Kat Jercich: Welcome to What Else Happened, a show for people who want to know what stories this week may have slipped under the radar. I'm Kat Jercich.

Regina Mahone: I'm Regina Mahone, and we're the managing editors at Rewire.News, where we deliver evidence based journalism for people who are passionate about health, rights and justice.

Kat Jercich: This week on What Else Happened, we'll talk about the disproportionately high rates of maternal mortality among women of color in Texas. The Trump administration's latest moves against trans students and how Chicago is putting religious restrictions above patient access to care.

Regina Mahone: We'll chat with Sonia Chopra about how a Black student in Mason, Ohio faced racist comments from his white social studies teacher, and what his mother is doing about it.

Kat Jercich: Let's get going.

Regina Mahone: The health and wellbeing of pregnant women and new parents has been in the news quite a bit recently and for an important reason.

Kat Jercich: You might have heard stories about maternal health from journalists or advocates following the tragic death of Erica Garner. She was the daughter of Eric Garner who was killed by a New York City police officer in 2014. Jessica Roach who is the executive director of Restoring Our Own Through Transformation in Columbus, Ohio, wrote a piece for Rewire on the way grief, trauma and resistance work to contribute to premature death of Black mothers.

Regina Mahone: Also, one of my favorite podcast, NPR's Code Switch, reported on the issue recently. Co-host Gene Demby interviewed Arline Geronimus, a researcher who coined the term “weathering” to describe the condition many Black women experience of being worn down by external factors.

Kat Jercich: Like racism.

Regina Mahone: Exactly that. Stressors like racism, which one might experience in a department store, which is the example Code Switch uses. Takes a toll on a person's body to a degree that affects their ability to live a healthy and full life.
Kat Jercich: That was such a hard Code Switch episode to listen to.

Regina Mahone: Yeah.

Kat Jercich: Yeah, it was really important, but hard. In her piece at Rewire, Jessica Roach explains how Black people have known that racism and the stress it brings can kill. It's like the media is suddenly catching up, but even with all these harrowing stories being published at outlets like ProPublica, many still aren't getting how institutional bias undermines any gains we might see with more awareness of this issue.

Regina Mahone: Yes. Institutional bias and that brings me to our story this week about maternal health, so we can really get into how institutional bias plays out. The Texas Tribune published a story this week titled 'Dangerous Deliveries' by Marissa Evans, highlighting how Texas is seeing record breaking maternal mortality rates.

There's some debate about exactly what the rate is for the state, which I'll leave to the data analysts to have their kerfuffle over. The bottom line is, maternal deaths in the state are higher than they've been in previous years. There isn't a single cause or a single solution to the problem and women of color, Black women in particular, have the highest risk of dying from pregnancy.

Kat Jercich: The Tribune reported that while black women delivered only 11% of babies in the state between 2012 and 2015, they made up 20% of maternal deaths.

Regina Mahone: I find this deeply upsetting, as I'm sure many, if not all of our listeners do as well so.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. What are lawmakers doing about this?

Regina Mahone: Oh, so that's the fun part. The Tribune found Texas legislators have actually quote “squandered opportunities” to help reverse the trend of this health crisis.

Kat Jercich: Oh good. Great. How did that happen?

Regina Mahone: Where to begin? Well they failed to expand healthcare coverage for hundreds of thousands of people who would be eligible for Medicaid, and they cut services to family planning providers, leaving many women without access to lifesaving services like cancer screenings and contraceptives.
Kat Jercich: Cool. Great. By family planning service providers are you talking about like Planned Parenthood and other clinics?

Regina Mahone: Exactly, and legislators cut those funds, because abortion, even though the affected clinics were not providing abortion care. The report does point to a recent examples of where the legislature made gains to improve research of maternal deaths and access to maternal care, but gaps remain. On the whole, the state continues to fall short.

Kat Jercich: There's also the fact that Black patients are experiencing injustices while they're in the care of medical professionals right?

Regina Mahone: Yeah. This issue has gained more exposure in the wake of Serena Williams's Vogue cover story, in which the star shared her birth experience of having to advocate for herself to receive the care she needed to survive.

Kat Jercich: I remember that piece. Black women have long said that they are often not believed in medical settings and the reports supporting those claims are piling up.

Regina Mahone: Yeah, and the Texas Tribune reporter adds to this growing body of evidence showing health systems and legislative bodies are not doing enough to support pregnant people. One final thing I'll say about this issue for now is that, as dire as the situation's become, there are a number of organizations providing resources for pregnant people, including services for women experiencing intimate partner violence and mental illness or substance abuse disorders.

The Tribune highlighted many of those service providers in a supplement to its standards deliveries piece. To reiterate, that's one small part of this larger issue. What are legislators and medical professionals doing to right their wrongs? What are we doing as a society to address the stressors triggering premature deaths of people before, during or after they give birth?

Well, you may have heard or read a few reports on the maternal health crisis in recent weeks. We're only really scratching the surface of a systemic problem that we're just beginning to understand.

Kat Jercich: Last month in Mason, Ohio, a 13 year old black student named Nathan told his mother that his white social studies teacher had warned him, that if he didn't stay on top of his work, his classmates would, "Form a mob and lynch him."
Nathan’s mother, Tanisha Agee-Bell said that she confirmed the comments with the teacher. This week Tanisha said that the teacher had been disciplined. Sonia Chopra, who covered the issue at HuffPost joined me to talk about the story and Tanisha’s concerns, which extend beyond the specific incident.

Hey Sonia, can you just start off by recapping to me what went on with Nathan and his social studies teacher in the classroom?

Sonia Chopra: Yeah, he’s the only African-American student in the class. The class is predominantly white with one Latino and some Asian students, who are from China and India. Nathan did tell his teacher that the comment was racist, but she denied that it was, and so the kid was silent thinking he had done something wrong.

It took him about a week to open up to his mother at the dinner table, when they were talking about injustice and how you should stand up if you see something wrong. He said, “Well, I just want to say my teacher is a racist,” and he told her the conversation. She describes herself as being heartbroken. The next day she made a series of calls, one to the assistant principal, who emailed her and she said that the principal will be looking into it.

She called the teacher, and in the conversation with the teacher, she admitted that she said the wrong thing. When the mom reached out to the principal, she got a standard email saying they’re looking into it. She called back to the district and she said, “I deserve much more than an email. I deserve a phone call. I’ve been on the diversity committee for 10 years. My struggles have, your struggles have been mine struggles. I have supported you and I’ve invested my time. I’m a hands on, engaged mother and I deserve so much more.”

The school district called her and said they were apologetic and so she went to meet them, but she got no response. Then she went to the school board, nobody gave her any answers, nobody would respond to requests, so she called the media. Once the media jumped in, the response was quickly swept from the school. They issued a statement saying that they’ve seen an uptick in the number of racially and culturally sensitive comments in our school and community. Sometimes these are just said out of general ignorance. As a district we …

Kat Jercich: They’ve seen an uptick in sensitive comments?

Sonia Chopra: Yes. As a district we want to be very clear of any racial slurs or any behavior that discriminates against other is not acceptable and the “not” was in capital letters.
Kat Jercich: What's happened since then?

Sonia Chopra: They had originally said that the teacher will not be removed from the classroom. She will go through a cultural sensitivity training program, but the mother said that she was not satisfied with that. She did not think the teacher was qualified to be in the classroom, especially teaching history since she obviously doesn't understand it.

With the media pressure, with the calls, they go on Saturday morning without calling the mother or communicating with the mother, they released another statement saying that they have made a decision, that the teacher will be taken out of the classroom and she will be trained.

Yesterday the mother and the father Mr. and Mrs. Agee-Bell were invited to the school district, and they were told that she is removed from the classroom, where she is going to have an inter hour training session. It's going to be on cultural, it's going to be on imminent bias and cultural sensitivity. She's going to be trained in an eight hour session and she's going to have to be engaged with the trainer. She's going to have to prove that she understands what she's done wrong and then she's going to be allowed back into the classroom.

The school will follow up on the training. Although Agee-Bell is hopeful, she says, “We have to be honest and open about our own hurts and biases, and be willing to forgive ourselves and others.” Right on the heels of this, yesterday was another racial incident in which white schoolmates put a black classmate of theirs on Snapchat, making fun of him, calling him lazy because he was yawning in class, so they took like a photo of him yawning in class and they said he was a lazy “N” ...

Kat Jercich: Sorry, was this at the same school at Mason Middle School?

Sonia Chopra: It's the same school and it was yesterday.

Kat Jercich: Oh my God. What are Tanisha and the other parents hoping from out of this? Obviously the teacher’s being disciplined, but if these incidents are still happening, there's clearly a broader problem.

Sonia Chopra: They do not believe things are going to change and most people have just, and will continue to, they said, to take their kids just out of the school district. Because, they said, with the bullying and the harassment issues, it's going to take them acknowledging that a change has been made. But they said the problem is so systematic that this is just a Band-Aid. It's not going to be fixed.
While Agee-Bell has been reassured over and over again by the school district, that the teacher is sorry, she understands this is serious, and she knows that it was wrong, she’s certainly never going to do it again — they’re just not convinced that this hostile environment is going to miraculously and suddenly change. They think there’s a lot of work that has to be done before then.

One of the things they’re advocating for, is more openness with the parents, letting the parents know that this is what happened in class and “this what we’re doing to prevent this,” which they feel has not happened in the past.

Kat Jercich: Thank you so much for joining us Sonia and for keeping track of this really important story.

Sonia Chopra: It’s been my pleasure, thank you for having me.

Regina Mahone: There’ve been a lot of questions around whether the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights under President Trump would defend the rights of transgender students to visit the bathroom of their gender identity. A HuffPost investigation suggests it won’t.

That investigation released this week, found Donald Trump’s Department of Education is dismissing cases involving transgender students who seek to play on a gender specific sports team or use the bathroom that corresponds with their gender identity. HuffPost’s education reporter, Rebecca Klein identified three such cases, following on the heels of a Washington Post report from June, that found the office had closed two other cases involving similar complaints. Kat, even editing our Team Legal analysts for a while, from your point of view, how do we even get here?

Kat Jercich: Oh my God. Well they can speak to it more than I can, and so for any further information, I suggest listeners head down to RewireNews. Just a quick summary, title nine is supposed to ban sex based discrimination in schools. The question of whether sex includes gender identity is kind of an open one and it’s been evolving over the last few years, as our understanding as a society of sex and gender identity has also evolved.

A few years ago, the Obama administration offered a guidance saying that Title Nine should ban sex based discrimination in schools with regard to gender identity specifically. In other words, if schools were preventing trans students from using the bathrooms of their choice, their federal funding could be in jeopardy, which was great, yay, good news. I know right?
The best example of this can be seen in Gloucester County, Virginia, where a high school student — or a former high school student I should say — named Gavin Grimm has been fighting for years and years to just use the restroom of his choice. Gavin Grimm is trans, and since 2014, he has been trying to use the boy’s bathroom to no avail. That case has been kind of making its way through the lower courts and it actually made it all the way up to the Supreme Court.

When it made up to the Supreme Court, that was after the Obama administration had made this guidance and so things were looking pretty good, knock on wood. Then, 2016 happened, and so the Supreme Court sent his case back down after the Trump administration rescinded that previous guidance. Basically, the court sent Grimm’s case back down to the lower courts. It’s kind of been stuck there ever since.

Regina Mahone: Yeah.

Kat Jercich: Progress denied, surprise.

Regina Mahone: Just to go back a little bit, basically what’s happening is that the Trump administration is specifically saying that Title Nine does not include gender identity. The legal experts are saying, actually guidance or no guidance, if Obama’s guidance is in place or not, gender identity is still included, right?

Kat Jercich: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Regina Mahone: At the end of the day, the Office for Civil Rights isn’t defending these complaints. It’s actually going so far as to say the complaints don’t even fall under its jurisdiction, which is confusing, because it’s a national office.

Kat Jercich: Right.

Regina Mahone: Basically, students raising these complaints have to fight them at the local level, is what’s happening right?

Kat Jercich: Right, and I mean the whole thing is just ridiculous, because as you said it’s a federal law, but it’s differing from state to state and circuit court to circuit court and court of appeals to court of appeals. One way to look at this, I find is with Title Seven, which was passed in the 60s in which bans employment discrimination. Because whether it bans discrimination based on sexual orientation differs from state to state, some courts of appeals have said it does, some courts of appeals have said it doesn’t.
It means that if you live in a state like Oregon, you’re way more likely to be safer at work or if you’re a trans kid, safer at school than you are if you live in a state like Ohio or Missouri. Again, these are federal laws.

Regina Mahone: Right.

Kat Jercich: It's incomprehensible to me that, by the luck of the draw, by a roll the dice you could be fired for being gay at work. It makes my stomach hurt. Of course, we see that with a lot of injustices that the luck of, the luck or unlucky of birth, means that you get put in different circumstances. Ostensibly, the Equal Rights Amendment should have worked toward fixing that, not making it more complicated.

Regina Mahone: I think what continues to be alarming for folks, advocates, LGBTQ rights advocates, civil rights advocates, is how President Trump continues to nominate people who fall, kind of fall in line with this anti civil rights, anti LGBTQ agenda. There's the issue with Kenneth Marcus, who's Trump's pick to lead the Office for Civil Rights. There's also his Justice Department nominee Eric Dreiband, but that's not even all the people who are already in office like Jeff Sessions, who already have pushed forward this anti LGBTQ rights agenda.

The administration is sending a pretty clear message. Trump is sending a pretty clear message with his picks too.

Kat Jercich: That bastion of civil rights Jeff Sessions. It's not just agencies, it's also federal judgeships. If these folks are bringing their cases to court, then eventually these cases will land before court of appeals judges. Those court of appeals judges are being nominated in droves by Donald Trump and being confirmed in droves by the Republican majority Senate. It just feels like no matter which way people turn, they're not going to have a clear path toward justice.

Regina Mahone: The hapless piece discusses how there's also been what appears to be a reduced number of complaints filed and raising the question, are students more reluctant to file complaints now that Trump immediately resented Obama's guidance? Or is it just a coincidence, because the number of complaints ebbs and flows, and it just happens to be at this point that there aren't many?

We don't know, but we do you know that the Justice Department and the Department of Education, we talked about Title Seven, Title Nine, have both sent clear messages to trans people, that defending their rights is just not a priority of the current administration.
Kat Jercich: On Wednesday morning, the Chicago City Council voted in favor of giving five point five million in tax dollars to Presence Health, a Catholic health system that restricts access to reproductive care like abortion and birth control. The money came from a system known as TIF or Taxpayer Increment Funds.

Regina Mahone: Explain that please.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. It's kind of a little confusing at the best of times. The TIF program takes a chunk of property tax money from a district, that is supposed to be used within that district for projects that wouldn't be completed without that money. In this case, Presence is asking for basically a reimbursement after it spent $13.3 million on its downtown office.

In exchange for getting that TIF money, it said it would spend fifteen and a half million dollars on four clinics in historically underserved neighborhoods.

Regina Mahone: I'm guessing some taxpayers aren't happy about that.

Kat Jercich: Yeah, you would be correct — including this one. I'm not going to get into the ways TIF money has historically been misspent by my favorite city. It is my favorite, but I'm mad at it. I'm sure you can imagine the ways it's been misspent. This proposal has a few broad implications. For one thing, as I said before, Presence is a Catholic health system, in fact it's the largest one in the state.

Like most Catholic health systems, it generally adheres to rules set by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Regina Mahone: Which means, among other things, no abortion care, no promotion of birth control, no tubal ligation?

Kat Jercich: Plus probably no trans healthcare. The rules vary from system to system and hospital to hospital, but if I had to guess, that would be the case. Chicago is, if it's not a progressive city, then it's a pretty Democratic one. If this willingness to put money over residents' healthcare options is happening here, like what about in places that are more prone to implementing policies in favor of religious restrictions.
Regina Mahone: I mean we just talked about what happens when legislators by conservative religious values over access to care in Texas. As we reported on at Rewire.News, the continued takeover of facilities by Catholic health systems persists. According to MergerWatch, one in six acute care beds are in hospitals that comply with Catholic doctrine. In rural areas, it's often people's only option.

Kat Jercich: Which is another concern with this TIF plan. In exchange Presence agreed to open a clinic specializing in cancer treatment in underserved neighborhoods on the city's south and west sides. That's great, like that's genuinely great, but what about when people in those areas need care that's not sanctioned by the church? Yeah. They need that care and they deserve it.

It's maybe not likely depending on the clinic specializations, but will those folks be forced to seek care across the city? For some people that's just not an option, especially in areas where transit is limited.

Regina Mahone: Right.

Kat Jercich: I completely understand the greater need for healthcare access in those areas, because again there definitely is one. Giving enormous health systems even more funding to provide incomplete care, just isn't the way to do it. It's really concerning to me that that's the only solution the city can seem to come up with.

Regina Mahone: Let me guess, people working at these clinics ... 

Kat Jercich: Will not be getting birth control coverage through their employers insurance, no, no they will not. Plus it's not a unionized system. Oh my God, there's so many issues, so many examples of the ways taxpayer money in this city, a city where need I remind us, schools are closing left and right because of lack of funding...

Regina Mahone: You pretty much remind us every week.

Kat Jercich: Well it's another example of taxpayer money shoveled toward a resource that many Chicagoans, I would say probably the majority of Chicagoans don't support.

Regina Mahone: Are you going to call your older man and yell at him?

Kat Jercich: It's extremely possible that I will, yes.

Regina, what's bringing you joy this week?
Regina Mahone: Science fiction writers Kat. Black women science fiction writers in particular.

Kat Jercich: Please tell.

Regina Mahone: I actually have not always been a huge science fiction person, science fiction fantasy person. It probably wasn't until I was introduced to 'Battlestar Galactica' by my husband a few years after we started dating, that I really got into it.

Then recently I've been reading more science fiction, because real life is just too much for me — reading about real life is too much for me. I much prefer the fantasy elements of it. I recently started reading, well I've been reading Octavia Butler. I started with her and then, and I read her 'Parable of Sowers and Talents' and 'Fledgling', all amazing books.

Then I've been reading some N.K. Jemisin and now I'm back to Octavia Butler. I'm reading 'Kindred' this week, which is an incredible book about time travel and a black woman writer who travels back to the 1800s and is learning more about her ancestors. It's an incredible book, but on a snowy time, a cold time, it is still amazing to be snuggled up with all these fantastic books.

I feel like every time I discover a new Black woman science fiction writer, it's like a present to myself.

Kat Jercich: Yeah.

Regina Mahone: It's great.

Kat Jercich: The second N.K. Jemisin book and the Obelisk series is actually on my nightstand right now. I'm really, I haven't started it yet, but I'm excited about it.

Regina Mahone: Yes. I can't not think about the time when you had the third book and you thought it was the second book of the series, so good.

Kat Jercich: Oh God I thought …

Regina Mahone: I also was confused, because I haven't finished 'Broken Earth' either.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. I thought that I had just completely forgotten what have happened at the end of the first book. I was like “oh”.
Regina Mahone: So much happens in the first book.

Kat Jercich: I guess, yeah, and I just completely blocked it out, so that was very, I guess I kind of spoiled myself.

Regina Mahone: Yeah. This is the ‘Fifth Season,’ listeners, by N.K. Jemisin.

Kat Jercich: Oh yeah, sorry.

Regina Mahone: ‘Broken Earth’ series, you should definitely check it out.

Kat Jercich: It’s so good. It’s so good.

Regina Mahone: Yeah, but Kat, what’s bringing you joy this week?

Kat Jercich: Speaking of cold snowy weather, it’s snowing outside — that’s it!

Regina Mahone: In Chicago, what?

Kat Jercich: I know. I mean I don’t want to be that Chicagoan who’s like, “You call that cold?” When everyone else is talking about how cold it is, but I came back from my winter vacation in California to like three degree weather without wind chill. It just makes me feel so alive.

I’m a summer baby. I love the summer, it’s my favorite season, but as I’ve gotten older, being able to kind of engage with the elements and feel that bright sunshine on the snow or going for runs in the powder, just, it’s really, it makes me feel really good.

Regina Mahone: You’re writing some beautiful poetry right now.

Kat Jercich: Oh thank you. I’m painting a word picture. It’s because my office window looks out on my street, so I can just see this beautiful landscape of snow. Also, I don’t drive, that’s an important caveat, I don’t drive, so I never have to deal with the garbage parts of snow like digging your car out. Yeah.

Regina Mahone: I know about that.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. I’m like yay, I’m walking five minutes to the train. Not really taking responsibility for all the terrible stuff snow entails, but I love it. I will be sad when it all melts.
Regina Mahone: What's your favorite snow time activity, like of all time?

Kat Jercich: I really like downhill skiing. I grew up downhill skiing, so it's actually one of the few activities I found that I still don't need something in my ears. Like I feel like running and walking and everything you get so accustomed to sort of blocking out the world, but that's really dangerous in downhill skiing.

You really are alone with your thoughts in a way that I find very appealing. Even though I'm not a very good skier, I'm pretty slow and anxious, but that aspect of just like the sound of the snow and the smell of it, is really one of my favorite things. Do you have a favorite winter activity, not necessarily like a snow activity?

Regina Mahone: Being indoors.

Kat Jercich: That's a second favorite.

Regina Mahone: Is a favorite of mine. Yeah, I know, I'm a big fan of just sitting on the couch and like I'm actively trying not to watch television, because it's just too easy to watch TV in the winter time. That's what I'm trying to focus on, just sitting on my couch like listening to music, reading a book, taking a nice bath, but yeah, being indoors is a favorite winter pastime of mine.

Kat Jercich: Yeah, hot bath for like a close second, I think. That's our show for this week. If you liked it, please rate it on Apple podcasts and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.

Regina Mahone: Thanks again to Sonia Chopra.

Kat Jercich: You can find her @SoniaChopra28 on Twitter.

Regina Mahone: You can follow Rewire.News @Rewire_News and me @byreginamahone.

Kat Jercich: I'm @KJercich on Twitter.

Regina Mahone: Good luck with the headlines and we'll see you next week on What Else Happened.

What Else Happened is a Rewire.News production created and hosted by Regina Mahone and Kat Jercich, the managing editors at Rewire.News. Nora Hurley is our producer, Marc Faletti is our executive producer and Jodi Jacobson is our editor in chief.