Craig Andrade:

Hi, everyone. My name is Craig Andrade, Associate Dean for Practice and Director of the Activist Lab at BU School of Public Health. Thank you for joining us for this public Health Conversation starter. Today we have the privilege of speaking with Maria Smilios, who is the author of an award women book, The Black Angels. The Black Angels follows the true story of female black nurses who contributed to help cure tuberculosis while working under dangerous, unjust conditions. Their incredible important contributions are covered in this book as their work has gone unnoticed. Ms. Smilios recently received a Master's of Art and Religion and Literature from Boston University. She currently is an adjunct professor at Columbia University School of Public Health and is a keynote speaker. Maria, thank you for joining us today.

Maria Smilios:

Thank you for having me.

Craig Andrade:

Well, it's great to have you. I'm looking forward to our conversation. First question, we'll start right out of the gate. Can you please share a bit about how you came to doing the work that you're doing and to this book?

Maria Smilios:

Yeah, thank you for asking that. So I came to writing this book in an interesting way. I was the science editor for Springer and I was editing a book on orphan lung diseases, and I read a line where the doctor in this particular chapter was going to test this new drug, and he made an allusion to Seaview Hospital. He said, "I hope the cure is as swift as it was at Seaview Hospital with tuberculosis." And I always loved science, I am a native New Yorker, I love the way disease moved through the city, I love reading about it, and so I stopped and I Googled it and up came this article about the cure at Seaview Hospital, but alongside of it was another article about a cadre of nurses named the Black Angels. And I was like, "Who are these women?"

And so I kind of tried to find them, I spent three days going down this Google rabbit hole, and sometimes you get to a point where you're like, I don't even care what this is about, I just have to find out what it's about or if it goes nowhere, and so I called the Staten Island Museum, and the woman who answered the phone, I said, "Do you know a woman named Ms. Virginia Allen?" Because the article had mentioned Ms. Virginia Allen, who was one of the last living Black Angels. And she said to me, "You don't know Virginia Allen?" And I said, "No, I don't." And she said, well, she's doing this talk

on the Black Angels this weekend. And so I took my then 4-year-old to Staten Island, I had been there two times. I met her and we started talking, and that's how this whole story came about.

The story was lurking around Staten Island for about 20 years, it was this very sentimentalized hallmarky version, white nurses quit, Black nurses come in and yay, there's a cure. But there was so much more to that story when I started digging in, and finally I said to her, and she lives in the Restored Nurse's Residence, which is on the Seaview complex, and she invited me to her home, we had been meeting in a little cafe beforehand, and I said to her, "This is a remarkable story." And she said, "Well, why don't you tell the story?" And I said, "There are no archives." And she said, "Well, I can tell you what I remember," She came in the late 1940s, "And then I'll give you the names of some people."

And that's how it began. The nurse's story was stitched together all through oral history, and one of the reasons I wanted to tell this story actually links back to Boston University. When I was at Boston University, I studied with Dr. Elie Wiesel, I took his course, and his class changed my life. He really focused in his class on bearing witness and what it meant to bear witness when you hear, or see, or read an injustice or a story about injustice. And he always said, it doesn't have to be on this grand scale of a Holocaust, it could be the simplest thing. And when I started to dig deep into this story, I was like the amount of injustices that these nurses faced and the patients too.

I am the daughter of immigrants. My grandfather had tuberculosis, he came from Greece, he got tuberculosis. He was not sent to Seaview, he was sent to another hospital, and I remember when he talked about the stigma, and then I read these stories about these patients who were so villainized because they were sick, and I thought this story has to be told, and so his class stayed with me and this feeling and this notion that I needed to use my voice to give voice to these voiceless women and to these patients. So it actually went back to my years of graduate school where really, that class changed my life. It resonated so deeply within me and what he taught was so extraordinary.

Craig Andrade:

Well, that might be another conversation that you had a class with Elie Wiesel. That is amazing, and I can imagine a lot of magic happened in that classroom. Given the eight years that you describe that you really gathered these oral stories, as well as found certain elements of that going back into that institution, are there any stories in particular that stick out?

Maria Smilios:

Yeah, I mean, there were so many stories that resonated deeply with me, but the one that I say seems to contextualize what I always call... When these nurses were asked to come up here, it was during one of the darkest periods in American history, the pre-antibiotic days of the Great Depression that was set against a backdrop of a country entrenched in the virulency of Jim Crow, and the story that I think brings so much of all of those themes together is one that I tell in the book about one of the second main nurses, Missouria Louvinia Meadows-Walker. She came up from a hardline Jim Crow town, Clinton, South Carolina, and began working at Seaview in 1936. In 1944, I don't know, this is a little known thing as well, Black nurses were not allowed to serve in World War II. So they were sent, they were not allowed to serve abroad or on the front lines, so they were sent to these POW camps where the Americans were bringing in mainly German POWs. And so the POWs that were brought into New York were sent to a hospital in Staten Island called Halloran Hospital. If you had tuberculosis, you were sent to Seaview.

So she gets this Nazi on her ward and he hates her, and for eight months she treats him. And Missouria worked on the men's ward, and the men's ward was really tough, it was described to me as kind of like this body bar place, people bad, and if you could just imagine in a kind of pub late at night, that's kind of the way it was. And so he, for eight months, abuses her, he yells at her, he curses at her, and one day he turns around and he spits on her and he says, "I hope you die." in German. And nobody does anything, and the story resonated so deeply with me because here was one of the most reviled people in America, in history at the time, a Nazi POW, and he manages to find the one person that America considers lesser than him, a Black female nurse. And that story brought so many themes of where we were as a country, and I use the word were likely because I don't think we've moved on in many ways from that moment, but I think that story just sat with me so, so, so deeply. And her family, when they told it to me, never forgot it, it was a story that they repeated again and again, but they never really knew the depth of what was happening.

Craig Andrade:

Wow. I hear your words, that the kind of time that happened then isn't so different than where we are now. I said off-screen before we started, I was one of four TB public health nurses for Boston, and in the eighties during the AIDS epidemic as well as during the tuberculosis issue with broad spectrums of homeless substance use disorder, mental health, and broad spectrums of immigrants had contracted tuberculosis, and the stigma that comes with that and the stigma that comes with all the other things, including racism, that just still is front and center in particular, given the administration that we're talking about, a lot has changed, tuberculosis doesn't kill

like it used to, but it really has continued to have this stigma and fear that it brings in the dirtiness that people connect with it. Are there lessons that you think, given the comparison of today and in the twenties, thirties, forties, and on, that you can see similar patterns?

Maria Smilios:

Well, tuberculosis in the global south, tuberculosis is the number one infectious disease killer in the world, and it kills 1.6 million people and sickens 10 million. Most of them are in countries where there are Black and Brown people. And you mentioned this current administration, the cutting of the USAID shut down a lot of those tuberculosis clinics, the cutting of other funds took away the ability to do these rapid tests that they had developed. And I don't think people really grasp how bad tuberculosis really is. When I was writing the book, and sometimes I read these threads just to get an idea of where people are thinking, and I still hear like, "Oh, it's just like Bronchitis, it's not a big deal." The regime to get cured for tuberculosis, if you don't have multi-resistant tuberculosis, could be anywhere from nine to 12 months up to 20 pills a day, and you know this, you worked in TB facilities treating people who are sick.

It's a wasting disease. It's called consumptive because it consumes you from the inside out. And I think there's a lot of things we could take away from this book, I mean, one of the things is history. If we knew this history and we knew what these women went through, and we knew that they were averting a public health crisis by risking their lives to come up, and the reason they came up is because the white nurses decided to leave at the end of 1929 because white women could find jobs that wouldn't kill them. And the city was in a pinch, and they said, "We either close the hospital and let all these TB patients converge on our city and our rates will rise, or we find a way to staff it." And so they looked at the great migration and they said, "Well, let's do that with professional Black women."

And so they made them a deal. They offered them housing and schooling and an opportunity to have a professional job, and the nurses came. And I always say one of the things is this was their ticket to freedom, a ticket to a TB ward at a time where there wasn't a single antibiotic, a staph infection could kill you and all of these secondary infections were a big deal. And they came and they stayed for years, and I think one of the lessons that we can take away from this is number one, their patients, they wanted to desegregate the New York City Hospital system, this is something people don't know. Only four of the 29 municipal hospitals allowed black nurses to work. They wanted to desegregate the American Nurses Association, which prevented barred them from joining. They wanted equal pay, and they wanted a right to buy a home, a lot of them were redlined in Staten Island. They believed that if they could buy a home,

they would be considered part of the American middle class, and therefore they would be seen as equal. They weren't.

So there's a lot to take away in terms of the work that they did, the communal work. When we look at now trying to prevent things or change things, these women came together and they saw the long game, and I think that's the biggest message to take away, is we live in a world of clicks and likes and fast-paced information. They saw the long game, they knew they had to stay the course, this was not going to happen overnight. So I think that's one of the biggest messages. I can talk on and on more about it, but I know we're limited.

Craig Andrade:

It resonates so much. During the pandemic, the frontline workers, the essential workers, the Black angels were essential essential workers and at the same time, I heard you in other conversations speak about how leaders spoke of them being expendable.

Maria Smilios:

Yeah.

Craig Andrade:

That expendability is a through line for Black and Brown and otherized people in our history.

Maria Smilios:

Absolutely, and so that is one of the most frightening parts of the book. The nurses were called up to fill these jobs that the white nurses didn't want, and in 1933 at a meeting in New York City, there were 300 hospital officials, including nurses. A young Black nurse stood up and asked the president of hospitals who was talking, "Mr. president, why do you send Black nurses to Seaview?" And he said, "We send Black nurses to Seaview because in 20 years we won't have a colored problem in America because they'll all be dead from tuberculosis." And he saw them as not only just as expendable, he wanted to eradicate the whole African-American race because you get rid of the women, you can't have children. And so he viewed them the way the patients were viewed, which were, "Immoral, uncouth, un-American dirty consumptives" that were sent to this hospital to languish and die with these nurses who they hoped would die. They didn't die, which is the best part of the story.

Craig Andrade:

And in that resilience, the women, for example, that you had lunch over on an ongoing basis to get the stories of what she did and her colleagues did on an ongoing basis, which is save lives and kind of build a resilience in their own lives in a way that allowed them to move up in the midst of that danger.

Maria Smilios:

Yeah. It is a story of resilience, it's a story of will, it's a story of determination. You made the allusion to Covid, there's so many parallels between the people, those frontline workers that stepped up in a moment to take care of people with an... We knew nothing about it, it was an airborne virus. We thought it first attacked the lungs, and they did it, they did it because it was their job, some of them had no choice but to do it. But I think in the end from this story and talking to some of the nurses' families and the few that had been alive before the book came out, they did it because they felt that it was their moral obligation to humanity to save lives, because that's what needed to be done at that moment in time. And the family said to me they never had time to think whether they could or they couldn't. They also couldn't think whether they could or they couldn't because they were subjects of Jim Crow's labor laws that gave them few, if any, options. So it's the same thing with a lot of the frontline workers, they didn't have a choice. They did not have a choice but to show up and go to work.

Craig Andrade:

And as you say, they helped in creating the cure. Was there any credit given to them at all?

Maria Smilios:

No. So Dr. Robicsek who is the doctor who ended up winning Alaska Award, which is equivalent to a Nobel Prize in America, his son was alive for many, many years. I became very close with him, told me his dad's story, gave me his dad's papers. Dr. Robicsek always said, "Had it not been for the Black nurses, none of this would've happened." This meaning Seaview running and also the first Isoniazid, the first drug trials for Isoniazid, which became the first drug to cure tuberculosis were done at Seaview and the nurses oversaw those trials. This drug was brand new, it had been tested by Hoffmann-La Roche on guinea pigs and mice. And the scientists called Seaview and said, "Hey, you want to try this on humans?" And they said, Yes, we do." So they had no idea how to titrate the medication, they had no idea the side effects, so the nurses were on the front lines every day, not only administering the medication to people, the criteria was death had to be imminent and all other treatments had had to

have failed. That means surgical interventions and also Streptomycin or whatever medications they had in the late forties.

And what ended up happening was these nurses not only administered the drug and took vitals, but they looked at the emotional and the mental state of these patients that they knew for years, they called themselves "Lungers" because they had been there for so long. So the nurses knew them intimately. And one story that stands out to give you an idea of how meticulous they were was they noticed that people's legs were twitching in their sleep under the blankets, and so they would write down all of these bits of information. At night, Robicsek would collate them with his partner, and then they started to come up with a list of, oh, they hear ringing in the ear, oh, there's twitching, oh, there's this weird giddiness happening, and that is how the trials came to be. And it took nine more years before they were able to tweak the medications and get the right cocktail, but it was those nurses who continued to work at Seaview doing this for nine more years.

Craig Andrade:

Maria, in telling and writing this story, I imagine you learned a whole lot. We here at the School of Public Health are really encouraging our public health students to think in bold ways and recognize that there are inequities in all ways, not just in the US, across the world. Are there lessons learned as you watched this story play out and finally laid it out in your book that you might share with our public health students, so things that they might think about or the kind of elements that you found these women working with marginalized populations?

Maria Smilios:

So I think the most important story was, and I'll just say this version, the final version of the book was the third iteration of the book, and I think this is important to anybody studying public health and wanting to write. I began the book when Barack Obama was president, and you look at the big, broad cultural moment, and he was trying to bridge those health inequities through the Affordable Care Act where everybody would have access to healthcare, and I had to keep that in mind. And then he wasn't president. And we went through that couple of years of Trump being president and trying to rip it apart and then Covid happened. And I was in New York at ground zero a mile from Elmhurst, and one day I walked out, I saw the morgue trucks, and I saw these lines sneaking around the corner just a little bit from where I had grown up in this heavy immigrant area and I thought, "This is no different than 80 years ago. This is a story, The Black Angels, about who lives and who dies based on the zip code in which

you live." Nothing had changed. Nothing had changed in terms of how the immigrants and the people who had financial struggles were trying to get care in the hospital.

The nurses were wearing garbage bags because there wasn't enough protective equipment. And so that is the heartbeat of this book. And I think what I told my students last semester at Columbia, I taught a course called Human-Centered Storytelling, so many words are dirty words now. We can't use the word climate change, we can't even use the word disparity anymore, and you have to find ways to work around that. And you have to find ways to get people interested in listening to the fact, for example, that there are public health crisis or there is a climate change happening. And how do you do that? You put a human at the center. And so the way I see it, students in public health should listen to stories, they should ask questions and just ask open-ended questions. If you are working with a marginalized population, it's one thing to treat them and to say, "Yes, we need to get you housed." But it's another thing to make them feel seen by saying, "Tell me about yourself. Tell me what happens. Tell me."

And when you start asking people to tell you, you start to collate information and you start to understand the nuances and the ways that you can help them that go beyond just the clinical aspect of being in public health. So I think these stories are really important, and there's thousands of them. The streets of New York, the streets of Boston, everywhere, and I am talking about the unhoused now, but people who can't afford health insurance, people who are slipping through the cracks because they can't get to their appointments because they don't have money for Ubers. Bring together communities, find ways to create food chains or start a fund so that people could take an Uber and it'll be paid for, and that only happens by sitting down and really hearing people.

Craig Andrade:

Mentoring the humanity.

Maria Smilios:

Yeah, absolutely. And then wanting to, as Dr. Wiesel said, "Make that injustice right."

Craig Andrade:

Yeah. Well, one last question before we go, Maria. So throughout the story of the Black Angels, where would you say there's the hope that you found in those stories?

Maria Smilios:

Oh, I always say the story is heartbreaking, it's infuriating, it's enraging, it's appalling, but at its heart this is a story of triumph. It is a story of people who found the will, who wanted to rise to these occasions and make the world a better place. They wanted to create a world where the injustices of the patients they were treating were corrected. One of the patients I had the opportunity to interview two of the trial patients, and one of them said to me, "It wasn't until those Black nurses took care of me that I felt human again." And so they wanted to write that injustice by seeing these people who were suffering from a disease that they couldn't help, they didn't want to get sick, many of them came to America to find hope, and they found sickness in Seaview and stigma.

I think the other hopeful part of the story is that it really shows us that the will to live and survive is always stronger than the will to kind of fold into ourselves. And I know we're living in really strange and dark times, and many of us just want to sit on the couch and fold into ourselves, and it's okay if you need to take that break, but I think what these women show us and showed us in this book is that you still got to get up and you've got to do the work if you hope to make the world a better place for those behind you. And they did, they wanted to bring up their sisters and their children, they wanted the world to be better for them. And they did, that's why when Ms. Virginia Allen came up in 1947, one of the main protagonists, Edna comes in 1929, and that's her aunt, and she paves this way. And so Virginia comes up into this world where her aunt owns a house in Staten Island, there's no more segregation in the New York City hospital system, they're three years away from being integrated into the American Nurses Association. That's because of all the work and the sort of shoulders that she stood on from these women. So I think that's where the hope is in the story.

Craig Andrade:

Well said. Maria Smilios, The Black Angels. Thank you for coming today and telling your story and the story of these wonderful women, I really appreciate all you're doing. Thank you.

Maria Smilios:

Thank you so much for having me, thank you.