

# Podcast episode transcript: Travis Bias and Allison Massari

**Travis Bias:** Welcome. I'm your host, Travis Bias, chief medical officer of the clinician solutions business, housed within 3M's Health Information Systems Division. Today I have with me Allison Massari. Allison is a devoted advocate for both patient and provider, a leading educator for the power of compassionate care, and a passionate voice for preventing and alleviating burnout in health care professionals. Her rare history makes her uniquely qualified to speak to health care teams. As the daughter of parents who were both clinicians, her father, an otolaryngologist, whose primary focus was on oncologic cases, and her mother, a nurse who worked in the emergency department operating room, an even newborn nursery across her career, Allison grew up immersed in the health care field. Then at age 32, her life was turned upside down by a tragic event that caused her to spend collectively over 400 days in physical therapy centers, hospitals, and doctors' offices as a patient.

Allison's story is more than just one of survival. It is a story of resilience, courage, and the rigorous pursuit of hope. It is a story of collaboration among teams of medical personnel and how their kindness, determination, and compassion changed her life and built a foundation for healing. As you listen, please keep in mind that Allison is also an award-winning visual artist. In fact, her work is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, Florida. Allison's story is extraordinary, yet even more remarkable is her unshakeable resilience and her commitment to share the beauty and the intricacies of what it takes to overcome adversity and live with heart. Allison, welcome.

**Allison Massari:** Thank you, Travis. I'm so happy to be with you today.

**Travis Bias:** Yeah, I'm very excited for this discussion and excited even more for our participants who are going to be able to hear you speak in person, but we're going to kick off in the podcast format. So first, tell us a bit more about your story with your own words and your journey, and what's brought you to this point in perspective?

**Allison Massari:** Great. Yes. So it was 24 years ago. I was full-time working as an artist, a painter, and a sculptor. And I was visiting back home seeing family, getting ready for a big museum exhibition. So life was exciting. One night I was driving home alone from a movie when suddenly I was stunned by a massive impact and I was hit head on, 60 miles per hour, trapped inside my car, consumed in fire, and nearly burned to death. I had just picked up art supplies, and so there were literally gallons of turpentine exploding in the backseat. Even my scalp came off the top of my head somehow with impact. It was burned, I was burned on 50 percent of my body. It was a complete decimation emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and physically. There's so much more to the story. This is a very encapsulated quick summary of what happened.

And then of course there's the recovery and the hospital, which is mind-bending pain four hours a day, being debrided, and then entering back into society with this new identity where my entire belief system that I had had before was completely ripped out from under me. I spent my whole life trying to be a good person, and I thought, "How could this happen? How could we live in a world where someone could burn alive?" So going to these deep, deep questions was agonizing, yet ended up being one of my greatest gifts. It was a journey that was extraordinary.

**Travis Bias:** Wow. I think most people would hear that story and start to think about our own experiences as individuals. As we move through life, we have varying levels and types of traumas that we go through. And I guess this can shape us for one way or another, right? And I think it really depends on how we go through that trauma. And for you, it was years of trauma following that impact of that one accident, but years of recovery, that in itself is a trauma. And so I mean, how do you talk about and think about navigating during that kind of recovery process and how that's kind of changed you at this point?

**Allison Massari:** Oh gosh. So there are so many different phases of healing. And one thing that I want to say right off the top here is that what people see today when they meet me is after many years of working so hard on myself. And it's really important to say that healing is a sloppy, messy, unattractive process very often. It's ungraceful, and that's okay. We have to give ourselves permission to be a work in progress, give ourselves permission to be human. And I found that I was grumpy for a long time. That's normal. I was in terrible physical pain, but then of course the mental emotional piece took a long time to rectify and get understanding on. But I would say, and here's the thing, in life, you don't have to go through what I went through to learn what I learned. We're all faced with challenges all the time.

And very often though, unless we're pushed, we don't meet these parts of ourselves that surprise us that are so... There are parts of ourselves that are so strong, that are so powerful, capable, wise, that we would never meet these parts of ourselves unless we're taken to that depth. And if you had told me before this happened, being a sensitive artist behind an easel everyday painting, if you had told me that I would go through this, burning alive, taken down completely at every level of my being going into a terrible darkness, that I would come out the other side better than before, more peaceful than before, I would've thought that was insane. I never thought this was possible. And that's one of the reasons I became so passionate about really putting my art career on the side and sharing this message with people what is possible for all of us. That to me is so exciting.

**Travis Bias:** That perspective is definitely one that I think takes time to come to, as you described. I appreciate your openness about being grumpy, and I think that gets to this. Sometimes I think we interact with someone who's maybe ugly to us or it's not a perfect interaction, and really a lot of that has nothing to do with me, but it has a lot to do with what that other person is going through. And I think that... It reminds me of this David Foster Wallace speech that I once read about the fish and water, the young fish that passed the older fish. Have you heard this story? And it's where the young fish passed the older one, and the more senior fish goes, "Hey boys, how's the water?" And the young fish goes, "What's water?" And so I think it's just being aware of your surroundings and being aware of what other people are going through and having an empathy for that. I think the more we grow and age and learn and go through these experiences, I think it gives us a little bit of a deeper empathy for what others are going through.

**Allison Massari:** And you bring up a really good point. By the way, I love that story. I do remember that story. You bring up a good point about when we see these parts of ourselves, our own anger, for instance, by going through difficulty, we witness parts of ourselves we're not proud of. We might feel shame around or very often people do. We feel shame around these things. But this is the beauty that I found is when you truly have that self-awareness and you're willing to let it bring you to a humbleness when you see it all. The gift is that then, when we see our own rage, for instance, our own anger, when we see it in other people, we have so much more compassion and understanding.

It removes judgment. So this is, very often we resist pain. We don't want to feel it of course, that's so

human. But if we look at it as this is here to teach me. And what I found is these emotions are here to teach us, first of all the power of having compassion for ourselves when we witness these parts of ourselves that we're in pain, but then having the humbleness and the reverence and the ability to forgive others. What a gift. It removes a huge layer of life that we can waste on being resentful, being angry, judging other people. What a gift.

**Travis Bias:** Well, to forgive others and to forgive ourselves, right? I think to have that insight and to be open to seeing the trauma or the difficulties that we're going through and having control over our responses to those, I think is what you're getting at. And I love that. And I think one of the other things you said was about this kind of a beauty in the recovery process from a trauma and being able to see that beauty. And I think that's challenging actually. It takes a real growth mindset. And you mentioned humility and I think insight as well.

And I actually spent a little over a year teaching in East Africa. This is seven years ago now. And there were a lot of things that I saw as far as extreme poverty and preventable deaths. And there's a lot of that exposure that when you come home, there's a certain trauma to being around that, even for short periods of time. And for me, a year, which is technically pretty short, but coming back and unpacking that trauma over several years and even now, I kind of look back at the growth and the beauty in that. But that took me a while to get there.

**Allison Massari:** Definitely. It took me 11 years to heal, to get to a place we're talking about. Okay, so people think, I seemed fine after a year or two if people saw me on the street, but there were layers of pain that would keep coming up or layers of anger. Healing is such a homeopathic process. If we felt all of our pain at once, we couldn't handle it. And I think our mind and our body and our spirit knows to give us a little bit at a time until we clear everything out.

**Travis Bias:** Sure. And I think it takes... So insight, self-forgiveness, and then patience maybe to go through that process and being patient with ourselves. Because I think there are a lot of these unrealistic expectations about, I've seen something difficult, I've been working in a difficult situation for years, and I should be fine because everyone else says this or our culture says this. And I think that's very prevalent in the health care space.

**Allison Massari:** Oh my goodness. Such a good point. You're bringing up. First of all, you don't have to be okay all the time. It's okay that you're not okay. And the idea, and I think people in health care have mastered the ability to show up with such extraordinary grit and stamina and excellence in their job. I mean, they have mastered this. Thank goodness for all of us. And what I have found, that is a vital part of resilience. That grit, that inner fortitude, that strength, that is a vital first part.

But resilience, if it starts and stops with that, with grit, we're going to get burned out. And that's where a lot of the misunderstanding is with resilience. People often think that that's it. It's just about strength, and we need that, the survival part, right? I had to have that in many situations in my life, not just when I was burned. You're confronted with a difficult person, maybe you've been betrayed and you've got to figure this out quickly sometimes and get through. But resilience has so much more nuance to it than that. There are so many components to it that take you to the beauty that we're talking about. That take you there.

**Travis Bias:** Yeah. So let's talk more about that with speaking about health workers specifically, because I think a lot of times in our training there is, passed down from generations of physicians, nurses, and

health workers of all types, there is this expectation of setting boundaries between you and the patient. And this expectation that you can compartmentalize those pieces of your work-life from your personal life. Yet, and I talk about this with my lovely partner a lot, we're deep empaths and actually that makes us so good at our job, yet it is so deeply impacting our personal mental wellbeing and our burnout journey, if you will, as health workers. So talk more about this personal resilience piece because health workers, we're quite resilient and in fact, maybe too much so. So talk about that need for strengthening resilience, going beyond grit, as you say, to make sure that we are not ignoring key issues and/or leading on leaning on unhealthy coping strategies maybe.

**Allison Massari:** Okay, fantastic. I did hear recently about some research that was done that the surprising findings were that people who had healthy boundaries were actually the most compassionate. And that doesn't mean putting a wall, a boundary doesn't mean you have a wall up to people, which often people think. That's the compartmentalization, that's the pushing away. A boundary is, once again, has more nuance to it than that. Your heart's still open. You can still be that empath, but you don't need to lean into it a certain way where you're taking on the pain of the person as heavily as we might naturally do at first. It's practice, okay. This is a big conversation, but just knowing that that's possible is hopeful.

**Travis Bias:** I actually love if I can comment on that. Speaking about boundaries, there's a different way to approach boundaries. And I guess, I love the way that you frame that because I have always thought that meant kind of closing off everything as far as my emotional availability for taking care of the patient, getting to the root cause. But what you're saying is there are various forms of boundaries and so we can talk more about that. Or again, I was just talking about just personal resilience in general in health workers, our approach to resilience thinking that it takes just having grit and being tough and strong and powering through the day. But a lot of times that can lead to us maybe sweeping key issues or things that are bothering us under the rug. Or maybe leaning on unhealthy coping strategies because we don't know how or when to reach out for help.

**Allison Massari:** And I've always said, as long as people have the tools, they can figure out resilience. But very often people don't have the tools. This is a huge conversation we haven't been having, and I'm excited to get out there. And I didn't even realize it until recently I started hearing more and more and more people saying, "Well, I'm resilient. I get it." But when I hear what they think resilience is, I'm like, "Oh, no, no, no, there's more. There's more." So it's exciting for people to know there's so much more. And I will jump in quickly with one beautiful piece of resilience that relates to what you're talking about is when you defiantly make the decision to keep your light shining, no matter what is happening to you or in the world around you, you begin to access something so expansive, so surprising, so much more beyond what grit does.

Grit really tightens you, okay. It's exhausting. We need it. It's a component. But then, this is something I feel is like a phenomenon that I've learned, that I've experienced that when you do make that decision, I want to be in command of my life. I want my life to be good. I want to experience life in a beautiful way. Yes, I'm in a difficult situation. Yes, I'm stressed. Yes, the demands are unbelievable and unreasonable sometimes with what we have in life.

But if I can take personal responsibility, despite that, that still being true, to keep my light shining, to be the giver, to be the one who says, "No, I will be the healer in the room no matter what." Not just from the technical aspect, but from your heart staying open. So the empath has an open heart. You don't need to shut down the heart. In fact, that's where you get more energy. And that's why I'm excited to

talk about this. This expansiveness I'm talking about when you defiantly choose to keep your light shining, that's the open heart. That's what gives us energy. It's tapping into something so much more than we thought possible.

**Travis Bias:** I love that differentiation between the grit, which I feel like is quite defensive and the kind of more, I guess proactive and coming from a place of strength and positivity to keep the light shining. And I think back to my residency training, there were moments where I was like, "This is just beating all of the romance out of life for me. All of the things that I," when you say see things kind of beautifully, optimistically, what have you. And then there were moments throughout my career where I felt like my empathy and compassion was just waning. And I mean, if you think about it, at least for a primary care physician, I have 20 interactions a day where people are complaining to me about something and telling me how something is challenging. And as an empath, I'm there and present for each one of those, which is draining in and of itself.

And then I've got to go do a bunch of administrative and clerical tasks at the end of the day. And I mean there's five days a week of this. And so that, I think it takes... Our generation of health workers are now kind of realizing that the current model, whether it's work environment or work hours or what have you, is just not sustainable for them. And I think it does take us shifting the culture a bit to being open to just talking about this. And like you say, I love that giving people the tools to actually be resilient in a way that is not like, "You need to go figure this out by yourself."

**Allison Massari:** Definitely. And the hope in that is very exciting. The fact that people can realize there's so much more I can be doing to help myself, to make my life good again. I remember when I was going through my recovery, there was this point where I just became so determined not to become bitter. And that's where I learned about this type of courage. I talked about it in the keynote, but it's a type of courage, and there are five of them for learning resilience. But that defiance is used in a new way.

It's not like how we see a rebellious child or teenager. It's being defiant to keep your light shining in a way, it's an act of defiance to choose your peace instead of bitterness. And it's an act of defiance to not let our anger take over. And in extreme situations, defiance means choosing to resist hopelessness. So it's a new way of using that word. This is what I found gave me a sense of personal sovereignty, of having command of my life no matter what was happening, I could take charge of this. That's how I was in charge.

**Travis Bias:** I love that. And really, you come from a place of strength in that case and positivity and then having control and understanding, "What are the pieces I have control over that I can affect?" And it's actually I think a lot larger than a lot of people would think in certain situations that feel challenging like you or hopeless like you say. So yeah, defiance, I'm on board. I like that. I like that approach and that use of that word. One piece of your story as well that struck me is thinking about the impact one person can have on another's life. You talk about your recovery and your exposure as a patient to lots of other, all kinds of health workers. And so that impact that one person can have on another's life, I think that's so true in health care, but I think among so many stressors that the health care workforce faces, we can easily lose sight of the impact we can have on so many individual patients. So how do you keep that thought, that idea at the front and center each day?

**Allison Massari:** Well, I'm so glad you brought this up because it's been 24 years since my accident. And to this day, what I remember are the little moments. The look, I literally 24 years later in my memory, burned in my memory is the way a nurse was looking into my eyes. I remember her so well when I was

in my moment of deepest despair and the healing that she gave me. And it was seconds, she didn't even have a conversation with me. We didn't exchange words. It was the love and the sweetness that came out of her eyes and the fact that she just stopped, it was seven seconds, but I felt her. Now, no matter how busy we are, we can learn the art of mastering bringing our kindness and our presence to someone in the blink of an eye like that. And that is exciting.

Everyone that goes into health care and that I know they're in this because they truly went into it to help people. You all are givers. You go into it with this mission, right? But feeling so stretched as everyone has and does with these systematic problems that need to be resolved too, as well, it's so easy to feel, "Wow, I'm just not living that mission." But you are. It's when you master the art of that, the touch on a hand, the art of listening, just listening, the way you listen to someone, focusing on the way you're looking at them, taking the time. Doesn't mean you're taking it on, but those little moments are the big moments. 24 years later for me, still to this day, I know that to be true for a fact.

**Travis Bias:** Sure. I think we definitely undervalue the power of the human touch. And when you say actively listening to and talking with patients about some of their deepest fears and most difficult struggles, I do think we can, again, when that happens multiple times a day or a shift or a week, we can lose sight of the impact we can have and when we can keep that light shining. As far as the humanism piece, I think there's a lot of work going on right now in the health care field, especially in medical training even to keep the humanism piece front and center and using technology or operational changes, some basics to say, "Hey, let's take away some of those tasks that are distracting from you and I making eye contact and really having a discussion and a connection that can help get you to the place of healing."

**Allison Massari:** Oh, I love that so much. I'm so excited about that and that movement you're talking about. And it's really important to just reiterate that it literally doesn't have to be a long conversation. It's seconds. It can literally be as you're walking out the room and you turn around and you look at a person and you just tilt your head and smile with sweetness and just go, "I got you." Or without even saying a word, but they feel you, feel that you care.

**Travis Bias:** I love that. Those small things can be so powerful. So one last thing I'd like to ask you about, because burnout, it's been increasing in health care over the last decade, even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. And so many health workers have heard a ton of messages about the need for resilience, but there are many systemic factors that are leading to burnout. And no matter how resilient we are or that I may be, our daily work can still feel like a constant uphill climb. So how do you encourage folks to focus on those badly needed personal resilience pieces, of course, while also advocating and push pushing for system level change?

**Allison Massari:** It's not an easy skill to learn how to balance so much at once. I mean, there's no simple answer other than just in the process of going to work every day and facing these challenges. Whether it's knowing you need to advocate for yourself for what you and your coworkers need, and speaking up, not doing it with fight, but just doing it with clear communication. Clarity is powerful, and you can be very succinct and have a huge impact, even more so than when there's emotion attached to it. But then at the same time, being so patient with yourself and kind to yourself that you're figuring this out, we're all developing these skills constantly.

And I talk about this in the speech too. Life is a school. If we look at life as a school where I'm ready, I'm present and I'm ready to find a solution to any problem or challenge, like I'm showing up excited to go,

"Okay, what is this here to teach me?" Instead of feeling a victim to our circumstances, you could just do that little shift, just turning three inches to the right or the left of saying, "Hey, wow, wait. What is this here to teach me? What if life is on my side no matter how it looks? And what can I learn from this? How will I grow?" And when we figure these things out, we become a gift to others even more so by leading by example or teaching what we learn. So.

**Travis Bias:** The help, physicians and nurses, I think a lot of times we underestimate our power to affect change, and it doesn't necessarily, and I love the thought about, "How can I be a productive part of this solution," versus, "Oh my gosh, this is painful, this is terrible." I think thinking about the system level changes, it doesn't necessarily have to be advocating for an act of Congress and legislation. I think it can be small at the organizational level or even your individual clinic levels. Some of these small changes, if we have the autonomy to affect those changes, I think can really improve our day as a health worker. But it also improves how we can deliver for patients. And so I think that that's why that system level focus is important. Yes, I've got to do the personal work, take care of myself so that I can take care of others.

Yet, I think there are lots of opportunities, like you say, to confront a problem and not just say, "Ah, this is terrible," and complain, but to be clear about what the need is and what the needed fixes to be diplomatic in how we communicate the need for that change, and try to get influencers or influential stakeholders on our side to make that happen. And so I'm hopeful that that's kind of what starts to come out of, like you said, the kind of burnout movement across the country. We're now talking about it differently than we ever have. So I'm definitely optimistic that lots of prioritization is coming and lots, I guess lots of resources are coming to help impact this issue. And I'm very excited for our listeners and our attendees at our Client Experience Summit to hear you actually get to speak in person on this.

**Allison Massari:** Oh, thank you. I can't wait. I'm so excited, and I'm so excited we had this conversation today because so much of this isn't even in the keynote, and there's so much more that I don't get to talk about usually on stage.

**Travis Bias:** Well, fantastic. Well, selfishly, I'm glad I had the opportunity to interview you and chat with you one-on-one before the bigger format. But any less concluding words that you'd want to leave us with?

**Allison Massari:** Just, thank you. Thank you to all of you for everything that you do for humanity. You are the healers of the world. I'm so immensely appreciative of the self-sacrifice, of the position you all are in. I'm so grateful, and it's an honor to get to reach you all. It's going to be a great honor to speak on stage for your conference, and I'm really looking forward to it.

**Travis Bias:** Well, I think that's a perfect note to end on. So thank you so much for your time and for the conversation today.

**Allison Massari:** Thank you, Travis.