

## LAURYN HIGGINS AUDIO SCRIPT

I was reporting on COVID for the New York Times during those early months of the pandemic, when every day brought a new wave of fear. And every headline carried enormous weight at that point. COVID deaths, at least the public ones, were still relatively rare. Most of us were bracing for what might come, but we really hadn't seen the full scale.

So when reports started coming out on Twitter and Facebook that the president of St. Augustine University had died of COVID, it immediately felt important, not just for the community he served, but for what it might signal more broadly about how serious and how personal this was becoming. There was definitely an undeniable urgency. We really wanted to confirm the story quickly. We knew we had to. This was a prominent figure, a respected leader at a historically black college. And the news would spread fast.

Other outlets would be calling as well, refreshing Twitter feeds, chasing a few words of confirmation. But even in that moment of high stakes reporting, we stopped to think carefully about how we approached it. This wasn't just a breaking story; it was someone's worst day.

We talked it through as a team. We agreed that we wouldn't move forward until we had a verbal confirmation, ideally from the college, but more importantly, from someone close to him, like his wife. And if we were going to reach out to a family member, it had to be done with intention and with compassion. So we decided to write a short script before getting on the phone. It wasn't much, just a few words, but it was our way of grounding the conversation in humanity. So when I called his wife, I introduced who I was and really spoke very quietly and just explained why I was calling.

I told her how deeply sorry that we were and how we understood that this must be an impossible moment. And then I asked her if she could confirm that her husband and the president had died of COVID. And we didn't stop there, though. We really didn't just want a fact. We asked if they wanted to share a few words about who he was, what kind of leader, what kind of spouse, what kind of person he was, and we really wanted to offer them a voice in the story and not just treat this as a quote or a verbal confirmation.

That moment has really stayed with me, not just because we were the first to report it, or even because it was widely read. It stayed with me because of how fragile it felt, how sacred that line is between urgency and empathy, especially in this field and in the middle of a global health crisis. When so much felt out of our control, we had one thing we could really hold onto: the way we chose to treat people in their most vulnerable moments. And that mattered.