right?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yes.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

I grew up in United Methodist Church. But when I started realizing what church was- my pastor was Baptist. He came out of the Baptist tradition because his wife felt the call of ministry, and the Baptists in the south were not fans of women in ministry, in any form or fashion.

So, he came over. Even though my church is United Methodist, it seemed Baptist because of his style and just the way that we operated, which was great.

I was making a point, that... Yeah. So I pastored in the United Methodist Church. Of course, I was appointed there by the bishop.

But I saw some really bad, horrible moves, or times where they did not move a pastor who was killing the church, and yet they stayed because that's where the bishop appointed them. Yeah. I think it leaves a lot...

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Enough said.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yes.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

How did you find yourself here in Asbury Park, at the Second Baptist?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

One of the leaders here, they were in a search for a pastor and of course, I had met him before. He called and asked what I was doing. I told him what I was doing. He asked me to send my resume. I did.

Didn't think anything of it. But then once I did that, I candidated, or interviewed. Came down to the end, I told them no, because the church where I was pastoring, it was going so well. It's like, why would I leave?

But of course, felt God strongly leading me to say, "This is where you should go. This is where I'm assigning you next." Told my wife, "Hey, I really think God is calling us to go to Asbury Park," and here we are.

My wife was sold because we had just celebrated our fifth anniversary. My wife and I love whale-watching.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

This is the spot.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. So, for our fifth anniversary, we went to San Diego to watch do blue whale-watching. And then we flew across the country to Boston and went off of Boston and saw some humpback whales. I mean, just some of the most amazing experiences.

So, when we were candidating here, shortly thereafter, she fell in love... both of us, with the beach community. This was a sort of beach community. So we're like, "Hey, this is cool."

We knew a lot of people in New Jersey and New York. Her brother lives in Philadelphia. So, it became a spot that was good for us.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Definitely. I just meant to ask you this before, but could you talk a little bit about your doctoral dissertation? I saw the title online. It seems so interesting.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. Yeah. "Loved Not Judged." The whole premise of what I believe was Jesus's ministry, was that Jesus was a disruptive leader. Right? That all of this tradition had developed. The Jews had developed these traditions and doctrines, that were sort of kind of based on the word of God, but really were not.

They developed these books, the Mishnah and the Talmud and these documents that became more significant and important to them than the actual Bible itself.

So, when Jesus came 700 years later, course, the tradition and the exploitation of people and the apostasy, the hypocrisy, all of that was at a high.

So, Jesus came. In his ministry, he did a lot of teaching that disrupted the tradition, a lot of teaching that upset the religious institution and the leaders therein.

What Jesus pointed out, was that these leaders and the institution had become very legalistic, which was opposite of the God we serve and claim, which is a God of love.

Jesus came to disrupt all of the legalism and this Pharisaic traditional hierarchal stuff, that really was toxic and to say, "Listen, God is not about all of this stuff. God is about love."

You heard Jesus doing a lot of teaching. You've heard it said, but this is what it is. The Sermon on the Mount is all about that. A lot of his teachings with the disciples, he really re-casted the meanings of Moses and the other prophets and helped the people understand that while your tradition teaches you this, it actually means this. Here's the significance of it. Here's the importance or the real meaning of what this is.

My claim then is that, that is what pastors ought to be doing in their ministry. Pastors ought to be disrupting the traditions, disrupting the operation of church leaders that are very legalistic, these statements of, "We've always done it this way." These statements of or these thoughts of, you have to meet certain qualifications, other than your belief in Jesus Christ and your love of God, to be a part of the church and to be all of these things that we make up in the church.

It's like, no, Jesus taught different. So we, as pastors, ought to do the same thing.

So, it was a dissertation about leadership and how to lead churches who are like the churches that Jesus came to disrupt, to become the church that Jesus came to establish.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Sounds awesome.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. [inaudible 00:25:47] at work, but it was fun. It was cool.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

How long was it?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

276 pages. Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

It's a book.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah, it's a book. I'm working on it.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That's not a dissertation. That's a book.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. It's copyrighted, but I have some... Coming here, I finished in my first year here, but I have some pieces that I want to add before I publish it. So, the dissertation is copyrighted, but the book, I'm going to call the book *Shift Happens*.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That's a good one. I like that.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. I'm looking forward to working on it.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Put me down for your book signing. I'll RSVP.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

I will make sure. Good.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Okay. I just need to see where I am in my questions.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

That's cool.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Okay. Your dissertation sounds so cool.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

I'm fan-girling it. Do you currently live in Asbury Park?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

I live right outside of Asbury Park.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Okay.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Right? Asbury Park is 1.6 square miles. Asbury Park itself has different communities, so this is - where the church is called the West Side.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yes.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

So the West Side of Asbury Park and what is called Midtown of Neptune, it's pretty much the same community. It's actually three times as large as Asbury Park itself. I live in Midtown of Neptune. Yeah. The dividing street is Ridge, which is three or four blocks up. I live on the next street.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Oh, okay.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. But most of my time is spent right here in Asbury Park. This is where I pastor, where I work, where I do just everything, exercise on the boardwalk. So, yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. If it's all like a similar area, is a lot of your congregation also from Neptune, as well?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

They are. They are. Three-fourths of my congregation, I would say, are probably... or a little less, but a significant number of them live in Neptune, for several reasons.

One, coming up, Neptune was a place where blacks... West Side of Asbury Park, which is not that big of a 1.6 square mile city, so the West Side of Asbury Park and Midtown was the place where blacks could live, the only place. Literally, the train tracks, which are three and a half blocks from here, going east, was a dividing line.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

There's only so much space in housing. So, they had to migrate. Of course, Neptune started three blocks away [inaudible 00:29:01].

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. It makes sense. It makes-

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:29:04]

**Semaj Vanzant:**

And housing. And so they had to migrate, and of course with Neptune starting three blocks away...

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. Yeah. It makes sense.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Right.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Could you describe the general demographic of your congregation?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

97% African-American. 2% Islanders and we have one Caucasian family. So far. It's pretty cool. Like from the whole, I guess the West Indies, something like that. Right. We have some folk from, Tahiti and Jamaica and St. Lucia, which I'm trying to get to like, listen, you need to take your pastor down there. Right? Like we need an excuse right. Is there a holiday something we can just go for? [laughter]

**Gillian Demetriou:**

[Laughter] Could you describe your day-to-day role as a pastor/teacher? I saw on the website that was your role, so that's a nice role.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah, it is. So pastor/teacher I use because of from biblically, right? Ephesians chapter four, where God says I'm appointing these roles. And talks about apostles, prophets, evangelists, and then pastor, teacher. Or pastor and teacher. And so I use that designation because I want to always be reminded and to let people know that my role as a pastor is to be a teacher. Right. And because that's what Jesus is doing, right. He came, he was pastoring people, but he was also teaching them the right way and teaching them to think differently, teaching them to treat each other differently. And so that's what my role is, whether I'm in just the general conversation, whether I am preaching or teaching Bible study, or constantly- my role as pastor is to teach. And



even when God spoke through the prophet, Jeremiah to the, to the Israelites who were just going haywire and just out of their mind, God said in Jeremiah 3:15, “I will send you a pastor or shepherd after my own heart, who will lead you in knowledge and understanding.”

**Semaj Vanzant:**

And so in order to shepherd the people, I have to be able to teach them with knowledge and understanding. So pastor/teachers, the role that I've been called to, and that I use again to remind myself and them that the most significant thing I can do as pastor is to teach.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

From your perspective, as a pastor in this community, what are some observations that you have made or seen on the city of Asbury as a whole?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

So, the city of Asbury is a fun, laid back, beach oriented community. One of the observations that I've made thus far is that there is an LGBTQIA community and there's a black community. So I think that's the division that exists. There's also a division of the affluent, which, cross the tracks, the median price of a house once you cross the tracks is somewhere around \$800,000 or something like that. And it's like, oh, okay... And then of course, this side, the west side, where a median house probably around between \$250k, \$350k type of thing, the sad thing is that on the west side, I think it's 60% occupancy, less than. Let me say it this way, there's less than 40% occupancy of the homeowners. So, that also speaks to the disparity and the poverty that exists on the west side, as opposed to the east side.

I do see a community that, that with all of those divisions, is genuinely striving to live as one, right? The LGBTQIA community in many ways, understands discrimination of blacks, from their perspective. So it's different because they may be gay, but they still white. But at least they are grasping that more so than other people. So I see a community really striving to be one. And one of the greatest privileges I have is that Second Baptist has become that safe zone between those on both sides of the community. And we've had all types of events here, where we strive to bring those communities together, the differing parts of the community. And I really hope to make it comfortable for people of all kinds and distinctions that they find safe and home here.

Even on the front door where most people come in when we're in the back, there's a big sign that just says “welcome home.” Right? Cause we want people be able to feel like, hey, this is a place, a comfort, a place of sanctuary and peace, a place of growth and, and a place where I belong.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That's awesome. That's the best you can do.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. That's it?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

We need more people like you man.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Oh, my goodness. Well, I would hope that more people would believe like I believe. If they could be. Yeah. Do it better.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

So you talked about your wife, what role - and you have kids?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

So tell me a little bit about them and what role do they play in your ministry, congregation?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

My wife is just this phenomenal person of many gifts and talents, naturally and spiritually. And she's an introvert. So she is not an "I want to be out front" type of public person and she's a homebody. So she loves being at home.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Good for her.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

But she is tremendously supportive and tremendously beneficial to the ministry, a great prayer partner, a great sounding board for new ideas and things. And so we co-founded this inspire life finance and technology summer camp, which has been a huge success. And we've also - just a lot of other ministries that have taken place have been because of her input, she's a behind the scenes person. So you won't see her out a lot, but she's the one who's on the phone, talking to people, encouraging people, praying with folk, that type of thing.

But she has her own thing. She is tremendously talented, educated, and she is right now, she's what they call a success coach for the EOF department. Wait, I'm sorry, I'm wrong. She is the, that's what she was, she is now the assistant director for the EOF department at Brookdale. In addition to that, she has a diversity and inclusion certification. So she does a lot of that stuff. So she does that and is excelling at that. She's like the leadership program and I mean- she has done in her three years at Brookdale, more than some people have done in that 20 or 30 years there. So it's a beautiful thing. It speaks of her gifts. And, but it also speaks of kind of the hate that you get. It's like, "why they promoted her? Why does she- how is she the director of a department? And she's only been at three years, I've been in 30. I deserve it." That, all that stuff that happens.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

She is working for it.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

She's working for it. She's smart. And she's getting the job done.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That's all you can ask for, some people are in those positions, they don't do.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Anything. Right. And the only reason they're there

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Is because they've been there so long.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

That's right. And they think, "I deserve it because of time." Like, no, how about you do the work and then we'll get you something. How about you earn it? Don't deserve it.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Exactly. You have two kids. Correct?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah, I have two amazing little kids and one is Samaj Jr. He is 10 years old now. And Seth who is seven years old, they are both so smart and they get it from their mother. And they're both so compassionate and fun-loving and energetic Samaj has a knack for music and acting. So that's like, he's really artsy. Seth has a knack for climbing and science. So like, even Seth's YouTube channel is Climbing and Science with Seth, Gym and Science with Seth, that's what it is. We had to buy them this big, old thing for the backyard, what do you call it? Play system. And it has a rock wall and ladders and monkey bars.... Yeah, it's like 15 feet high. This is huge. Right? It's real cool. And so we had to buy him for like Seth would get climb all the way to the top of his 15 feet high and just lay out and just take a nap.

My wife has a picture of him just sleeping up there. Just like, what are you doing? So that's their thing, but both of them are articulate and, and just growing in tremendous ways. And I attributed a lot to they're in a Montessori school. So I attribute a lot of their growth and development to that pedagogy that enables them to really grow and develop naturally. Right? And according to their own genius and not somebody else's common core curriculum of this is what, this is how we want the robots, citizens to be.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Definitely. Semaj junior, play any instruments?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

He does play the drums and he's about to transition to private lessons on the piano. Cause he needs to learn more piano and challenge. It's like, okay, the drums came real easy to you, congratulation, but now we need to challenge you and get you on this, on the piano.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Definitely. And what are some of the programs that you offer here at the church?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah, so we offered Inspire Life, Finance and Technology summer camp. That's one of them. We also, every second and last Saturday we do food pantry. So people can come and they can pick that up. We also, our building is being used for this interfaith neighbors program training, where they...run the program, but we also use it here.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That was my next question.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

I do run a program; it's a barrier busting program that helps non-college bound individuals get certifications and launch into their careers. And so we do the training here. So that's, that's another one. We also have many youth- like all of our youth stuff is really community oriented...of course there's pre pandemic and we'll pick it back up.

You know, once a week they come in and they learn lessons, we get them food, they have games and things and then once you here a certain amount, then you earn within a quarter, you earn an outing and we're taking them wherever, whether it's DC, Camden, Liberty Science Center, and all these other places. Hopefully we can get them whale watching one time. We also, we have a nonprofit, that's developing a program called Essential Africa.

Once we get the right funding, it's going to be a yearlong program where youth are involved in it, learning all types of things about the history, African history, that legacy, doing the research. And then also the big culminating event is an 8 to 11 day trip to Ghana. Where they can spend time with the tribes and, religious- hopefully in some way, find themselves attached to Africa, understand the legacy that goes back to that point.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Because everything we learn in schools are so whitewashed, it's two paragraphs about the Ghana Empire, and then it skips the colonization, Like there is so much more.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

There is a whole lot more, and all of the history and all of the richness, that exists in Africa it's amazing, it's not just, the kind of the resources, but also genetically, right. You can wipe out every single human being in this world. And if you leave one tribe in Africa alive, you can repopulate it just the same. That's amazing.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah, absolutely. Right. All life started there.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

That's it! That's it. Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That's so cool.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

It is.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Sorry I say everything is cool.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

No it IS cool, well, me too, I guess. But I understand it. So really, that's one of the things I'm excited about with the Juneteenth holiday. My- my hope is that it makes people aware and causes them even to miss these fights and you know, where they are in certain states pulling critical race theory from the curriculum. I hope that with this holiday that they have to talk about it.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

And how have your day-to-day operations and job responsibilities changed because of the pandemic?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

They became more intense. So day-to-day, I don't even know if I finished this answer yet, but day-to-day it's typically, let me say, I don't have a set schedule. Right. And I love it that way, because anytime anything can come up meetings, people, members who were passing or just different crises in phases of life, constantly sessions, this and that. So I really have an open and flexible schedule. So I guess that's why the answer is, I don't have a schedule outside of my time of studying, and in preparation for preaching and teaching. But other than that - which includes prayer. But other than that, I really have a kind of open schedule intentionally because I have to remain flexible for everything that happens.

I get calls that- like two days ago I got a call at 10 o'clock at night, like, "pastor my husband just died." Or I'm getting calls, even if I got one, I missed it because I put my phone on, do not disturb at, at midnight, but I had another member whose brother passed and he called, right? It's kind of that first call that people make. So- and then I meet and see that everywhere. So yeah, I have to remain flexible. So how have they changed on the pandemic? Everything has shifted to zoom and pastoral care became difficult because before, I was calling them, my secretary was calling to say, "pastors on his way," or "when can pastor come?" That type of thing. But now it's, I'm calling. And that's all we're going to do is call on the phone and talk, so that became difficult. All of my meetings had to shift to zoom, of course worship became digital.

And so there was this huge, quick learning curve where we had to go quickly get to digital. And then we were doing live; live presented some issues. So we started doing pre- recording and so pre-recording, it would be like, okay, if we're going to do prerecorded, we need to learn production. And so then it became, production and pre-recording. There was a whole lot going on and keeping people together. Then trying to stay in contact with our members. Many of them who were older, some of them who don't have the technology to stay in contact with each other. It was a whole lot, so it became more intense because in many ways, while I was doing the same things, I had to relearn and reimagine how to do them. And, and it wasn't just a theoretical thing...

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah, and there's no like little grace period where you can like process what was happening.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

No, we were in church March 15 and Tuesday, I made the call like, "okay, we can't come back on March 20, 2020." And we're still not back. And probably won't be back until September. So yeah, that shift was- and for church people who are not apt to quick change...

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

It was such a struggle for them, it was mind blowing, some people just threw up their hands.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Do you think any of the changes that you've made to accommodate the pandemic times will remain when it's over, like technology?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Absolutely, technology's here to stay. Our worship experience, I'm not planning to change it. It's an hour. Are we going to be in and out of the house about an hour, about an hour? A lot of stuff that's digital, will remain digital. Even when we have people, it'll be great to have people here, but it won't be as many, at least for the interim, at least for the next probably mid to late '22, I don't see us having a full sanctuary again, we'll still be registering people to come and all this other stuff.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

You guys developed the portion of your website, the SBC kids section during the pandemic. Could you just talk a little bit about That?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

So let me go back real quick to the other one. That's another thing we'll keep is- though I do plan on keeping all my digital meetings, and Bible study, because, we've seen more people attend our zoom meetings and we've had more attendance on bible study because it's been digital, so I don't have to leave my house.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah you don't even have to put pants on. [laughter]

**Semaj Vanzant:**

[Laughter] Don't have to put pants on. Right. It doesn't matter whether it's cold, raining, I don't have to look at the weather and try to figure out if I'm going to go or not. So those things will stay. The question, the SPC kids portal came out of this need- Asbury Park did a great job in

making sure that all of the kids had internet and devices. And so since we could not meet, we said, well, let us develop this kid's portal so that we can still continue to provide places of enrichment for our kids. We read books and put up videos and stories, just really trying to help do that. But it became just another thing that it's like, we got to put up more video, it's like, oh my gosh. And editing takes forever. And so there's a lot more, you know, just time to do all of these different things that are required.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Going back a second, you said you're going to keep your digital meetings and your digital Bible study. So do you think you'll eventually, like once things start getting a little back to normalcy, do you think you'll have like an in-person option as well? Maybe like a little bit both, have you even thought about that?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah we have. Eventually, Like I said, it works and our numbers are great. So it was like, if we have more, why fix, what's not broken? Cause, other thing is, we have people that watch worship and bible study from all across the country. We have, our membership has grown too because we have members in Texas and Michigan and Maryland and California and oh, Illinois...Pennsylvania... that watch regularly and they're on regularly. So eventually we'll get back to where we'll have people here and, just set up the technology. The place where I typically teach Bible study is in the fellowship hall because there are tables and people can write, take notes type of thing. And we just don't have the technology in there yet. So when we get to that place, we'll definitely, we'll put it there but I'm not rushing.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

So you said you have like national thought, like people all over the country, how does that even happen?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

I think word of mouth, I've preached in all of these places and people that hear your preaching and it's like, oh, let me follow him. All of Louisiana too, that's just hometown folk that knew me from back when. I know there's a lady in O'Fallon, Illinois. I think it's like three hours from Chicago, but it's near some other city in Illinois. One of the sorority sisters were telling her this and you know, also the sorority sisters in Oklahoma. So I have a couple of people watching Oklahoma, cause that's where I was pastoring. So they were just saying, you should hear this young man. And so to watch, and this lady's 95 years old and she watches the worship twice every week, she like, I always miss something so I got to go back. I think it's word of mouth and people who have heard me preaching different places and like, oh, we like, it's preaching, so let's tune in and hear what he has to say.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Sorry, I didn't write this question down. I'm trying to figure out how to word it. Do you have a set service? Like, do you have like a set, like thing that you do every Sunday? I've just never experienced or gone to a Baptist service. And then do you have your own sermon? Like kind of just explain to me what happens.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Every Sunday at 10 o'clock. Now the services open up with a call to worship, like, "Hey, welcome to Second Baptist Church. This is the day the lord is made," type of thing. So call to worship, we go straight to scripture, a scripture reading, we have opening prayer, kind of intercessory prayer. And then we have praise and worship, oh I should call it celebration music, then the sermon, benediction, announcements... So we try to get it done in 75 minutes. And so that's how it is now, before they had other stuff in there. And you know- and then also like, like the offering- before it used to be where you walk around ...and we also had the meet and greet time where everybody just got up and just met, greeted each other, you know what I say, go find three people or something and come back to your seat...

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Like a whole social time.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

It was, right. So we had that. We also had an announcements where somebody was reading it. So, a lot of those elements just won't be. It's going to be, you come in, sit down in your seat. We'll be done in 75 minutes. Stay right there. Don't breathe too hard. And then, give your offering on the way out.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

And music is a big aspect of church?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Huge, music is- it permeates all aspects of it. From prayer, scripture reading, to the actual singing, and ministry through music, and also even preaching- there's music at every aspect of it. Offering time is big. Oftentimes you hear folk talking about the search - let's give them some marching music! Cause he's like, "let's make sure they happy when they're coming around. Hopefully they give more." But also, just every aspect of it. There's music from the beginning to the end. So there's a lot of investing in that part of worship.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Sounds really cool.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

So this Sunday we actually have outdoor worship. We'll be outside. So you're welcome to come, hang out.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

I have to go back to New York, but maybe I'll be here in a week or two.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Oh, that's right. This is summertime. We'll be here in the fall. We're not going anywhere.



**Gillian Demetriou:**

Maybe not next week, but definitely when I come to school, I'll be here. Like full-time so.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Cool. Yes.

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:58:04]

So we're doing outside every third Sunday through September, and then probably be back in, but you're more than welcome any time, and you can watch on YouTube too.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Definitely.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Definitely. And you said your wife works at Brookdale before, and I was reading a little bit about a partnership that you guys had with Brookdale to distribute technology to students in need, this past year.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. So one of the struggles for some of the students... Well, no, not some. The struggle with a lot of students that come from this area is always transportation to Brookdale.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Right. If you catch an Uber, it's \$40 each way. If you catch the public transportation it takes you two and a half hours each way.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

So if you don't have...

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Time or money.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah, you got- yeah. It's one of those- and so even when Brookdale was distributing laptops, a lot of their students couldn't get there, because at that time Uber wasn't running, nobody wanted people in their car, public transportation was at a halt, and so we became a distribution center to make sure that we could get those computers and technology to individuals.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That's great. And actually, my next question is how did you become involved with the Asbury Park Dinner Table? And that's actually where I was interviewing Julie Andreola and she suggested that I reach out to you.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. Julie's amazing, her and Joe. So I know Joe, her fiancé, and so when the pandemic hit, right, typically every night we were doing, I mean, once a week, we did our youth thing, and when the pandemic hit, schools were giving out breakfast and lunch, but we knew that from our experience here, that these children were hungry at dinner time, and I knew that whatever lunch and breakfast they were giving them kids probably would not eat. So I'm like, we need to take care of these kids and provide dinner. And so I then started calling churches like, "Hey, we need to do it. We can do Thursday and probably another day." I was finding churches to fill in these spots, right, to be able to feed the community, feed the kids, [inaudible 01:00:47] can you all at least provide meals for a hundred kids? Something like that, just because if not, they'll go hungry, right?

Especially if their parents have to stop working or depends where... I mean, just stores were closing, just all types of trouble. And so I started arranging that, and then I was in a meeting and I was like, you know what, let me call Joe. So part of my arranging that was to see if I could get restaurants to donate, and so I thought about [inaudible 01:01:19], several restaurants on the boardwalk. And so I said, "Well, let me call Joe..." Come to find out, Asbury Park Dinner Table was planning... We had these restaurants that want to distribute meals, that we can supplement, that type of thing, but we don't have distribution points. I called him, I said, "Well, I have distribution points, we need food." Right?

And so it was providential, and so we made that connection, established Asbury Park Dinner Table, and I forget how many hundreds of thousands of meals later, we're still serving, to the end of the month. And so this has been going on... it started March 16?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. And here we are again...ended again before, then we got more sponsorships, so it ends again June 30th and, hopefully people will have been able to find places to get... And with the return to normal, in some ways...So yeah, that partnership helped to save lives, I believe, of people who otherwise would have gone hungry, and literally starved to death, and it also saved businesses, in this community. And so I'm just grateful that we were able to partner together, and it's been a wonderful partnership too. Just everybody's gotten along, everybody's had the same heart, and the same goal in mind, right. And so, yeah, just so grateful for Asbury Park Dinner

Table, and our role that we play now, of course, doing vaccinations too, along with serving, so yeah, it's just a great thing.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Sorry I'm not faster.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

That's fine.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

So I know we've been talking about it for the past half hour, but if we haven't mentioned anything that you would like to talk about, how else has the church, and you, being the leader of this church, how have you been able to help the community during this uncertain time for everybody?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. I think one, by continuing ministry- that all of the ministries that we've done with food pantry, when nobody could come in the building, we found a way to redo that. Of course, all the digital means. We found a way to do that. We became a pop-up clinic for vaccinations, and that was significant because the partnerships that we formed with the county and the VNA were specifically geared to the vulnerable in our community. Because I was coming here just on the regular, and when the vaccinations were released, I noticed that there were a whole bunch of luxury cars parked here that wouldn't normally be here, and this long line of white people across the street that live in this community.

And so I went over there, just curious, "Hey, where are you from?" They were coming from Colts Neck, and Rumson, and Hazlet, I'm like "What are y'all doing here?" So found out that they were here getting vaccinations, and to me, that was just absurd, that these people who are safer because they live in single family dwellings, and yeah they may be older because of age, but they live in single-family dwellings, so they are the safest, are coming to the community where people are the least safe, and getting a vaccination that could save lives, I said just "No." This would not happen on my watch.

And so I knew the executive director of the community health network, Chris Rinn, I called Chris, I said, "Chris," and I just explained to him, I said, "Listen, we have a whole bunch of luxury cars and a long line of white folk in a black community. They're all scared, the women are clutching their purses, the men just kind of got their hands in their pockets, keeping the head forward." I said, "What is going?" And I said, "It's not because it's cold." And I said "And they're getting vaccinations in our community, and no black people." Chris, who worked for the state prior, he understood the injustice, right, that existed, and my righteous indignation. And so we formed a partnership where we were able to get hundreds of people from this community vaccinated, and then of course the county came, established the county partnership, Tom [inaudible 01:06:01] was generous in that, and we were able to get hundreds more vaccinated. And so, we became a place to where that could happen, and I was grateful for that. And there was the county in the city. We also all partnered together to make it happen.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

How have you been able to address the pandemic in your sermons, and to your parish?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

So I did a sermon series on it, right? One of my first sermon series, I finished the sermon series I was in, then my first sermon series that was created because we were in the pandemic was called "Home Improvement." Right? Just this whole understanding that we're going to be home for a while, and so how do we worship at home? How do we pray at home? How do we exist at home? So I address those spiritual matters, I also addressed practical matters of managing relationships and everything, and familiar relationships, and isolation, right, for some of our seniors and things of that nature. So just talking through, preaching through all of those things, finding biblical lessons and principles that we could apply at those times.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

And how have you personally been dealing with the pandemic?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Personally? I've been doing all right. I have, again, my family, and so that's been fun. Some of the, I think the first semester, I guess it was the spring semester, last year where we had to finish school and my kids were at home-

**Gillian Demetriou:**

It was half and half.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Oh my goodness. That was interesting, trying to adapt to the virtual learning, and keep up my schedule, my wife trying to keep her schedule. We were stressed beyond belief, and thankfully summer came and it became a whole lot easier. Then of course they went back to school, because the school that they were in, small school, had small pods, it was great.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

So they've been in person this whole year?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Well that's great.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. That's-

**Gillian Demetriou:**

I'm a little jealous, but that's okay. [laughter]

**Semaj Vanzant:**

[Laughter] Yeah. Oh my gosh. No, it's amazing.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That's fantastic.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. Yeah. So it's been great.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Kids need that [inaudible 01:08:31].

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Absolutely. Absolutely.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

It's so important.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah, and the parents need a break! [laughter]

**Gillian Demetriou:**

[Laughter] Exactly.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Insanity.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

It's good for everybody.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Everybody's sanity, and I mean, just on meetings- there was some days where I would literally be on the Zoom from nine to nine, and with small breaks to eat, and to get up and maybe walk around the block or something, right. It was just... So, but otherwise, I mean, I've been good, right. I haven't had to... Because I still connect with people, and I guess, I haven't... The only thing that the pandemic really stopped that for me, and really, I guess it stopped in, not even all of 2020, was the travel. I love to travel. We travel a lot.

I'm typically gone at least once every other month, at the least, and so on a plane heading somewhere. So not traveling, which for me is a place of relief, and so that was kind of, it's a mental health thing for me. And so even when it's for business, I'm out of the norm. And even when my family comes, you know what I mean? That's great. I'm just out of the norm. And so to not be able to do that was like, what are we going to do? Yeah. Yeah. But I did end up going, I think our first plane ride was to Texas, to see my grandmother, for my grandmother's ninety first, second, one, I don't know, one of them 90th birthday parties. Yeah. We had a digital party, but I was like, I got to be there. This 90, she's 90 plus, who knows? So we're going to be there for these birthday parties.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. That's it.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Got to be there.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. Then after that I was like, oh, it's not too bad. So my wife turned 35, I'm like "All right, we're going to Costa Rica for your birthday." Did it. It's been a while since we've been back to Mexico, back to just everywhere, we're going to California in a few... Where we going first? Then we're going to... No, it's California, then Texas, but we're back to traveling.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Where in California?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

So are we going to fly in and out of Los Angeles, but we got to go to San Diego because we're going whale watching, and we love the zoo there. Our kids loved it too.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That's a good, that's a high quality zoo too!

**Semaj Vanzant:**

It really is. It really is.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

I'm not a zoo person, but I'll go to the San Diego zoo.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Oh my gosh, we love zoos and aquariums. So that was our trip that got canceled. So we were- in April, we typically take a big trip, because our boys' birthdays are three days apart, and it typically falls around Easter and that break, and the break from school. So we typically take a family trip in that time somewhere. So the trip that got canceled was to Monterey. And we're going to go to San Francisco, go to Monterey aquarium, and spend some time amongst the redwoods. But that got canceled. So we're not going there, but we are going to Southern California. This time go spend some time in Tijuana, San Diego, Los Angeles. It's a business trip, but we going to make some fun out it.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

As you should.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Absolutely.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Joshua tree is right there. That's-

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Joshua tree?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Joshua tree national park.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Really? In- where is it?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

It's more inland, I think, but it's all in that Southern California area. If you want a nature. It's supposed to be beautiful at night.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Really?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

It's like you're on Mars or something.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

What?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah, one of those, like in Arizona, the red rocks. It's desert and then the trees. Joshua Tree.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Oh, cool. I'm going to look that up and find out about it.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah, look into it. I don't think it's too far. It might be an hour or two outside of that area.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. That's not bad. That's cool. Yeah. So you travel a lot too, I take it?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yes and no. My dad is from Cyprus, so we used to go once a year. Then 2008 rolled around so that caused some issues, and we had just bought a house. So issues on top of more issues. So we've been back once or twice, but yeah, we just started doing more local traveling. We went to San Diego for wedding.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Nice, nice. Love San Diego. They have these ice cream... This was the first time we had the ice cream cookies, sandwiches rather, with a warm cookie and ice cream. Oh, absolutely amazing.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

A fresh baked?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah, fresh baked, warm cookie.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Oh my goodness.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

And he put a scoop of ice cream. Oh, you talking about the best dessert treat ever.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

I've only ever had them when you get them at the pool and they come out of the little yellow bag, and they have the chocolate chips around the outside.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

No comparison, no comparison. And where we stayed, because we did an Airbnb type of thing, we were two blocks from one, and oh, it was... We were there when they opened, on our way to the beach, it was just ridiculous, but they were great.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. Now I'm hungry. [laughter] Yeah. San Diego was the first time that I ever saw a whale. That was a couple years ago. We weren't whale watching, but you could see them off the coast.



**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. We were, oh my gosh, where were we were? I think we were in La Jolla, and all the seals are on the beach, it was just beautiful. And there's so many old missions in that area, too. It was so cool. And the food.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. It was great.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

We went to this Japanese French fusion restaurant.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

What?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Two things you wouldn't think would exist in the same universe.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

They found a way.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Best food. I dream about that restaurant. It was four years ago, and I'm still-

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Oh my gosh.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

I think they closed. But if you see a restaurant called Land and Sea.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Land and Sea, that's the spot. Okay. Joshua tree; Land and Sea.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. They might have closed, because of the pandemic, I'm not sure.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Got you, got you. But if they're open, I'll try to find it.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

You wouldn't think that anything would together.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah, and we love eating stuff that it's like, "Oh, let's just go try this place."

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

And local spots are always great too.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Local spots are always... Best fish tacos.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

I would agree. Yeah. I would agree that... Are you talking about Land and Sea?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Anywhere in San Diego.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah, I was about to say, we had some great fish tacos out there too.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. I forgot what area we lived in, but we were right down the street from the beach, and it was amazing.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. I'm getting real hungry.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

I know. It's like is it lunchtime?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

My mom, every time we go out to eat, she's like, "Oh, fish tacos are on the menu." She gets it. She eats it. She's like "This wasn't as good as the ones we had in San Diego."

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. That's a downside about traveling and trying-

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah you get the best things, and you never, unless you're there, you can't get it again.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

We just had some amazing fish tacos in Eastland Harris right outside of Cancun, and so we've been trying them here. Oh. Such a disappointment and a let down.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. My mom has resorted to making them and she's like, "Even these aren't as good. I can't get it right."

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Right. It's a little bit better, because I made them. But they're not really...

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. It's made with love.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Right. There you go.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Okay. Now that we had a little side conversation...[laughter] I have one more pandemic question. So how do you feel that the leadership of Asbury Park of New Jersey and of the nation have handled the pandemic respectively?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

I think they've done their best, right? This thing is, for anybody to expect that leaders would just know what to do, right? And they should have the answers? That is a farce, right? This thing is so unknown. The last time something like this happened was over a century ago, nobody was alive. Right? And so - and then right, science was developing, at one point, almost every hour. There was something, some new development, some new finding. Then it became half days, then it became daily, then it became weekly. So there was something, all of that. And you have to adapt to this new thing. So the leaders did the best they could, and I celebrate them for remaining open here, as opposed to what I've seen in other states where it's like, 'No, this is what we want. We don't care if the scientists, we're not going to learn and listen to science, we're just whatever, we're going to do what we feel like doing and let that be it.'

So I do celebrate these leaders, on every level. Locally and on a state level, that they did their best with what they had. Especially, in the beginning of the pandemic, the tough nature of the national narrative being spewed by the administration and some news, there was such a big contrast in information.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

It was politicized so heavily.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Oh my gosh.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

It was just pure hatred.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Right. People are dying. This is not political. So yeah. So I think amidst that environment, amidst the change, and the development of science, that they did the best they could.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. That's it for my pandemic question related questions. Is there anything else you wanted to touch on?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

No, not that I can think of with the pandemic.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

[inaudible 01:19:51] all about you man.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

So you said that you moved here more recently, right?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah, to be pastor, in December of 2015. I moved, I think my plane arrived on December 9th. I think so. Or no, I'm sorry. I didn't arrive here by plane, we drove. That was Oklahoma. I'm confusing it. We drove here, the truck actually came four days early to the house, and I was down in DC with the family, and I was down in DC and I had this event with President Obama, and so we got the call, "Hey, your truck is going to be here four days early." We were expecting it to be here on Sunday, but it came on Thursday, and my event with President Obama was on Wednesday. So thankfully I was able to make that event, but I had to skedaddle right up here.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

What was it?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

It was for the abolition, right. Where he signed the abolition and made that a national thing and into law. So I was there for that signing ceremony. Yeah. It was amazing. It really was. That's what I meant, so many of the just political items, right. John Lewis, and some of the others, Elijah Cummings, and just a lot of people, Julian Bond was... All these other folk, Jesse Jackson.

Was that my first time meeting... No, I didn't. Al Sharpton was there, but I didn't meet him, but I ended up meeting him later, but yeah. Yeah. Then of course all these other political figures were...with it. So yeah, it was cool. Eric Holder, I actually met him in the airport though. Surrounded by security. I was like, "Attorney Holder!"

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Hey!!!Past the secret service?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

That's right. That was funny, because they surround him, probably as wide as this room, and he's walking in the middle. So I ran towards him, and security was like "What are you doing?"

**Gillian Demetriou:**

One of my uncles, who's recently passed, but he was secret service.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Oh, nice. Nice.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

But it's still a cool job. But I remember we went to the White House-

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Eagleton? He was on the president's team?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

I think he was just White House secret service. I'm not sure, but they've got their glasses and that, they're so intimidating. And I was five or six, I'm looking up at them, it's so intimidating.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

That's cool. I only say that because, so I was going into political science and I did a internship with the secret service and with the HRT department. So I got a chance to meet a lot of secret service agents, and see some of the bunkers and all kinds of fun stuff, right? The president's limo, and it was during the time when George Bush was president. And so it's funny, it was always interesting because after that, when I watched TV, I could see even the plain clothes agents of "oh this is so and so," in the audiences and stuff like that, so...

**Gillian Demetriou:**

I'm not sure what level he was on. I remember one time- Oh my God you just unlocked the memory. One time in my elementary school, they brought the presidential limo, with our governor, I think. And as a little fourth grader, they let us all... They opened both doors and you went in, you sat, and then you got out the other side.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

That's pretty cool. That must have been an old one.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. That might've been right when Obama was elected.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Okay. So y'all started-

**Gillian Demetriou:**

2008 or 2009.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. With the blue crushed velvet seats?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yep.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yep. Definitely.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. I was about to say, because even though they had done this extensive background and I was there, they wouldn't even let me get in the limo.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

It probably was a decoy limo, not the actual limo.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

So they brought it and it was a crushed velvet and Obama, then they were, those are retired, and so they would let you ride, get in those, because they'd taken all the cool stuff out of them.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

The vibes are cool. We can't take the vibes out.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah, that's right.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Oh, back to our questions.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. Excuse me. My stomach is growling, but I'll be all right.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

You'll hear mine too. So you moved here in December of 2015?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

So were you aware at all of the racial upheaval that took place here in Asbury park in the 1970s?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

I knew of it because the evidence was still right across the street from the church. Right? I'm asking why is this building dilapidated? What was it? And why is this field... Because this beautiful park was not a park, it was just an open field with half dirt, half grass, half cement. It was rough, it had this nasty fence that was partially falling down, and it was just horrible. So I'm asking "What was here?" And I began to hear all of these amazing stories about the clubs, and the stores, and the gas stations, and the barber shops. [crosstalk 01:25:31] Yeah. All on Springwood Avenue.

And so, of course I asked her what happened, and that's when I got the stories of the 1970s, then the riot in July, then I'm like "You all I haven't rebuilt yet? This was 30 plus years ago. What are you all waiting on?" And it's just- in the same way that in Tulsa they were not able to build back wall street, the trauma of it all, for generations, right? They were just not able to rebuild. Not just the trauma, but also the discriminations where... Same thing with black wall street. Right? Insurance companies weren't granting claims, resources were just destroyed, just key people died. It was just, yeah...

**Gillian Demetriou:**

After that, the white flight from the area.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

White flight from the area. So even city resources were not available. I mean, it's just all kinds of stuff.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

One thing and then everything, just constantly.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Right. Because it wasn't just Springwood Avenue. I mean, Springwood Avenue went down, but then also the whole city got impacted, and it wasn't until the LGBTQIA community decided they were about to move into this place, yeah, and re-establish it, that everything started bustling. And

as in all the communities, right, the black community, was the last to develop, but that's what's happening now...

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:27:04]

**Gillian Demetriou:**

So, how would you characterize race relations in Asbury Park today?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Progressing, right, progressing. Yeah, I think that, -I remember in the beginning there was this young 10 year old kid that was shot, and killed. I'm sorry, let me say before that there was discrimination against a transgender individual. So, we had this big rally, you know... community called and I'd rather just come into, we all came together. Right? And then shortly thereafter there was a 10 year old black child that was, that was shot and I'm calling them and they, you know, no, just a few of them showed up. Right? And cause I, I let them know how disappointed and disgusted and upset I was at that, that you know, that there was no reciprocal reciprocity there. But since then, right, we've had, we had some hard conversations and since then, there's definitely been that because then I think the next year, this minister tried to come in and he was, you know, this- he was touting Trump and anti-homosexuality and all this other stuff. And so it was just like, this is the worst place- and he's coming, like I'm coming, he's coming to save everybody from their sin and debauchery. Like, he's the holy one. I was like

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Was like, savior complex.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Right. So we're unified on that too. He had a stage set up in one side and then right across the street, you know, we set up as a bigger stage or the biggest house.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Drown him out.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah we had more people. It was just a, it was just tremendous. Right. So yeah. So ever since then we've been together and you'll never think- even like right now, Juneteenth, right? The event tomorrow is huge. Brought all kind of partnerships and things together that- the Garden State Equality, you know, Interfaith Neighbors, Merck, and Monmouth Reform Temple, which- the Jewish community, faith community, all these different people are coming together to make that happen. You know? So yeah. It's been pretty special. Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Are you going, there's like a fair-

**Semaj Vanzant:**



Oh, I planned it. So I should.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

You have to be there.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

I'll be there. It's a big- so last year- I've been doing- so I started the Juneteenth, nobody's doing Juneteenth in this area. Coming from New Orleans, I'm like, where's the Juneteenth celebration?! Nobody's doing it. So I actually started Juneteenth celebrations in Asbury Park and, ah, four years ago? And then last year we did the big unity walking rally, first time. And then of course this year it's happening again. But it's developed, it's a big parade. It's yeah, big parade, fair. You know, we have 50 plus vendors. I mean, it's just a great time.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Sounds awesome!

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. Yeah. CBS in New York county too, just did a story on it came out last night. So we're hoping to hopefully have some visitors and everybody else comes and go.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

And then like once you started here though it'll spread.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. That's the hope. That is the hope.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

And then now with the federal holiday, hopefully it'll...

**Semaj Vanzant:**

... Yeah, it's already- so we did it last year for the first and you know, we've been doing it, but last year was the biggest we had it so far. And then of course now Red Bank picked up on it until now they're doing something and, and on and...

**Gillian Demetriou:**

On. So Domino's whole domino effect.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Hopefully that happened all over the state and country.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. You, you do feel...so in your own opinion, how have current events of the past year and obviously the entire United States history, but more specifically the past year, like the black lives

matter movement and the murder of George Floyd, how have those events impacted us in Asbury Park?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. So that's what the rally and walking rally was about unity, you know, because of that. And it has affected Asbury Park in that people started looking at my home police department and started paying attention more to the claims of discrimination and, and wrongdoings of our own police department and some of the rogue cops that amongst them. And so it has affected- as we were talking, in a positive way and that some of the rogue cops, right? We've been able to have removed from the force. There's more tension on the police department. So they're more conscious about, you know, how they treat individuals no matter who they are. We've been able to do things like - which one of the things I hated writing was this false traffic, a false stop of a black individual. It was automatic call back up and you have like four to eight police cars for one individual for one stop, which was, it's like, you don't think they're going to be intimidated, scared, and try to run for their life and think that it's in danger? You know? So, yeah. So that has stopped, you know, and it's typically, it's only one or maybe two at the most, but... not rolling up with the lights and the sirens and maybe park up the street or something. So it's just, it's a big thing. So I think, you know, the... I think people too, like doing their best to say, we don't want Asbury Park to be like these other places, whether it's Staten Island with Eric Garner or, you know, Minneapolis or George Floyd and the other young man now, Brian, I think he got killed not too long. Like while the same day Chauvin was being prosecuted...you could like flip the channel and it was the same story. Same time it became a split-screen or something, you know...children walking off in handcuffs and it's called, you know, this young black boy being shot for, being stopped for air freshener in the window. Yeah? It's like, you've got to be kidding. So there'll be administrators to say, we don't want to be that city man. So I think, you know, racial relationships- having a lot more conversations, honest and hard conversations, have happened. One of the things that I've done is, I'll lead a dialogue group and now we've read...white fragility and had some honest discussions about that. And then there's another one... So, yeah. And not just my dialogue group, but other dialogue groups I've happened to where people are having these hard and honest conversations and, and trying- right? Which is really all you can ask.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

In doing my research on you. I watched an interview you did with another pastor...

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Isaac. Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. And it was just really powerful. I was watching - cause I always forget to like, eat, and then it's like 8:30 and I'm like, "oh, I should probably eat something." But I had my laptop online. I was in the kitchen. So I was like- and my parents were like, "who's that, that's?" And they sat down and watched it with me. It was the same thing. It was just, my mom and I are white, and my dad's like more like...

**Semaj Vanzant:**

...olive color? Right? Greece, or..?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

...He's just like darker than the rest of us. And it's just so, it's just a different experience and it's just something we all need to be conscious of and learn...

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Just because of the way we look. Isn't that crazy? How- like, we're so shallow. It's like, come on people.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

There's more...

**Semaj Vanzant:**

You're right. A whole lot more.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

But since other people are shallow, you have to be conscious of their shallowness.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yes. That's exactly right.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Because if everybody's shallow, then you get the big problems.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Right?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. So I think we probably talked about this already, but how have you, as a pastor, utilized your position in the community to promote progress, change and education in regards to race relations?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. I mean in every way possible. Right? I talk about it as often as I can. I am organizing part of the conversations, doing video interviews, like the one, you know, with Isaac, and I've done, you know, we do a lot of events and rallies. We had a big, one of my- the one and my first and biggest events that I did was I organized the, what did we call it around some of our unity, something about unity, but it was in response to the Charlottesville incident. And so we had

almost 1500 people in the park. It was just absolutely amazing. So, but I always use my voice in my platform, both digitally and in person too. And just my presence, right. When I'm there, even in conversation, I've been privileged to sit at different tables and been able to sit there and then bring awareness to things that other people may not be aware of. So, that's been a great privilege of mine to do that. So I use my platform in every way to try and help us cherish, enjoy and celebrate our humanity and our diversity. Right? And see beyond skin color or hair texture.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah, definitely. We mentioned before about the Derek Chauvin trial, do you think that- I have to think about what I want to ask. How do you think that had an impact? Like what do you think about it? Like it's, it's not enough....

**Semaj Vanzant:**

It wasn't enough. I think it brought awareness, but it was kind of like a, almost like a pacifier, right? For a baby that's crying because they're hungry, you know, the milk is not ready yet. And so they stick a pacifier in their mouth. Right? It's like, I – here, take this and suck on it, chew on it or whatever. And so I think Derek Chauvin just became a pacifier because no laws have changed right.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Nothing's happened.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

No policies have been adjusted.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

But they can be like, oh look, we did that.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Right, exactly and so he becomes a scapegoat, right? He's like, “oh, well we locked Derek Chauvin up. What else do you want?” But even the judge in his, in his being in his guilty verdict. He was like, “yeah, you'll have the opportunity for appeal.” You know? So it's like, yeah, you've been there, but not for long because we gone make sure you can appeal and get out of jail and, and still be, you know, who you are. And yeah. So it was just like, you know- so you got the Derek Chauvin, but then you have the black woman in Buffalo, New York, right? When- who stopped her partner from doing something similar to what Derek Chauvin was doing, choking a man, and she lost her pension, got fired, everything else- it's like, so a policeman stopped another policeman and because she's black and the person was black and the other officer was white.

Y'all robbed everything from her. You know, it's just like, yeah. So what's it mean? Derek Chauvin got what he deserved, but nothing changed. I mean, that's just, yeah. I didn't want that. I think Derek Chauvin and the other guy that shot the, down in Texas, the police officer that pulled the kid- I think he got 20 years in jail or something like that. But I mean, two out of the hundreds that white police officers murder every year. People can make your bed and I know they're going

to try to lie in it. Yeah. But again, it's just a pacifier. So I don't really think, nothing changed. I think, let me say, let me say, what did change? What did change is that people thought, okay, we've disliked - when Obama got elected, people started saying, "we're in this post racial era," that is another big farce, right? Like we're not in this post police discrimination practices against blacks, you know? And we, we just can't accept that.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

And how does the system built on- like, police worked like slave catchers?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Absolutely!

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Like how does that even translate to?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

That's it? And we have immature punks who are police officers. Right.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

The amount of schooling that you have to get.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Oh my Gosh. You can graduate from high school, go to six weeks of training and get pepper sprayed and become an authority of the law. It's ridiculous. You know.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

It's like the high school dropout job. It really shouldn't be...

**Semaj Vanzant:**

I think I've been advocating for a long time. I remember standing in front of the legislature at, in Oklahoma making a case that policemen, need to one, living in the community and to at least have an associate's degree, because if we don't have policemen, who can process thoughts, write papers that help them to think through what they're trying to say. Yeah. Like if you're not doing, if you don't have that ability, you shouldn't be. Because when it comes time to make a split second decision you're always going to go with instinct. You're always going to go with something that this is not effective.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah, and if your instinct isn't trained to be any better than a high school, a high school, a high school, probably jock, like a high school jock...

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. What are you doing? It's high school, high school dropouts and ex military dealing with PTSD that get priority and...

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That is not the place for them to...

**Semaj Vanzant:**

No, not at all. Not at all. It's hard. I know people- well, one of my drummers here, he was talking about how he knew this kid that was, you know, just a punk wouldn't fight anybody, real scared and timid. He's now a police officer. Now he's just the most arrogant, cocky dude, you want to meet. Cause he got a gun on his side, you know? And, and it's just like, yeah, you didn't hear that punk is still in there. And then before, like- when my dad was a policeman, I think it was, I don't know how often, but it was multiple times a year. Like they, they would have to do self-defense classes and you know, where they're fighting and all this other stuff. Right? They don't do that anymore. Right? It's just like, well, you got the gun and taser you'll be alright. What?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. How you just give someone those kinds of weapons...

**Semaj Vanzant:**

...And make them executioner and judge, judge, and executioner on the streets? These immature undeveloped human beings? It's sad, so sad. Yeah, it really is. And promotion comes because of time, not because of actually doing your job, you're doing your job or trying to make it better. Yeah. It's systemic. It's a systemic evil, I believe. The qualifications that it takes to be, to serve in that position. Meanwhile, so doctors, lawyers, and those in the, the ministry are called professionals in the same way that a policeman is, a police officer is. They go to school for six weeks you know, we in there for years. It's like, I don't think need to be called an authority, nor called professionals. It's crazy.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Oh my gosh. Oh my Gosh. Yeah, no, I probably answered all these questions, actually. I think you've answered this question, but just for clarification, have you addressed the black lives matter movement and the death of George Floyd and other specific current events? Because obviously it's not just those...

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah. I address a lot of them. Yeah. I do. I speak about them. You know, sometimes in the sermon, sometimes I just make it its own segment in the worship. In the course I'm doing, I do videos, I have conversations, you know, I have crucial conversations with different people. And I was like, "Hey, can you join me on a zoom call? We're going to do, you're going to have a

conversation about this.” And they do it. I’ve, you know, talked to the county prosecutor, I have a meeting with him on Monday. Again, you know, some- like in all these different areas, I even talked to a policeman, cause I’m a chaplain. So I’ve even talked to policemen, you know, and I address them and talk to the pastors and push and challenge my ministry colleagues. Right? Who may be in different contexts than I am, to also talk about these things. So I’ll want to make sure that they are wanting to make sure to get in the job. You know, that they’re saying something, speaking up and, and that they know it as part of their duty. Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Definitely! Already answered that question in depth. So I won’t reiterate it to you. So arguably the past year and a half, very tumultuous, uncertain for everyone. So, people often turn to religion in these trying times in your experience, have you found that statement to be true?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Absolutely. You know, and especially because they’ve been dealing with the isolation and stuff like that and because of the uncertainty, right? It’s like all of these smart people don’t know what’s going on. Right? I’m going to believe in that faith in the one who I believe does know. Right? Who is God? And so you’re right, that people don’t believe in- I mean that people have turned to religion, even if people don’t believe, so they’ve, they’ve in the same way that churches were jam packed after 9/11. Right? It becomes like, oh my gosh, either end of the world, some type of thing has happened. So I need to be present. Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

All right, talked about that... So what, if any, have you- oh my gosh, I forgot to say a word. [laughter] What changes, if any, have you observed since you’ve arrived in Asbury Park?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

A lot of housing development- one of the weak points of Asbury Park is the lack of jobs. And, and I’ve seen a lot, all of these housing developments that have come, I’m always asking the politicians ... I’m glad there’s housing, but where are the jobs? Right? Because the people who live in this city cannot afford those, the houses that they’re putting up. And so it’s like, obviously you are...just forcing them to be honest, that they’re really developing this to be a resort city, not necessarily, or not a resort, resort weekend destination city, right? It’s a destination place more than they are like a place where people can actually live and thrive in this community. Because if you don’t work in hospitality or the hospital, then really your job is elsewhere, you know, and you have to leave the community, then it becomes, why do I want to stay here if I got to travel so far? Not a lot of people do it, but yeah, eventually they may get tired or something. Oh, excuse me for one sec. Hello. [inaudible 01:48:51] Hey, I’m good. How are you?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

So what are you most looking forward to when the pandemic is over?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

I think being able to see people again, you know, in mass and, and I just- cause I, while my wife's an introvert, I'm an extrovert. So I get energy from being around people and hanging out and seeing that type of thing. So being able to do that, you know, and yeah, I think that's about it. Cause I have really enjoyed this pandemic. I, I have enjoyed this pandemic, you know, just - amount of people in different places, less people on the bike path, less people in the parks, less people in New York City, traveling there and back and on the interstates and the park. It's been wonderful. So I really don't have- like, the pandemic has been- I have not, I don't despise this pandemic and it can- like, I don't like the fact that people are dying from it, but this way of life and this- yeah. It's beautiful, yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

I support that, I love the less traffic.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

I can bet, if you're going back and forth.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. It's not that bad. Once you get into New Jersey, it's going through Staten Island that's the worst. Staten Island and Queens. Oh my God. That's like 98% of the trip once I get on the Parkway, 20 minutes anywhere. [inaudible 01:50:37].

**Semaj Vanzant:**

All right, I'm ready.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Okay. Three more. So what is your favorite thing about being a pastor?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Watching lives, transform, transformed. Yeah and being used by God to do that. It's pretty amazing because I know it's not me and I, just because I'm just this great person, but I know it's just this willingness that I have to be used by God that causes these transformational things in people's lives.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That's amazing. So with all this happening in the world right now, where do you find hope?

**Semaj Vanzant:**



In God? I mean, that's, you know, the, just this notion or not notion, but the understanding of scripture, right? Romans 8:28, which is my favorite scripture. Not only just says, "in all the things or together for the good for them who love God and are called according to his purpose," that everything that happens I know is- will work out for something good. Right? Then I don't have to worry. I don't have to fret and then try to figure this thing out. It's like, that's God's job. I'm going to just go ahead, let the lord do what he's going to do. Right. And even Jesus talked about what, what can you, how can a man add ... to his life? Right. My worry and of course the answer implied answer there is no. So yeah, that, I find hope in knowing and believing that the same God that was in control, you know, for through pandemics and I mean yeah, past pandemics and earthquakes and, and all these other stuff is the same guy that's in control now. They made it through, God brought a lot more positive out of those things and negative and I believe God is going to do the same thing with this. Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Always, always good things after the storm.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Absolutely.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Well, that's the end of my written questions. Is there anything that you want to discuss that we haven't really touched on?

**Semaj Vanzant:**

No, I think we've talked about a lot. Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Cool.

**Semaj Vanzant:**

Yeah.

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [01:53:11]