

Interview on Trauma in Youth with Kenisha, a survivor

Hello, my name is Josie and I would like to welcome you back to Rising from the Ashes, Trauma Talk, a podcast series brought to you by the 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 in the field of trauma as well as those who have experienced trauma. Here we will reflect on 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 am here with Kenisha. She is going to talk a little bit about her experience in the foster care system. On behalf of the institute we would like to thank you for being here today to share your story with us. So now I'm going to begin by letting Kenisha share with you, the audience, a little bit about her story.

1:14 **Kenisha:** So, you say my story, so I guess I will start at the beginning, until now. I was born in Phoenix and then came here to Buffalo New York when I was about 18 months. I was actually born in prison. So, I guess you could say I was born in a traumatic type of event. I was born in prison in Maricopa County, in Phoenix Arizona. I was brought here by my grandmother. It took her 3 days to get there, her and my brother on a train to come get me. I guess you could say rescue me. You know bring me back to Buffalo. My mother, my biological mother she was you know living a poor lifestyle as far as doing drugs. Those were the type of things that landed her in jail. So, my grandmother raised me all of my life up until now I guess you could say. She placed me in foster care when I was 12 years old. Which was actually kind of a good thing it actually felt as if I knew my foster mother my whole life. Everything was just so natural. So, I stayed there until I was 18, 19 years old, then moved into my own place. I went into foster care because I was I guess you could say, now that I look back at it I was probably like considered verbal abuse. It wasn't necessarily because my grandmother wanted that to happen, but she was she was older, and you know how older people get irritable and stuff, and she had raised all her kids and grandkids already, so you know, and I was the last one. I'm the baby of the family even though I'm 23, still a baby. I went to foster care with my foster mom. It was an awesome experience, I stayed there that's my second family, I always say that. It feels like they are my first family though. Feels like we are blood. Basically, I did that, I moved into my own apartment thanks to New Directions. They helped me transition into SOAP (?) It's an independent living program. They showed me how to pay my bills on time and things like that you know, live independently and responsibly. I moved into my own apartment and I liked it a lot. And then I, I was in school at the time. I enrolled in Medaille College for communications. I recently graduated this past year. May 2016. During that time, I believe it was my junior year, I caught two DWI's. which could have ended my life, but it didn't. I still have a lot of opportunities coming my way and the doors open wide I guess you could say. I am blessed for that, I know I'm blessed with that. What actually was considered DWI's and they dropped them down. That was a blessing as well. So, I guess you could say I was a very traumatic, I was one of the most the biggest thing is but yeah, I learned from that. I was a teenager having fun, you know young and fun, immature. I guess you become more mature after you pay 10,000 dollars' worth of fines. But yeah, I became more mature, I learned from it my mindset has grown to an extent I have never imagined. I am grateful for that. So now you know I basically work at my own business that's the Western New York Irish movement. I opened that in March of 2016. And that is basically I started it to help the community. And I knew that I had a blue print to

eventually branch out and that is what I did. I'm doing so I am working with artist, comedians, tattoo artist. It's not only music anything that has to do with art across the board. It's not only Western New York, I'm working with artist in Albany, Rochester, Central New York, Syracuse, and New York City as well. So, we have that going and that's a growing process. I also do, do music of my own. You guys should listen to some music YouTube, you can just type in KB and type in a few songs. Type in Money Moola, All Year, I Can Do Bad, I can too, a couple of different songs on there, and there's more to come. I recently branched off from that and made a lot of different connections. I've got to meet a lot of different celebrities and artist and stuff through internships and employment such as WKLK with Town Square Media. WPPZ 97 Rock. I work with the Buffalo Bills and stuff like that. But it leads to a bunch of connections One that really stood out to me was the Roughriders and I was with DMX. I'm still working with my manager is actually close to DMX so I'm working with them now. So, I'm looking forward to seeing where that takes me as an artist. Also, got to meet my favorite rap artist so it was like getting to meet a hero. I guess you could say and that was 50cent. Then I realized that we all are the same after that. You know how you kind of pick your saying and you meet him and he's just a person. So yeah. I guess that's what you can you know words to describe me would be team player, very motivated, very determined. Whatever I say I'm going to do I have to get it done. So that's fun.

8:46 **Josie:** Thank you so much for giving us that like you said from the beginning to where you are now to where you are going that's awesome. So, when I heard you talk especially about being born in prison and then having the experience when you were 12 and moving into the foster care system and being connected with New Directions also who helped you out, especially when you were 18, 19. So during that time of interacting with different systems. Starting out in the criminal justice system and then moving into working with the foster care system, it reminds me of something we call trauma informed care. Which it asks service providers and systems to ask the question what has happened to a person as opposed of what is wrong with the person. It's a change in perspective. Harris and Falot talk about these 5 guiding principles of trauma informed care. Which are safety, trust, choice, collaboration and empowerment. Those are the tools that service providers can use to provide a more trauma informed practice and environment. So, I want to spend some time talking about those and your experience with those 5 principles throughout your experiences thus far. So, the first principle is safety. What I'm curious to know is I heard that you said that you have a powerful connection with your foster family and that it was a very natural fit, that they feel like blood. I'm wondering if you can tell us a little bit about how your foster family made you feel safe with them.

10:36 **Kenisha:** Well I always felt safe because I felt comfortable. I guess you have to make the child feel comfortable in the home. So, once you are comfortable you feel safe. So, ways you can make the child feel comfortable is finding out their interest, finding out what they like what they don't like as far as characteristics. Asking them what makes you feel a certain type of way. I remember my foster parent asking me what made me feel angry or sad. And I said well my mom will yell. That was just a habit of yelling you know. So, you know just asking simple questions to get in their head of the child and see where their mind is. There was a situation where I kind of did feel not safe when I was in foster care. That was when she had another child there that was from foster care and that child swung on her and CPS was involved, and I was placed in a respite home and that was like really, really sad, because I wanted to go back home. That was a time you know it was a traumatic time you know as far as the foster care you know, but that was about it in the home there.

12:13 **Josie:** Yeah that sounds like it would be a little bit of a shock to the system and you said you felt comfortable there so to be pulled out of that of being comfortable and feeling at home. That makes a lot of sense. So, the second principle that is very closely related to safety is trust. And I'm wondering what your experience was when you were in the foster care system did you have a case worker you interacted with? While you were with your foster care family? So, I'm just like wondering what your experience was with them in terms of trusting that they really valued you as a person or that they were trying to keep your best interest at heart. I just want to know a little bit about your experience with trust and your worker.

13:10 **Kenisha:** Before I even entered foster care, we had I had I was in the program I remember. It was a long time ago, but I remember. I had a counselor or a caseworker. I remember her name was Trish I believe, and she would come pick me up. I was interested in music and still am now, I was starting at 7 and that didn't occur until maybe I was 10-12. And she would come pick me up and take me to open mic concerts. So, I always had great experiences with all my caseworkers and case managers especially at New Directions with Lynn, with Stacy, with Melissa they all were the best. They would genuinely help you. They would be so concerned, and just be there as a friend as well.

14:11 **Josie:** Absolutely. Was your experience did you shift into being involved with New Directions at one point during your time?

14:19 **Kenisha:** Yes, I was in numerous agencies. I guess several agencies closed down like Hopeville and Global Village and then New Directions. I guess the name changed several times. I'm not really sure but I know that Hopeville were no longer.

14:40 **Josie:** There were changes

14:40 **Kenisha:** Yeah.

14:41 **Josie:** But it sounds amazing that your case worker would actually take you to things to really build on your interest. That's awesome. It's clear that she really saw what made you tick. And really fostered that. And I'm sure really fostered that sense of trust. Like I said that she really saw you for you. The next principle is choice. I'm curious, you talked about that New Directions connected you with that independent living program. And so, I'm curious think about that. What kind of choices where you provided in terms of that independent living program? Were you able to pick and choose or go towards things that really called to you with in that?

15:35 **Kenisha:** Like picking and choose as far as?

15:38 **Josie:** I suppose like maybe elaborate on that independent living program what did that look like? Was it like finding a certain place like to live and employment and school.

15:49 **Kenisha:** Well It's kind, you know, independent decision. You go out and you look for an apartment and that's what I did. Went online to Craigslist to different websites to look for apartments. When I found one I informed New Directions and they helped me out throughout the process.

16:15 **Josie:** Oh cool. So, you were able to really independently identify in where you were interested in being in a good place and they were able to help provide the support and backing for you to be able to do that. That's awesome. In terms in especially as far as schooling. I know you mentioned going to

Medaille. Did you feel that you had the option of choosing the direction you wanted to go with school? I know you said you did communications and you are really into music.

16:44 **Kenisha:** Well my junior year I wasn't sure what it was called. I just knew it as communications in high school. I just knew I wanted to be involved in media. Once I decided to go to college, I found out it was communications. I looked at a few colleges, Canisius, it was either or it came down to Canisius or Medaille. Medaille had the better communication program at the time and it was 10,000 dollars less.

17:14 **Josie:** That's a big attraction.

17:16 **Kenisha:** So, I decided to go to Medaille and got involved in a lot of things there and I'm grateful that I made that decision. Because there is no telling what I would have did instead of you know.

17:31 **Josie:** That's excellent. In that process of transitioning out of foster care and having the support of New Directions I'm thinking about your experience of still staying connected to New Direction and your foster family. So, the next principle is collaboration. And so that's looking at how do all these different pieces of your life all of these supports. How do those work together to help you achieve your goals? So, I'm wondering what that looked like as you transitioned out and you stay connected with New Directions. Did you stay connected to your foster family? Could you tell us a little bit about that experience?

18:14 **Kenisha:** Well yeah, My foster family. I'm with them every day. It's either on the phone, my foster mom recently moved to North Carolina. She wants me to move down there. She recently got a 5 bedroom down there in a very nice house. Says she has room for me. I said yeah. If I move down there, I would probably get my own spot. So, I'm connected with them, they are like family. Most of the time they are there more than my real family is. Definitely. Same thing goes for New Directions.

19:00 **Josie:** During the experience you talked about while you were a college student of having the two DWI's you mentioned. During the experience of that which is dealing with that is traumatic and difficult and like you said you were young and you're just seeing the world and you're having these new experiences. Did you find that there were different people or systems that really helped you out to get through those experiences to really come out on the other side of them?

19:34 **Kenisha:** Well you know you have to go through all the different programs all of them. But it was really like an individual thing. It was like you didn't want to go through all these programs, but you have to. But you have to suck it up because you made the decision to go out and drink and drive. So, you have to suck it up and complete these programs which is what I did. And after that you get back at it. It's not really like get back at it, because through all of that, it just means you have to work even harder. Because you have to continue what you are doing. But with this that you have created a whole you know. You have to work harder because of all the things you have to pay for. As far as you know the incident. I did that. I have come a long, long way when it comes to that. You lose your license. I had to get that back, so you know it comes with a lot of things that you have to prove that you want to you know, heal what you have damaged. That's exactly what I had to do. I wouldn't change a thing if rewind time. I wouldn't change a thing because I was immature. My mindset wasn't where it was supposed to be. You learn things like who your friends are. I don't really care about the whole friend concept, but you do which is when I say that, you know people you should hang around and you realize where your mindset is because you see what people do that you clearly see that's not fit for what someone should

be doing. You are growing into a well-rounded adult. After you make decisions like that. Into grow and if you are willing to actually go through the steps you are supposed to.

21:48 **Josie:** Absolutely. It's making me think of a term we sometimes you when talking about collaboration is teamwork. I'm thinking about all these amazing teammates also your cheerleaders, right? In that you have really set your mind on a goal that you have pursued really with tremendous courage and foresight to be able to reach that. It sounds like you have been surrounded with really awesome people like, your foster family, your foster mom with the folks here at New Directions. The caseworkers who have provided something of a foundation as teammates and cheerleaders on that way. That's really cool Awesome. The last principle is empowerment. So, in talking I hear the empowerment and courage, bravery, fortitude, just emanating from you the entire time. So, I'm curious to know. How did your time being in the foster care system going thought that experience, how do you see that as having empowered you going on your way to be where you are now?

23:09 **Kenisha:** As far as being a foster care I would say. It empowered me through relationships. Because I call them my cousins, they're my cousins through foster care. We would do talent shows and things like that. You know encouragement and just basically I just take from being in foster care, especially because my foster mom was I can do anything I put my mind too. I didn't realize that until I got into foster care. I just knew that's what I wanted to do. I just had a younger mind. I knew that was what I was going to do. It didn't hit me that you can do anything you want to do until. So, and not only that but actually planning and executing. That's what I learned from my foster mom too. So that's what I take away from being in foster care. Actually planning, executing and doing it in a dynamic way so that no one is like you. You stand out of a 1000.

24:28 **Josie:** That's totally what it sounds like with the arts things that you have gotten involved in. That you are orchestrating that your behind. I'm curious to know how you'll have to remind me of the names of the art organization that you referred to in the beginning, but. I'm curious to know how that sense of empowerment saw all that come to fruition. I am sure there were some bumps in the road or some confusion to navigate. So, I'm wondering if you can tell us more about that.

25:00 **Kenisha:** For the Western New York Arts Movement. Well when I began the Western New York Arts Movement it was just you know something that I wanted to do to practice marketing and promotions, because that's what I fell in love with. Surprisingly because you know you change your mind when you're in college. It was that but what I didn't learn, as far as bumps in the road, is you can't just pick anyone. To do a job. I wasn't very wise when it comes to that. Say I would choose one of my friends and they don't have one of the knowledge, not even the drive to complete the mission you are trying to accomplish. And that's what I learnt. You can't get people involved that doesn't even have the same drive. Not even close to it. They just want to have a name or something. You can't do that. So, I'm glad that I learnt that and got people involved in before. Not necessarily people that I know, but I'm getting to know, and they are able to contribute something to the business. And they have that drive, they have that drive. It doesn't necessarily have to be the same mission as I have, but you know they have a mission that is going to make the business successful. So that is what I learnt. By the business being successful, that isn't just benefit me individually it's not only to benefit the employees that are working, it's to benefit Western New York mainly. And then you have all the artist from all over to help us out. Because we have a lot of talent here. We just needed someone to showcase and that's what I noticed.

So, I said this is what I need to do because this is what I do. But yeah, as far as bumps in the road, you have to make sure you have the right people on board whether you know them or not.

27:13 **Josie:** Absolutely that's awesome. So, for those who are listening to this podcast and are other service providers for children in the foster care system, caseworkers, or maybe for people who are listening that are in the foster care system or recently aged out of it. Do you have any final words about your experiences or values that you would want to share?

27:41 **Kenisha:** Just wanted to say whatever you have set as a goal it's only short term. The dream is long term. You have to reach your goal on time because there is a dead line and that's all I got to say. Work hard to achieve your deadline and you will achieve your dream. That's all I got to say.

28:08 **Josie:** Awesome thank you so much on behalf of The Institute on Trauma an Trauma Informed Care we really want to thank you for taking the time to share with me today. And taking the time to share your witness of strength and resiliency. it's been a pleasure.