

The Daily Helping Episode 304:
Tajay Ashmeade

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:00:00] Move with intention. Move with intent every single day.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:00:12] Hello and welcome to The Daily Helping with Dr. Richard Shuster, food for the brain, knowledge from the experts, tools to win at Life. I'm your host, Dr. Richard. Whoever you are, wherever you're from, and whatever you do, this is the show that is going to help you become the best version of yourself. Each episode you will hear from some of the most amazing, talented, and successful people on the planet who followed their passions and strived to help others. Join our movement to get a million people each day to commit acts of kindness for others. Together, we're going to make the world a better place. Are you ready? Because it's time for your Daily Helping.

Thanks for tuning in to this episode of The Daily Helping Podcast. I'm your host, Doctor Richard. And this is another episode in the Athlete's Voice series of episodes on The Daily Helping, where we are interviewing exceptional athletes doing even more exceptional things in the world. My guest today, Tajay Ashmeade. She likes to go by TJ, so we're going to call her TJ.

She is a former Division 1 Olympic and professional basketball player. And usually I go into the whole thing about her story, but her story is so cool and inspiring, I'm not even going to say it now. I'm going to let her say it. But she's now working as a public speaker, coaching other athletes and individuals reach their full potential. She's got two master's degree --

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:01:43] And a tech company.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:01:43] And a tech company. So, there's a lot we could talk about.

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:01:46] I'm excited.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:01:46] TJ, welcome to The Daily Helping. It is awesome to have you here.

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Tajay Ashmeade: [00:01:49] Hello, hello, hello. Thank you for having me. I'm always excited to do new things, experience new things, and meet new people. Honestly, I'm a people person, so I'm always down for it, especially in sports.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:01:58] Wouldn't guess that at all. So, this is really cool because, you know, we're actually sitting here in-person and we're a really sensational event here in Atlanta, Georgia, where athletes are truly changing the world. And so, we're definitely going to talk about how you're making an impact, but I want to hear your story first, because I know that there's been challenges and that's understating it. So, let's go back in the TJ time machine and tell us your superhero origin story.

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:02:25] Oh, wow. I mean, my story is not special - no. I will say I just had a very interesting upbringing. I mean, I always tell people what is kind of surprising as I step out the realm of New York and Brooklyn and the Bronx, it kind of was the norm in my community in life. So, you know, long story short or not too short, I was born in Jamaica and I came to the States permanently, roughly, around 13, 14.

And in that midst of coming to the States, for Caribbean people or individuals who are not born here, when you come to America, it is the land of opportunity. You come here and you can do anything you want to do and be anything you want to be. So, that's what we were taught. And I came here, me and my family, my mother and my sister, we settled in the Bronx at first. And while we were in the Bronx, it was not necessarily what I necessarily thought the land of opportunity should be. Remind you, I did go to school here younger ages, probably around 9, 10, but then I went back and forth and then I was here permanently again.

So, I say all that to say I started to interact with the wrong crowds, and kind of gotten gang affiliated, and started to participate in gang activities that I shouldn't have participated in. But I felt welcomed. I felt supported. I was in a community that was like, "Listen, you're new here, let's cover you." And it wasn't the covering that I needed, but I didn't know the difference.

So, me being in that community came with some rocky turns and I ended up getting shot. And when I got shot, it was a very transcending, of course, life changing part of my life. But, honestly, it wasn't what slowed me down by no means. It actually was my

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brother getting shot, my younger brother, because he was following in my footsteps. And I didn't think that was a thing until I seen it happen. So, he got shot and that's what shifted me to really dive into sports.

So, I ran track. I did Junior Olympics for track and field, Penn Relays, and then I started to do basketball. And then, I got my little brother into basketball. And then, I went D1 and then my little brother went D1. So, I seen that what I was doing was really playing a ripple effect on him and I wanted to be a positive influence on him. And so, that's the upbringing of my life. And I forgot, I was placed in special education.

And I necessarily did not, again, understand or kind of feel the difficulties, but I knew there were hardships. I just thought these were just normal hardships that were kind of just supposed to happen to a young individual like me in my neighborhood. And then, now, I'm just doing my thing. Through all these struggles and obstacles and hurdles, I just never took no as an answer, and I kept on bulldozing through it. I was fortunate to go to junior college where I still did wrong.

But then, everything had to happen the way it happened because I ended up getting recruited to Seton Hall after losing a scholarship to Rutgers University, and I got recruited by Anne Donovan when she was leaving the New York Liberty that summer to enter into D1 basketball.

And if you don't know who Anne Donovan is - I don't know if you know sports at all, to be realistic - she's the pioneer of women's sports. She is up there with the Pat Summitt's of the world and the Geno Auriemma's in women's sports and women's basketball, specifically. And it was just a very kind of transcending moment for me. She understood who I was, what I went through, and where I wanted to go, and how I wanted to help my little brother. And she pushed me forward.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:06:27] So, there's a lot. This was, like, five minutes and you just gave us 20 years of your life. So, there's a lot I want to unpack there. So, first of all, it's interesting because you got into the gang because you didn't really have people, right? Like, they were your people. And I'm curious, what was it like getting out of the gang? Because it's often said that you don't ever get out. You get out when you're dead.

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Tajay Ashmeade: [00:06:56] You don't get out. You just stop being active. So, that's what happened for me. I just stopped being active as soon as I entered Seton Hall. I just kind of realized, "Whoa. You have something greater than self and your brother is watching you. You cannot continue to do this." So, I stopped being active at the age of 19 - I want to say 18, 19. I would say 19 when I came into Seton Hall. I really don't know the age specifically.

But I just stopped being active. I stopped being a lookout on the rooftops in Brooklyn. I stopped making drug drops, to be transparent. I stopped doing things that would count me as an active gang member. And that just kind of was the way of life. And, honestly, it wasn't hard because I was always known as the girl playing basketball. "Don't bother TJ. She's going somewhere. She's playing ball. Nah, TJ's going to make it out. She's playing ball. Leave her alone." So, they kind of just respected that.

Okay. You protected me this whole time. I mean, it wasn't the best necessarily protection, but you watched over my little brother and myself in a neighborhood where a lot could have went wrong a hundred different times. And I was always the girl that played ball. So, let me play ball now. Let me fully commit to this.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:08:17] And your brother, did they leave him alone, too?

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:08:22] That was one of the main reasons why I joined a gang, because if I joined willingly, they wouldn't have gone after him. And that was, you know, young black men. They would have gone after him quickly. So, by me willingly stepping in, again, it was like, "Leave TJ and her brother and her mom alone. TJ's playing ball."

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:08:43] Okay. And you mentioned that through your childhood had these learning disabilities that got diagnosed. So, tell us about that, too, because now you're two masters and on your way to a PhD. So, that's obviously --

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:08:55] I know. I'm so tired. And I have a paper due and I'm just like, "Ah," annotated bibliography. And I'm just like, "I cannot right now." So, simply said, I had a learning disorder and I didn't know. I didn't know until I was at college that I had ADD, which is now just simply ADHD. And I was placed in special education because, I think, it was just like a more easier way out for the admin who was treating me at the

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time. It was kind of just like, "Well, we have these classes." They're supposed to be better because special education, it wasn't new, but it was still kind of, like, 2001, you know, I'm heading in around that time.

And I say, that's all to say. It was more so I just learned different, and I was okay. I was not okay with it at that time, but I love it now. I learn different. I'm different. I read different. I pick up knowledge differently. I have knowledge gaps that have to be filled and be a little bit more attended to. And I love that because it just makes me who I am now.

But I was placed in special education. I was called stupid. And I changed the narrative of the word stupid to Strength, Toughness, Understanding, Persistence, Identity, and Determination.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:10:15] Do that again slower. Do that again slower.

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:10:19] Yeah. So, I was called stupid. And I changed the narrative of the word stupid to Strength, Toughness, Understanding, Persistence, Identity, and Determination.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:10:29] How old were you when you came up with that?

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:10:31] I came up with this probably 2015, so recent.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:10:34] Okay. So, this is new.

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:10:34] Yeah. This is recent - no. I came up with it 2010 - sorry, 2010 -because it was probably a couple of weeks after I found out I had ADD at Seton Hall University. But I started to use it powerfully in journals and my vision boards in 2015 when I was playing overseas because I was just going through a tough year.

And it really kind of put that narrative in my mind like, "I do not ever want to live by any opinion anyone puts on me. I am a free goddess, angel, bird of the world. I am just thriving in the life that I have and I only have one chance at this, and I'm going to live at

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the most fulfilling, understanding that there's going to be hurdles, obstacles, hardships. But that's not going to hold me down." What is life without hardships? It's a balance.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:11:28] I'm curious and I do want to talk your post-basketball life. So, what stopped you from going to Rutgers? What ended up happening to lose that scholarship?

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:11:40] You know what happened.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:11:42] I don't know what happened.

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:11:43] No. I'm messing with you. What had happened was, I stole cheeseburgers. That's what happened. So, I was at junior college, Trinity Valley, and then long story short, one day before our JUCO championship, I went to the supermarket, and instead of using my per diem money - I don't know why - I stole the cheeseburgers and then my teammates just started calling me the Hamburglar.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:12:09] That's pretty funny, actually. How did Rutgers find out you were the Hamburglar?

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:12:14] They find out everything. I don't know. They find out.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:12:17] Maybe Grimace or Ronald McDonald told them.

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:12:19] I was arrested. It was a real thing.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:12:21] Okay. Well, that's a thing. That's different.

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:12:22] Yeah. So, I was arrested, fingerprinted up, mugshot up for hamburgers. And that's when I knew sports was just something that, even in a Brittney Griner situation, sometimes we have to be examples for people to learn a lesson. It sucks, but it's true.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:12:38] If it's any consolation, impulsivity is often seen in those with ADHD, so maybe you were having one of your moments.

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Tajay Ashmeade: [00:12:45] Oh. And I didn't know it.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:12:47] But in all seriousness, though, getting shot, having the learning differences and then making a poor decision which got you arrested and cost you a scholarship at a D1 school, at that point, were you thinking, "All right. Well, I'm just going to get out of jail." Was that a moment that you realized that things needed to change in some way?

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:13:15] No. Because, again, it was my brother. Him getting shot while I was at Trinity Valley, that shifted it. So, when I got to Seton Hall I had a coming to Jesus moment immediately with my coach.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:13:27] Was the arrest for the cheeseburgers before your brother was shot?

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:13:32] No. It was after - no. It was before. Sorry. It was before he got --

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:13:39] It would have to be if you had just gotten to Seton Hall, right?

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:13:40] Yeah. It was before because I just got to Seton Hall. Sorry.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:13:43] So, when Seton Hall's coaching staff was talking to you and they see this arrest, like, how did you --

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:13:49] Coach Donovan called me. She called me and I spoke to her and I told her everything. Yes, I told her everything that was going on. One thing about me, I'm not a liar. I don't lie. And that's not something I'm like "I don't lie." There's no one to lie to. Like, who is such to lie to? Like, we all have the same type of life set up. You know, we are all given one chance on this earth.

So, I told her the truth and I was just like, "Listen. This is what happened, I lost a

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scholarship." And she was so open to give me a second chance, and so open to just provide an opportunity that can change my life, which it did. Rest in peace, Anne Donovan, my mama bear. And she brought me into Seton Hall.

And Seton Hall is where everything shifted for me because I had someone, I had a coach, I had a mentor, I had a person off the court who I called my mama bear who cared about TJ. You know, as I said on the stage earlier, she cared about TJ, the person, not just the player. And that's one of the things I feel that's missing, especially now in just the sports community.

I mean, you have individuals like - what is this? I'm tipping her name right now. But you have so many individuals in the sports realm like a Pat Summitt, who says "The game doesn't stop when the player leaves the court. It just begins." And that's who Anne Donovan was for me.

And by that, I found out I had ADD because she said, "Look at the court," and when a coach says look at the court, they say look at the players, and instead I looked at the court. And she was like, "Okay. This is the last stick. I really got to speak to TJ again." And we came in and she said, I'm going to do an evaluation and everything. And I found out I had ADD. And I had therapy three times a week during the season with my sports psychologist because I was just like, "I need to figure this out." And that's how everything shifted.

I went to the Connecticut Suns camps, like, pro basketball started from there. I went overseas. Because when I was able to focus in on a positive with my ADD and put it towards something, which was rebounded, I became the Dennis Rodman of the Big East. I became the number one --

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:16:07] Hopefully not in terms of your behavior. Just in terms of your rebounding.

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:16:11] No. I became the number one - number two rebounder - let me correct myself - in the Big East Conference, and number one rebounder in my senior in the Big East Conference.

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Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:16:24] And so, after college, then WNBA, playing overseas?

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:16:29] That's how I got picked up, rebounding.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:16:29] When your playing career ended, because playing careers are so finite in sports, and so was it in your mind what comes next? Did you know? Did you have a plan?

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:16:44] I had a plan. I was fortunate, again, to have Anne Donovan in my life. So, while I was playing overseas, I was doing my first masters at University of Phoenix online. So, I already had a plan. Did I know what this degree was going to do for me? No. But I knew let's get it so we can start looking for jobs. But a lot of athletes don't have a plan.

And I was already going to give up the game. It wasn't taken away from me. And that's the difference. When the game is taken away from you like a lot of athletes, you are frustrated. My little brother is going through that right now. You are frustrated. You are just hurting so deeply inside because this is not a job that you wanted to give up. You've been doing this since you're 13, 14 years old. And this is not a choice that you necessarily put on the table. It's hard.

You know, for me, I had the choice. I was just like, "I am tired. I am done. I do not want to play professionally no more." It would be selfish and unfair if I did not allow this opportunity to go to someone coming up.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:17:52] I think that's true of many things, what you just said. And, obviously, the people listening to this in their cars or at home, very few of them are playing professional sports, right?

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:18:04] They are. Life is a professional sport.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:18:06] That's interesting. Tell me what you mean by that.

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:18:08] Life is a professional sport. Oh, my gosh. You have to understand the people who are supporting and surrounding yourself with. You have to

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understand the plays that are coming to you daily, how you're going to maneuver through that strategically, who is going to help you move forward, who's going to push you forward, who's a liability in your life. Because you have to understand that you need assets in your life, not liabilities. You have to understand how to read situations, how to speak to people, how to keep on going in difficult, challenging times the last two years, challenging times before that, probably challenging times now.

Life is a professional sport that you play consistently. There's no halftime break. I mean, you know, you play consistently and you have to practice to win. I'm a firm believer of that.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:19:05] I love the way that you phrased that. And it really is true. I mean, for many of us, we can think about who's our coach, who's our mentor. We can think about who are the people on our team.

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:19:15] And your mentor doesn't have to be someone that you met. I always say that Jay-Z is my mentor and I never met Jay-Z in my life, but we have the same upbringing story and he's made a switch. So, a mentor is just someone that you see, that can be someone that you've seen accomplish things that you are interested in, and you take notes. I mean, the world is so open now, you can take notes from anyone and be successful. It's just got to be consistent.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:19:40] Yeah. I like that a lot. One day, maybe Jay-Z will listen to this and he'll reach out to you.

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:19:47] Oh, if you send it to me, I'm going to forward it.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:19:50] But in all seriousness, so now you're in your post-basketball world, you've got your two degrees, so what is on the horizon for you in terms of - and this is the big piece - the impact you're trying to make in the world?

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:20:05] Oh, wow. The impact I'm trying to just simply make in the world is creating the next generation of athletes. So, I have a sports technology company called Nurture SPRT. And, basically, we are the NCAA off the court, when you're not playing your sport. So, what we do, we help athletes get jobs with our job

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board. We help athletes with sports psychologists. We make sure that we are not disrupting their day-to-day life while they're playing the sport. So, you're able to access everything online. We provide resources.

And we have a statistic generator that matches all high school athletes to the proper college, whether it be D1, D2, D3, NAIA, NJAA, to show them that even if you have a 0.1 GPA you can still play collegiate basketball and get a scholarship and have it paid for you at an NJAA and then transferring. There's always a way. And that's what I want to teach my babies, my athletes, is that there is always a way.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:21:06] And how many athletes, if you had to guess, have you helped find their way with this so far?

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:21:11] Thirty-six thousand. I know the number by heart now because we've partnered with the PSAL, the Public School Athletic League, in New York, the Tri-State area, and it's 369 schools, 36,000 athletes. And only 2 percent of them get scholarships, which is 720 of them. And, now, we're pushing that forward. So, we know the stats. We've been really hitting it hard.

And then, I have a sports leadership consultancy where I go to colleges and schools and work directly with the athlete. You know, they call me the Aunt Viv of sports, like the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, the optimist [inaudible], and I think that's so cute. But who am I to ever not help the way my coach helped me?

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:21:56] So well said. TJ, you're doing awesome things.

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:22:00] Appreciate you.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:22:01] Your life could have gone very differently and so really, really amazing that you saw the opportunity and took the fork in the road because not everybody does that. TJ, this has been a cool conversation. Your energy is fun.

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:22:18] Thank you.

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Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:22:18] So, as we wrap up, I always ask my guests one question, and that is, what is your biggest helping? That one most important piece of information you'd like somebody to walk away with after hearing our conversation today?

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:22:29] Move with intention. Move with intent every single day.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:22:34] You didn't even think about that for a second. You didn't even blink.

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:22:36] Nope.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:22:36] I love it. Where can people learn more about what you're doing?

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:22:40] Well, you can always find me on my website, tajayashmeade.com. I'm on the socials, @nurturesprt on Instagram. Sport without the O, so Nurture SPRT, S-P-R-T. And then, Tajay Ashmeade on Instagram as well. So, follow me. I'm a vibe. Let's go.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:23:01] And we got you covered. We got everything TJ Ashmeade in the show notes at thedailyhelping.com.

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:23:08] Yes. Congratulations on everything, for sure. I love podcasting. I'm just nervous always to do it. So, you're knocking it out of the park.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:23:16] Appreciated. Very much appreciated. And each and every one of you who chose to listen to our conversation today, I appreciate you, too. If you like what you heard, go give us a five star review on Apple Podcasts, because that's what --

Tajay Ashmeade: [00:23:28] I will.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:23:28] I was talking to them, but you can do it, too. Because this is what helps people find the show. But most importantly, go out there today and do

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something nice for somebody else, even if you don't know who they are, and post on your social media feeds using the hashtag #MyDailyHelping because the happiest people are those that help others.