

## Interview on Grief and Loss with Roger, a survivor

Hello my name is Elyse and I would like to welcome you back to Rising from the Ashes, Trauma Talks, a podcast series brought to you by UB School of Social Work, The Institute on Trauma and Trauma Informed Care. This series provides an opportunity for individuals to share their witness of how strength and resiliency has allowed them to rise from the ashes. Trauma talks follows people who have both worked within the field of trauma as well as those who have experienced trauma. Here we will reflect how trauma informed care can assist those who have experienced traumatic events to embrace a new life of wholeness, hope, strength, courage, safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment.

Today I'm here with Roger. Roger is here to share his story of resiliency after the death of his mom. On behalf of the institute, we would like to thank you for being here today and sharing your story with us. I'm going to let Roger begin by sharing his story that has allowed him to rise above the event and become a stronger more confident person.

**00:57 Roger:** Ok, so I guess I'm just going to start off. So I grew up with you know a fairly normal relatively normal lifestyle. I would even say privileged or a spoiled. I always had an allowance. Uh my parents always brought me drove me to and from school. I always had food on the table and things like that. I never had a baby sitter, um, my parents worked a split shift in order to make sure that myself and my sister always had either one of them around us to take care of us.

**1:26 Elyse:** That's ok

**1:26 Roger:** Yeah, so I always had every winter I played hockey, every summer I played soccer it, it, was a good life. And my parents did fight uh every now and then, the police did come to our house several times. Uh and one occasion my dad was put in jail and was prevented from seeing my family. Um and my mom for two years. After that time, they, they pulled through at the age, uh when I was 13 my mom was diagnosed with small cell lung cancer. She was given 6 to 12 months to live. I had always been a little trouble maker at home. When she introduced the news, I started to comprehend the seriousness of the situation and how stress could affect her recovery or lack thereof. So I started to be a little more conscious about how I treated my family, especially my mom, and the people I loved in my life. 5 and a half months passed before she passed away. After that time, I uh fell into a long stream of drug abuse and uh self-destruction essentially. I used cannabis, alcohol, while stealing drugs. Pretty much uh, fell away from everything I loved and cared about. I stopped playing hockey, I stopped all the sports and community involvement I was in. I used to be involved in a church group and a couple of other volunteer organizations around the community. I stopped doing those things, because I was more involved with drug use and the people that were associated with that drug use than anything else in my life. When I was 16, after seeing the guidance counselor at my high school fairly frequently, I ended up being persuaded after a number of months to speak to a counselor one on one about the death of my mom. And my maladaptive coping strategies I'd developed since then. It took uh, uh, a couple of months as I said, and also a community, or a group people at my high school, included a few teachers, the guidance counselor, the principle, the Chaplin, just a nice wholesome group of people that guided me through that dark point in my life. There was one point that I was being very disrespectful to teachers and getting in fights after school and things like this. and one of my idols that I still talk to, and respect to this day, a teacher at the school took me aside after class one day and told me that if I didn't go speak to a counselor that she was going to call them myself and was going to have everything put together for me. She was some sort of a mother figure for me in that way. I decided to take her advice or her persuasion there and I went to see a Nexus youth group counselor in my uh, home town near Toronto. I started off with uh, a one on one counselor who I didn't really connect with on good terms, so I shifted on to another counselor who I really did do well with. That counselor encouraged me to also take part in a

group therapy session where others my age who had also lost loved ones either parents or close friends, or family members or whatever would also share their stories and how they coped with the death of those people. I decided to go along with that I went through a couple of group therapy sessions and uh I, I felt like because I was a little bit further removed from the passing of my mom it, it, had been roughly 3 years since my mom passed away, relative to others. They had had more recent passings of their loved ones. I was able to share with them some of the things that really helped me as well as the that hadn't' really helped as well as I was able to connect with them because I was right, right at their age group and I had been through everything they had when they were sharing with me some of the things they were doing. Immediately after the passing of their loved ones that were similar to what I had been doing.

Things like you know uh, disregarding responsibility and sleeping all day, getting involved with drugs or different groups of people really withdrawing, isolating themselves and things like that. And because I was able to share my story with them, and connect with them and to relate to them on that level and share with them things that really helped me. I, I really felt the benefits of being able to help others, within this field. It was from then on that I did some research and decided that I wanted to go into a helping profession social work, or psychology for school. The same year it was my final year of high school and grade 12 I started volunteering in my spare period with a planning for independence class in the basement of the school. This was a class that included lots of student with autism or cerebral palsy, general developmental disabilities, and, and, uh, uh they were taken away from the rest of the school so they could be in a special classroom. I spend the year with them every lunch period or every spare period of the week and uh, half way through the year one of the teachers asked me if I'd like to be involved with the volunteering organization that is associated with their class it's called Best Buddies it's a volunteer organization that was started by the Kennedy's uh John F. Kennedy and his wife because of a child of theirs that was born with autism. This Best buddies organizations seeks to help those with autism or other developmental disabilities by surrounding them or giving them the opportunity to be surrounded by people their own age and people they can associate with and interact with because typically these people are always surrounded or looked after by much older people, parents, or caregivers in that sense. In the process of joining that volunteer organization in throughout that year with the planning for independence class I, I, really had a thorough understanding of uh, uh, just the way these people think the way they do business and just how similar they are to you and I. So yeah, during that year with the Best Buddies organization I really developed a thorough understanding of how these people function and, and how similar they are to you and me. Near the end of the year I was applying for university of education I, I was made aware of the fact that the organization gives out scholarship to individuals who had been involved in their organization for, for long periods of time. I had only been involved for 8 or 9 months at that time or less. But I decided to give it a try anyways because of the benefits I was feeling from it and I felt like I had a good story to share and everything like that. It turns out that I didn't win that scholarship but because of the heartfeltness of the story and, and the quality that they, that they felt I was sharing with the program uh, they created a scholarship in my name which is now awarded every year. It's been renamed the spirited Best Buddy's award but it is in recognition of individuals that just make the impacts within their top organizations their, their, individual group organizations in that sense. And I'm, I'm honored to have been the recipient of that award and the starter of that award. I've been given opportunities since then to speak with Best Buddies Canada at a number of events that they have held throughout Ontario. It's really jumpstarted uh, my willingness and love for volunteering, by continuing to volunteer with that origination and with the classroom through the special Olympics and other avenues for a number of years. Now I'm involved with um my university education and far away from my initial location of high school it's a little harder to be involved with that segment. But when I go back to my home town I, I, always make sure to visit and say hi to the teachers and the students that are still there. I'm still in very good contact with. So once I moved on to university uh, I left the sheltered environment that I was in and ended up back in a negative environment to a

negative place in my life doing drugs and skipping class and not really fulfilling my potential. It took a couple of years, one year I was in one program and then I transferred programs and moved to a separate school to be in a different environment. Coupled with the willingness and the drive to learn and knowing what I'm there at school for and things like that, these things all came together and helped me stay focused on my school work and on what goal was in my life. Since then I have volunteered with a number of organizations with Best Buddies included in my new university. I also volunteer with counseling organization where I'm a peer to peer counselor to other students who just walk in, just to walk in counseling service and they try to balance what regarding school or personal life and I think it's a really good experience in that sense for that. Getting more involved with the helping profession in that sense. Lately I've started volunteering with the organization that I initially went to for group bereavement counseling. The organization is The Bereaved Families of Ontario. They provide services to youth and adults for bereavement purposes they do walk in or drop in services and long term group sessions. Um, so I'm a facilitator for the group therapies there. Just in the short time volunteering there I feel like my progress in my own bereavement to my own bereavement is moving along in a greater extent than it was before. Just being able to listen to other people share their stories and experiences and their emotions surrounding the loss has been a great experience.

11:04 **Elyse:** It really sounds like what you have experienced along the way was really rooted in collaboration, empowerment, maybe trust and safety kind of made a difference as well. So those are all kind of aspects of trauma informed care. And what trauma informed care does is ask individuals and service providers to stop asking what's wrong with the person and turn towards asking what has happened. So Fallot and Harris talk a lot about the 5 guiding principles of this. Where safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment are tools that they can use to provide a more trauma informed practice environment. So I'm really wondering if you could speak to in the time following your mother's passing, when was that first time you felt approaching help you felt a sense of physical or emotional safety again and what did that look like?

11:59 **Roger:** Yeah, that's a great question. Well during the time after my mom's death I was really struggling with making connections with people who were feeling the same way I was and that's part of the reason I, I pushed my emotions to the side and dived into my drug use. I had never really been a great person to, to other people and in no way did I deserve the help that I received but uh, the people who really cared about me came together and, and showed me that they wanted to empower me. And. and they wanted me to be safe and reach my full potential. And I trusted them and I never looked back, it's been great.

12:38 **Elyse:** Was there any one thing that you know maybe a teacher or a counselor said to you that stuck with you or made an impact on that feeling of safety that you started to develop?

12:49 **Roger:** Well, perhaps not one thing that they said but the instance where I described earlier where the one teacher my idol at the school pulled me aside after class one day and pretty much gave me two choices. Said I'm going to go and seek some help or she was going to seek help for me. She saw how much I was struggling more than I did I suppose. She, she, really said that she can see it in my eyes and in my posture that I wasn't happy. And that I was faking it and going with the flow of things right?

13:24 **Elyse:** mmhmm

13:24 **Roger:** So but that really stuck with me.

13:26 **Elyse:** And so it also sounds like the collaboration around that, that it happened between the

chaplain and the other teachers at the school kind of very much helped to create a type of safety net around you? Through that process?

13:42 **Roger:** Yeah, for sure, I mean having, having a bunch of different people there uh, to go to if I needed help was and just, just that conjoint pressure on me. The pressure to uh, to do well. It was a pressure to do well, it wasn't like, like, a negative pressure, it was a, was a positive pressure, it was empowering pressure.

14:02 **Elyse:** So empowerment is another very important thing that happened there.

14:07 **Roger:** Definitely

14:07 **Elyse:** I guess I'm wondering if we could partialize the events that happened after that kind of push to empower you in that way. You know, what was that first step that you kind of took yourself? And what was really? What was happening around you that made it possible to take that step?

14:26 **Roger:** Well, I, I can either be seen as uh me stepping in counseling the first time or, or me stepping in my volunteer position with the planning for independence class? I mean, I'm not really sure what was going on in my life at that time. It, it, might have been that I had the collective guidance of the teacher and the chaplain and all those people, there to help me. It may have just been the time that had elapsed since my mom's death, I'm not really sure about that.

14:58 **Elyse:** Yeah, were you given any type of information that was helpful by the counselor labeling what you were going through? And maybe normalizing what you were going through, maybe labeling it as sudden grief or however.

15:11 **Roger:** In the process of seeing the counselor, I was diagnosed with a number of disorders psychological disorders. One of which was an adjustment disorder in relation to my mom, in relation to the death of my mom. It's essentially a less severe form of post-traumatic stress disorder which isn't long lasting and specific to a familial event in that sort of sense. So the labeling really helped me understand what I was going through. It helped me understand that I was, that this was going to be a temporary occurrence and that I was going to get through these feelings.

15:41 **Elyse:** I guess what, how it really felt to hear, to put the label to those very intense or chaotic feelings, was that empowering in itself? So, I'm also wondering what kind of resources were you given at the time maybe through, maybe through your school and also part two would be were there others around you supporting you through this transition ?

16:06 **Roger:** Well the resources mostly through the school, I was seeing the guidance counselor quite regularly and that, that was very helpful. the resources I was given were outside, outside of the school um, there was socially run free to me at least those were just pretty much the resources I was given, but I think I was given the opportunity to empower myself and to seek the adaptive coping strategies that I needed in terms of volunteering. I was given the opportunity to volunteer with a number of organizations that really helped me develop my sense of passion for a number of things, even though I probably didn't deserve the opportunities I was given. On a school note I was given the opportunity, very early on in my university career when I transitioned to the new school to work with very established experts in the fields of addiction and other addiction and depression and other psychological disorders in that sense. So even though I definitely didn't deserve the opportunity so, being able to accept the opportunities and to being given the opportunities in the first place has been a huge help.

17:20 **Elyse:** So it sounds like you've been kind of involved in multiple volunteer opportunities and kind of touch base with different organizations. So what I'm wondering is there any persevering qualities throughout. Like a red thread if you will of those organizations that kind of made them particularly meaningful or useful to you in that being the staff, or the way the program was delivered. Does anything stand out?

17:47 **Roger:** Well, I think in terms of the people and the staff everybody's very warm and kind and gentle and accepting. They make it a very safe space and a place you want to be around, somewhere you want to share your experiences. I wasn't in a good place when I went through being in a place where people were overflowing with love you know, I've heard before that you can't spread love to others if you haven't done love with yourself first. If you don't have enough love within yourself, it can't overflow unto others like that. So yeah just really supportive and caring and loving environment. One of my volunteer opportunities they offer free addiction counseling, and just free general counseling anytime that you need it really. So being given the opportunity to seek help even if it's not necessarily positive for the environment. I don't get people look upon addiction and other kinds of things too highly, so being able to seek help for these things saws helpful.

18:49 **Elyse:** So kind of having that choice was important to you

18:53 **Roger:** Yeah, Definitely

18:54 **Elyse:** It kind of sounds like you were offered choice in terms of being able to access these programs or groups. I'm wondering what about the program, maybe the addiction support one, let you know that it was safe to go there. That, that maybe this environment or group you could trust.

19:15 **Roger:** Well, I think uh, the program begins very professional helps in seeking support and seeking help through the program. Introduction to a lot of my volunteer opportunities start with 4-5 a day training sessions where we go through the protocol for volunteering. For the group it was 4 or 5 days they list off resources we can seek out if we're triggered through the time of the training. Just a lot of training on confidentiality and people work is what I like to call it. Yeah these things you know help to have a better perspective on the way people work so I think that helps me, I'm not sure if it's going to help others, but I think it really helped me to function as a better person.

19:59 **Elyse:** I guess just to wrap it up that person to person people just need other people at the end of the day kind of idea really resonated. The idea that you know people need other people and that connection is so magical and important for healing. It also sounds like through the many things you have been involved with that may have been important.

20:40 **Roger:** Yeah definitely the people there are half the fun right?

20:29 **Elyse:** For sure. Now kind of where you are today in this journey you've taken. When you look back do you believe that you are a different person now? Than you were pre event? And if you do how so?

20:43 **Roger:** Well, one I definitely think I'm a, I'm a different person. Before the event I wasn't really self-conscious of how I reacted or how I treated others. Or how you know just the thoughts or the perspectives that I held in my own mind I wasn't aware of the biases that I had going into different situations. Just a simple like a personal bias like I, I tend to be a little more hot headed or have a shorter fuse around, especially certain times of the year that remind me of my mom passing. Around her birthday the date of her passing, Christmas, or Easter and things like that. All of these things come

together for sure.

21:24 **Elyse:** So just to kind of end things off here. How important today is self-care for you? And what do you do to take care of yourself?

21:33 **Roger:** Well, I , I am surprised I didn't mention this through the whole talk show part the teacher, this is one of the reasons she's my idol, she, she just always uh, she's taught me so much and she's helped me become the person I am today. Around the time when she asked me to start seeing the counselor, she also introduced me to the concept of journaling. And when I explain it to people, I say it's not a diary it's a journal. You know just for the sense of that. But the, the journal is a big part of my self-care. It's a place where I can write or I can write about my own personal feelings about the day. Or I can be open and honest on paper, it's not like talking to another human being where sometimes I have to hold back you know to save face. In things like that. Writing down my thoughts, and feelings and emotions also helps put a frame of reference to it I think because when we write there has to be beginning middle and an end I mean it is just the way we end up going to the writing. We start off at the beginning and we work through the end and uh, throughout that time or perhaps even reviewing what I've written, I'm able to take a different perspective and, and see thing's in a different light. You know maybe things aren't as big of a deal as I thought they were in the movement. And all these different kinds of things. So journaling is huge part of it. And, and just recently over the past summer I've realized how important physical activity is. I got really involved with school over the past couple of years and, and didn't realize that I wasn't as physically active as I once was. So this past summer I started rock climbing, I started yoga, I started going to the gym again and all of these things combined I would say especially the yoga, it helped me to really bring my focus in, to you know put a purpose on the time on the mat and yeah come to terms with some struggles I was dealing with at the time for sure. Some anger issues and some along those lines but. Yeah, so yoga and the journaling and physical activity in general and I also get a kick out of talking to people, you know hearing other people conversing with them. Finding out what makes them tick I think just learning in that sense. It's, it's a big thing for me.

23:55 **Elyse:** For any listeners who may have gone through a similar event, are there any kind of words you would like to just leave with them? Or share?

24:05 **Roger:** Well I guess you know this is kind of cliché but uh it will get better, if you are going through something right now that uh, you aren't really happy with or maybe you aren't coping with it too well, it's going to get better. One of two things you know in time is going to pass and you are going to be able to approach it with a different perspective or a different attitude or uh, you know the people you surround yourself with the environment it's really going to influence the outcome or the way you think. Right? So those would be the main things.

24:34 **Elyse:** Thank you so much

24:37 **Roger:** Thank you Elyse

24:37 **Elyse:** On behalf of the Institute we just want to really thank you for being here and sharing your story with me um we really appreciate it.

24:45 **Roger:** My pleasure thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate being on.