STAT
Color Code
Episode 4: “Birthing while Black” is an American crisis. Communities demand justice.

Transcript Key:

In this written version of the episode, all words, including speakers, ambient sound, effects, and music, will appear in size 11 black type. **SPEAKER NAMES** are in bold and all caps. Music and other sound descriptions are indicated by [brackets] in regular font.

Speakers:

- **NICHOLAS ST. FLEUR (“NICK”)**: Our narrator Nick is a science reporter for STAT, where he often covers the intersection of race and medicine. Based in Long Island, NY, he is in his early 30s.
- **KATY CECEN**: A reproductive justice activist in Brooklyn, Katy organizes folks against racism and misogyny in the context of childbirth.
- **MEEMA SPADOLA**: A postpartum doula, lactation counselor, and mother, Meema is a maternal health advocate based in Brooklyn.
- **SHAWNEE BENTON GIBSON**: An activist, artist, and advocate for Black birthing folks, Shawnee is a trusted community leader in NYC. She is the mother of the late Shamony Gibson.
- **BELINDA STALEY**: The sister of Denise Williams, Belinda is a maternal health advocate, who helps raise her sister’s daughters, Avyanna and Adalee.
- **RACHEL HARDEMAN**: A reproductive health equity researcher, Rachel is a professor of health and racial equity at the University of Minnesota, School of Public Health.
- **CHARLENE MAGEE**: The aunt of Denise Williams, Charlene is the founder of Niecy’s Purple Heart Foundation, a nonprofit that organizes for Black maternal health.
- **OMARI MAYNARD**: An artist in Brooklyn, Omari is a community organizer and the bereaved partner of Shamony Gibson.

[A slow fade in: BIRDS chirp. A CAR DOOR closes. FOOTSTEPS on gravel are heard.]

**MEEMA SPADOLA** [in conversation]

Hi, good morning. How are you? Do you need a hand? Is that a little insecure?

**CROWD MEMBER #1**

Yeah, my hand – thank you.

**KATY CECEN**

We’re outside of Queens Hospital, which is part of the NYC Health and Hospitals Corporation, which is the city’s public hospital system because in August, Denise Williams was brought here seeking care for postpartum depression or anxiety. And her family was informed two days later that she had died.
NICK
It was a cold, windy January morning when my producer Theresa and I arrived at Queens Hospital Center in New York City.

KATY CECEN
So we’ve been gathering somewhat regularly outside of the hospital since then to demand answers and to say her name and to make sure the city knows that it matters that we’re watching.

NICK
A group of about 10 to 15 people were gathered in front of the hospital, holding bright purple signs and a dozen purple balloons. After all, Denise loved the color purple. The signs they held read: “Denise Williams Should Be Here,” “Black Mamas Matter,” and “Justice for Denise.”

The crowd of family, friends and activists had come together on what would have been Denise’s 30th birthday. They were there to celebrate her life and to mourn her loss.

[We hear sounds of TRAFFIC in NYC and a CROWD of folks gathered in front of the hospital.]

CROWD MEMBER #2
Wait for uncle. 1, 2, 3!

[People cheer.]

Yay!

NICK
Three-year-old Avyanna releases the purple balloons, which are quickly carried high into the sky by the winter winds. Avyanna is Denise’s daughter and, even at three years old, she is aware enough to miss her mama. She will carry memories of Denise that her new baby sister Adalee won’t be able to.

SHAWNEE BENTON GIBSON [on a megaphone]
Y’all cold?

CROWD
Yes!

SHAWNEE BENTON GIBSON
Alright, I’m just checking in. It takes something to stand out here in the middle of a winter day and rally for justice. It takes something. When I think of our ancestors, all of our ancestors, whether they identify as Black or Brown, or identify as white… [fades off]
[Sounds from an electric keyboard enter. A newsy musical phrase glides back and forth across 4 notes. It’s the THEME MUSIC for Color Code.]

NICK
This is Color Code, a podcast from STAT. I’m Nicholas St. Fleur, a science & health reporter here. And over 8 episodes, I’m taking a look at the hidden and not-so-hidden forces behind our country’s stark racial health inequities. This is Episode 4, where we’re discussing America’s Black maternal mortality crisis.

BELINDA STALEY
Okay, so Denise: Honestly, I think what I can say about my sister is she is and was a loving, caring person. She was smart…

NICK
That’s Belinda, Denise’s sister.

BELINDA STALEY [cont.]
She was intelligent. She loved music. She loved dancing. She loved drawing. She was the life of the party. You know, you can walk in a room with her crazy laugh: She will light up the whole room. Niecy was the type of person — If you went to her and asked her for something, it wouldn’t be a question. She would just automatically do it. And I think if you guys had the opportunity to meet Denise, I think what would stick with you will be her laugh and the fact that she loves people.

NICK
After Denise’s death, Belinda is helping raise Avyanna and 9-month-old Adalee.

BELINDA STALEY
Oh Lord, her kids: I can just say they are just angels from every aspect of the world. Looking at them, Avyanna is her twin. And when I say her twin, it's down from her smell, literally to the hairstyles I put in her hair, you know, the face expressions. There's not a day that doesn't go past that I don't see her mother, their mother inside of them. Now Adalee, although she only had a couple of short weeks for her mother, she’s a splitting image of her mother. My sister loved music. My sister loved to sing. And one thing about Adalee, for her to be seven months right now, going on eight next Friday: That baby – she holds a tune. So if I sing a song, she’s right with me, just trying to hum at literally six or seven months, and I find that to be funny because… [fades off]

[Tense MUSIC with stringed instruments enters.]

NICK
It’s been an emotional, restless and frustrating time for Belinda, as she takes over the care of her nieces and grieves her sister – who she lovingly calls Niecy. When she tried to speak at the rally in January, it was an incredibly difficult experience.
BELINDA STALEY [to the crowd in front of the hospital]
I just want to thank everyone for coming out.

[A long pause.]

I woke up crying because today’s my sister’s 30th birthday, and I have her two babies to raise. Let me shake it off. I just want my sister to know we have her back. We’re going to continue to have her back: Myself, my family, and my husband is going to continue to help raising these two babies.

NICK
We talked again a couple weeks afterwards over Zoom.

BELINDA STALEY
Leading up to the months, Niecy – Denise was my sister, but – give me a second; I'm sorry.

NICK
Belinda noticed Denise showing symptoms of depression while she was pregnant this time around. Denise would tell her family about how she was feeling mentally and emotionally. And after she gave birth to Adalee in July, that depression appeared to become much worse.

BELINDA STALEY
Leading up to the months of my sister's death, I would say, you know, she surrounded herself by family, you know, out the blue: She would just call us and be like, “Oh, let's go out to eat. Let's talk.”

She would ask us, “Was she a great mom?” Like, you know, I felt like she was second-guessing herself, and it's like: Wait a minute. Why would you be second-guessing yourself when you do everything with your kid, you know? So leading up to the month, maybe, you know, I think she knew she was going through it, but we were there to support her, not realizing the impact of, you know, that it was this severe.

NICK
By late August, Denise’s depression had worsened.

BELINDA STALEY
The day that my sister went to the hospital, I’ll say she was just having a little episode, and we just wanted to make sure that she was okay. So we sent her to the hospital; we called the ambulance; the ambulance came. We wanted her to go to the hospital of her choice, which was considered LIJ. Obviously, you know, with the ambulance – they didn’t want to take her there, so they took her to Queens Hospital for evaluation. So she was there, I'll say, for a day.

[A sobering VIOLIN enters.]
And the hospital called basically saying, “Oh, so we want to release her the next day.” Apparently, they called us to say, “Everything looks good. We're going to release her the next day.”

So my mom is like, “No, I would like you to keep her overnight just to make sure everything's okay.” We get a phone call the next day.

**NICK**
Denise and Belinda’s mother missed a call from the hospital early that morning. They tried to call back, but they couldn’t get a hold of anyone. When the phone rang again around noon, several hours later, it wasn’t a nurse or one of her doctors who called. It was the medical examiner. To their shock, he was calling to tell them that they were preparing to do an autopsy.

**BELINDA STALEY**
At the time, my mom is thinking they said “biopsy.”

She was like, “Biopsy? Okay, I'll be there tomorrow.”

And he was like, “No, autopsy.”

That's when my mom screamed, dropped the phone, and like: “A autopsy? How can it be? You guys just called me, telling me that my daughter was going to be released the day before.”

**NICK**
Belinda and her mom rushed to the hospital. Once there, they demanded answers about Denise’s death from anyone and everyone that they could. But no one was providing them with any information. Belinda said they felt as if they were being misdirected by the staff. And this evasion – it compounded the pain and the confusion that they were dealing with, surrounding Denise’s death.

**BELINDA STALEY**
There was nothing. It was beating around the bush. No direct answers. It was like there was nothing that they said to me, my mom, my aunts to reassure us, you know, that my sister died in peace.

**NICK**
Denise’s family did eventually learn an official cause of death, but that didn’t provide closure.

**BELINDA STALEY**
Well, concrete is what they so-called-said is she passed from a pulmonary embolism. Before that, they tried to say it was natural causes, and then they changed it to that.
A quick note that we did reach out to Queens Hospital Center about Denise’s case, but did not receive a response.

Denise’s story and her family’s story in the wake of her death – it’s just heartbreaking. It was first reported on extensively by local New York news outlet The City, in collaboration with The Fuller Project, about a month after her death.

Unfortunately, this kind of story is not as rare as it should be. Black birthing people are 3 to 4 times more likely to die during or after childbirth in the United States compared with their white peers. It’s an epidemic that survivors, mourners, activists, policymakers — really, just so many people — have been working to address.

The United States is the only industrialized nation that has a rising maternal mortality rate and has for several years now. But what we see when we pull back the layers and look at things by race is that what’s contributing to that rise in maternal mortality rate in the United States is the fact that Black birthing people are at three to four times greater risk of experiencing maternal mortality.

That’s Rachel Hardeman.

I am a mother to an eight-year-old daughter. I’m a wife. I’m a scholar. I serve as an associate professor and the Blue Cross-endowed professor of health and racial equity at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health.

I knew I wanted to talk to Rachel about this. We’ve spoken together on panels about this issue, and I’ve always found it insightful how she leverages data and statistics to tell the human side of this tragedy.

So there’s a couple of different definitions of maternal mortality. The W.H.O., the World Health Organization, defines it as death during pregnancy or within 42 days after giving birth. But really, we, as public health folks, tend to look at the entire year postpartum because it’s important to understand, and these things can happen quite a ways out from that initial pregnancy and childbirth.

It takes nine months to grow an infant [laughs] and give birth, right? So how do we expect someone to recover from that in only six weeks?
NICK
The disparities seen between Black birthing people and other races have deep roots.

RACHEL HARDEMAN
We have to really understand the history of our country. 400+ years ago, really starting in 1619 with the formation of chattel slavery in the United States and the enslavement of Black people and Black birthing people, in particular, because that's set our country on a history and on a pathway and set up a legacy of racism in our country.

That's a really huge concept for people to wrap their head around — that something that happened 400 years ago is contributing to current data around inequities. But the reason that is, is because racism shows up in so many different ways over time.

So the weathering hypothesis is a really important part of understanding this. And what that means is that throughout the lives of Black folks, and particularly Black working people, when you have this cumulative disadvantage due to structural inequity across the life course – so as even, you know, we're talking from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood – that cumulative disadvantage sort of has this wearing and tearing on the body, so that by the time a Black birthing person becomes pregnant, their body is already sort of disadvantaged in ways that make them at greater risk for these adverse outcomes, like maternal mortality and morbidity.

NICK [interviewing]
What do you find through these several conversations is the most impactful thing that you say, or that, you know, someone else in this community says to people who have no idea about this crisis, that really shakes them into action or shakes them into caring? How do you get people to care?

RACHEL HARDEMAN
I often talk about the fact that it's racism, not race, that is the risk factor for Black maternal health outcomes. And what I mean by that is we often will talk about what Black women or Black birthing people are X, Y and Z, right – are at greater risk. And we're not talking about the process behind what's happening. And so I think it's important for people to understand that it's not that Black people aren't going to their prenatal care appointments; it's not that Black people are at greater risk or are more likely to use tobacco or other substances during pregnancy. Because once we strip all of that away and look at and look at the numbers, we still see that Black birthing people are at greater risk, and therefore it's not about Black race.

NICK
The disparities around maternal mortality are clear and well-documented. I've now interviewed many people, for this podcast and for other stories I've written, who have lost loved ones in childbirth. And so, like many other survivors and activists, when there's a clear, shared sense of injustice, people come together to fight it.
CHARLENE MAGEE
When that plane hit that ground, they had their signs. I said, “Meet me at the hospital.” And we went to the hospital.

NICK
That’s Charlene Magee, Denise’s aunt. She’s been the lead organizer around the gatherings for Denise and in creating a nonprofit in her name.

CHARLENE MAGEE
We stood in front of that hospital, and I pleaded — my family, not just me – my family pleaded for answers. Plead for help. And I’m going to tell you that the community: Those are the people who have been sharing this story, who have been inquiring about what happened to Denise. My family have met so many wonderful families who have gone through the same exact thing as Denise.

NICK
After Denise’s death, her family was desperate to understand how a young, healthy person could die so suddenly. And to their surprise, a community of families, who have also lost loved ones to this same tragedy, sprang into action. It’s about half a dozen people, who attend every protest, and every demonstration, so that they can raise awareness around any type of action that might help the family.

CHARLENE MAGEE [in front of the crowd]
If I didn’t love you all before, I love y’all deep – like, for real deep. We are family, and we’re so connected. Shawnee – my God! – I always call you Doctor Shawnee, right? That’s literally in my phone. [laughs]

NICK
At the January protest in front of Queens Hospital, members of this makeshift family spoke out.

CHARLENE MAGEE
When you are chosen, when God chooses you, without your permission: Without your permission, we are all chosen. The pain is unbearable. But when God chooses you, he gives us the strength to carry on and to move forward.

I just want to say just thank you to everybody. It is a beautiful thing that we don’t have to be on this journey by ourselves. What I’m going to do right now is, I’m going to introduce – I’m going to introduce the board members… [fades off]

MEEMA SPADOLA
We know that Shamony Gibson should be here. We know that Amber Rose Isaac should be here. We know that Kira Johnson should be here. So over and over and over, we have to say their names. Let’s say their names together.
Denise Williams. Amber Rose Isaac. Shamony Gibson. Kira Johnson. The list goes on and on. We can do better. We must do better… [fades off]

[Somber MUSIC underpins what NICK says next.]

**NICK**
Omari Maynard was preparing for the joyful arrival of a new child, and instead found himself thrown into the terror and grief of profound loss. He now raises his two-year-old son without his partner Shamony.

**OMARI MAYNARD**
Being in a position when you lose your partner, somebody you wake up every day when you go to sleep, you know, you go to bed with every night and not having that… It's life-changing, right? So again, like I said, I go through bouts of emotion on a daily basis, right?

**NICK**
He shows up for Denise Williams’ family because her family and others show up for him.

**OMARI MAYNARD**
How we got in contact with Denise Williams’ family is through Bruce McIntyre. So Bruce lost his partner Amber Isaac Rose 2020, probably about maybe six to eight months after my partner Shamony Gibson passed, and we, you know, cultivated a relationship together. Basically, we fellowship. We do things together.

I say all of that because there's a big need, right, especially with anything, but specifically with maternal health, is that we commune, right, and we support each other because, you know, these experiences are just so devastating. You need support, and you need other people, who you may not even know support you because of the fact that you guys all kind of have this shared experience, and it's something that is super powerful to come together. So when I found out – when he told me that he was doing this rally for Denise, he's been doing a couple of rallies with them, you know, of course, he was like, “Anything you need, I'll be there.”

**NICK**
This has become their new calling: Showing up for their family, the ones who share their pain.

**OMARI MAYNARD**
You know, to show our solidarity and support, and that this is a real thing. We're not going to be standing next to you for, you know, a five-minute photo op. This is a very real issue for us, and understanding that families need to come together to again cultivate and create this new community is paramount. It's paramount.
Omari is on this journey with Shawnee Gibson, his partner’s mother.

It’s just part of the work that we respond when folks experience this type of loss, and we step up and cover them because we were blessed to be covered in that way, when we experienced our loss and still are covered in that way. So when Bruce asks for us to show up somewhere, and vice versa, when we ask him to show up somewhere, we do that. There’s strength in numbers. And because of the nature of the work, it can be very exhausting, standing alone.

I actually feel that if there is inconsistency, if we don’t consistently show up, then folks go back to their regularly scheduled programming. That’s the hospital staff. That’s our community. And this may sound controversial, but even the folks who've experienced the loss, it's like: We're so used to, as Black and Brown folks, taking sucker punches, like being mistreated. Sometimes, we even miss it when it's happening because it's just such the norm, like the microaggressions that we experience day to day. I forget who the author is, who talked about the thousands of tiny little cuts that have us hemorrhaging, right?

And so if we don’t consistently show up in the cold, in the rain, in the heat, then they’ll forget. We’ll forget, and this will continue.

So there’s certain key, kind of, components to this, right? So this is not the first hospital that we’ve had to stand in front of, you know. And I say that to say: It’s an epidemic, right? This is a systematic failure.

This is about maybe the fourth or fifth hospital that I've had to stand in front of and protest and rally and, you know, advocate, and, you know, just be supportive from. So it’s not something that’s happening, you know, in pockets or, you know – this is something that's happening across the spectrum.

The whole system has failed my niece. And they are continuing to fail women of color. We say something is wrong with us. It’s ignored. No one is listening. And we are dying.

My life, my family's life, Denise – most importantly, Denise’s children’s lives have changed.

I have become an advocate. I’m taking classes right now, and as we speak, I have a 3:00 class. I’m going to be a doula. My life has completely, completely changed. I, as Denise’s aunt, as Avyanna’s auntie and Adalee’s auntie: This is a lifelong commitment for me. I’m going to utilize my resources, my time, to fight for my two baby nieces, who lost their mother.
[MUSIC with stringed instruments marches into earshot.]

NICK
The family is trying to move forward while keeping Denise in their hearts.

BELINDA
And my sister would always buy them things, but I don’t know. My sister bought her this one particular teddy bear, and it sings this song, and I'll try not to cry.

“Wherever you are, wherever you be, I will be right there for you.”

So my niece knows. Sorry… Anytime my niece says, you know, “I miss mommy” because I talk about my sister all the time. I show her pictures. You know, I don't want her to forget who her mother is, but she has this teddy bear that she bought her. And when you press the hands, it sings. So any time she thinks of her mother, she'll be like, “Auntie, I miss mommy.” She grabs a teddy bear. She hugs it. She's like, “Auntie, hug it with me.” And we just start singing the song together, so…

Honestly, that's what helps my niece get through it. She understands that Mommy is gone. But being three years old, it's kind of hard to understand that she's not coming back. But with that safety blanket, which is her teddy bear that sings, it's a saving grace for her because it melts her heart and makes her feel good knowing that Mommy is here in spirit, although she's not here in sight. I'm sorry… [crying] But it hasn't been easy. It hasn't been easy. You know, I can't replace my sister, but I can be the best aunt that I can be to these two beautiful babies.

NICK
If there’s one thing that does give me hope in the face of this crisis in our country, it’s that finally, Black maternal mortality is getting the recognition it deserves at the highest levels of government through something known as the “Momnibus Act.” It's a series of about a dozen or so bills, aimed at eliminating these disparities we see that Black women and Black birthing people face. And it's being championed by people like V.P. Kamala Harris and Rep. Lauren Underwood and Rep. Alma Adams and Rep. Ayanna Pressley and Sen. Cory Booker.

I've been reporting a bit on this Momnibus Act and watching representatives come together to protect Black women, to protect Black birthing people. It's heartening. It's impressive to see, and just earlier, in April, we had Black Maternal Health Week, where we had warriors, if you will, for Black maternal health, come together, whether they be politicians, or midwives, or researchers, or physicians, and share what they’ve learned about this crisis, but also share more about what can be done.

The champions are there. The lives of Black women and the lives of Black birthing people matter.
Thank you for listening and being part of our Color Code community.

Our team here at STAT is Alissa Ambrose, Hyacinth Empinado, Theresa Gaffney, Crystal Milner, and me, Nick St. Fleur. Kevin Seaman is our engineer, and Tino Delamerced is our intern. Our theme music is by Bryan Joel.

Special thanks to Charlene Magee, Belinda Staley, and the entire family of Denise Williams. And thanks to Dr. Rachel Hardeman, Omari Maynard, Shawnee Benton Gibson.

Thanks to the Commonwealth Fund for supporting this podcast.

After every episode, we'll have a bunch of photos and some more reading related to the episode’s topic at STATnews.com, so please: go check it out! We'll have a new episode in two weeks.

If you like the podcast, please leave a review, and subscribe! And if you have any thoughts for us, you can reach us at ColorCode@statnews.com.

[THEME MUSIC ends on a final note.]