Vertus Hardiman and the medical tragedies we must not forget

Transcript Key:

Speakers:

- **NICHOLAS ST. FLEUR (“NICK”)** is the host of Color Code and a science reporter for STAT, where he often covers the intersection of race and medicine.
- **WILBERT SMITH** is the creator of the documentary “Hole in the Head: A Life Revealed,” as well as a book with the same title about his long-time friend Vertus Hardiman.
- **VERTUS HARDIMAN** was a neighbor and friend to Wilbert Smith and many others in their Pasadena, California community. He died in 2007 after suffering most of his life from complications due to radiation he received as a young boy in Lyles Station, Indiana. This is his story. We hear from Vertus in clips from Smith’s documentary, labeled **CLIP - ‘HOLE IN THE HEAD’ - VERTUS HARDIMAN**.
- **LINDA VILLAROSA** is a journalist and contributing writer to The New York Times Magazine. She recently wrote a book titled, “Under the Skin: The Hidden Toll of Racism on American Lives and on the Health of Our Nation.”

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.

Transcript:

**CLIP - ‘HOLE IN THE HEAD’ - VERTUS HARDIMAN**
I remember like it was yesterday. They had a little round beanie, they put on our heads, and the one that I had it was white and purple stripes around it. And they had little wires and they put it on my head. And then two girls stood behind a lead screen, and they said, don't move. And they pushed a button and seemed like I saw some flashes. And then that was all. And then I remember her taking the cap off and she told the other nurse, Oh my God, I've given him too much. I remember that as if it was yesterday. I will never forget that.

**NICK**
It was 1927 and Vertus Hardiman was just 5 years old when he and nine other young Black children from Lyles Station, Indiana, were brought to the basement of the Gibson County Sanitarium in the nearby town of Princeton to receive a special treatment for ringworm. What they and their parents did not know was that the so-called treatment was actually radiation — which was widely popular but poorly understood at the time. This trip to the hospital forever altered Vertus’ life. The radiation exposure disfigured his scalp, and later dissolved his skull. He hid the damage under a wig and a hat for more than 70 years.
Near the end of his life, Vertus confided in a friend from church, Wilbert Smith, who worked with him to make the documentary film “Hole in the Head: A Life Revealed,” as well as a book with the same title.

[Sounds from an electric keyboard enter. A newsy musical phrase glides back and forth across four 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 in over eight episodes, I’m taking a look at the hidden and not-so-hidden forces behind our country’s stark racial health inequities. This week is our 8th and final episode for season one: The Story of Vertus Hardiman.

I first stumbled upon the story of Vertus Hardiman last year while doing research into Jonathan Jackson, who you might remember from our previous episode on clinical trials. I came across a presentation that Dr. Jackson had given that touched upon the shameful history of clinical research in America. It featured a photograph that horrified me - a graphic image of an elderly Black man with a massive, disfiguring wound that consumed the top half of his head.

The picture was shocking and I immediately wanted to know more. After reading about Smith’s documentary I wondered why this glaring example of medical exploitation was not widely known, when it seemed to be as egregious as the more infamous stories of Henrietta Lacks and the Tuskegee syphilis trials.

My colleagues at Color Code and I reached out to Wilbert Smith, to speak with him about Vertus.

WILBERT SMITH
We both sang in the church choir, and uh Vertus was a little 5.5, five foot, eight inch individual who stood to my left. I stood about six foot two. And we became very, very close friends. And he always wore this little strange wig. And of course, I could not only look down on him, but I could look down upon the top of his head, meaning I became very interested in him. And his uniqueness says used to say things like, Doesn't he know that this is a wig? Maybe I should take it upon myself to give him some advice on styling because it was an Elvis Presley kind of shape wig. Kind of tall on the top and. Short on the sides and had no gray hair in it, even though Vertus was well into his seventies and eighties by then. So after 20 years of friendship, I finally got to know Vertus.

NICK
Wilbert said Vertus was a well-loved landlord in their Pasadena, California community who was known to rent to folks who had trouble finding housing elsewhere. In addition to singing in the choir with Vertus, Wilbert was also his Allstate insurance agent for many years.
WILBERT
Cause Vertus was kind of like the community's grandfather. Everybody loved him.

NICK
Wilbert had no idea what Vertus had been through as a child. He had no idea why Vertus’s head was always covered, first with a wig and then a beanie. Until one sweltering hot day when Vertus came into his office.

WILBERT
He came in, perspiration flowing, sat down in front of my desk and started crying. And he said, You've always wondered why I have worn this wig, and now you see me wearing this beanie all the time. And then he says, I’m going to show you. He took this hat off. He took this beanie off and showed me the most amazing wound that I had ever witnessed from anyone in my life — given whether it be cinema or be in real life.

NICK
Vertus told Wilbert he was tired. Tired of wearing a wig. Tired of wearing a hat. Tired of hiding who he was from the world. He took a deep breath and through his tears he shared with Wilbert the story of how he was experimented on at just 5 years old.

Vertus remembers it starting is that there had been an outbreak of scalp ringworm at the local school. Vertus was too young to go to school himself, but he caught it from his older brother, Melvin. Lyles Station was a Black community founded by freed slaves and made up of mostly poor sharecroppers, many of whom were also family members and relatives to Vertus.

According to Wilbert, who interviewed several people from the town who were alive at the time, a school district trustee happened to be related to the head physician at the county medical center hospital.

WILBERT
So the superintendent takes it upon himself to go and visit the homes of each and every one of these students who were eighth grade or younger and told them that they had a new, innovative, creative approach to treating scalpal ringworm and they needed to have the parents sign the permission slip and everything else would be wonderful.

NICK
The 10 children – nine of which were Hardimans – were brought by bus to the hospital which was in a neighboring town. The bus driver was actually Vertus’s Uncle Cliff. When they arrived at the hospital, the head physician led the children to the basement. He told Uncle Cliff to stay with the bus.

CLIP - ‘HOLE IN THE HEAD’ - VERTUS
We were in the basement of the General Hospital at Princeton, Indiana, the basement because Blacks weren’t allowed above the first floor.
CLIP - ‘HOLE IN THE HEAD’ - WILBERT
Go ahead and explain where we are Vertus. I can hear you on the tape. It’s on the tape.

CLIP - ‘HOLE IN THE HEAD’ - VERTUS
We’re at the hospital in princeton indiana, and here’s where I had my uh x-ray treatments for ringworm, which took all my hair out in this very building in the basement. I’ll never forget it. Never

NICK
The children were lined up one by one in the hallway. There was loud music playing, which stifled the sounds of what was happening in the room. Each child received more radiation than the one before, according to Wilbert. And Vertus was last in line, behind his brother Melvin.

WILBERT
Melvin, after he's done, he's in such pain. He is burning at the scalp as all the kids are. The doctor is there trying to settle them all down. But Vertus, they gave him way too much. Vertus screamed to the top of his lungs. Melvin heard it in the next room, even with the music turned up as loud as they could turn it on the radio.

NICK
Wilbert says that Melvin ran to Uncle Clift and told him to go get Vertus, that he was being hurt. Uncle Clift found Vertus, grabbed him and the other kids and brought them back to the bus.

WILBERT
As the bus started moving, the kids are vomiting all over the bus. They're defecating all over themselves. They are urinating all over themselves. It is an absolute chaotic mess inside the bus.

CLIP - ‘HOLE IN THE HEAD’ - VERTUS
I think it was racial when this happened. Because why the black school? The white kids had some too. They experimented on the black children first and if it didn't work, you know, so be it.

NICK
Following the radiation, all of the children lost their hair and were left with discoloration on their scalps. To cover their heads some wore flat cap hats, like the ones you see on old-timey newspaper boys.

Vertus bought his first wig when he was 14 years old. The psychological scar from the radiation cut as deep as the physical wounds on his head. It interfered with nearly every aspect of his life. Including his relationship with the woman he loved.

WILBERT
Marguerite was his first and only love. You know why he left Marguerite? Because he felt that if Marguerite ever saw his head that she was going to turn away from him and call him a monster.
And he had nightmares about that for years and years and years and turned around and left her before it actually happened. And never knowing until later that he had made a mistake because that was his one true love. And he said, you know what? There was never another Marguerite. He never loved or was loved, he felt, by anyone.

**NICK**
Throughout his entire life, Vertus only told a handful of people about this experience. He lived and died with it as a secret.

**WILBERT**
When Vertus came to my office I, well, felt so bad. I remember driving home, pulling into my driveway and just sobbing like a baby. And something said to me, Stop it. Figure out a way to make it right. And I said, this is a story that I'm going to spend a lot of my years trying to get people to simply get in front of it. And so I asked his permission. I waited patiently for it, and he eventually said to me, Well, if we do it, we've got to do it right.

**NICK**
After Vertus agreed to let Wilbert tell the story, his condition continued to worsen. Wilbert learned about just how much pain his friend was in.

**WILBERT**
He says, My head feels like the way it feels if you put your hand on a hot stove. And that's the feeling I have 24 hours a day. He said to me, If the pillow touches my head the wrong way, it hurts. So I lay on the floor some time to get the ultimate flatness where nothing will touch me. Again. All I could do was cry internally because I didn't want him to see me as some guy constantly in tears. And yet I expect him to be strong. I washed his wound for him twice a day. If I didn't flies would congregate on top of his beanie because of the smell of the rotten flesh that attracts them.

**NICK**
The wound was cancerous. As the cancer spread Wilbert became his care-taker while they were filming, wrapping and washing his wound regularly. Wilbert took care of Vertus until he died in 2007 at the age of 85.

A few years later, Wilbert released the “Hole in the Head” documentary about Vertus’ life. It’s been over a decade, but the story hasn’t rippled through the culture like other stories, such as that of Henrietta Lacks or the victims of the Tuskegee syphilis study. Vertus’s story may not be as famous as other examples of medical experimentation, but it was tragic — a fact underlined by Wilbert’s film.

My team and I watched the documentary in the STAT office. The film documents the last, brutal progression of Vertus’ cancer. You can literally see the wound getting bigger and deeper as the cancer ate away at his head. It’s hard to comprehend just how exposed Vertus’s actual brain
was. It makes you want to look away but demands that you hold your gaze and see it for what it was — that you see Vertus for all that he was and all that he went through.

WILBERT
Vertus said to me: I have been hiding who I am all my life. Starting at age 14, I have been concerned about being seen and if someone were to see me they would say, Oh, could you imagine living like that? Could you imagine always living under this cloak of incredible secrecy? He says, you make sure you don't turn that camera off. You make sure you show everything. This is my coming out party. Don't hide me.

NICK
More than 15 years after their initial conversation Wilbert is still working on sharing Vertus' story. He completed a screenplay for a feature-length film adaptation of Vertus's life and hopes to start shooting later this year. He's also created a curriculum for children, with lessons that can be learned after hearing Vertus's story.

WILBERT
So these are the kind of dreams that we have for the story. I kind of love the word 'we' because I think Vertus is a part of this. And I'll tell you one thing he said to me. He said, 'Oh, Wilbert, nobody's going to be interested in my story.' That's my motivation. Those very words, because I'm actually committed to doing everything in my power to show him that he was wrong.

NICK
Wilbert is focused on spreading the word, but to my surprise, the end goal after spreading the word is a little different than what I expected. Wilbert isn't thinking too much about justice or about potential lawsuits. That sort of thing is always on my mind when I hear about stories about medical exploitation. But Wilbert is taking his cue from Vertus himself, putting forgiveness above justice.

WILBERT
Nick, hear what I'm saying very closely, because I was like you. I said, just somebody needs to, duh duh duh. But Vertus was the one that helped me put it in the proper perspective. I asked him more than once. You'll hear it in the documentary. Are you angry? No. Quickly. He didn't say no. No. It was his response.

CLIP - ‘HOLE IN THE HEAD’ - WILBERT
Are you angry?

CLIP - ‘HOLE IN THE HEAD’ - VERTUS
No. No. The reason I'm not angry, because if I was angry, I know my prayers would not be answered.

WILBERT
When I heard him say things like that, which was so profound. It changes your life. To this day — I'll be 72 on my birthday — I think twice before I get angry. I first think of Vertus.

NICK
Honestly, I don't know man. I completely respect how Vertus and Wilbert have processed all this, but I'm not sure I feel the same. And especially after watching the pain he went through, I really wrestle with the idea of forgiveness, and of justice. What is owed to Vertus and everyone like him who suffered deeply because they were taken advantage of by the medical establishment?

After I talked to Wilbert, I connected with Linda Villarosa, a journalist and contributing writer to The New York Times Magazine who, like me, covers the intersection of race and health. In February, I watched her moderate a panel with Wilbert and some medical professionals where they talked about Vertus' story and how medicine has exploited Black bodies.

LINDA VILLAROSA
This country has done a disservice to so many people and Vertus is so forgiving and such a kind person. I just had such deep compassion for a person who seemed so innocent, so kind and trusting. And I think that's what happens to a lot of us in this country. We get blindsided by the cruelty because it feels unexpected, even though we know it's happened, even if we know the history, even if other people have told tales of it, each time feels painful and you feel blindsided by that kind of cruelty.

NICK
Linda recently released a book called "Under the Skin" about racism in the health care system. In it, she writes about two sisters named Minnie Lee and Mary Alice Relf who were taken from their home in Montgomery, Alabama and sterilized without their consent back in the 70s. They were just 12 and 14 at the time.

The parallels between the Relf sisters and Vertus struck me — particularly how their parents were misled by the white medical professionals they trusted. Vertus' parents clearly did not fully understand what sort of treatment they were signing their sons up for. The Reifs' mother, who could not read or write, unknowingly signed an X on a surgical consent form, thinking that her daughters were getting birth control shots.

LINDA
If you don't understand what you're signing up for, that's completely unfair. And it's obviously unfair if you are signing with an X. The other thing — a bigger question is — why are you sterilizing people? Why are you sterilizing people? They didn't ask to be sterilized. Vertus Hardiman did not ask to have radiation treatments. The Tuskegee experiment, people thought they were doing something good, getting help, and they weren't. And so that's the question, is: why are Black people so expendable?

NICK
And yet, despite being treated so callously by the medical establishment and suffering grave injuries that followed them throughout their lives, both Vertus and the Relfs said that they have found forgiveness.

But what is really owed to them?

LINDA
I think that because of our deep spirituality as a people, we are taught forgiveness. You know, our religion, those of us who are Christian and other religions teaches us forgiveness. I think forgiveness is good. But first, I want to see the apology and then I want to see reparations. I want to see money. And it's very interesting because if you read discussions or listen to discussions about, oh, we don't know how to do reparations for people in, you know, black people in America, we're not sure how it would work. Well, this is how it could work.... Vertus Hardiman, people like the Relf Sisters, deserve something. They deserve it because they've been harmed. In my story about the Relf sisters, we looked at three states where women and other people who are sterilized have gotten money. In one state, they got $25,000. So the states are North Carolina, Virginia and California. California reparations program is still going on for people who were sterilized without consent or against their will. This is how you can pay people back is by. Money isn't everything, but money is something.

NICK NARR
Something I think about these days, is: how many more stories like these are out there? One of the reasons I wanted to talk about Vertus' story on this podcast was that not enough people know about him and what happened to those children at Lyles Station. If it wasn't for Wilbert, their stories could have been lost.

Linda stresses that it's important to keep these stories alive and connect them to the present. To do that, we need to keep retelling them.

LINDA
I just think that we have to pay attention to history and even near history. And sometimes we think of history as so far long ago. But history is 1973. History is the 1980s. History is yesterday. And so if we keep ignoring or sort of downplaying the health inequality and racial health disparities, then we're not getting the whole picture and we're not also having a complete solution. So if the the way we're framing the problem was wrong, then the solution will invariably be wrong. And so part of it has to be not about blaming people for their circumstances and not about ignoring people who have been harmed, but actually uplifting the stories, looking through, looking at, you know, our institutions and our structures that are hurting people and trying to change them.

NICK
It's kind of a cliche metaphor at this point, but I think the health care system in America is the biggest example of this notion that racism is like water to fish. You know this metaphor – you
ask a fish, how’s the water? And they’re like, water – what’s water? It’s all around us, permeating every aspect of our life.

But obviously we all know what the water is. We get it. But there are so many stories that we don’t know, and so many different parts of the problem to focus on. Learning about Vertus’s history sort of brings me all the way back to our first episode of Color Code, on medical mistrust. The question isn’t how do we get Black folk to trust the medical system after these horrible things have happened. It’s how do we make a medical system that doesn’t do horrible things? One that deserves trust. And one that recognizes its past misdeeds and chooses, actively, collectively, wholeheartedly to address them. To rectify them. To not forget them. And to ensure that they never happen again.

That might mean constructing medical school curriculums that are rooted in antiracism; or pouring energy, empathy and resources into combating the Black maternal mortality crisis; or making sure that the algorithms that run our health care system are free of bias; or ensuring that anyone who wants to be part of a clinical trial has access and that those trials reflect the diversity of the patients that they impact.

All of these issues that we’ve touched upon across this season highlight steps our medical system can take towards achieving health equity. And yet, when you see a medical misdeed as visceral as what happened to Vertus Hardiman, you can’t help but asking yourself what is owed? What is owed?

To me, it seems the path to health equity is really a path to forgiveness – and it’s a path that needs to be paved with justice. For me at least what is owed is my attention, my acknowledgement, my ability to do everything I can as a journalist to ensure that these stories are told. And to you as a listener, we must refuse to forget these stories. We must keep them front of mind as we push forward to rectify the devastating toll that racism has had on our health care.

[Full, uplifting music, complete with a keyboard, percussion, and more, rises. THEME MUSIC closes the episode and takes us to the credits.]

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 and Katherine Gilyard are our interns. Our theme music is by Bryan Joel.

Special thanks to Wilbert Smith and Linda Villarosa. This episode is dedicated to the memory and legacy of Vertus Hardiman.

Thanks to the Commonwealth Fund for supporting this podcast.
After every episode, we have photos and some more reading related to the episode’s topic at STATnews.com. This week, there are some photos of Vertus on our site – they do include some where you can see his wound, so please take care of yourself if you are going to look at them.

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.

That's it for our first season – we really appreciate you listening.

[THEME MUSIC ends on a final note.]