

ANTONICA ALEMAN: Hello, and welcome. Thank you for joining us for the Fostering Psychological Safety on Child Welfare Teams podcast. My name is Antonica Aleman. My pronouns are she, hers and her and I am a content developer at the Capacity Building Center for States. Today I will be hosting our podcast episode about personal healing and growth. The purpose of our discussion is an opportunity to hear from our guests to share their personal experiences and expertise working in child welfare teams, helping foster a sense of psychological safety, navigating your journey through child welfare, while having personal traumas, and nurturing a growth mindset as an individual and team member.

We will be hearing from our guests, sharing personal experiences about healing from loss and addiction, working with and in child welfare while healing, reuniting with families and overcoming adversities. This podcast contains sensitive information that may be upsetting to listeners. Please take care of yourself and listen at your discretion. Hello and welcome. Thank you all for joining. I am here with Angela Braxton,

Remy Morris and Brandy Hudson. I'm going to be passing it over to them to just give a quick introduction.

Angela, would you mind starting us?

ANGELA BRAXTON: Absolutely. I'm Angela Braxton. I work with the Capacity Building Center for States. I also work with the ICF on specific state and local projects currently. I'm going to pass it to Brandy.

BRANDY HUDSON: Thanks, Angela. I am Brandy Hudson, a consultant with the Capacity Center Building for States. I work in a couple of different venues. Primarily my work is around racial equity and lived expertise. At the Center I work in philanthropy as the Director of Power Building for the Weissberg Foundation.

REMY MORRIS: Hello, my name is Remy Morris, I use she, hers, her pronouns. At the Center I work as a young adult consultant and a part-time staff. I am particularly passionate about lived experience, but I'm still relatively new to the Center, so I am open to learning and exploring what other things that I can become compassionate about.

ANNOUNCER: The next section focuses on defining personal healing. First you'll hear Brandy Hudson talk about the

connection between healing from the trauma of being in the child welfare system, and being able to work to improve the system. She is followed by Remy Morris, who shares her powerful journey coming to love herself.

ANTONICA ALEMAN: When you hear the terms personal healing and growth, what does it mean to you and what comes up for you in your mind when you hear those terms? To kick off this conversation, I really would like to pass it over to Brandy.

BRANDY HUDSON: When I think of personal growth and healing, it really is about my ability to heal from the trauma that was inflected on me through the child welfare system in order to show up in a way that can actually help to guide, promote, and work with and support people who are currently being impacted by the system. And identifying and defining personal growth and healing for themselves and walking beside them in their journey.

I think for a long time I was working in the system and adjacent to the system as a person with lived expertise, but that had not been my own work and inadvertently and unintentionally was perpetuating harm

for a lot of the folks that I was advocating or working on behalf of. And until I was able to do my own trauma healing, that's when I became the best version of myself and then could pour it into other people. So I think particularly for people with lived expertise and lived experience who want to show up for other folks and who want to be really positive helpers in the system, the first step is taking care of self, right? So I think that once you can take care of self, you can think about taking care of somebody else.

ANTONICA ALEMAN: Remy?

REMY MORRIS: For me I think about healing and growth more wholly. I think for a while I was focused on healing and growing just for my foster care experience and the experiences of my ten brothers and sisters in the system as well. That I unconsciously didn't even think about where I kind of just hid away. I think I needed to heal from when I was living with our bio parents, or the things I needed to heal from being a first generation in school. Or just all these other things that I didn't even think about how much they affected me. I only thought about the child welfare aspect. And to be honest, it was 12 plus years of my life, so it

was a big thing for me to heal from. And I needed to start being unbiased when I looked at me as a person. I needed to because I wanted to be seen as a good person and not a whole person.

So I stopped telling myself be good today. Your best isn't always good, right? So I have to start being wise and honest with myself, and that was the other part. Like that honest and transparent like outlook on who I am. And learning how to accept that and decide what about me do I want to work on, because I realized I am never the person that exists in anybody's head. The you that people perceive you as is never you. Only you know you. And you could be the nicest, most kind person in the world, and people still don't like you. So I started having those types of conversations with myself; I started to like me and I started being able to grow, because I started to know me.

ANTONICA ALEMAN: Remy, thank you for sharing that. Next you'll hear from Angela Braxton as she shares the story of her journey in child welfare and her healing path to reconcile with her former caseworker.

ANGELA BRAXTON: Wow, my personal healing and growth. When I think about that, it absolutely means everything to me. I didn't begin to heal personally until I was in my 30s, to really heal. To really look back on the trauma that I had experienced my own self and then to begin to heal from the loss of my children. You know, I lost my children to child welfare. And then I had to get clean from addiction. It was a very painful process to experience and to look at some of those truths. And then to own my own role in everything that occurred and how I responded, and then there's growth.

I remember experiencing an anger, frustration, and betrayal by the child welfare system and how when I was approached by one of my former caseworkers, how I hadn't even realized how much I had grown until she reached out and engaged with me. I met with her and was able to sit with her and have dinner with her and have a meaningful conversation with her. And it was in that moment that I knew and fully recognized just how much I had grown and just how much I had changed.

Personal healing and growth for anyone who has experienced trauma, be it through your family, through systems, just however you've experienced that, if you can't find a way to heal on a personal level. I think Remy mentioned she began to love herself. It took years for me to even know what all of that meant. But when you begin to love yourself, that's when you are fully open to continuing to grow and continuing to heal. And it's just a wonderful, amazing experience because I never knew what love was until I began to love myself.

ANTONICA ALEMAN: Thank you for being open and vulnerable.

ANNOUNCER: The following section contains sensitive information about mental health and suicide that might be triggering to some listeners, especially those with lived experience in child welfare. First, Antonica Aleman shares her story of personal growth and healing with going back to work in child welfare. Then Brandy Hudson comments on the healing power of sharing our stories.

ANTONICA ALEMAN: Personal healing and growth, what that means to me is a lot of work. Where you have to begin first is recognizing that we're not perfect. We all come with our flaws, our imperfections. And as we

journey through life, there are things that happen, trials that we go through that definitely makes us feel low. I have direct lived experience being in child welfare.

I entered child welfare when I was 13 years old with two of my other siblings, we were separated. And going back to work into child welfare is where I realized I still had personal healing that I needed to do. Trauma was coming up. I don't know if anyone else has experienced this, but there were certain trainings in child welfare that we take that might bring up these emotions. It was through my supervisor trying to tell me you might want to go talk to somebody, in a very nice way is how she brought it to me. And for a while I was really like no, I don't need any help, like I'm okay. I got this, I can deal with this.

But then I realized I need to talk to somebody. I was able to heal through several of the traumas that I had experience in child welfare, and outside of child welfare. I struggled with depression, I struggled with thoughts of suicide. I struggled with self-harm, and I



have also attempted suicide. Fortunately I'm here. I'm alive still. And so with our stories, there's a beauty in how we are able to come to a place where we can say that we've made it. We have come to a point in our lives where we can now share our stories with others and help them. So thank you all for being so vulnerable.

BRANDY HUDSON: That is beautiful and thank you so much. And I think sharing our stories and having our stories, but also like using our stories in ways that are transformative. That's the real power in bringing people with lived experience to the workforce and child welfare. It's not just really their story, but it's the insight, the wisdom and the perspective that they gain through their story that can inform better practices, policies and support for the workforce, including those with lived expertise.

ANNOUNCER: In the next segment, Antonica Aleman and Angela Braxton explain what system supports they needed for healing. Then Remy Morris shares her insights into the importance of community and sharing power for facilitating healing.

ANTONICA ALEMAN: As we're going through this conversation, and I know we're definitely sharing our personal experience of what it looked like when we're going through personal healing and growth, but it also makes me think of while we're working in child welfare, I think about what would be some helpful things when you're in child welfare and you're trying to navigate your own personal healing, but still trying to show up to the work. What are some things that might be helpful for us to be able to do that? I think having a supportive team while working in child welfare is super helpful.

That's what I experienced when I first was a peer support worker. There was only four of us, but we were like a family. So having like supportive, healthy relationships really helped me throughout my journey. I really want to hear from you all, what were some things that are helpful for you?

ANGELA BRAXTON: The worker came back to engage with me. It was to become involved through systems of care. And we had an entire grantee that was so supportive. She and I did have to work through some of our differences and I

think providing the space, the platform, the support and the mentorship I think that they provided for me, without me even realizing at that time that that's what it was. I worked in surgery at this point in my life. I didn't have anything and wasn't sure I wanted anything to do with child welfare again, but here I am.

I appreciated being able to bring my authentic self to the table without judgement. I didn't feel fearful to speak, to open my mouth and that was due to that support that they provided. It was almost like a wraparound support for me to be able to come to those meetings and provide input without feeling - I never felt like a token during that time.

ANTONICA ALEMAN: Thank you for sharing that, Angela. Remy?

REMY MORRIS: My biggest thing is community, is people. I realized it's not always what you know sometimes; it really is who you know. Having mentors who believed in me before I got my life together - because let me tell you something, I'm a problem sometimes. I'm honest with myself. I like me now. But I like me now because I haven't always been this good of a person.

I used to get the workers a pretty hard time. I had two workers who just always saw my potential who supported me before I got here. Then having the young people I work with, honestly, I love the ones who everybody are like they give them a hard time, those are my favorites. They're funny, they're honest. And so like when I'm having all of these people support me and love and who I can pour love into, it feels like your chosen family is something.

Biological family is one thing. You don't have no choice in that. But your chosen family has, like for me has always been the push I needed. The other thing for me is actually having shared power. You don't invite me nowhere if you're not going to listen to me. I can go somewhere else. I am not here to just keep talking in circles because I am very solution-oriented. I got to work on a youth advisory board and one of my rules was okay, we could talk about problems all day, but let's talk about a solution. Let's talk about like what do we do next.

And I'm like that for myself. I don't just like to be in spaces where I can be like this is all what we could do better here. I like to make change. What we do know is that the traditional way isn't working and that we're trying to make change for the people who are coming up after. There isn't a pipeline from child welfare to this work, unfortunately.

ANNOUNCER: In this final section, first Brandy Hudson, then Remy Morris lift up the importance of authentic relationships and trust in their growth and healing journeys.

BRANDY HUDSON: I think for me, you guys really touched on the most important, which is relationships. We can call it community, but all healing transformation, it lives in relationships. I think particularly in child welfare where there is someone, the worker without lived experience. You are coming against very difficult situations every day. Like you're faced with folks who are at the brink in their lives. They've got substance abuses, abject poverty - I mean, all of the things, right?

And we haven't even talked about racism yet, right? And so we think about like how those things compound and compound and compound. Like it is very emotionally draining and it's very tiring to do this work. I think it is more so when you have lived experience, right, because of all of the triggers and the secondary trauma. And those relationships, those trusted relationships, the ability to go to someone and say - hey, I'm having a really hard day. Hey, somebody said this really messed up thing. Help me think through this. Was it really about me, was it towards me? Help me process. Like those relationships are so critical to being well.

And so if we want the workforce to be well, we have to have strong relationships and the ability to make mistakes, or anywhere. You're going to make mistakes. This is very complicated, difficult work. You're being asked to make really complex decisions that are going to impact the trajectory of somebody's life forever, for generations. And so having you make a mistake in a supportive environment where you can get feedback, where there's a growth mindset, where you're being

supported and people believe that you're going to do better next time. Right, to me that is so critical, particularly in child welfare because it's impossible to get it right because there's no such thing as right.

REMY MORRIS: I just needed to piggyback off the relationship part because I experienced it. So moving into this work, before I got into the work, I would always be like there's nothing out there, there's no money, there's no help, there's nothing. And then I got into the work on the other side of the water and I'm like okay, wait, there's things here. Why didn't I know about these things? Why couldn't I utilize these things?

And I saw it in action during COVID. I got to help with the COVID money that young people got and I got to talk about, say how they were going to use the money in helping the young people through this really hard time. Resources like housing, certain money for transportation, schooling, et cetera. Like we have money to spare.

And I had young people choosing to be homeless because they didn't want to deal with the system. I had young people choosing to figure it out, to not have a car, to not have food, to struggle because they could not fathom getting help from a system that hurt them. And it made me realize that oftentimes resources without relationships go unutilized because we don't trust that you have the best intent.

That is the impact of your relationship. That is the impact of how young people see you. They don't care what you have to offer if you hurt them, if you don't make them feel safe. If I offered you a plate of food and I'm your enemy, you wouldn't eat it either. You'd say that you poisoned it. We start thinking about the intent of the favor given. And so it made me really talk to my state about how they were coming across to the people that they were serving.

ANNOUNCER: In Part 1 of this podcast episode, you have heard our guests share their experiences and perspectives about reconciling with people in their lives, building new relationships, and working towards personal healing and mental health. Tune in to Part 2



to hear a deeper dive into the harmful effects of not having strong and supportive relationships, ways of building trust with people, and coming to love ourselves.

Additionally, you can explore the Center's other resources in the fostering psychological safety on child welfare team series by visiting the Center for States Website at [capacity.childwelfare.gov/states](http://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states). This podcast was created by the Capacity Center Building for States, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau under contract number HHSP 233201500071-I.

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