

## Interview on COVID-19 response with Jesse, a provider/survivor

Hi my name is Whitney. Welcome to Rising from the Ashes Trauma Talks, a podcast series brought to you by the University at Buffalo School of Social Work's the Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care. Our trauma talk series provides a platform for people who have worked within the field of trauma as well as those who have experienced trauma to share their witness of how strength and resiliency have allowed themselves and others to rise from the ashes of adversity. Today I am joined by Jess Kohler who in addition to serving on the board of the campaign for trauma informed policy and practice, is the director of development at the North Lake Community Center in Philadelphia and the creator of the lowering overdose and violence initiative known as the "Love Initiative." On behalf of the Institute, thank you so much for being here today Jesse and for sharing your story with us.

**0:58 Jesse:** Thank you for having me Whitney, it's truly a pleasure.

**1:01 Whitney:** The pleasure is all ours. And we are so delighted to have you. As we begin, I'm wondering if you might be able to tell us a bit about the capacity in which you're interacting with trauma survivors.

**1:12 Jesse:** Sure. So North Lake Community Center has been a critical community -- a major place in the community. We call ourselves a central community HUB. Over the last 84 years we have organically grown and we went from just being an after-school sort of boy's club to encompassing a holistic continuum of community support. We have childcare programming, we have workforce development, college and career readiness programming, and then we have emergency service programs like a food cupboard, and a fuel and utilities fund, assistance program, etc. Our goal is to allow for all of those, you know, programs and services to exist without cost ever being a barrier. You know, about 91% of the population in general is economically disadvantaged. The majority of that number is living below the poverty line so in that socioeconomically disadvantaged community, you will see not all of them are traumatized, but there are increased barriers and obstacles that they face. Race certainly plays into that -- we serve a large population of communities of color, and when you put all of those circumstances together there is going to be a certain amount of traumatization, or increased stress at the very least, that the people that we work with are going to face on a daily basis.

**2:46 Whitney:** Thank you so much for that context, Jesse. As we think about navigating this pandemic together, we truly are all in the midst of a collective trauma. And how providers respond matters, especially with attention to that cumulative and compounding harm you just touched on. And as we all face this, how is it that even in the face of this disruption you have managed to continue your role?

**3:14 Jesse:** Our mission is to empower people of all ages and abilities throughout our community to reach their full potential as productive and responsible citizens. One thing that we shifted – our food covered about 10 years ago -- was to make it a “Choice Pantry Model,” where we’re not just giving out bags of food, but we actually set up a sort of shopping-like atmosphere where there’s tables that have various goods, and people get to pick what they like rather than just being given food. You don’t like pinto beans? Too bad, you have three. You know, cans of pinto beans... We now moved away from that model with the crisis to keep them healthy and to reduce community. We now have to reduce contact, we have to go back to the “Emergency Cupboard Model,” but we are taking in a menu to the best of our ability to sort of still get people what they want to eat to the best of our ability, while still keeping them safe. We have to be very wary. In addition to you know, people needing food, there are populations that are severely at risk during this time of COVID, and so we have begun to actually deliver food to the elderly and disabled populations in our community, who coming to the center would not be safe. What that has done for my role in particular is that grants are necessary as they have ever been. There are some COVID-19 specific funding sources, as well as other foundations and supporters, that we are continually trying to reach out to. And even though most of our staff are part-time childcare staff, we do have a number of full-time staff who are still on salary. But we the board, and our executive director, made a decision to, for as long as possibly can, not lay anybody off. So even though we don’t have any childcare fees coming in right now, we are also still working to raise money so that way we can keep as many people on payroll as possible because in addition to serving our constituents, you know nobody in the non-profit world is, at least not at North Light, making a huge amount of money, similar to our constituents who may have, many of them may have lost income and... and so in addition to working to be trauma-informed and sensitive toward our constituents, we are constantly doing the same thing for our staff. You know, through fundraising and through... yeah. I mean, raising funds and having greater capacity to continue to operate the programs that need to be operated as well as keeping the staff that we have to make our family structure tight, and their family structures safe and stable – and so, you know, my role in fundraising has actually only gotten busier.

**6:14 Whitney:** Wow Jesse, as you describe your job demands increasing to support continued operations to meet these important needs, I’m really struck by how you are so tuned in to the shifts that trauma-informed care invites us to make. From asking what’s wrong with you --- what happened to you, and not just at the consumer level, but also at the organizational level. Specifically, Doctor Roger Fallot and Maxine Harris have pioneered seminal research about the implementation of trauma-informed care, and in doing so, have identified the framework’s five guiding principles as safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment, many of which you’ve sort of given us a brief foray into already – and we’re going to explore more deeply how these principles have shaped, and continue to shape, your work in the era of COVID-19. Beginning with physical and psychological safeties – so I am wondering, in your role, how do you establish your own sense of psychological safety and how is that useful to you?

**7:19 Jesse:** I think that it was very difficult at first for me personally. I have, you know, my own adversity in my past that has sort of create anxiety and panic disorders in various times of my life, and the coronavirus was very triggering at first. You know, it's an invisible sort of thing where you can't see it and I really, you know, I am fortunate to be – to have been exposed to this trauma-informed world. I really took this as an opportunity to practice the coping skills, and the “regularly regulation skills” -- that's the word that I was looking for. Being able to regulate myself when I feel myself sort of getting into this panicked state. So, for me, it is really working to keep as much of a routine as possible. I still wake up early and I work out. I have been cooking food more to eat healthier, also. So, that way I'm not going out and getting food. I'm trying to stay inside as much as possible, and just try to keep a semblance of normalcy. And then, I think that by modeling that, we are able to communicate the same thing to our constituents or to the other staff members that I work with. You know, especially because of the role that North Light plays, and has played, for so long in our community. People look to us in times of need as well as you know, just in quote-unquote “normal everyday life,” when it isn't COVID-19. And so, if we are able to model the behavior that we want to see our constituents partake in, and that we believe is important to overall health, you know, it makes us that much better in terms of serving the people in need in our communities. It's honestly been the most honest and open with myself that I've probably ever been about the fears that I feel, because they're so legitimate and I think that everybody's sort of feeling them right now, but maintaining that balance and structure to the best of my ability is, has been, you know, the physical and psychological wellness piece for me that's incredibly profound.

**9:43 Whitney:** And you have me wondering what sort of new possibilities do you notice emerging as a result of prioritizing safety in helping yourself or others weather this storm?

**9:53 Jesse:** I think that there's a lot of opportunity that's going to come from this. I heard someone say on a webinar the other day that like, it was something along the lines of like, ‘don't let any good crisis go unused,’ or it was something like that. It was better worded but there's always opportunity, you know, in terms of resilience, you need adversity to build resilience. You know, I'm a former athlete so I always use the example of if I were to go to the gym and lift what was comfortable for me, I would not get stronger. Now as human-beings, we don't want to expose ourselves to too much adversity, but in these times that we can't help it, therein lies opportunity to build strength that will last into our future. The other thing that I think is so unique about the coronavirus in particular is that it is affecting all people.

**10:57 Whitney:** Isn't it? It's really bringing people together and caring for their neighbors. Jesse, listening to you highlight the ways that engineering safety however you can right now has positively impacted members of your community, including illuminating these new strengths and altering how people connect with and relate to each other, I really find myself wondering how

trust plays into all of this, and what you find yourself thinking about pertaining to trust right now in your role?

**11:32 Jesse:** I don't know that a lot of people trust anything right now. Yeah, you know, it is incredibly difficult. There is less trust in systems, and there is – there has been a mistrust and a distrust at the system's level for so long, which is why people trust an independent and autonomous non-profit organization like North Light, where they may not trust the councilmen or the representatives of our district quite as much. Understanding the need for consistent and clear messaging, I think that when that gets conveyed properly, when we stick to the same message day to day, we will see a greater ability for people to find trust. And we communicate with our constituents through a number of means – through individual emails, we use social media, we have a website, and so we are constantly communicating and showing that the most important thing to us right now is the health and well-being of our constituents. You know, and by really, like I said earlier, by modeling those values and by being values driven throughout this whole process, that is what has helped to maintain that level of trust and comfort with our organization.

**12:55 Whitney:** As you're modeling that model to the people seeking services from you, I'm wondering, because similar to how we can observe and notice stress responses in individuals, we may also notice those stress responses transpiring at an organization level. So, with that frame in mind, what do you notice your workplace setting's administrators doing to maximize honesty and transparency to build trust that can buffer that organizational stress during COVID?

**13:24 Jesse:** It's been different than how we have done that when we're all together to see the organization and the board of directors, and oftentimes for a non-profit organization, especially the board of directors, can be this sort of higher up body that you never actually communicate with. It is sort of like you know, in the Wizard of Oz, the management, and that whole sort of feeling – and so even though I'm a full-time staff person, I'm salary, to see them working to maintain and continue our part-time staff and continue to pay them by pulling out of our endowment if necessary, where we won't put the organization at risk, but we may be able to buffer a month. And seeing how much the organization truly cares for its employees and the people that works for it as well as the people that we serve is truly refreshing and heartening. It can be overstated just what kind of trust that builds.

**14:25 Whitney:** I am in awe of the ways that North Light is really walking-the-walk in terms of maintaining safety and trust and consistency, and you've also mentioned how you provided meaningful choice to your constituents to the extent that you can right now, and as you mentioned, how you're all adapting and doing things a bit differently work-wise. I find myself wondering, what kinds of choices have you been finding yourself needing to make that maybe you hadn't even considered before COVID-19?

**14:55 Jesse:** I guess, that there's always choices available to us at North Light certainly calls that out for its staff and its constituents -- what it's allowed for us to do is really try to maximize this time to make the organization better. We can't work with our constituents hands-on. We can still communicate with them via email, but that certainly wasn't the majority of our time. The ability for our administration to care for the staff and the constituents has enabled us and empowered us to make good choices to sort of, move-forward, through this. If we felt even more isolated than I think everybody already sort of feels in this crisis, we would have likely made other decisions, but because someone's looking out for us, we're then able to look out for others as well, and sort of advance ourselves.

**15:53 Whitney:** I'm really noticing you mention that being afforded choice yourselves as staff, so it filters down through the work you do, and allows you to provide more choice to your constituents. So, I am wondering how you think choices that your constituents have available to them, these new possibilities that they can see, what difference do you think that makes in terms of allowing them to rise from the ashes of adversity?

**16:24 Jesse:** I mean, it's everything, right? It's you know, I mean, in sustaining and maintaining the community for people most in need, we are hopefully able to empower people to make the positive choice, as many times it is as it is necessary to get through this very trying time, and even without the coronavirus, right there, there are people who are experiencing homelessness. There are people who are experiencing abuse and neglect to create partnerships, and a sort of feeling of support that may allow people to first of all, make mistakes and come back the next day, and still feel like they are going to be supported, but also hopefully at some point find the strength and the connection to overcome what might have held them back in the past, is so valuable. There is choice there, and I think that, you know, in a very, very circuitous sort of way, the decisions that our administration is making and our board is making that is empowering staff that is reaching the constituents through the pandemic may in a small way be helping people to also make better choices themselves.

**17:43 Whitney:** Absolutely! These are all incredibly connected at every level, and as you mentioned, engaging in these sorts of shared decision-making practices. I am noticing how you're really demonstrating how we can heal through a relationship, and how vital collaboration is, especially when working with survivors of trauma and those who have faced adversity. What do you notice happening when collaboration is present?

**18:10 Jesse:** It's huge. We only have so much capacity to make so much difference, you know. There are so many partnerships that help us coordinate better services for our constituents for you know, Villanova University sends students every single day when schools in session at least, to work with our children and our childcare, which creates a more meaningful connection and

good care and appropriate adult-supervision and relationships. Additionally, a new non-profit that's a proud partner of the Love Initiative called Unity Recovery, which is attached to a yoga studio, has the ability to do telehealth and recovery meetings over the internet right now. We're you know, we have been able to help coordinate relationships with that organization with some of our constituents in need where we don't have the capacity to on a daily level, sort of coordinate that level of care. None of us are counselors, none of us are peer support specialists. We don't have the ability to give much beyond just genuine compassion and care and understanding to our constituents. We bring Unity Recovery into our food cabinet; they help out and build relationships with constituents that way, and make their services known. And through that relationship there's been sort of that bridge of trust where we've been able to elevate trust with their organization and what they do through the trust that's been built through North Light, and now in this time of – so generally, it's huge for us because they're able to support differently than North Light is generally able to support. But in this time of isolation, when we are particularly concerned for our constituents, who may have substance use history, they are able to still connect to those people which is something that North Light simply does not have the capacity. When you partner with organizations and agencies that have different missions, but similar values to your own, you are able to reach people in so many more ways.

**20:35 Whitney:** I am so impressed by the way that you're mobilizing not just your own unique strengths as an organization, and an individual, but also these meaningful relationships to assure the continuity of care that people so desperately need right now. And, that you're empowering people to meet their needs and that's our final principle. I'm wondering, so in the face of this pandemic, it's certainly understandable that a lot of us may have found ourselves feeling sort of powerless and uncertain about what we can do right now, and so I am wondering how have you managed to continue to empower people? And that can mean your constituents, that can mean your colleagues to help them move through this crisis?

**21:18 Jesse:** I think that it's incredibly important to first acknowledge what we can't control and just being honest with what I don't have control over and in commuting the same communication, the same sort of principles to others, we're able to then look at what we can control. And in that, we have found staff members who are looking to solidify their programs for when this gets up with constituents. We are seeing people spending, even though it is particularly stressful right now, more time with their children. Understanding that you know there are things that we can control during this time of uncertainty and find strength and power in those opportunities and things that we are in control of, when there is so much uncertainty around us. What I really think there's an opportunity for here that no one was expecting this – so it's hard to blame anybody for not having trauma-informed responses, but we can develop a trauma-informed blueprint for – with the levels of communication and with increased technology and with the ability to work from and stay at home, that our world and our society now has a “what does trauma-informed response look like?” Let's develop the blueprint now that we have

actually lived in a world where we have all been on lockdown and now, we have a better understanding of what some of the needs may be. You know, there's a lot of fear in the people who are most isolated right now, who may not know what telehealth resources that have available to them – whether Medicaid or Medicare pays for them or not, they may not know how to access them and to make those more available, to make those more well-known for people – to utilize the resources that we are actively trying to advocate for through the national trauma campaign, and then in addition, we are like I was saying, looking at ways that we can develop a blueprint and a model, so that way in the next emergency situation, to have a better response, so that way we can continue to move forward and build community – build resilience, built grit and determination to get through these situations not alone, but together. And so, that was all a very, very long way of inviting everybody and anybody who feels as though they want to contribute more, and have power over something right now, nobody can take away your voice and to utilize that in such a strong way by advocating to Congress and other businesses and industries in your region or your community, or just in your house – to use your voice in your perspective that is unique to you and to team up with people from all around the country, specifically around trauma-informed care. We're talking about the national trauma campaign, but I know that there are other resources out there as well.

**24:31 Whitney:** I appreciate that you're really noticing the window of opportunity and the new possibilities to build resilience into our societies right now, and I think that's really profound because there's no doubt that COVID-19 has been a massive disruption that is experienced as traumatic for so many people and maybe even by most of us really, and yet we know that we can make meaning of and emerge from these experiences stronger than perhaps ever before. So, I'm wondering in what ways have you found yourself personally becoming more resilient or experiencing a sense of growth in your professional role or your personal life as the pandemic has unfolded?

**25:18 Jesse:** I think that we all like to put on a face and pretend that we are all okay all the time. I have been doing that for a while because I felt like I was an adult. Now, I'm 26 and I felt like for the last four years for sure, I am an adult, I need to – everything needs to be okay. I need to have my life together and I have been kidding myself, because no everything has been okay. And I've sort of shielded myself from the truth. I've been so distracted by—by the needs of my job and by the stresses of the world that I have been able to sort of look past the truth and just sort of kept going, not acknowledging what was really there. And like I said earlier, this has been a moment where I couldn't escape how I really felt. There was nowhere to go – there was nothing else that I could see on the television. I mean, you know, I'm able to write grants and escape into my grants to a certain extent of escape. But, at the end of the day, I was still quarantined and staying at home and I have been much more forthright in being intentional and really gotten to the point where when I'm working out, I'm working out and I am intentional about doing that when I am spending time with my family, that's what I'm doing. I am intentional about that,

when I need to work and to get my eight hours a day in, which is often as I'm sure is the case with you, closer to 12, 14, 16 hours. I am doing that and to eat healthy and, and to just be more intentional and not take for granted what can so often just become the day-to-day minutia. But instead, just really making that part of my daily structure has been a huge sign of growth to myself. I have started cooking, which is much healthier than eating out on a daily or multiple time a day basis. But really being honest and really being intentional to promote greater health for myself has been a huge experience.

**27:33 Whitney:** Wow Jesse, thank you so much for your candor and for sharing how you've made meaning of this time. That has been particularly challenging for you personally, and it seems like reaching for tools like intentionality and connection and honest self-reflection have helped you tremendously to become more resilient in this short time already. One thing you mentioned was not taking things for granted, which I found really striking as a point of growth during COVID, and it really prompted me to wonder what you have found yourself finding gratitude in lately?

**28:20 Jesse:** Well, when I was 15, I lost my best friend... he and his father passed away. Their plane actually collided with the helicopter above the Hudson River... and that was a very difficult time for me and I know that there was a year that I was not okay. But following that, as you have said, rising from the ashes of that, I appreciated life differently. When he was alive, I was incredibly connected and close to him, and after he was gone, I still felt that closeness which, as I gained in appreciation for life, helped me thrive. I consistently felt close to him and I believe the way that a lot of people may feel close to God or something or other spiritual being, I had this connection that was unbreakable and as time moved on, I lost that connection. I struggled for a long time in remembering how important each day is and how truly blessed and fortunate I am to be on this side of the ground walking and getting a chance to make a difference, and I think that in my constant fear somewhere in my mind of potentially catching the coronavirus, potentially, you know --- just, it's so uncertain that I can't escape that part of my brain from going there that I have been able to reconnect to the way that I felt those years after that really bad year where I was so close to Doug, and I was so appreciative of the opportunities that each day presented that brings a level of gratitude for me personally. I believe that everybody has their own Doug, but for me it's been sort of a re-grounding experiencing, and remembering that I am so lucky and truly taking advantage of the opportunities that I have today and tomorrow and every day in perpetuity, hopefully for a very long time to continue to work to make the world a better place

**30:45 Whitney:** Wow, deeply inspiring and so heartening Jesse. This crisis has drawn out strength and meaning and resiliency and spirituality and resourcefulness and adaptability and awareness in you, and thank you for sharing so much of yourself. Truly profound that you've been so generous with your wisdom today. So my last question for you is for others who are in



similar spot to you professionally interfacing with trauma as all of us collectively experienced COVID-19, can you offer just a few final words on the reasons you believe trauma-informed care is particularly crucial right now?

**31:31 Jesse:** There are so many people in need of support all the time, but especially now when there isn't that same feeling of community and ability to gather and have support services that there was in the past. North Light went from a holistic continuum of care to just a food cupboard at least temporarily, and there's a great Ralph Waldo Emerson quote where I think it was Ralph Waldo Emerson, but it's 'if you can make one life breathe a little bit easier, that is to have succeeded,' and to really look at that on micro meso and macro levels, we can impact people positively, and make them breathe just a little bit easier. It's not a function of taking trauma that has been experienced away -- nothing is going to bring Doug back, nothing is going to bring other people who have been lost back, other childhoods that have been lost, we can't bring those back. We can prevent that from happening in the future hopefully, but more so, we can come together and find ways to create feelings of happiness and togetherness that helped us get through those hard times. Often times I think a lot of other people get lost in trying to make a big difference, never stop trying for that if it happens that's amazing, but doesn't lose the little things that we can do each day that make the world just a little bit better at a time. And there are just so many ways right now to help people in small ways. It may never be a news story, but that isn't why we do good things. Just looking at every level, the ways that we can be trauma-informed and potentially mitigate the effects of potential traumas and potential adversity in other people's lives by building relationships, by developing community, is so important, now as much as ever for sure, but I think that it was always critically important and it will be when all of this is done.

**33:45 Whitney:** And with those beautifully reflective words of wisdom in mind, on behalf of the Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care, thank you so much Jesse for taking the time to speak with me today, and for sharing your witness of strength and resiliency. Truly, it has been a great pleasure and I wish you all the best.

**34:08 Jesse:** You too, Whitney. Thank you. Take care.