

ARKANSAS ATOLL – EPISODE 1

Obed Lamy (00:00)

This episode was produced in summer 2020. Since then, statistics may have changed.

Niesen Laukon (00:07):

I don't know nothing about the coronavirus. I just know that it's contagious, and it's scary. And every day I go to work, I prepare myself, you know, do everything that they're telling me to do to take care of myself.

Lamy (00:27):

It's July 2020. The world is in a global pandemic from the novel coronavirus known as COVID-19. It's left more than 130,000 Americans dead. In the past few weeks, Northwest Arkansas has become a hotspot for a virus outbreak where the most affected population is the Marshallese. As of the middle of July, the pandemic has killed 60 Northwest Arkansas residents, and roughly 50% of which are Marshallese. The area known as Northwest Arkansas includes the cities of Fayetteville, Bentonville, Springdale, and Rogers. Its population is just above half a million people. And there are approximately 20,000 residents from the Marshall Island who now call Northwest Arkansas home. They represent the largest population of Marshallese in mainland United States. Many Marshallese have found job opportunities at Tyson chicken plant, a chicken processing plant whose headquarter is in Springdale.

[Theme song plays]

Lamy (01:28):

My name is Obed Lamy. For this episode of Arkansas Atoll podcast, I spoke with two members of the Marshallese community in Northwest Arkansas, Niesen Laukon, a Tyson employee, and her daughter, Faith Laukon, as the coronavirus sweeps through their community.

Faith Laukon (01:46):

My parents know all three of the people that died.

Lamy (01:50):

This is the voice of Faith. We spoke via phone on 26th of May. At that time, three people in the Marshallese community had died from the virus.

Faith Laukon (01:59):

Yeah. They've known them. They're elderly. So they've known them even before living here in Arkansas. And then we have more people in the emergency room right now that have COVID-19. Yeah, I'm talking specifically about Marshallese. My dad has diabetes, and my mom has unknown sicknesses. So yeah, they have underlying conditions, yeah, both of them. So far, knock on wood, they've been okay.

Neisen Laukon (02:27):

I'm feeling okay. I'm feeling pretty good. You know, I went back to work. I've been working for 10 months now at Tyson, so I feel pretty good. My name is Neisen, and I am 60—well, 67 years old right now. I've got seven kids. My first one was adopted. And then I've got three boys, and three girls.

Lamy (02:58):

Neisen is Faith's mother. She immigrated to the US in 1975 as a nuclear refugee following the US bombing of the Marshall Islands. She spent the greater part of her life in Springfield, Missouri, and two years ago she moved to Springdale in Arkansas. More on her story in upcoming episodes.

Neisen Laukon (03:19):

And I've been here for three years now, in Arkansas. I work at Tyson, a chicken place.

Lamy (03:27):

Tyson Chicken is an economic powerhouse and one of the biggest job providers in Northwest Arkansas. The Marshallese workers account for 30% of Tyson's workforce in the region. Neisen works at one of their processing plants.

Neisen Laukon (03:41):

My work schedule is from 2:30 to 11:00, sometimes 12:00. It depends on how much you can get out. It's not bad, it's just cold. It's really cold. Where I work, it's really cold. It's a line attendant. Or I work on an assembly line. I check the chicken, you know, before they go into combos. You know, so it's like I am the last one on the line, checking for good chicken, bad chicken, all that stuff. I wear a lot of clothes, you know, I mean, I wear sweaters. I wear my overcoat, you know, like a winter coat. Where I work, I have to wear all that. And then we wear a smock and aprons and gloves and all that. So I try to make myself warm, you know, where I work.

Lamy (04:47):

During the COVID-19 pandemic, meat processing plants across the United States have been a hotbed for viral outbreaks. Early in April, a number of poultry and meat companies shut down after workers tested positive and died from the virus. On 28 of April, President Trump invoked the Defense Production Act and sign an executive order to require meat processing plants to stay open to avoid a nationwide meat shortage.

Neisen Laukon (05:15):

They told us that they couldn't stop working at Tyson because, according to them, we feed the world. Even—they got t-shirts for us that said My Work Feeds the World. So, I haven't heard anything about that, the sickness at our work, but they're doing everything they can to—you know, wearing masks, you know, six feet apart. You know, they do a lot of things, you know, that—to make it work. So I haven't wo—I haven't heard anything about anybody get sick in where I work. But other plants, you know, I have heard. Three people died this week, you know, from coronavirus. Now, I don't know if from their work or from getting together with other people or what. I don't know. My work—at my work they they're really taking all the—you know, whatever they're telling them to do. And today my husband is at—well, my husband went back to work now, too. He's retired from [inaudible], but at it—their work right now they're checking all the workers, you know, all the employee. He went there early this morning from 3:00, and they're gonna do it all day long today. Check all the people at their plants. There are, I think, six different plants, Tyson plants, you know, in Arkansas. So one of them they're checking this morning or today.

Faith Laukon (07:09):

Yeah, and there was somebody that got sent home just a couple of weeks ago from Tyson that had COVID-19. I'm like, "Oh my gosh, Mom, you do not have—you're old, and you do not have to go into work." And she just, I don't know. She refuses not to—she has been there every single day. She's never missed hardly any days of work, unless she was deathly ill. And so—or unless we were, but even if we were, she would like nurse us until it was time to go to work, and then she'd go to work, come back, and nurse us again.

Neisen Laukon (07:41):

Well, because everything is so high here. I mean everything. I mean, the Social Security is not enough to cover everything. I mean, you work for twenty-some-odd years and get only a few, you know, dollars. It—I mean, it's ridiculous. I mean, you can't let—you pay the rent. You don't have no food, no nothing else. I mean, everything is so expensive. So I had to make the decision to go back to work to help myself and my family.

Lamy (08:26):

Neisen retired in 2011, but she was struggling to pay her hundreds of thousands of dollars of medical bills because of her chronic disease. So she went back to work in Tyson out of need to cover health care and other costs. But she has a hard time protecting herself during the pandemic.

Neisen Laukon (08:44):

I'm scared, you know, that I'm going to be in contact with somebody sick, but I try to do everything that they're telling me to do. You know, like washing my hands and wearing my mask all the times and not to get, you know, together with people

at the plant and all that. Trying to distance from anybody. And I don't know, with that many people, I don't know how you can, you know, be distant from anybody because, you know, it's a lot of people working.

Lamy (09:25):

Marshallese culture is very social, and oftentimes extended families live together in one home for both cultural and economic reasons. Marshallese people are generally very expressive and strongly connected.

[Crowd noises, singing, and music]

Faith Laukon (09:57):

We're—our community is close. We always gather. That's the thing that we do as a community, is we gather. We gather in church, we gather for birthdays, we gather for whatever. We have reason. We have—we gather for barbecues. I mean, people, we just—we are—we do not practice social distancing very well. That's just not been something that we've ever done ever in our lifetime. And so yeah, it's hard to get people to not do that.

Lamy (10:33):

Another reason that puts the Marshallese community disproportionately at risk to the coronavirus is its number of people living with healthcare conditions like diabetes, obesity, and heart disease. We wanted to understand why the people from the Marshall Islands are likely to develop this disease, and we asked that question before the pandemic started to a Marshallese family physician named Dr. Sheldon Ricklon.

Dr. Sheldon Ricklon (10:58):

You know, if you change a culture by destroying their islands, and some of them disappearing from the face of the earth, or having them move from their atoll, because we identify ourselves with our land, with our *waddo*, then you're basically changing the whole way of living for the Marshallese people. So the diet changed, the way of living changed for the Marshallese, and the culture basically changed. So we all became not as traditional Marshallese as we used to be. So that relates to behavioral changes, that relates to dietary changes and all those. Then you get your high levels or rates of diabetes and hypertension, salty foods, and cholesterol, and all those are risk factors for heart disease and such.

Lamy (11:50):

A study conducted by the Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese found that Pacific Islanders are 4.5 times more likely to contract and die from COVID-19 compared to other racial and ethnic groups. Access to healthcare is also a major problem to many Marshallese people who do not have insurance and are not qualified for Medicaid programs.

Faith Laukon (12:13):

Yeah. I don't know, but that's something that we're fighting for.

Lamy (12:17):

The Heroes Act stand for Health, Economic and Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions. It is a bill of 1,800 pages that is moving through the American legislative process

Faith Laukon (12:29):

We called our senators and told them to vote for it. They just, it passed the house. And then they went to—they went to vote on it at the Senate, then they decided to hold off on it.

Lamy (12:47):

It's meant to supplement a previous stimulus package called CARES Act, meaning the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security. Basically, the Heroes act would provide for a second stimulus check to Americans. For the Marshallese and other Compact of Free Association populations, it would also restore the access to healthcare through the expansion of Medicaid.

Laukon (13:09):

It would provide services, I mean, money, resources for our folks that are either underinsured or not insured and don't qualify for any of the government assistance because we don't qualify for anything.

Lamy (13:30):

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the vulnerability of the Marshallese community, which already displayed some of the worst health indicators in the region. But there are many layers of impact that affect the ability of Marshallese people to fully control their health and access to health care in the U.S.

[Theme song plays]

Stay tuned for the rest of the Arkansas Atoll podcast, where we will dive into the history of the United States relationship with the Marshall Islanders, what brought the Marshallese to Arkansas, and the effects of climate change on the islands.

Neisen Laukon (14:03):

I thank you for taking the time, but I gotta go to work. I gotta get ready to go to work.

Shane White (14:10):

Arkansas Atoll is a production of the Arkansas Story Vault project at The David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, Fulbright College of Arts

and Sciences at the University of Arkansas. Shane White, Neba Evans, Obed Lamy, Octavia Rolle, and Sam Whitesell are the student producers for this podcast series. Sarah K. Moore and Colleen Thurston are the staff and faculty advisors to the project, with the guidance of Dr. William Schwab. Funding for this Arkansas Story Vault project was provided by a generous donation from the Walton Family Foundation. Our sincerest gratitude is extended to the Marshallese community of Northwest Arkansas for sharing their stories with us. For ways to support them during the COVID-19 crisis, visit impactnwa.org. That's impactnwa.org. The theme song used for this podcast series, and so that I don't butcher the correct pronunciation, in Mr. Tibon's own words is titled:

Jorelik Tibon (15:12)

Jiduul im Kaddol

Shane White:

We'd like to extend our many thanks to Mr Jorelik Tibon and producer Scott Stege for their musical contribution.

[Theme song continues] (15:53)

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