Interview on Mental Health and Trauma with Lauren, a provider/survivor

Josie: Hello, my name is Josie and I would like to welcome you back to Trauma Talks: Rising from the Ashes, a podcast series brought to you by the UB School of Social Work Institute on Trauma and Trauma Informed Care. This series provides an opportunity for people to share their witness of how strength and resiliency have allowed them to rise from the ashes. Trauma Talks follows people who work in the field of trauma, and have experienced trauma. Here we reflect on how Trauma Informed Care can assist those who have experienced traumatic events to embrace new life, wholeness, hope, strength, courage, safety, trust, choice, collaboration and empowerment. Today I am here with Lauren. Lauren is going to share her experiences and wisdoms and tell her story of liberation and recovery. And on behalf of the Institute we really want to thank Lauren for being here today, and for sharing her story with us. So now I am going to turn the floor over to Lauren to share with you, our audience, a little bit of her story.

1:05 **Lauren**: Oh, my story is still unfolding. And changing. I have a Masters in Clinical Community Psychology and spent probably twenty-five years working in the conventional mental health system. Different capacities. Did some counseling, that was never a primary interests more residential case management, running case management programs, and other programs — inpatient hospital, work on site units, in those twenty-five years. And then about thirteen years ago I got a job as a recovery advocate, an educator for a county. My only time ever being a county employee, I was the first person in the position. So I'm working with mental health and substance addiction professionals, and I realized very quickly that I needed to share my secret. The secret that I had held all of my life — which was that I was locked up, you know, as a sixteen year old and labeled with chronic schizophrenia. I never shared that those twenty-five years because of the oppression. You know, because of how people would treat me and, differently, unawarely. And also that I didn't believe that I could ever get an executive level job and I was at the level where I was considering applying for like an executive level, CEO, and it's like, there's no way! So I had been a senior manager in a non-profit. So I realized that I needed to be honest with them so that they could understand the changes that I was advocating for in the system. So that was maybe thirteen years ago. Roughly. And then soon after that I got a "dreamy" job that I thought was way, way, way above my capacity. And I spent a lot of time thinking about if I even wanted to apply for it. Because it really scared me. But I like looking fear in the face and doing the work I need to do to release it. I did actually end up applying for the job and then became the first director of the National Coalition for Mental Health Recovery, so this quiet little insecure mental health manager that just tried to shake up the system, but little ways suddenly was shaking it up in much bigger ways. Trying to represent the voice of mental health consumers and survivors on Capitol Hill. And we, actually I was pretty successful in impacting Federal Policy and funding for some of the Federal pure-run Federal programs. I left Washington two and a half years ago or so. Just in time. Left the job. Have a very different life now, and the journey has taken kind of a right-turn. Still, I'll always be a community builder, a healer, and have my foot kind of in mental health. I see myself as a bridge actually, a bridge between the mental health community and the general population. Because there's a divide. That seems to be my role the past few years, to be this bridge.

3:56 **Josie**: And that's a beautiful role. Surely needed.

3:59 **Lauren**: It's right for me, and then the other very new thing in my life, I just started two years ago. And I don't really, I am still working on the language of it, but its studies and consciousness. It's some quantum-physics, but it's really looking, taking a deep dive into "what am I? Who was I born to be?" So

that spiritual journey that I'm doing with, I mean I do some by myself, but I mean there, this is a big spiritual community down here where I live. So it's, so that's just a whole different piece. It's not different. This is about our health and body, mind, spirit. And environment. So I am just expanding, like the universe!

4:37 **Josie**: When you share about those experiences. Sharing your story of your teenaged years, and then being in the mental health world, launching into that new job and where you are now. It makes me think of the need to not compartmentalize pieces of ourselves and to really find a wholeness. I think that really speaks to the values of Trauma Informed Care that we will spend some time talking about. Trauma Informed Care changes the conversation from saying "what's wrong with a person," to "what's happened," but the five principles of safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment — those are values that really permeate every layer of not just service providers, but even have the potential to influence communities, society, and the world. And so, I am excited to spend some time talking about those with you. And so, to launch into a conversation about those I just wanted to start with talking about safety. How have the experiences that you know, you have gone through impacted your sense of safety, or your perspective on safety?

5:50 **Lauren**: If you're not safe how does it impact your health and your welling being? So I am trying to weave together what I share with you because a lot of the work I do is going back and looking at my life. What I understand, and it's pretty clear to me, the instant I was born, I felt emotionally abandoned. I don't have any memories of being in the womb, but I think, I say that but I, you know I am accessing deeper and deeper memories. I know people who do remember some experiences in the womb, especially if they were kicked, you know if something traumatic happened, I don't remember anything happening like that. I am assuming I felt pretty safe and things were pretty predictable, voices, noises, moves, stuff like that. But when I was born, and it's not a cognitive memory, it's a somatic memory. I just remember being very, very anxious from as far back as I can remember. You know like, I know as an infant for sure. I grew up in a kind of working-class middle-class family. We didn't have to worry about a roof over the head and food, and we weren't living in a war zone or a ghetto. Physical needs were taken care of — but emotionally? I never saw my parents touch in my life. So, I think I felt very unsafe. And the impact it had was clinging to anyone or anything that could offer some safety. But of course, I guess I shouldn't say of course, but I didn't become aware of that until kind of early, starting to take a look at my life much more closely until my thirties. Okay, I am sixty-one today, so about half my life now I've been very intentionally focused on, "what happened to me to give me the patterned ways that I have?" I do have control of what I feel like I don't have control of. Just those things I do that I don't want to do, and changing them. Just really replaying the tape and looking at it from a different perspective, a more empowered perspective. I know we will get too empowered later! But safety is just huge. It's just huge. And one of the important lessons for me was, I was in the Peace Core in my early twenties for three years and that's really, in West Africa, in a small village in West Africa. In the woods. No running water, I lived in a mud-hut with an attached roof. That's when I learned what community was, really. Because, and I saw a number of infants being born and in my village, and also in a clinic where I was hanging out with this nurse and her, a lot of babies were born there… When babies are born, whether it's in the rice field or the hut, they are never ever left untouched. That first year, they're constantly held! Until they start walking. I compare that my childhood and I think, "oh my god!" And these were the most loving, so I lived in the village with them. I lived with the chief actually, all the Peace Core volunteers lived with the Chief of the village and a family of 25, a big family. And I thought, "Wow… my childhood wasn't like that." They grow up feeling safe, and knowing never ever questioning, they belong. There is not a word in their language, the Mendica language, for "alone." The concept doesn't exist. So I've, I do the compare and contrast and think, "Yup! I felt pretty unsafe."

9:04 **Josie**: What a contrast and an experience to have later in life of just…

9:11 **Lauren**: You see a lot of life. Because the people are so happy. They are joyous. The happiest people I've ever known. Just loving and warm I think, gee! I mean I grew up in the suburbs of Washington D.C. right? And it's we weren't like that. I mean it was a great community, I love growing up there. But comparing and contrast taught me a lot about myself and also the world. It taught me a lot.

9:34 **Josie**: In terms of moving from in your teenage years rather, when you had the experience as you said, of realizing you need to share what happened to you at that time in your life — What role did safety play in propelling you from that moment in your life and those experiences growing up, to seeking help and to kind of starting on a journey of, as you talk about "Recovery and Liberation." What role did safety play in that kind of trajectory?

10:02 **Lauren**: I felt really unsafe for so long and you know I wasn't even aware of it I just thought well this is the way life is and you know even as an infant we learn, I think it's pretty universal, well in our culture, but to be hard and tough. It becomes the new norm, right? We think, "Oh this is normal." And there's nothing normal about it. Another piece of my life, and it's related to the safety is when I was fourteen and a half, if that matters, my father was shot in the face by a teenager with a hand-gun and after two and a half weeks in a coma, never regaining consciousness, he transitioned me out of the safety, and it's like you know a parent, the only person in my family that I felt a little safety with because he actually had some attention for me, you know was ripped out of my life by someone who was basically my age. So that was a big introduction to racism and classism and the kid lived 30 minutes away from us. So yeah, I felt pretty unsafe. We had the Vietnam War going on. When I got out of the mental institution at seventeen, finished high school, I really was a little bit in and out of the mental health system. There was this one time I did try, I was in my early twenties, I felt some sadness and I went right into, well college, Peace Core, and then came back and went to grad school. But during college I needed some help. I think I was struggling a bit with feeling sad and not really understanding why, and I went to the community mental health center. At first I started at college they had a therapist, actually she was a social worker, and I would say she was the best helper. You know social worker, psychologist, the best helper I ever had and I can get back to that but for some reason I know she left the college and went into private practice, and it must have been during those years, I couldn't afford private practice, I went to the Community Mental Health once and I never returned. And at that time I would say the Mt. Gomer County was the wealthiest county, if not one of the most wealthiest counties. Mt. Gomery County Maryland. We had money for mental health services and all that. And I wasn't going to go back. No art work on the walls, it was just like this controlled, harsh place where I was treated like some sick-o. And it was horrific. So, not safe. Not respected. So I went back to her. But I'll stop there and…

12:23 **Josie**: Well I think that that is a really great Segway into trust because you just said, especially with that helper, the social worker, it seemed that who she was in your life really engendered a lot of trust. So I am just curious to know, what did she do to gain your trust and to maintain that?

12:43 **Lauren**: She was very genuine. I had not experienced that before. Anywhere. My parents had put me in therapy when I was, so shortly before my father died, I might have been like eleven or twelve or something. It was these authoritarian figures and I didn't trust them and I didn't talk to them. They probably thought I was strange because I didn't talk to them but it's like having therapy with your mother or something. It didn't work. She sat behind a big desk, a big desk. I was like, "this is so not working for me!" So that was my introduction to therapy as a, I was eleven, twelve-ish, something like that. Anyway. And then sixteen, seventeen in the hospital. I just felt like, you know it was THE system.

Well intended, good people but, and I was confused, I was sixteen, seventeen. But when I met Maryann, she just… she had a genuine-ness, and a grounded-ness, and she smiled. She showed that she cared about me as an individual. I didn't feel like a check on the box. It was session-ed on so I could go to my next patient or my next appointment and my paperwork. And it was just the genuine-ness. She would laugh sometimes. She wasn't trained in the Freudian School, she was trained in the Carl Rodgers School, just real caring. She remembered things I said, that was like a breath of fresh air.

14:01 **Josie**: It really, the juxtaposition, your two experiences of the authoritarian figure sitting behind the desk and then this individual that was really engaging with you, I mean what a contrast in reality indicating the importance of service providers of being authentic-real-people. And really recognizing that in the folks that they're engaging with.

14:26 **Lauren**: Yeah, I want to say that I am seventeen and I get discharged from the big mental institution and I go back to one semester of public high school, I went back to I went back to a different high school. I lived near like, between two high schools so I had the choice. And it was like a big secret back then. So the school counselor promised to keep my secret, you know, where I had been the past fifteen months. But I was in an out-patient therapy. One day I went, and I rode my bike to the psychologist, and one day he asked me if I wanted to know my diagnosis. And I really didn't because again, that was an authoritarian thing and they're compartmentalizing and doing what they need to do for reimbursement and insurance and all that stuff. But I told him, "sure" because that's what I felt you're supposed to say. Right? And my recollection. This is my memory, if he was here he might remember it differently but, so my recollection was that he pointed his finger at my clinical record, you know he had a chart on his desk, and he pointed his finger, which you know when I am telling you this it seems like you know it's not even possible, right? But again, this was thirty something years ago. He pointed his finger and I read, it was like chronic-undifferentiated schizophrenia, I'm seventeen. Trust, safety? He didn't explain it. He didn't say it was a diagnosis, it's subjective, you know "duh duh dah," nothing. It was just. What ramped through my mind was psycho. This system has labeled me so sick. How could I possibly trust these people? Because they don't understand me. They don't seem to genuinely care about me in contact. They kind of look at me as out of contact, they don't get the bigger picture. And so, it was just… And then I met Maryann and it was very different.

16:13 **Josie**: It speaks to, when we talk about trust we often think about transparency so, as you just pointed out he pointed at this diagnosis and offered no other insight or conversation about that. It was a very pate and final sentence. And with that being said, having different experiences with service providers, both at mental institutions, folks you engaged with after that, going into seeing Maryann who was really influential and careful, I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit about choice and how it felt to have choice or to not have choice in your treatment experiences.

17:03 **Lauren**: So, choice. Choice is a big word. You know there's real choice and then there's the choices you are offered within a compartment, right? In a square. And I like to think outside the box. In my thirties I made the choice to start looking more deeply. And to do that with people outside the system. So it wasn't the mental health system or… it was people that were looking at liberation. Human liberation. And how do we live the life of our dream and be free from anything that makes our lives smaller? That's where I found genuine choice. Because I started to learn who I was. I started to actually get more in touch with my feelings. I had suppressed so much, I think fear and rage and anger at the way I had, at the way my life had gone with my father's murder and with just the way that I was raised. And just everything that happens, and it happens to everyone else too that I knew in our culture. This very, "put-the-kid-in-the-box," "shut-up," "don't make waves," that was the message I got about don't make

waves, don't stand out, "conform conform conform!" Be good. Get good grades. WAIT A MINUTE. THAT'S NOT WHAT I WANT! Yeah, I think the trick with choice is to make sure it's genuine. And that was one of the messages that I certainly tried to convey that any good service provider works on, is let's think out of the box here. What do you really want? If you look in your heart, your soul. What do you really want? What's your dream? Because we all get stuck in that box you know, and we all think we have choice for one, two, or three, and it's like I want another door! It's like, creating the future, right? It's creating the one we want. So for me choice is about helping people not conform, necessarily, but to look into their heart and their soul and ask them and explore with them and support them in their thinking about, "what do you really want?" Because otherwise, we all stay stuck in the box.

19:11 **Josie**: The values overlap, obviously, and that so much overlaps with what we were just talking about with trust that the social worker that you interacted with for a while saw you as a person, interacted with you in a way that was very genuine and authentic. A piece of that, I would imagine, is acknowledging as people, we have really deep desires for what we want for ourselves that cannot just be reduced to a check-box, or to anything that can be denied and easily manipulated. We are complex and messy people and you're like, that's something that, especially that one provider really embraced.

19:58 **Lauren**: I'll be honest with you, when I um, so I was out of the country in my early twenties? Right in the Core, and another year in France working actually in a mental institution. That I came back and, no I am sorry I came back and saw Maryann, but actually it was before that, I must have been in college, I think I was in college — I started getting a little, I don't know, loopy isn't a good word but, a little high, a little— and, it scared Maryann. She wanted me to see the psychiatrist and, I think you need to see the psychiatrist meaning you need to be on meds. So, I saw this other side of her and realized you know, she had some unfinished business. So I, in that moment I remember it was very painful, I remember thinking, "she doesn't trust my mind." She's scared. She can't go with me and explore this, place… like a "higher-dimension" or whatever you want to call it. You know what I mean? It's her response instead of trusting my thinking and me was: fear. It was the only time I really saw that and it caused this big shift, and it was… it was scary for me too. I followed what she suggested because I did trust her but, it was a split with her. It was realizing something else was going on in her. Like she wasn't there 100% for me. It was there 90 something because her own stuff came into the interaction, and it could have gone very differently. You know, if I were to have a conversation with her now you know I probably could actually. You know, it just changed and shifted a lot for me. I don't know if she ever really realized it.

21:28 **Josie**: It speaks to the need when we talk about Trauma Informed Care that it is not just a perspective that we hope that service providers will take with clients, but also it's a whole cultural shift and a mindset shift that also applies to the workers themselves. So as you just pointed out that you can tell that there was something that was changing with her and within herself. And in Trauma Informed Care is also about being honest and authentic and processing that.

21:56 **Lauren**: You know it's like, I don't understand with therapist, whatever their training is, social-work, psychiatrist, psychologist — really, really, really do the work on themselves. And I don't mean ten sessions of therapy. I mean really gut-wrenching, looking at the dark parts, the scary parts. Because to me, that's where I've gotten the most freedom is when I go places that no one wants to go. It's scary. Whether it's confronting my father's murderer… or, you know I've been to Auschwitz twice, I'll probably go again. You know, it's deep. You know, I was working on going to a community tomorrow and working on the community. You're just going into those deep, deep, deep, places — really inside me, you know I'm mentioning other places, but to me that's where that grounded-ness and genuine-ness has come from, for me. I can be with other people in extreme states, in remote psychotic-suicidal states. I can go

in and be with them without getting triggered and scared because I've been in those deep, dark places. Even in seclusion as a sixteen year old, and it's a gift that I think peers, people who have been through the mental health system, particularly being in the institution — it's a huge strength that we can give that I don't know anyone else can give. That moment, if it makes sense to you, in those moments when people are really struggling. And most people just get afraid, understandably. Like Maryann did in that moment. I don't get afraid. And a lot of people, we don't get afraid because we've been there. So because of the healing, it's not so scary. We can be there in a way that is incredibly supportive. It basically says, "I've been there, and you're going to get through this. We're going to get through this." To be able to say that from a genuine place is extremely powerful. I'm not sure what one of the main things that goes under. It's not choice, maybe empowerment. I don't know!

23:56 **Josie**: I think it speaks to the next value too, which is collaboration, because you're speaking to really the beauty and the power of peer resources and peer support and that can be a really wonderful and beautiful collaborative tool for people who are on their journey of their own liberation and recovery.

24:18 **Lauren**: And you know it doesn't have to be peers. I've gotten support, tremendous support, and I continue to because it's in… it's a world-wide peer thing that you've never heard of, it's not advertised but, it's a larger definition and a much broader definition of peers. It's really, there's peers who have been through the mental health system who have and understand mental health liberation and that "it's not your fault, there's nothing wrong, there's nothing wrong with them." There's not this oppressive society that our responses are actually rational responses to the irrational reality around us… But it's people who understand you know crisis is universal it can happen to anyone at any time. Anyone can get really confused. But it's really understanding that our minds don't go anywhere, and we sometimes get stuck in the isolation and our recordings and are stuck in monologue. If we can help people engage in dialogue, and you don't have to be a mental health survivor to do that, understand that human connection, and I guess it probably touches it under safety, and trust, but also the collaboration that just having another mind there, trusting your mind, believing in you, and supporting you can make all the difference in the world. You can save a life and one of the most giant learning experiences ever.

25: 41 **Josie**: And that really nicely ties into the last value being empowerment, which I know that we have brought up already many times. When we talk about empowerment, we're really talking about something that goes far beyond "cheerleading." It's really celebrating who a person is as a whole, with everything they come to the table with. I'm wondering if you can share a little bit more about your experience with empowerment whether it is just something that is in your journey that has been particularly empowering, or has helped you understand, as you pointed out just before how you're not defined by the experiences that you have had, and that things that have occurred is not your fault. I'm wondering if we could hear a little bit more about your experience.

26:34 **Lauren**: I have three things. One is, I can do them in consecutive order on how they have occurred in my life. One thing that was major, major in shifting my life was back in my thirties was when Janet, this women, who was a mental health system survivor — brilliant woman, one of the smartest people I've known in terms of liberation work, human-liberation work — and it was probably one of the first or second times I've ever met her, we were at a weekend workshop. She was leading the workshop, but she was leading this small support group that we had at 7AM or something, before the bigger workshop started. So she was working with everyone individually, for just like a few minutes. And she said to me, knowing my history you know, on and off psych drugs for twenty years, chronic schizophrenia, and you know the mental institution for fifteen months, she said, "Lauren, there was never anything wrong with

you." And my response was like, "what are you talking about?" You know, I'm like a mental health counselor at the time, I'm like little Ms. Professional right? But people I didn't come out publicly, this was privately, and I just thought, "that's ridiculous," you know, all my life I've been told something is wrong with me and I was locked up, drugged up, and you're saying nothing is wrong with me? Like, I don't know what you're talking about. So it took a few years, literally, I really mean a few years to, I thought, I've tried everything out: therapy and drugs and different things. Including being a counselor, mental health counselor, I thought, well I have nothing to lose, and I've never tried it before so I tried it. And it took me a few years of really working on it, doing emotional release on it. Like what if it was really true? What are the ramifications and the implications politically, socially, economically, if there was never anything wrong with me? Well, would we need mental institutions? Would we need therapists? It's like what does it mean if there was never anything wrong with me? What would have happened if someone had said, "what happened?" instead of just slapping a label on me. A year and a half after my father's brutally murderer they are just like, "Upppp! Schizophrenia! Lock her up." And it's like, I don't recall anyone ever asking me about my dad. The dad had been brutally murdered. Like, is that even possible? They could not ask me about it? I don't remember anyone ever asking me about it. Let's blame the person who's got the big feelings. So that was one thing, someone was telling me that nothing was ever wrong with me. And then there was, the two bigger ones are this big job is announced, this National Coalition job, and I'm thinking I helped to write the definition for first position, which was really a director of public policy, never, cause' that's part of what I did as a senior manager in the company right is to write policy and job descriptions and all that stuff. Never, never once thinking that I would apply for it. The leader that was putting this coalition together, the main leader I should say because he brought in many other nationally known leaders. You know, he said one day, "I believe in you," I said you know, no one has ever said that to me before. It feels really good. But you know it also makes me realize that I need to believe in me. And that's like eleven years ago, it's not that long ago. I realized, I really have some work to do learning how to believe in myself, cause' I didn't believe in myself. That was huge for me! Like what does that mean? To completely believe in yourself. That was like a foreign concept. So I worked on it a lot, a lot of rage, a lot of terror. Because I wasn't going to apply for the job because I realized I was too afraid. Then I thought, I don't want to NOT apply because I am afraid. It took a couple months for me to, I have some time to decide if I wanted to apply or not. I needed to really get a better sense of, get more comfortable with the idea of thinking that maybe, possibly I could do this job. And to have that leap of faith that I've got the support around me was absolutely key, having a strong support network around me that's peers and other peers, non-peers I should say. People who understand human-liberation, and that's in my life what it is. It's having a strong support system that developed over twenty plus years. So did I answer, what was the value?

30:24 **Josie**: It was empowerment.

30:27 **Lauren**: The last thing I'll say is I did a PBS special a few years ago, and the only piece that was not left on the cutting room floor was a piece of that empowerment. By getting a job and somebody believing in me, I was like "whattttt?" You know, YOU believe in ME? You're going to stand by ME? That was the only piece that actually made it into this one-hour long PBS special. Everything else, I guess, was not what they wanted to hear. More, kind of… the other values.

30:57 **Josie**: Thank you so much. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to us and some of the folks who are listening to this, they may be having some of the experiences that you have, or they may be service providers, or studying to become service providers. So, do you have any final words on the importance of the values that we talked about? Or anything else that you feel you'd want to share before we wrap up our conversation?

31:26 **Lauren**: Get support around you to have the courage and dare to have the honest conversations with someone you feel safe, to create… cause' that's what I've done. And I know many people, hundreds of people who have done it and it's completely changed our lives. That we can teach people how to listen to us, listen to each other, right? And create that safety and trust that we need to live the life of our dreams. And beyond our dreams.

31:51 **Josie**: Thank you so much again. On behalf of the Institute on Trauma and Trauma Informed Care, I'd really just want to thank you for taking the time to speak with us today and to share your story. It's really been a real honor, so thank you.