

THE BLOODLINE WITH LLS

A PODCAST FOR PATIENTS AND CAREGIVERS

Episode: 'Tragedy to Legacy: NFL Player Continues The Fight'

Description:

Join us as we speak to Alex Okafor, a defensive end with the Kansas City Chiefs. Alex lost his mother to acute myeloid leukemia (AML) in 2020. In this episode, Alex talks about his mother's short battle with AML and the difficulties his family faced receiving this diagnosis during a global pandemic. Following his mother's death, Alex found a new determination to make his mother proud and continue her legacy in fighting against racial injustice and creating a better society for the black community.

*Since the taping of this podcast, Alex has launched the Alex Okafor Family Foundation, which is raising funds for the LLS Scholarship for Blood Cancer Survivors Program. In addition, in honor of Mother's Day, Alex wrote a touching letter to his mother, titled *A Letter to My Mother* for The Players Tribune website.

Transcript:

Elissa: Welcome to *The Bloodline with LLS*. I'm Elissa.

Edith: I'm Edith.

Lizette: And I'm Lizette. Thank you so much for joining us on this episode.

Elissa: Today we will be speaking with Alex Okafor. Alex is a defensive end with the Kansas City Chiefs, recently playing in the 2021 Super Bowl Championship. Last year in 2020, Alex's mother was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia or AML. COVID-19 restrictions made it more difficult for Alex and his family to visit her, and sadly she passed away only three weeks following her diagnosis at the age of 59.

Not long after, our country experienced disturbing and highly visible acts of racism, resulting in the deaths of multiple Black Americans and an outcry this country hasn't seen since the Civil Rights Movement. Following his mother's death, Alex found a new determination to make his selfless and courageous mother proud and take his own

steps to fight racial injustice in this country. As he shares the story of her brief battle with AML, he also continues her legacy in creating a better society for the Black community.

Welcome Alex.

Alex Okafor: Thank you. I appreciate you all for having me.

Elissa: So, let's start with your mother's AML diagnosis. How did she get diagnosed, and what were the signs and symptoms leading to her diagnosis?

Alex Okafor: Man, so like you touched on, it happened right in the heart of COVID-19, right in the middle of the pandemic. So she was sick for about a two-week span, and she had signs of COVID. She was coughing. There wasn't any loss of taste or anything, but she had issues breathing and she was coughing, so for the longest, we thought she had COVID, but she kept testing negative. So, at this point, we're just confused and just hoping it's just something that passes by. And then finally, we took her to the doctor's office, and they said her white blood cell count was through the roof and-

Elissa: Oh!

Alex Okafor: -they said, "Most likely it's cancer." And she went through all the tests, and they confirmed it, and she started a chemo treatment immediately.

Elissa: Wow!

Lizette: Did you have time to speak to the doctors to learn a little bit about the diagnosis? It's an acute diagnosis, so a lot of people start treatment really quickly. Was that just the case? She started treatment really quickly and, unfortunately, you weren't able to be there with her in the hospital?

Alex Okafor: Yeah. So just going back to where you asked if I talked to the doctor, yeah, I talked to the doctor briefly. My dad did most of the communicating between

the two. But my biggest things with the doctor was just how come we didn't see this coming, type of thing? There were no signs beforehand. All this kind of just came out the blue, and I was just more confused than anything. And as quickly as it came, the doctor recommended, chemo right away, so it's kind of a no-brainer for us. And she was a fighter; we wanted her to fight, and she went to that battle and we started right away; I think the following week.

Edith: Hearing your mother was diagnosed with cancer must have been incredibly difficult but adding to that diagnosis during a global pandemic must have increased that difficulty, like, times ten. What was that all like for you and your family?

Alex Okafor: It was hard just because we all kind of had to tiptoe around the situation just with all the COVID protocols. So, I was in town with her, but I wasn't living with her, and I was kind of scared to go around her with the pandemic in full force at that time. So, I mean, obviously, I had a mask on every time I was around her, but you want to hug her, you want to be close to her; and just being that close to her at the time just wasn't the safest way to go about things. So, the whole family was just kind of cautious in that aspect.

And, yeah, it was hard that we weren't able to be by her side during chemo. I think, if anything, that's the hardest part because when she was at her sickest, we weren't able to see her.

Elissa: Did you know at any point about the severity of this diagnosis and what the prognosis was for her?

Alex Okafor: I didn't, so everything just happened so fast. And, obviously, when you hear cancer, the worst-case scenario comes up in your mind. But, you know, there was also a glimmer of hope just because I know how strong my mom is. And I know as quickly as AML had popped up, I just figured it's very beatable and it can disappear that quickly, obviously, not knowing any other research or anything behind it. But to answer your question, we were very hopeful about the situation.

Elissa: Did she ever end up reaching remission after that first round of chemo?

Alex Okafor: I want to say she did have remission, so that's why we were so excited after that first round. I think it was three weeks exactly on the dot; that's how long the first round took. And, yeah, I think the doctor did say she was in remission. We were excited about her coming home at the end of that three-week period. And I remember it was on a Friday that marked the 21-day mark. And that evening my dad had called and said that she had just been shipped to ICU. I don't remember what was going on exactly, but, obviously, she was in critical condition and having kidney failure and whatnot. It was, you know, it was just a lot going on.

Elissa: Yeah. That's tough. It can happen just so quickly.

Alex Okafor: Um-hmm.

Elissa: So, after your mother's passing, the world saw the tragic deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and more, most of which were caught on video. What were you going through emotionally having just lost your mother so suddenly to this awful disease and then seeing these injustices play out?

Alex Okafor: Yeah. Whew! It's just hard to even put into words everything that was going on internally with me. There was so much. Obviously, there was sadness for my mom passing away, but at the same time, that was met with anger from the way the African American community continually was getting devalued in our nation. So, you know, those two emotions mixed together doesn't usually end well or equal a good formula. My head was all over the place. I wasn't in a good place. I'm sure a lot of the nation wasn't, but, you know, it was especially hard for me and my family.

Elissa: Yeah, it just seems that the pandemic, in some way, has almost brought these out even more to the forefront. At the time of this taping, we're also recently dealing with an increase in anti-Asian sentiment in addition to all of the Black Lives Matter

things going on throughout the summer and into the fall, and it has really just brought it out into the forefront. How do you feel about all of that?

Alex Okafor: Yeah. I'm right there with you. I think the pandemic has put everybody in an uncomfortable space, you know, just with the whole quarantine, the whole lockdown, some people refusing to wear a mask while people are all pro mask. You know, there's just a lot of animosity and anger going around right now with this pandemic. And, I think that's why we have seen so much media attention and so much attention through athletes like myself and other public figures around speaking on it, just because I think everybody's just fed up and it's time for a change. And the anger and all those emotions from the pandemic has just helped bring light on that.

Elissa: Yeah, it really did seem to open up a conversation, which is good. You have probably seen it your entire life and the rest of the BIPOC community has seen it play out, but it is really just coming to light for everybody and starting that conversation which is very much needed.

Lizette: And even for our blood cancer folks, the pandemic has also brought out the issue of healthcare inequities, cancer patients not being treated the same way depending on their racial or ethnic background.

Alex Okafor: Absolutely. There's just so many issues that have been, not brought to light because they've been ongoing issues, but I think there's a little bit of extra focus this past year and a half or with the pandemic going on.

Elissa: So, you ended up writing an article, which ended up in the *Kansas City Star* and *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* publications. In that article, you talked about the events leading you to a new determination to fight racial injustice. But you also tied this fight back to your mother and a need to make her proud. Tell us a little bit about your mother prior to her AML diagnosis and how it led you to step up and make a difference.

Alex Okafor: Yeah. So, if you knew my mom, her whole life she's kind of just invested in making our community better. And just going back to her job history, when I was young, she was a probation officer. Then she transitioned into housing in which she helped underprivileged communities achieve housing. And then as I got older, she moved to another nonprofit organization in which they helped lower income kids receive college scholarships as well.

So, her whole kind of life's journey has been making the community a better place, making our world a better place. And with everything going on, as we touched on, with all the racial injustice and the pandemic going on and with her passing, I needed a way just to have an emotional release and let all my feelings out. And I just kind of mixed up everything that was going on and put it into one piece and just to kind of get a lot of stuff off my chest.

Elissa: What was the response to that article?

Alex Okafor: Man, it was a great response. It was overwhelming and it, honestly, made it all worth it. You always get uncomfortable when you make yourself vulnerable and put things like that out there, and you always wonder how people respond or you're even worried if people don't respond, like, they just don't care. And the amount of response that I got on this piece, it was heartfelt, and I appreciated every bit of it.

Lizette: And in this article you talked about ending systemic racism in the United States. For our listeners, how would you describe what systemic racism is?

Alex Okafor: For me, it's just institution systems, laws, all these type of things put in place to keep a certain demographic down. And that's the way I see systematic racism built in this country with the African American community. And not just in these other communities which we touched on, the Asian community recently; but I'm part of the African American community, and I need to make sure that I do my part.

Elissa: You talk a lot in the article also about things that your mom had to teach you and your brother to be able to stay safe in this country. It's hard to read sometimes to see, to not wear your durag in public and to always keep your hands on the steering wheel, things like that that I think a lot of people don't think of.

Alex Okafor: Yeah. Just the way we were raised and the way most African Americans are raised in this country, you just got to be mindful of things like that. And that basically all just comes back to the fact that you're constantly going to be judged in this country if you're a minority, so you just got to keep those things in mind. And that's kind of what my mom tried to not instill but just make sure that we were aware of growing up, me and my little brother.

Lizette: And I want to apologize for the pun, but how do you plan to tackle systemic racism?

Alex Okafor: Oh no, you don't have to apologize. I love that. This past season I worked with the Chiefs, specifically Dr. Tyrance, Dr. T. with the Chiefs, and we started the Kingdom United Reading Program, or he started it, and I adopted my elementary school out here in Pflugerville, Texas, and had them join that reading program. And I can go into what that reading program is if you'd like me to.

Elissa: Yeah, what does that mean, adopting a school?

Alex Okafor: Yeah, so first of all, the Kingdom United Reading Program is basically you take an elementary school and we've already targeted a series of books that include diversity, race, inclusion, equality, all these type of principles. And what we do is we take that elementary school and each kid in that school will receive this series of books in hard copies and they'll do class reading and discussions tackling those issues that you talked about – diversity, inclusion, racism, equality. And what we do with that is we also have players from the Chiefs film videos and record them reading those books, so that the kids at those elementary schools get to see us reading those books

while they're reading them; and we're all kind of involved in this discussion and getting better.

And basically, adopting a school is me sponsoring my school which I pay for all the materials, the books, all that; and I sponsored my school so every kid at the elementary school I went to, which was Spring Hill, will receive those books. And the program is there, and they'll have those discussion questions on the monthly basis; and I just want to do right by my community.

Elissa: That's incredible, and it's really sharing that love of reading so young, but also teaching them from that young age when they might not have heard differently yet how to make sure everybody's included, and everybody can be treated equally. And there is that level of justice and equity.

Alex Okafor: Yeah, absolutely. I think what we realized is when everything was going on with the Ahmaud Arbery and all these black slaughtering, because that's what they were, we needed to find answers. And everybody was looking for answers; and one thing that Dr. T really addresses, he had an answer for the issue. Kids aren't born with hatred in their heart. They're not born-

Elissa: Exactly.

Alex Okafor: -to think this way. This is definitely a learned behavior. So, we just figured if we could, you know, grab these kids at a young age and kind of teach them the right way and bring these topics of conversation at a young age, as opposed to later in their lives, then we could start making improvements from the grassroots.

Elissa: Is that program happening anywhere else outside of the Kansas City Chiefs or spreading around to different NFL teams? That's a great program.

Alex Okafor: No, not yet. So, the Chiefs they called it the pilot program.

Elissa: Okay.

Alex Okafor: So, we did four schools in the Kansas area, and the fifth school was my school, Pflugerville, Spring Hill Elementary School. So those were the five schools that we did this semester or this year; but definitely, the ultimate goal is to keep expanding, more schools in the Kansas City area, more schools in the Texas/Austin area, and then, hopefully, we can expand this throughout different NFL ball clubs and just keep it going because I think it's an effective mechanism.

Lizette: I think we need it in every state. I really do.

Alex Okafor: Absolutely, I agree with you.

Elissa: That's a great way to really make a difference, and people think that one person can't make a difference; and that's really just not true. You have made a difference to a whole elementary school of children.

Alex Okafor: I've definitely been blessed. I've had good people in my circle. But yeah, just kind of going back to what we're talking about, me just kind of fulfilling my mom's life mission and just kind of bringing that around full circle. It's my time to take the torch.

Lizette: And I think your mom was teaching you how to make a difference when she was encouraging you to vote.

Alex Okafor: Absolutely. If you read the article, that's one thing that she always pressed me about. When I was younger in college, she used to always make sure, did you vote? And we're not even talking about Presidential elections. We're talking about like primaries and stuff, and I had no interest at the time to go and vote for the primaries. I just knew who my President-elect wanted to be.

But she made sure she stayed on top of me and got me there and made me do my research on, who was in office, who was running, and all that type of stuff. And looking back on it now, I see why it's more important than ever.

Elissa: That matters. LLS really pushes public policy. We have an advocacy arm, and we really want to make sure that patients have access to quality and affordable care wherever they're at. And it starts locally. It always starts locally from what's going on in your state and your state policies, all the way up to the federal level to the Presidency. So, it is important to make sure that you are voting in people that care about healthcare and care about people and taking care of our citizens. So it really is important, just right from the local level.

Alex Okafor: Absolutely, I agree.

Elissa: So, you have now started some involvement with LLS, and we appreciate you being on our podcast. Tell us how your mother's AML diagnosis has encouraged you to get involved in awareness and the fight against blood cancer?

Alex Okafor: Yeah, just kind of going to continue on extending her legacy. Throughout the whole situation with my mom, I just kind of felt helpless throughout the whole experience, and especially with all the COVID protocols, I couldn't even be around. So, I kind of had my hands tied the whole time and had no effect on what was going on.

So, you know, after she passed away, I just tried to get as involved as possible; and I had the blessed opportunity to work with a great organization like LLS; and it's kind of worked out perfectly. We have similar interests, similar goals, and we're both passionate about this. And I'm just looking forward about what the future holds with our partnership.

Elissa: That's great. And it really is such a great way to continue your mom's legacy and make it so that her death was never in vain; and you can continue that and make a difference for AML patients, blood cancer patients that come after her to give them that chance of life, that chance to get out of the hospital and live a good long life.

Alex Okafor: Yeah, absolutely, and I couldn't agree with you more. I'm just looking forward to the opportunity to continue to work and finally come down to a cure, hopefully.

Elissa: Yes, definitely.

Alex Okafor: That's always what we're working towards.

Elissa: That's definitely what we always hope for. I assume that your teammates had known about your mother. Did they know about kind of the involvement that you're starting with LLS or backing you in that way with trying to find that cure?

Alex Okafor: The partnership with LLS, this is something that we've been kind of working on throughout the whole season.

The season was kind of just brainstorming and getting a plan in place. This offseason, starting with this podcast, we're kind of executing the plan. I say that to say that my teammates are aware; but now is the time to get everyone involved, and that's what we plan on doing in the very near future.

Elissa: That's great. The more people the better, and I think a lot of people don't think about blood cancer or they think about leukemia as a child's disease.

So it's great to really get that awareness out there; and we really appreciate you stepping up. We appreciate all the future of what this could be.

Alex Okafor: Absolutely, and trust me, I'm more excited than ever.

Elissa: Great.

Edith: So, on our patient podcast home page, we have a quote that says, "After a diagnosis comes hope." Based on your experience as a family member of someone diagnosed with leukemia, what word would you choose to complete that sentence? After a diagnosis comes?

Alex Okafor: I like hope a lot. But I'd say after a diagnosis you get to show your strength. After my mom got diagnosed and just me talking to her, she almost calmed me down. Like you could kind of hear it in her voice that she was ready for the uphill climb; and she sounded confident doing it, and it made me feel good. And that confidence just showed her strength; and I loved seeing that. And I think with every diagnosis, it gets to show the strength of the patient, no matter how it turns out, just the fact that they're willing to fight shows their strength.

Elissa: That's great. And it's important for our listeners to hear as well that it's great to be able to show that strength and move forward after a diagnosis.

Alex Okafor: Absolutely.

Elissa: Well, thank you so much, Alex, for taking the time to speak with us today and share about your mother's diagnosis and journey with cancer.

I have to say it was so exciting for us to speak with an NFL player on our podcast. We certainly look forward to watching you in the future with football and, also, see the difference that you make in your fights against both blood cancer and racial injustices. So, thank you for all you do and all you will do; and again, thank you for joining us today.

Alex Okafor: No doubt. I just want to say that I'm thankful and I'm blessed to be able to have the opportunity just to join you all and be able to do this fight with LLS. So, I'm grateful, I'm thankful, and we've got to do this again some time.

Elissa: Definitely.

And thank you to everyone listening today. *The Bloodline with LLS* is one part of the mission of The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society to improve the quality of lives of patients and their families. To help us continue to provide the engaging content for all people affected by cancer, we would like to ask you to complete a brief survey that can



be found in the show notes. This is your opportunity to provide feedback and suggested topics that will help so many people.

We would also like to know about you and how we can serve you better. The survey is completely anonymous, and no identifying information will be taken. We hope this podcast helped you today. Stay tuned for more information on the resources that LLS has for you or your loved ones who have been affected by cancer.

Have you or a loved one been affected by a blood cancer? LLS has many resources available to you – financial support, peer-to-peer connection, nutritional support, and more. We encourage patients and caregivers to contact our Information Specialists at 1-800-955-4572 or go to [LLS.org/PatientSupport](https://lls.org/PatientSupport). You can also find Information Specific to COVID-19 and cancer at [LLS.org/Coronavirus](https://lls.org/Coronavirus). All of these links will be found in the show notes. Thank you again for listening. Be sure to subscribe to *The Bloodline* so you don't miss an episode. We look forward to having you join us next time.