Johnny Powell:

We are very much challenged here at Stanford as grad students and medical students everywhere, I think it’s just inevitably difficult to be a medical student regardless and immense privilege. So for me, recognizing that I'm living out my dreams right now, how can I complain? I will say, since being here, I've learned the term toxic positivity, that with a little masochism sprinkled in. But in general, recognizing how privileged I am helps me take the pressure off my first world problems of having to bike across campus fast or not doing as well on an exam. These are pennies on a dollar to real issues people are facing, not just here in America, but throughout the world, especially in this point in time. So that just, for me, almost makes me feel guilty about complaining, which again, sometimes can be toxic. But in general, that usually grounds me to recognize that I have a purpose and I should continue pushing towards that and try to pull people along with me where I can.

My name is Johnny Powell. I’m a member of the 2023 Knight-Hennessy cohort and a first year medical student at the Stanford School of Medicine. I imagine a world where nobody has to worry whether other people care enough about them to support their health and social needs.

Taylor Goss:

Welcome to the Imagine a World podcast from Knight-Hennessy Scholars. We’re here to give you a glimpse into the Knight-Hennessy Scholar community of graduate students spanning all seven Stanford schools, including business, education, engineering, humanities, law, medicine, and sustainability. In each episode, we talk with scholars about the world they imagine and what they are doing to bring it to life.

Willie Thompson:

Today, we're speaking with Johnny Powell, a first year student at the Stanford School of Medicine. During our conversation, you'll hear Johnny's experience being the first in his family to attend an Ivy League school, choosing medicine as a profession, balancing grit with grace, and so much more.

Hey, what’s up y'all? Welcome to another episode of the Imaginal a World podcast. I am one of the co-hosts, Willie Thompson, a member of the 2022 cohort doing some stuff at the business school, hopefully at the Ed school. We're still waiting on that admissions letter. I'm joined by my amazing co-host and co-producer, Taylor Goss.

Taylor Goss:

How's it going, Willie?

Willie Thompson:

Going great, man. And we've got special guest today.

Taylor Goss:

Wait, what?

Willie Thompson:

Yeah, you know.
Oh, that's right. She's in the room with us.

Willie Thompson:
She's in the room. We got Sydney joining us from... Actually, you know what? Sydney, do your own introduction.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah, who are you?

Sydney Hunt:
Hey everyone. My name's Sydney. I'm a first year PhD student in electrical engineering and part of the 2023 cohort. I'm really excited to be one of two first '23 cohort scholars to be featured on the podcast today.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, Sydney's part of the growing and budding team for the Imagine World podcast. So Taylor and I don't do everything by ourselves, there's no way we could.

Taylor Goss:
Oh God, no.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, glad we have Sydney-

Taylor Goss:
This podcast would fall apart without the team.

Willie Thompson:
Oh, 100%. So glad to have Sydney on the day. You'll be hearing her voice throughout the episode. And as you heard in that Imagine a World statement, we've got the one and the only Johnny Powell joining. Man, how you doing?

Johnny Powell:
Doing well, doing well. Really excited to be here and excited to hopefully share some insightful things with the group.

Taylor Goss:
Undoubtedly. You're sitting here looking real doctory in your scrubs.

Willie Thompson:
I know, the scrubs. What company scrubs do you use, by the way?

Johnny Powell:
I use the uniform factory setting versions they gave us for free during our opening days orientation. I will say, anyone listening out there that wants to sponsor a budding medical student, I take offers. I take offers.

Sydney Hunt:
Yeah. Do you have a favorite color?

Johnny Powell:
Favorite color of scrubs or in general?

Sydney Hunt:
Yes, of scrubs.

Johnny Powell:
I will say, someone sent a promo code in our group chat, and I saw some olive green ones that were kind of smooth. I didn't purchase them because they were expensive, but yeah, that could be nice.

Willie Thompson:
How much do scrubs actually run you, though? Like, how much-

Johnny Powell:
Great question. Upwards of 100 for a set, depending on the brand and the fit.

Willie Thompson:
Okay.

Johnny Powell:
But I will say, from what I've been told, some of the higher brand or more expensive scrubs really do fit comfortably.

Willie Thompson:
Okay, yeah.

Johnny Powell:
I've actually seen a third year med student play basketball, a full IM game in scrub pants.

Willie Thompson:
In scrub pants. Okay.

Johnny Powell:
Not even scrub shorts, those don't exist, but scrub pants, yeah fully.

Willie Thompson:
Oh, that's wild.

Taylor Goss:
Wow. That's so cool. I didn't know that you could play basketball in scrubs. I've never seen scrubs in that setting. I think last time I saw a scrub, he was sitting in the passenger side of his best friend's ride. He was trying to holler at me, actually. I knew it was going to be made at some point.

Willie Thompson:
I mean, I didn't know you needed tender love and care in your life. That's crazy. Well, actually, I have one quick question on the scrubs. This is probably the final question for scrubs right now.

Johnny Powell:
Yeah, let's do, let's do it.

Willie Thompson:
How long do scrubs last? How often are you changing scrubs? Are they like jeans? Are they like dry fit? What's going on there?

Johnny Powell:
Well, yeah, this is my second quarter of medical school and I received the scrubs that I'm wearing, again, for free, the beginning of last quarter.

Taylor Goss:
Okay. And you've never washed them.

Johnny Powell:
I wash them after every time I wear them.

Taylor Goss:
Oh, good.

Johnny Powell:
And I assume other people do as well.

Willie Thompson:
You wash them every time you wear them?

Johnny Powell:
Yeah, like normal clothes.

Willie Thompson:
Okay.

Johnny Powell:
To that point, I would say that last quarter we had anatomy, we dissected cadavers or dead bodies for six plus hours a week, and there were some bodily fluids that got on them, so we ensured to wash them after every wear.

Taylor Goss:
Right.

Willie Thompson:
Oh, interesting.

Taylor Goss:
And you don't have an extra pair?

Johnny Powell:
They give us two pair. They give us two sets.

Taylor Goss:
Okay. Two sets, excuse me.

Willie Thompson:
Two sets.

Johnny Powell:
Two scrubs.

Sydney Hunt:
Doing a lot of laundry then, I guess.

Johnny Powell:
Yeah, we had anatomy every Tuesday and Thursday, so I did laundry every weekend for sure.

Taylor Goss:
Nice.

Willie Thompson:
Two scrubs, one for the plug and one for the load. That's crazy.

Johnny Powell:
A lot of references today. Wow, the culture grew.

Taylor Goss:
We got to get them all out at the top of the episode.
Willie Thompson:
Yeah, because they're probably not going to make it throughout the episode, so I really got to get these jokes off before we start it. But anyway, Johnny, so glad to have you here on the episode. You already have this very evocative Imagine a World statement. But before we talk about the world you imagine, let's talk about the world you were born into and have experienced thus far.

Johnny Powell:
For sure.

Willie Thompson:
So for folks who are listening, where are you from and what was your journey here?

Johnny Powell:
Yeah, great question. I will say, I was originally born in Petersburg, Virginia. My father was in the military for over 20 years, retired Lieutenant Colonel. My mom was a high school teacher. So I was born in Virginia, but lived the first few years of my life in Charlotte, North Carolina. And after my parents divorced, I actually spent the rest of my life from first grade up in Greensboro, North Carolina. I'm very proud of where I'm from. Shout out 336. All right, all right.

Willie Thompson:
All right.

Johnny Powell:
Yeah.

Willie Thompson:
He's like, "I'm done. That's it."

Johnny Powell:
Yeah, I forgot the rest of that. But yeah, no, I went to public school, K through 12. I really kind of had a diverse experience from my elementary school, which was predominantly Black, and my mom actually worked there.

Willie Thompson:
Okay.

Johnny Powell:
So that was an interesting dynamic of being threatened by every teacher I ever had.

Willie Thompson:
Isn't that crazy?

Johnny Powell:
Yeah.
Willie Thompson:
My mom was a fifth grade teacher at my elementary school. And everybody's acting out, but if I act out, it's like you go down the hallway, talk to your mom. That's crazy.

Sydney Hunt:
Yeah. And it happens even after they leave. My mom was a teacher at my high school, but then she switched schools, but the teacher still knew who I was and you still get-

Willie Thompson:
That's crazy.

Johnny Powell:
The worst part is I would say my mom would've even use me as an example. I'd be called into the hallway and she says, "Yeah, I just needed to make it look bad for the other kids."

Taylor Goss:
"I need to set the tone."

Johnny Powell:
So yeah, it was cool. I think having an educator in the home definitely put me in the right direction to take school a little more seriously and whatnot. But yeah, through that I graduated high school and was admitted to Harvard. I will say, I was the first person in my family to not attend an HBCU at the time. Most of the folks in my family went to North Carolina A&T State University,

Willie Thompson:
Aggies.

Johnny Powell:
Aggie pride. Shout out Jiho. Other side of my family went to North Carolina Central University, which is actually A&T's rival about 45 minutes down the road. For me, going to Harvard was a huge culture shock, but there, got really acquainted with a few affinity groups, a lot of service orgs out in the Boston community. And after graduation, spent a few years in consulting being a company in Chicago, and then my most recent gap year in clinical research at the University of Chicago, and that has all brought me here to Stanford School of Medicine. Incredibly grateful for the journey.

Taylor Goss:
That's an impressive journey. Can we wind it back to high school?

Johnny Powell:
Yeah.

Taylor Goss:
And when you're thinking of applying to Harvard and sort of diverting from the path that some of your relatives had taken, what was your thought process there?
Johnny Powell:
I say this as humbly as I know how. In high school, I always thought I would probably go to A&T or maybe be admitted to UNC Chapel Hill or maybe be admitted to Duke, the state schools in my area that were fairly competitive. I hope I don't regret admitting this, but there's a movie that was actually released my junior year in high school called Dope.

Willie Thompson:
Oh, yeah. Mm-hmm.

Johnny Powell:
It's about a kid who went to an underserved school in I guess great Los Angeles County.

Taylor Goss:
LA. Yeah, yeah.

Johnny Powell:
He was Black, he took academic seriously, also kind of had a hip hop affinity and cultural affinity similar to myself, and he applied to Harvard and at the end of the movie, he got in. And I literally watched that movie before my senior year and after I watched it, I decided that I should take the SAT again and apply. It was the only Ivy League school I applied to and by the grace of God, I got in and that was all she wrote.

Willie Thompson:
It's very dope.

Johnny Powell:
Literally, literally.

Taylor Goss:
I hope they can hear the snaps.

Willie Thompson:
It's got Shameik Moore in there too. That's a good movie. Young Shameik Moore.

Johnny Powell:
I will say, leading up to that, though, I was number one in my class during my senior year and class president and involved in my church home, played football, ran track a year, quiz bowl. I'm a little nerd.

Willie Thompson:
Well-rounded. Renaissance man.

Johnny Powell:
So I will say, you can't wait... For anyone out there, you can't wait till your senior year and decide to have a competitive application. I will say, I was fairly well-rounded before, but that was the motivation to really take a path much different from the rest of my family, for sure.
Taylor Goss:
Yeah. Just curious, being a musician and you mentioned your affinity for hip hop.

Johnny Powell:
Yes.

Taylor Goss:
Who are your people?

Johnny Powell:
Ah. I would say top five-

Taylor Goss:
Oh, we're getting the top five. All right.

Johnny Powell:
Well actually...

Taylor Goss:
Sorry, you're locked in.

Johnny Powell:
Top five, no order. Cole, J. Cole. I'm from North Carolina, you know what I'm saying?

Willie Thompson:
You kind of got to do that, yeah.

Johnny Powell:
Sixth grade, before he was big. OG fan here. HOV, Jay-Z, the GOAT. Debate that with your mama. I will put Nas and Kanye in there, personally. And my fifth actually rotates, so I'm not going to commit to anything. It depends on my age range, I think it's evolved the past 10 years, but those are my four bread and butter. If I'm feeling unlike myself, I'll always go back and listen to those kind of core projects.

Willie Thompson:
Okay, that's bread and butter. Who's the pickle? Who's fifth?

Johnny Powell:
Again, it rotates, man.

Willie Thompson:
I know it's rotating, but someone's sitting in the chair right now.

Taylor Goss:
That's such a great question.

Johnny Powell:
So right now, I've been on an R&B wave. I've been on an R&B wave recently, to be honest.

Willie Thompson:
Okay. Rap song. If you want to go that way, that's cool too.

Johnny Powell:
A little Giveon.

Taylor Goss:
Okay. All right.

Johnny Powell:
You know what I'm saying? Some of that. But Drake is in there at times, he's very popular. I always have my little gospel fix every now and again, so it rotates. For sure, it rotates.

Willie Thompson:
Well, cool. Well, aside from the music and I appreciate that divergent to the hip hop, thank you, Taylor, for that, I very much enjoyed that top five list. What is the... and honestly, I mean, hearing you talk, I know you went to Harvard. You sound like Morehouse man, sound like a renaissance man. But I'm wondering for you, what was the communal feeling about you applying to Ivy League and then choosing not to go to an HBCU in terms of just your experience? Because I could imagine that can go a number of ways just given what I've experienced personally as an HBCU grad around how seriously people take legacy and lineage when it comes to attending an HBCU.

Johnny Powell:
No, for sure. I think growing up, my family was incredibly supportive and I think, for me, doing my best in school, it opened opportunities that maybe weren't available for other folks previously and I didn't get a lot of pushback from anyone in my immediate family. I think we were all just incredibly shocked that I got in. And yeah, no, I will say, for what it's worth, I have a younger cousin, we're about 18 months apart, went to the same high school. She also had a really competitive application for college and she went to A&T and she got the same scholarship program that I had at A&T. So in a way, I feel like I've been able to see what my journey may have looked like through her, albeit we have much different interests. She's currently about to graduate law school at UNC Chapel Hill.

Taylor Goss:
Good for her. All right, all right.

Johnny Powell:
But seeing her transition and excelling and prospering and being nurtured at A&T, I think really did set her up for success now for the rest of her life, and then me having my own unorthodox journey up in Boston.
Sydney Hunt:
Speaking of Harvard, I remember you were an excellent introducer last fall when, through Knight-Hennessy, we had our McMurtry leadership lecture and you introduced Dr. Anthony Jack who wrote the book, The Privilege Poor. I loved what you said in your introduction about your experience at Harvard then and was wondering if you could talk about that and whatever you want to share with our listeners about your journey there.

Johnny Powell:
Absolutely. Great question, incredibly loaded question. For the sake of time, my quick spiel, I think that Harvard is a very unique place. I was actually listening to a podcast, ironically, earlier today where the person said, "It's where the sharpest elbows meet the sharpest minds." And by sharpest elbows, meaning privilege, influence, power, et cetera. And I think, for me, being a very naive public school product, I was very much thrown to the wolves my first quarter, felt very much out of place. With that being said, it is a very transformative place. That phrase became cliche.

Our dean at the time would always say transformative education, but I think it truly transformed my life in terms of my exposure to folks in different backgrounds, opportunities to travel abroad, et cetera. To answer Sydney's question a bit more directly, I think the culture shock on campus, just folks coming from, again, all over the world, folks, again, different socioeconomic statuses, it does present a really unique juxtaposition where, for me, I was forced to reflect deeply on what was important to me, why I was there, albeit overcome some insecurities regarding my academic background. But ultimately, I think through this reflection and commitment to different orgs and projects and community organizations, I was able to find that I really do just like helping people and I really do like helping people that oftentimes look like me. So I think having that chance to support peers, friends, mentees was really rewarding and also helped lead me closer to medicine.

Willie Thompson:
You actually teed that up quite well. How do you get into medicine as a profession coming out of undergrad? Or just even when do you start having this inkling that, "I want to go into medicine, I want to be Johnny Powell, MD."

Taylor Goss:
That's such a good doctor name.

Willie Thompson:
It really is.

Taylor Goss:
It's like a TV show.

Willie Thompson:
That's what I'm saying, man, it could be a TV show.

Taylor Goss:
That's ours now, no one can take that.
Willie Thompson:  
Great, fantastic.

Taylor Goss:  
It’s ours and Johnny’s.

Johnny Powell:  
Great, great question. I think it probably is a little bit different for everyone. I have heard stories from friends, peers, classmates around the kind of journey to medicine, whether it be through an illness that they suffered as a child or something they witnessed a family member suffer through or a unique research opportunity. I will also say, I think medicine is evolving to be incredibly broad and inclusive, to not just be the strict clinical provision, but the research, the health policy, the healthcare access, health equity, there’s so many lenses. For me, personally, growing up, seeing illness in my family, that being everything from heart disease, clinical depression to Alzheimer’s definitely left an imprint on me to want to serve, build community, learn more about the hard sciences and why these things were happening to folks that I love. That being said, medicine is an incredibly arduous commitment and being in undergrad, seeing a lot of my friends secure internships and ultimately full-time roles in very profitable industries definitely made me reflect deeply on my earnest interest in committing to 10 plus years of training.

Willie Thompson:  
Right, yeah.

Johnny Powell:  
To that point, that is what led me to my brief detouring consulting. And while I was fortunate enough to be staffed to social impact projects, pharmaceutical projects, I really felt like I missed that intimate engagement with folks in need - that led me back to medicine. But I think if I had to call up key moments would be my family experiences, some of my leadership experiences in undergrad of just kind of corralling groups and medicine to team sport. And lastly, my last gap year in clinical research truly reaffirmed that I want to be a physician. I worked at U Chicago with a lot of folks on the South Side who were incredibly underserved in terms of their health and social needs.

Taylor Goss:  
Sure.

Johnny Powell:  
It definitely made me realize that I have a privilege to support others in many unique facets using medicine potentially as a platform for other social work as well.

Willie Thompson:  
I see. And so what it sounds like is there was an inkling towards medicine and given, and it is quite lucrative, consulting, it sounds like consulting was where you initially parked your career interest just for honest purposes because it’s a very lucrative field and there’s a lot of privilege comes with it?

Johnny Powell:
Not that that alone. Great question. I got that question quite often during the med school admissions process, and I think consulting very much did teach me a lot about work planning, teamwork...at the beginning of the session, but interviewing, synthesizing information, excel skills, kind of a given, but I'm very grateful for the experience, 100%, and I wouldn't change anything. I will say, me not knowing what I wanted to do in my gap years, but knowing I wanted to do something just to explore life before committing, again, back to 10 years of training.

Willie Thompson:
I see.

Johnny Powell:
I weighed the option of doing research, what a lot of folks often do, which I did in high school and college, service work, which I did in high school and college. So why not do something different? And I'm grateful for it. I think it's made me a much more well-rounded professional, a lot of the softer skills you kind of learn.

Taylor Goss:
Sure.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah.

Johnny Powell:
It was huge. It was great for my growth personally. And again, being on healthcare social impact stuff while I was consulting kind of helped me stay close to my interest in medicine.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah. I would say consulting is a good place because what I'm hearing is that it was a good place for you to figure out with certainty where you want to go next and consulting is a great place to find an extra--

Johnny Powell:
For sure. No, for sure.

Taylor Goss:
You've mentioned offhand a couple of times that the leadership and service activities that you participated in college, I know a big one for you was the Harvard Black Men's Forum, right?

Johnny Powell:
Correct.

Taylor Goss:
Would you talk about what that meant to you and why you spent so much time in that organization?

Johnny Powell:
Yeah. I think that marginalized identities need space to vulnerably share their lived experience to uplift one another. And I think regardless of what backgrounds you bring to a place like Harvard, it's probably going to be a little bit humbling. Even friends I know who went to the elitist of elite boarding schools pre-Harvard still in offhand conversations would share some of the insecurity they even felt on campus. So I think for folks similar to myself, we benefited from having a space to talk about everything from microaggressions to sending money back home to the basketball game, like sports, just general stuff. So that was huge to me. I also will say, having a chance to lead a few organizations in high school, it let me see what leadership can look like and I think equally as strong, seeing what the absence of good leadership looks like really did push me to want to do my best.

And through the org, I served as brotherhood chair my sophomore year, then president of my junior year. But I think in both of those roles I wanted to do my best to make the organization the best I thought it could be. And I think that kind of lens or approach can be contagious for other board members. I don't know, it definitely became my identity in the second half of my college career, but I think I wasn't as intentionally seeking that initially. I kind of grew into it in a sense through my own need and my affinity to serve others.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah. This might be a big question, but in a nutshell, what do you think good leadership looks like? What did it look like for you at that time?

Johnny Powell:
So Harvard, and similar to my experiences here at Stanford, just a wealth of opportunities available to you. That can be everything from corporate recruiting to research to social impact projects in the community. And you're being pulled in so many different ways, it's hard to convince people to give their time to one specific thing wholly. So I do think other folks who I worked with through my terms were being pulled in a lot of different directions and I recognized that struggle that I probably would've reacted the same way as them at the time. So for me, leadership looked like serving the interest of the group to the highest capacity and that ultimately boiled down for me to active programming to build that community and rapport amongst the group. Everything from resume workshops to Wednesday wing nights to parties to intimate forum discussions about things like gerrymandering and, like I said, microaggressions and everything, but just having those spaces to really connect with people.

The second pillar I would think is service. I'm very proud to say under my term, my humblebrag here, we expanded the afterschool program from one school to three schools. That was huge for me to expand our reach. We were incredibly privileged to be at Harvard, why not share our access to information with youth locally? And then lastly I think was just collaboration with other orgs. I think the undergrads communities at Harvard can be a bit fragmented because of so many opportunities, people being pulled in different directions. For us, collaborating with other groups and just kind of creating community broadly, not just within the org, but recognizing our privilege as Black men to help other folks in our community as well.

Sydney Hunt:
I love it. I love it. I mean, it's very clear. I think this ties into your Imagine a World statement that you personally very much care a lot about people. I'm curious to know, though, where did this statement come from? Because you're talking about where no one has to worry about where other people care enough about them to support their health and social needs. How do you convince someone that that is
a world that we should be living in? Because I believe you believe that, and it's very clear to your actions that you put your money where your mouth is. But I want to know what made you pick this statement?

Johnny Powell:

Very kind confluence asked question there, so thank you, Sydney. I think that something that frustrates me is the amount of focus put on identifying problems. And not to get myself in trouble, but in medicine and even in other fields, and there is not as much time or resources put into addressing problems. So when I say other people have to worry whether other people care enough about them, that we take something as blatantly obvious as disparities in maternal mortality amongst Black women who suffer a much higher burden in childbirth and death and issues after birth than women of other races. That is well-documented, even across socioeconomic statuses, still well-documented, but what are we going to do to solve that?

Similarly, we know folks who live in our poorer, often more diverse areas, communities, have poorer options nutritionally, have poorer schools. We know these things exist. So for me, I, having access to really privileged spaces wonder why we aren't addressing them. We could talk for hours about that, but I sometimes am frustrated by what feels like maybe a lack of empathy on folks. I recognize a lot of these decisions and a lot of ways that time and money is earmarked for different uses is very complicated. So not just for me to be hyper judgmental and critical to not understand, but I feel like there is room for growth. And I wonder if people, speaking broadly, cared more than other folks would feel like their needs were being supported a little bit more.

Sydney Hunt:
Speechless. That was so good.

Willie Thompson:
So to that point, it has been well-documented in a number of other sectors in the industries around an empathy gap when it comes to the profession. I feel like medicine can definitely be a case study for that. What in your personal experience has given you perspective and strength about what it takes to fill the gap?

Johnny Powell:

I don't know if I am capable of answering that wholly. I think, again, trying to maintain my humility here, from a young age, I was just helping people. I don't know, I think it's fulfilling. It never gets old. Getting new shoes gets old, getting a new car, going to a fancy restaurant, all these things - helping somebody never gets old. I don't know if it was supporting folks in my family or people at school. I don't know, just that fills my cup. I think it definitely fills other people's cup as well.

But I think that, again, as human beings we're being pulled in a lot of different directions and it's oftentimes really hard to put someone else's needs things above your own. So just the prioritization of time can be tough. But yeah, again, family experiences, my service experiences through high school mentoring elementary schools and college, my work with patients who didn't have as many resources and had poor health outcomes, all of those things in aggregate have helped me realize what I love to do. And I'm pretty confident about that now after doing other things for a little bit that maybe were kinder to myself.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah. The confidence comes through.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, the confidence and the optimism.

Sydney Hunt:
For sure. So much so actually your optimism always comes through. We sent out a little survey to the 2023 cohort and I asked them to give us a few things that we admire about Johnny, that we love about Johnny, questions that we wanted to ask him. And I'm not exaggerating, I have the data right here. People were talking about "how welcoming he is and greets everyone with a smile." People admired your 6:00 AM gym grind every day, your motivational quotes on your Instagram, #begreat. We love it.

Taylor Goss:
Great. My favorite Instagram quote was, "How are you going to be mad on vacation?"

Sydney Hunt:
Yes, yes. So good, so good. So it's very clear from everyone within Knight-Hennessy, especially this '23 cohort, that you just radiate this sunshine anytime you step into a room. But someone asks, how do you deal with bad days?

Willie Thompson:
Especially considering how tough grad school at Stanford can be, especially med school. I mean, you cutting up dead bodies and stuff, man, that's wild stuff.

Johnny Powell:
To be honest, I would say taking the focus off myself. We are very much challenged here at Stanford as grad students and medical students everywhere, I think it's just inevitably difficult to be a medical student regardless and immense privilege. So for me, recognizing that I'm living up my dreams right now, how can I complain? I will say, since being here, I've learned the term toxic positivity. That's also a thing.

Willie Thompson:
Oh. Yes, sir.

Johnny Powell:
And I think that sometimes I might lean into that a little bit.

Willie Thompson:
Yes, sir.

Johnny Powell:
That with a little masochism sprinkled in. But in general, recognizing how privileged I am helps me take the pressure off my first world problems of having to bike across campus fast or not doing as well on an exam. These are pennies on a dollar to real issues people are facing, not just here in America, but
throughout the world, especially in this point in time. So that just, for me, almost makes me feel guilty about complaining, which again, sometimes can be toxic. But in general, that usually grounds me to recognize that I have a purpose and I should continue pushing towards that and try to pull people along with me where I can.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, that's a good reflection.

Sydney Hunt:
How do you know the line between gaslighting yourself versus actually recognizing that this is something that we should deal with and we can sit with? Because I also sometimes make myself so busy that I don’t have to sit with my emotions and reflect on, it is tough.

Willie Thompson:
It's tough.

Sydney Hunt:
So what's your way of navigating that gray area?

Johnny Powell:
Yeah, I think there are two very poignant periods of life that I get called to when thinking about challenging circumstances. One, my sophomore fall of college, I very much overextended myself. At the time I was taking organic chemistry and multivariable calculus.

Willie Thompson:
Good lord.

Johnny Powell:
I had two part-time jobs and I had two board positions, one of them being BMF brotherhood chair. And I still tried to go to the gym at 6:00 AM every day. So for about six weeks out of the semester, I only slept four or five hours a night. And I got actually really sick to the point of where I had a cold that evolved into an ear infection I couldn’t even hear out of my ear. And at that point I forced myself to go to the doctor. And then over winter break, I literally just slept the whole time and kind of recovered. And I think my body low-key broke down where I had to recognize you have to choose yourself sometimes. Additionally, my senior spring, shout out COVID, I also undertook a pretty rigorous journey for an organization. And I think both of those two experiences helped me strengthen my grit a little bit. So a lot of things now, again, we’re very blessed to be here, stressing about a test - that doesn't bother me as much as other things that may feel a little more intense.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah. And to that point, you mentioned the grit. What do you do now to insert grace with yourself? I feel like the grit’s something that people who, especially speaking as a Black man, grit can become an idol almost to some degree. So how do you imbue grace and sort of how you navigate your day to day now at this point in your life?
Johnny Powell:
I think a big stress reliever for me is unironically going to the gym at 6:00 AM. I have a friend who quoted me saying going to the gym is spiritual healing. So I feel that some days you can see people in the gym, they have their headphones in, hoodies on, fighting demons. Some days that is literally me, like literally lifting out my frustration and stress. I will also say prayer is huge for me. Unabashedly turning things over, everyone has their own religion, but for me, I grew up Christian. So that also gives me a sense of peace in my life. And more recently, I think medical school actually brought this out of me. I've been trying to meditate a little bit.

Willie Thompson:
Okay.

Sydney Hunt:
Nice.

Johnny Powell:
And I used to think meditation was some grand master zen floating in the air.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, I feel you. Yeah, no, I feel you.

Johnny Powell:
But it's really just sitting with your eyes closed, not looking at your phone, just thinking about your breath. And it's very hard because we're so wired and our attention spans are so short.

Taylor Goss:
It's so hard.

Johnny Powell:
So even doing that and me forcing myself to return back to something simple like my breath or whatever, helps me control my thoughts throughout the day when I start stressing about something else. So those would be my big three: gym, prayer, and meditation, which I'm still learning. I don't want to make it sound like I'm a pro or anything in that.

Sydney Hunt:
Yeah, so healthy. No wonder you're going to be a doctor.

Johnny Powell:
I know. I know, right?

Willie Thompson:
I feel like, just come into the waiting room and like, "Man, you look too healthy to be a doctor."

Johnny Powell:
Hey, don't ask me about my eating habits.

Willie Thompson:
Well, you're still young. Your metabolism's still really fast, so you're still good.

Johnny Powell:
That's a different story. I'm malnourished low-key. That's a different story.

Taylor Goss:
You talk about finding this place within yourself to be centered and find peace.

Johnny Powell:
Mm-hmm.

Taylor Goss:
Has there been any part of the Stanford community, maybe in the Knight-Hennessy community that's sort of served a similar purpose?

Johnny Powell:
Absolutely. I was actually talking with a friend about this more recently that I don't feel as close to all of my med school class. There are only 90 of us, I think other schools are a little bit larger. With that being said, reflecting on friendships I've had throughout my life, I'm kind of a friend group jumper in a sense. I find community in different places for different purposes. So I am pretty close with a handful of folks in my med school class. I'm also pretty close with a handful of folks in KH. There's a close friend of mine who is a current business school student that I've known since my freshman year of college. So having that kind of longitudinal relationship now here on campus has always been really important to me. And then family, calling, calling Mom. She doesn't get sick of hearing me complain.

Willie Thompson:
We saw a lot of your mom on Instagram.

Sydney Hunt:
Yeah, mama.

Johnny Powell:
That's my dog, yeah, my mom. Yeah, no, I think finding community from places and really being self-aware when you're not feeling your best to have those conversations and lean on that support system I think is huge, and I've definitely got better at that. Med school has brought that out of me, for sure.

Willie Thompson:
Can you talk about the relationship you have with your mom and how she's played a distinct role in your life? I think, as has been mentioned, your mother is mentioned quite often in the social media posts and it's always mentioned from the collective perspective that we do this. And so I find that very endearing.
And so I wonder if you can share a little bit about your mom, because I think there’s even a quote that says, "We graduated cum laude at Harvard College."

Johnny Powell:
Yes, sir. We. We graduated.

Willie Thompson:
"... with a BA in chemistry today. Mama!"

Johnny Powell:
Yes, sir.

Willie Thompson:
"And I promise to keep making you proud, man." Graduation cap emoji, heart emoji, in case folks are wondering about the the non-tech stuff.

Johnny Powell:
I appreciate that.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, so tell us about your mom and how special she is to you.

Johnny Powell:
Yeah, she is my light, my rock. Like I mentioned before, my parents were divorced when I was young, so I grew up with her. My father and I are also pretty close as well. I have a lot of love for him and he’s taught me a lot. But being in the home with her, I come from school, I’m stressed, she sees that; social problems, friends, partners type deal, she usually gives pretty significant wisdom in those areas. And also say, keeping me grounded, both from getting too full of myself and keeping me-

Willie Thompson:
Black moms will do that.

Johnny Powell:
Yeah, they definitely will humble you with the quickness.

Willie Thompson:
Quick. Lightening quick.

Johnny Powell:
I need that. I need that sometimes. But also when I started getting too focused on a goal. For example, at one point studying for the MCAT, it was over Christmas break and I tried to tell my mom that I was going to skip Christmas, like I was just going to stay studying the whole day and not go to dinner and not go. She wasn't having that.
Taylor Goss:
I already knew.

Johnny Powell:
So for me, her helping me keep check of what's important, being at my little cousin's graduation in a few weeks, being at other family's birthday parties, those kinds of things, and maintaining relationships for people who have poured into me, I think is incredibly important. Yeah, she's just kind of a conscious little angel on the shoulder keeping me on the path I need to be on. So much love for her. Can't really say more than that, yeah.

Taylor Goss:
Oh, man.

Willie Thompson:
That's beautiful.

Sydney Hunt:
Beautiful.

Taylor Goss:
Shout out to Johnny's mom.
Oh, my gosh.

Willie Thompson:
Is it Ms. Powell or is she-

Johnny Powell:
Ms. Powell. Ms. Tia.

Willie Thompson:
Ms. Powell. Ms. Tia.

Taylor Goss:
Ms. Tia.

Johnny Powell:
She's going to be laughing when she hears this, for sure.

Taylor Goss:
I mean, because of her, we have you. So we're grateful to her.

Willie Thompson:
I know. Exactly.
Sydney Hunt:
So Johnny, speaking of our favorite social media quotes that you've had, the first one being celebrating your mama and how amazing she is. One that I very much resonate with is, "You can't be what you can't see." And actually, funny enough, today on your Instagram story, I saw that you were in, it looked like a classroom, perhaps teaching?

Willie Thompson:
500 pre-med people?

Johnny Powell:
No, that's something else.

Sydney Hunt:
Oh, that's another thing. That's a different thing.

Willie Thompson:
That's different? That's crazy, I can't even keep up.

Sydney Hunt:
That's a different thing, yeah. Too many things to celebrate Johnny about. So I want to know, where does that statement come from? And it seems like you're really putting, again, your money where your mouth is about empowering that next generation. And how do you find a way to incorporate that in your life? What makes it a priority for you?

Johnny Powell:
First off, very admittedly, a lot of the things I say, I'm not original in their creation. There are a lot of little lessons, sayings you hear growing up in a Black household, you hear growing up in a Black church that stick with you because you get told so many times that whenever I'm thinking about doing something stupid, I can't not hear them. So what often happens with these quotes is that's what I'm telling myself. And then I'm like, "You know what? Let me just share that with everybody else for the one time."

With that being said, you can't be what you can't see, I'm sure there's countless people that have said that before. I'm not the first by any means, but I think particularly if it pertains to medicine, there is a very much shortage of diversity. I believe there was a stat that in 1960s, 2.4% of physicians in the United States were Black men, and in 2018, it was like 2.3. It actually went down over 60 years, which I think is pretty terrible. So with you can't be what you can't see, again, very cliche. We need people who are in roles to be the role models that they can be. Another thing I think that oftentimes happens is being a young Black dude, the doctors aren't the most cool, admittedly.

Willie Thompson:
100%.

Johnny Powell:
Everything else is cooler than going to school for 10 years. So for me, I hope to be myself as unapologetically as I can without ruining my life, but also being a very relatable example of what a
doctor could be or that can also extend to what an attorney could be or what a teacher could be, anything. So I feel like everybody has a job to be the best version of themselves, not only for themselves or those that are serving, but to serve as an example for other people, especially if you come from marginal identity, I feel like that is, what they say, the minority tax is unfortunate. It can feel like a burden sometimes. But I feel especially empowered to be myself and show people, like young people that it's possible and that you can still be yourself in the process to an extent.

Sydney Hunt:
Yeah, it feels very full circle. You talked in the beginning about your movie, seeing a Black man go to Harvard, to now someone to listen to this podcast and be like, "Ooh, now I'm going to do what Johnny's doing."

Willie Thompson:
They're going to be like, "I'm going to apply to 21 different med schools."

Taylor Goss:
Get accepted to every single one of them.

Sydney Hunt:
Not apply, accepted to 21 med schools.

Taylor Goss:
Accepted to 21.

Willie Thompson:
Actually, you know what? Let's go to the research here. So you got into 21... First of all, I got a couple questions about this med school situation. So you got into 21, how many did you apply to?

Johnny Powell:
I'll say on rookie here, at least 30. At least 30.

Willie Thompson:
Okay, at least 30.

Johnny Powell:
I would say-

Taylor Goss:
Hey, that's pretty good return.

Willie Thompson:
That's a very good return.

Sydney Hunt:
That's more than half, yeah.

Johnny Powell:
I'm going to be honest, I was pretty scared. Medical school admissions is very competitive and stressful and I had a few friends who were stressed throughout their cycle. So for me, because I was in a fairly privileged position from my consulting background, I was able to afford to apply. That's something else I can just mention on the record. Medical education is kind of inaccessible, something that people are aware of. People don't have to worry whether or not other people care enough about them. It costs a lot of money to apply to school.

Willie Thompson:
How much does it cost to apply to med school?

Johnny Powell:
Primaries, you do it all at once and I want to say probably like 30 each. But then secondaries, which are the essays, can be like $100 per.

Sydney Hunt:
Each school.

Willie Thompson:
Wait, each school?

Johnny Powell:
For each school, yeah. It's crazy. And that doesn't even mention pre-COVID, folks had to pay for their own flight to go to the school to interview and potentially be told they weren't going to get in. So we're talking, I have friends in undergrad who took out seven, 10K of debt just to maybe not become a doctor, which is crazy. Not to mention medical school itself is incredibly expensive.

Willie Thompson:
Right.

Johnny Powell:
Yeah, I was very privileged to be able to be in a position to apply to schools and very grateful that things worked out well for me. Very blessed. Yeah, very blessed.

Willie Thompson:
What's the average number of schools someone applies to for med school?

Johnny Powell:
I think pre-COVID, maybe 20, 25. I think post-COVID, probably 25, 30, maybe more.

Willie Thompson:
Oh, interesting.
Johnny Powell:
During COVID, because folks didn't have to pay, remote interviews, virtual interviews were introduced and since then they've persisted. So for that reason, people can apply to more schools, assuming they can actually attend more interviews because they don't have to pay for flights to go around. I think additionally, because we experienced a global healthcare crisis, more people were inspired to pursue medicine as a career. So the last few years I think more people have been applying to more schools, which is just a positive feedback loop whereas they get more competitive, but then more people are going to be applying to more schools. So I think that number's probably risen a lot more recently.

Taylor Goss:
So as we're taking the plane down in this podcast episode, we like to ask everyone a little bit about one key part of their application process. Everyone that has applied to Knight-Hennessy had to give improbable facts. For most people, including myself, it was the thing that I spent the most time on probably.

Johnny Powell:
Interesting. Okay.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah, yeah. For me, at least.

Johnny Powell:
No, I love that.

Willie Thompson:
Did you spend the most time on that?

Taylor Goss:
Yeah.

Willie Thompson:
Where'd you spend the most time on your application?

Taylor Goss:
Yeah.

Johnny Powell:
I think maybe the work activity section.

Taylor Goss:
Okay.

Johnny Powell:
Which sounds kind of-
Taylor Goss:
You're busy just because you did so much.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, you had to pick. "Which ones do I include?"

Johnny Powell:
Yeah, I'm not going to say anything more. Y'all are...but that's what I was stressed the most about.

Taylor Goss:
Okay, okay. But when you got to that improbable facts section, how did you think about answering those questions?

Johnny Powell:
Yeah, great question. The prompt on the KH application, I believe it reads things about you that other people wouldn't believe, but are actually true.

Taylor Goss:
Sure.

Johnny Powell:
So I took that to heart.

Taylor Goss:
Well-remembered.

Willie Thompson:
Hey look, man, because look, was it Vidal who put us on the spot with the KH leadership thing?

Taylor Goss:
Yeah. Vidal asked us to quote the KH charter.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah. Could y'all quote the KH charter, by the way?

Johnny Powell:
What do you mean, charter?

Willie Thompson:
Like, purposeful leadership.

Johnny Powell:
Oh, yeah. I definitely tried to align my application with those as well, those criteria. But I think for the improbable facts, I tried to think about what makes me unique. Whether it be travel experiences, whether it be extracurricular interests, racial ethnic background. I tried to think about what wouldn't believe potentially about me. And that is the approach I took while also trying to provide breadth and not say the same thing a different way eight times. So I tried to have eight different answers, yeah.

Taylor Goss:
Okay. So of those, would you be willing to share any of them? One or two.

Johnny Powell:
I will say, on the portal, you can have them hidden.

Willie Thompson:
Did you hide yours?

Johnny Powell:
One of them I hid.

Willie Thompson:
Okay.

Johnny Powell:
One of them I hid.

Taylor Goss:
Well, would you like to share?

Johnny Powell:
No, I'm not going to share that one, but the other ones that I believe are still unhidden and you probably can still see.

Taylor Goss:
We're checking right now to verify.

Sydney Hunt:
Yeah, I'm trying to pull it up right now. I'm pulling up right now, yeah.

Johnny Powell:
I believe one of them was I helped a nonprofit pursue $3,000,000,000 to combat gun violence in Chicago. And I was, again, incredibly blessed. My first project at Bain was a pro bono project for Chicago based nonprofit. So really helping them size their funding to address the entire at risk population throughout the city and kind of scale up their operations across the different neighborhoods that were at risk. That was really rewarding for me to see what impact at scale might look like. But I feel like
$3,000,000,000 is a huge number and for me to be able to say I helped someone size that and pursue that is pretty unique. So that's one that comes to the top of my head.

Willie Thompson:
$3,000,000,000 to solve gun violence, that’s a lot of money. Is there anything else that comes to mind for you in terms of just improbable facts? I like that story and I feel as if there’s something else that could be helpful to folks.

Johnny Powell:
Yeah. If my memory is serving me correctly, there was an improbable fact around my experience doing a program for mentorship of high school students in Japan.

Willie Thompson:
Okay.

Johnny Powell:
And this program was really unique. I spent one week in four different geographic locations throughout the country, at four different high schools throughout Japan, and stayed with four different host families.

Willie Thompson:
Oh, wow.

Johnny Powell:
We came in a few days earlier to Tokyo for kind of pre-orientation and post-orientation and kind of wrap up as well. So I was there for a total of about five weeks. Through those experiences, I had one really noteworthy one with, I believe that my host brother in the third family I stayed with, who suffered through an hour long commute with me each day one-way to school. And through those conversations, me being the passive-aggressive, inspirational seeking person I am, forced him to answer questions about his life and interests and goals.

And through those experiences, he also found an affinity for healthcare and medicine. And this is my last humblebrag, y'all got to chill on me because people are going to hate me. But I got a text around, I want to say this was... Let me check the date. About a year after I left the family, came back to US and whatnot, and it was from my host father on Instagram.

Willie Thompson:
The third host father.

Johnny Powell:
Host father of the kid.

Willie Thompson:
On the host father’s side, yeah.
Johnny Powell:
Yes. He said, "Hello, how are you? My son Taichi decided to be a medical doctor and he began to study hard like you." I said, "Hi, I'm good. That's amazing. He'll be a great doctor. I'm very proud of him." And he said, "You influenced at least one student in Japan." I said, "He's very smart and will be a great doctor." This is humblebrag, I hate myself for sharing this, but it says, "We were very lucky you stayed in our home so Taichi could find the significance of life."

Taylor Goss:
Aw, that's so sweet.

Johnny Powell:
And that actually really did almost bring me to tears. And I think I shared that as an improbable fact on my application that I pushed my host brothers to pursue medicine. The most ironic part is that I got that message in 2018 when I was, I guess a junior in college. And if he went to medical school, then he's a doctor now and I'm just now starting. But that was huge for me to just experience eastern culture and have a really intimate relationship, again, through the hours of suffering of intimate conversations we had every day. But if you all listening to this, much love. Proud of you, Taichi. And yeah, no, it was huge. That was huge. And that's something that I feel like no one else will believe, but it's true. I got it on wax.

Taylor Goss:
I'll take your word for it, right.

Sydney Hunt:
Yeah. I believe it, I believe it. Okay, well, this has been so fun chatting with you. We have one last question for you and that is, what advice would you give to anyone who is applying to Knight-Hennessy?

Johnny Powell:
Yes. I think it sounds cliche and a lot of things I do sound cliche, but that's just fair. You should really just reflect on who you are and what is important to you. I get a lot of questions around qualifying statistics, GPA, all these things. And I do recognize a lot of those are important for any fellowship program, any scholarship, any grad school application regardless. But I think Knight-Hennessy is incredibly unique because they are explicitly on the website looking for service oriented leaders. So you need to reflect on what service experiences you've had, why they're important to you, what leadership experiences you've had, why they're important to you. For what it's worth, I was lucky enough to get connected with someone in KH through a mutual friend during my application cycle.

And I actually asked him straight up, going into my application, going into interview stuff, "Should I try to share stories that are really powerful in the traditional sense of me helping pursue $3,000,000,000 in funding? Or should I share the more intimate, smaller scale interactions? For example, me mentoring Haitian kids in Boston who are fifth graders with afterschool math, which of those should I prioritize in my interview and my application?" And he said, "The ones that are most important to you." And through my application, I very much highlighted those small level little things, like pushing wheelchairs at a hospital on Saturdays for eight hours for free to volunteer. Those are things that I actually like to do. So I think for me, KH, maybe you could see that. But I will say I don't feel like it's a status competition of who has the most impressive accolades. Really, are you service oriented? Are you a leader? Highlight those things and pray on it and it's going to be what it's going to be. So that would be my best advice.
Sydney Hunt:
Beautiful. Thank you so much. And also, shameless plug, if anyone has questions, come to our info sessions for the applications. You can sign up on our website.

Taylor Goss:
Oh. KH ambassadors, huh?

Sydney Hunt:
Yeah. I know, I know. I feel like I have to say it. But thank you so much, Johnny, for speaking with us today. It was so fun. We're honored to have you as the first 2023 cohort to be interviewed on our podcast. I feel like you were by far the most highly requested cohort interviewer.

Johnny Powell:
Y'all are too much.

Sydney Hunt:
And yeah, I had a blast chatting.

Johnny Powell:
I had a blast as well. Thank you all for having me. Shameless shout-outs to my family, love you all, my friends. I don't want to get specific because I'll leave someone out.

Taylor Goss:
"I'd like to thank the academy."

Johnny Powell:
The rest of my village, but I would not be where I am today without everybody that's around me. So I'm just so grateful, honored, and privileged, and hope to pay it forward. Lift as we climb.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, absolutely.

Taylor Goss:
It seems clear that you are. It's really cool to see how excited folks were to have you on the podcast and how much love you have in the community. So it's an honor to know you and we appreciate spending some time with you.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, man. I'll probably close this off with a cliche. People have heard that it takes a village to raise a child.

Johnny Powell:
It takes a village.
Taylor Goss:
It does.

Johnny Powell:
It takes a village.

Willie Thompson:
It takes a village, and so we're glad that you're part of this village. Although you're not a child. We're grown, but still.

Taylor Goss:
It's a grown village.

Willie Thompson:
It's a grown village.

Sydney Hunt:
It’s a grown village.

Willie Thompson:
It’s a grown village. But yeah, glad to have you part of our village here at Knight-Hennessy, and so glad to have highlighted your story, man. Appreciate it, man.

Taylor Goss:
Thank you for joining us for this episode of Imagine a World where we hear from inspiring members of the KHS community who are making significant contributions in their respective fields, challenging the status quo, and pushing the boundaries of what is possible as they imagine the world they want to see.

Willie Thompson:
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