

[00:00:01.390] - Lisa Qualls

Welcome to the Adoption Connection podcast, where we offer resources to equip you and stories to inspire you on your adoption journey. I'm Lisa Qualls.

[00:00:10.290] - Melissa Corkum

And this is Melissa Corkum. Don't worry, we get it, and we're here for you.

[00:00:18.450] - Melissa Corkum

Well, hello, friends. Welcome to the Adoption Connection podcast, episode 167. I am super excited to have our friend Gaelin Elmore on the show today. So, Gaelin, welcome.

[00:00:31.420] - Gaelin Elmore

Thanks for having me, Melissa. I'm excited to be here and just talk a little bit about my story and just where it fits into the foster care and adoption world.

[00:00:40.460] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, absolutely. So before we really jump into your story, do you want to just tell folks a little bit about who you are and kind of where you are and what you've been doing lately?

[00:00:51.750] - Gaelin Elmore

Yeah. So, I'm Gaelin Elmore. I am 26, about to be 27 this year. My wife, myself, and our two year old daughter currently live in Edon Prairie, Minnesota, which is like southwestern suburb of the Twin Cities, here in Minnesota. I work full time as a speaker and workshop facilitator and have been just enjoying the opportunity to use the things that I went through to have an impact for other people, but also just to get into the weeds of people and talk about life, talk about the hard things and help other people navigate their own stories and what they're going through.

[00:01:36.920] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, amazing. And here at the Adoption Connection, we really value and honor voices from all aspects of the adoption constellation. And I think we spoke on the same stage together at a conference recently, and I was just really impressed by your story, and you were so well spoken, and I'm excited to bring that to our audience. So let's just jump into your story. What do you remember about coming into care?

[00:02:05.250] - Gaelin Elmore

Yeah, so my memory, I feel like that's one of the, I would say blessings that God had given me for a while. It was a curse, but one of the blessings God had given me is a really good and solid memory about my youth and upbringing. I think now because it plays such a big role in my ability to draw on some of those memories and those experiences to give other people perspective and help them in their journey. So one of my first childhood memories ever, in general, is actually being taken away from my parents. I was in the house with two of my older sisters. We were all living with my parents at the time. And my two sisters, being older than me, were off at school and I wasn't old enough. And my case worker, who was new, fresh on the job, had never met them before, came to my parents' house when I was around four or five years old and my dad was at work. He worked third shift, and my mom, it was just me and her. And I just remember just the chaos that ensued, the battle or the tug of war from my mom, trying to figure out how to stop this from happening. And my caseworker ultimately just trying to do his job. That's one of my first childhood memories. And I actually recall going, my caseworker ended up removing me from the situation and putting me in his car and basically asked me to sit tight while he went back in to try to get the rest of my stuff. And I remember just sitting there as a little kid and thinking to myself, how can I take control of this situation? And what can I do to help my parents or help myself? And the decision I made was, "I'm going to be as difficult as I possibly can be for anybody that is on the side of, quote, unquote, foster care." If you were a foster parent, if you're a social worker, if you're a teacher, all those things. I was just like, if I show people that I'm not happy, that I'm not doing well and that I don't like them, that they will eventually take me back home, which is a very childlike way to view the world and envisioning things playing out. But yeah, that was a decision I made right away as a child. And that wasn't my first time going into care. I had been in care as early as five months old when I was born to my parents. And so I had gone back and forth and played the

game of going home for a couple of months, going back into care and bouncing pinballing all these different places. But that was just the first time I genuinely remember the encounter that took place in order for me to go back into care.

[00:04:40.530] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. What a powerful window into that world. What do you remember about the time with your birth parents? Do you remember thinking about or understanding why someone might want to, quote, unquote, protect you from them? Or were you kind of just like they're my parents and I don't really get this. Like you said, you've already expressed just anger around I don't want people to take me away. I want to come back. So can you give us just a little window into what it's like as a child? As adults, we kind of look at and we see reasons why it might be unsafe. But what was your experience in that?

[00:05:21.030] - Gaelin Elmore

I think the answer to that goes right in line with what I was saying about my memory, because I think my awareness as a kid was really high, too. I knew when things were not the way they should be or I knew like, okay, this is odd that you lock me in my room at a certain time every night. And so my parents were addicts and alcoholics, but they were high functioning. So it wasn't like they weren't working jobs or that we didn't have food on the table or we didn't have clothes. And my sisters would go to school in these handy downs or dirty clothes. None of that was the case. My parents were actually very big on appearances. They wanted to make sure that outside looking in that you looked at our family as successful and thriving and all those things. But the difference is my parents are just addicts and alcoholics. And so at certain points in the night, any day of the week, their mind would go to that and only that. So there would be mornings where they're hungover or they're not able to do things. And my sisters have to get themselves ready for school, that I have to go in the kitchen and get breakfast set up for myself. And that was just normal. So I knew my parents did drugs, but as a kid, I don't have the perspective that drugs are this awful and bad thing. It's just normal. And so I knew they were doing drugs. I knew that they would still be up when they locked me and my sisters in our bedroom at night so we couldn't come out and see what was happening. I knew they were still up. I knew they were partying. I knew they were doing all those things. But we always felt loved. We always had what we needed. It's just in the moments where we needed them, they may not have been there. It was such an interesting experience because when I got into care, I didn't experience a lot of that same love, a lot of that same emotional attachment. Just so odd because I'm being told that my parents aren't the right spot for me or aren't the most safe option for me at that moment. And to start you believe that and then I go to foster homes that it's like this is a million times worse than me being home in a lot of different ways. And so that was a really hard thing to understand or comprehend that these people who say they want the best for me objectively looking at it, I don't feel like they do because when I go to this foster home, I don't have any relationship or connection with any of the people here. They're not even trying to have one with me or my experience a little bit later in the foster care when I started to be physically and emotionally abused, like all of those things conflicted with this idea that your parents weren't the safest place for you. Yeah, I did know that my parents were addicts and alcoholics. But at the same time, you don't think it's like that. It's your normal. So you don't think it's that bad.

[00:08:12.730] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. So interesting. So you're getting to the car. You're, you know, five, six years old, four or five, six years old. You're making a conscious decision about, I think I can change the situation. And we're going to talk a little bit more about the Enneagram in a couple of minutes. But you identify as a type eight dominantly, and I think that's a pretty common way to view the world. I have a really strong wing to eight as a seven. And we were just having this conversation with a couple of other folks who find themselves in what we call the assertive, aggressive stance on the Enneagram. And we said, oh other people don't look at the world and just think they can change it to what they want it to be.

[00:08:56.670] - Gaelin Elmore

Yeah, exactly right.

[00:08:58.740] - Melissa Corkum

And so that shapes you. Even as a young child, we often talk about, like, does trauma shape our

number or does our number shape how we view what we experience? And I think that's such an interesting picture of even as a really young child, your perspective was, "I'm pretty sure I can get what I want out of this situation."

[00:09:20.070] - Gaelin Elmore  
Yeah.

[00:09:20.810] - Melissa Corkum  
Yeah. So what were the behavior like? What were some of the things that you tried? I'm sure our audience probably has kids in their home that may be displaying similar situations. So what does that look like for you?

[00:09:36.690] - Gaelin Elmore  
Yeah. Immediately it was I stopped talking. I knew that I could control what I wanted to say and the emotions that I showed people. And I became extremely cold. I don't know for sure, but I believe it contributed to how much I moved around in the first couple of years. So after my first memory of being taken, I bounced around to a ton of different homes in that first kind of year and a half, two years span.

[00:10:06.370] - Melissa Corkum  
Did you stay with your sisters?

[00:10:08.140] - Gaelin Elmore  
No, I was by myself.

[00:10:09.460] - Melissa Corkum  
Okay.

[00:10:10.650] - Gaelin Elmore  
So I was by myself for four, five, six, mostly five and six I was by myself. Yeah, I remember not talking. I'm a very extroverted person. And so there'd be moments where that would slip through and I would have to catch myself. The first night that I was taken from my parents, I was actually placed in a crisis nursery. It was a very eerie scene and feeling because I got there in the middle of the night. The first night, everyone else was already asleep. There's a hazy orange glow over the room from the exit sign. And there's just these motionless bodies that I have to, like, go and lay next to and expect to get some sleep. And I just remember crying and crying and crying that whole first night, which only solidified the feeling that I'm absolutely not going to let anybody in. And I'm going to be as difficult as I can be because you still hold out hope, right. When I was in the car waiting for my social worker, I kind of made a concession with myself. I was like, okay, if he comes back out and he treats me in a certain way, or he tries to connect with me, or I kind of threw out one last one hail Mary, if you will. He came back in, all he did was grab a bucket of toys and hand them to me and was like, you can have one. And so I grabbed a toy and just kind of waited for him to say something more. And he just turned on the radio and we drove. And it was just like, okay, yeah. It was like, Yep, I need to trust myself and that's the only person I can. I'm in that home for, like two days. I don't really build any relationships with anyone there. I'm not playing with any of the kids. And then that same social worker shows up again. Before this situation, I didn't know him, but he shows up again. And I remember immediately being excited to see him and kind of like running over or galloping over. And then I catch myself as like, no, I can't do that. And so then I just go back into that shell. And that was the same kind of approach at all the other foster homes after that. Although the kid in me wanted to come out in some moments, I just had to suppress it. Because to me, that was leaving me vulnerable, that was going to leave me in foster care, and that was going to lead me to get hurt. That's what I was trying to do, to protect myself.

[00:12:34.230] - Melissa Corkum  
I can almost hear the thoughts and the questions of the folks who are listening. And a lot of us have had kids who, I think, are coping doing the self-protective thing that you're talking about. And I think the question that's, like, echoing through the airwaves is, "what do you wish adults had done along

that journey that would have been more helpful, that maybe would have helped you break out of that shell, would have given you permission to be the kid that you wanted to be?" All of those things.

[00:13:06.030] - Gaelin Elmore

I think ultimately, first and foremost, it's just the willingness to sit in it with me. I love this quote, but I never remember who it's by. And I've been searched for a while. But there's this quote that says, "When I'm alone in my pain and suffering without an empathetic witness, then it becomes trauma." And I just know so many times in my childhood I was processing trauma in my head alone by myself, and no one else was able to sit in it with me and help me navigate it or help me think about it or talk about it out loud. So much so that when I became older, I was so resistant to anything like that. And because I had just gotten so comfortable not dealing with it, but suppressing it for so long in my life that I didn't even have the skills to do that when I got older. But what I really wish someone would have done is sit down and help me verbalize what I'm feeling and to have them help me navigate it right. To be told as a kid that it's okay to feel what you're feeling that you're not the reason that this is happening to you. The responses that you've had are normal because this is the way the human mind and body works. To hear those things, I think would have been extremely comforting, but then also to be told that you're safe. And we're going to try to figure out something that's like the best possible situation for you. Yeah, I just think those conversations can be extremely impactful because think about navigating trauma or any time you're in your head about something, it always makes more sense to you when it's just inside your head. And when you start to verbalize it, it may not make as much sense as soon as you say it out loud. I do that all the time with my wife. I'll navigate something in my head. I'm like, oh, this makes perfect sense. And I'll say it out loud, and it just sounds about one of the dumbest things I could have said. And imagine that as a kid trying to process something as foreign as, like the understanding of trauma that is so expert level knowledge and information that you're trying to process. But I'm doing it alone and in my head. And so just someone being willing to ask me questions so I can verbalize it, maybe I don't. But still, that effort or that gesture, I think means a ton. And if anything, it just starts this beginning of trust that's being built. So then when I do want to talk about it, maybe I go there. And the one thing that's super interesting, though, in my file from foster care, there's like home studies and different visits that there are notes there. Some of them are super interesting because I get to read them and someone's writing the things that I'm saying or the things that I'm sharing about. And I can just so easily see after someone engages with me as like we're supposed to engage with children, how quickly that child wants to come back up. But when I'm not engaged in that way, that the walls are going to stay up and I'm going to try to be as tough and as strong as I possibly can be. I know, and I tell people all the time, yes, I do believe I have a really good memory. I do believe I had really good awareness of things that were off when I was a kid, but I was still fully a kid. And so those moments of it equally made me smile as it made me sad to see those glimpses of a normal six year old pop up. And one of the situations that same social worker that picked me up that day and that I was sharing about when I was at the crisis nursery a couple of years later, he was still my case worker. And there's this note of a random worker in the break room, and she said Gaelin was walking around asking for him. And so I was going around to all these different people asking to see where he was. And he wasn't in the office that day. And this lady that ended up writing the report told me like, hey, he's not here today, but do you need something? Can I help you? And so she recounts this story of me engaging with her. And then after just like minutes of conversation, I revealed to her that my mom and dad are still together. And I tell her and she quoted she was like Gaelin said, "I wasn't supposed to tell anyone, but his mom and dad are still together." And what had happened behind the scenes is they had communicated to my parents that they needed to separate if they wanted a chance to get me back because they were struggling together still. But just that moment of connection and interaction made me comfortable to share a secret, just like any kid, normal kid would do. But me, when I don't have that connection, when I don't feel that sense of, like, security or safety, there's no way I'm letting any of that out. And I've seen so many other times as I'm experiencing abuse and things like that where I don't say a word. And so those are things that I think are small and simple, but they can take you so far in building a relationship or helping a child go through what they go through.

[00:18:30.020] - Melissa Corkum

So helpful. And I'm also thinking sometimes as parents, we reach out to our kids, we ask, how are you feeling? Or you can trust us, you can tell us. And we still kind of get the stone wall or I don't want to

talk about it or whatever that looks like. But what's so helpful about hearing your story to me is the inner dialogue that you are having, and that those points of connection, those attempts at connection, you're kind of interiorly, calculating, internally calculating all of that, and kind of deciding whether you're going to trust as adults. So what would you say to parents who are like, I'm trying, I'm trying to be the safe place for my kid. And it doesn't seem like they're able to let me in or they don't want to allow it, or all of those things mattering. And maybe there are seeds that will be planted in the future. Or do you have any other words of advice for those parents?

[00:19:34.370] - Sara

Hey, this is Sara. I'm briefly interrupting this episode to make sure you know about an upcoming support group for adopted teens that I'm facilitating. As an adoptee, I'm passionate about supporting adopted teens because I wish I had had a group like this when I was younger. During this eight week session, teens will explore the seven core issues of adoption; learn better ways to respond to others adoption related questions, even the more insensitive ones; have an opportunity to process their personal adoption journey; and hear from one another in a supportive and collaborative way. For more information or to sign your team up, head to [theadoptionconnection.com/teen](http://theadoptionconnection.com/teen). Now back to the episode.

[00:20:18.450] - Melissa Corkum

Do you have any other words of advice for those parents?

[00:20:21.430] - Gaelin Elmore

Ultimately, they all don't hold the same amount of weight, right? You trying to build that connection on a day where it's like a simple random average day isn't the same weight as you trying to do that same thing when they're having one of the worst days ever, right. So they're not weighted the same, but at the same time, I know for me, I absolutely kept track. Still, in many ways, I'm still that kind of person. But I absolutely was keeping track and would remember like, okay, you said this and now because you said this about my sister's situation, if you don't say the same about mine, there's differences there. And if you're not telling me about them, then what makes their situation better or makes you want to connect with them more than you want to connect with me? And that was really hard for me, too, because there's a lot of time that I was in different homes than my two sisters and they were together. And that played a lot on my mental wellbeing, because it's like, why do they get to be together, but I'm not? Why are people willing to take both of them, but I have to be by myself? And so I definitely kept tabs on those different things. And I tell every parent, every foster parent, biological parent, you have to be willing to match the resilience of your kids. Resilience is a skill that can be learned and unlearned, but ultimately, we're all resilient beings. It's just a matter of are we being resilient in a positive way or a negative way? There's so many, every kid in the child welfare space through adoption or foster care are extremely resilient people. They wouldn't be here if that wasn't the case. But at the same time, if you're never taught or guided or showed how to utilize that skill to benefit you, you're going to use it in the wrong way to potentially harm yourself. And so you see that in kids that push people away or kids that are really defiant against someone trying to help them. And it's not that they don't want to be helped, it's that they don't know how. And their resilience is stopping them. They're like, okay, this is what's going to prevent me from getting hurt again. So this is what I need to do. And so for us as adults, for you as a parent, you absolutely have to be willing to match the resilience. And once I think that is reciprocated, I think the gestures, the attempts that you're making will really start to have an impact. But if you're not willing to go the distance like they are, essentially you're telling them you don't want to be here more than I want you to. And that's not not a realization that anyone wants to come to. So I would say matching the resilience is a really big part of starting in that journey towards healing.

[00:23:22.880] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, what I hear you saying is out stubborn the stubborn.

[00:23:27.730] - Gaelin Elmore

Absolutely. And I think for me, in my experience, I felt like I never found anyone that was willing to do that. I felt like I was always pushing boundaries, pushing limits, and eventually they would cave. And them caving validated me of like, see, they didn't want me here. All that stuff they said didn't really

matter. And so I'd go to the next place and like, well, the last four cave. So you're going to cave. And so then I'm going to continue to do it and you start this cycle and then you get in this mindset of, I need to do it sooner so it hurts less. So I don't want to be here for nine months. So let's speed this process up to three. How can I do that? And so you start to compete with yourself in the past of like, okay, this is going to protect me more. I feel like I'm protecting myself by getting me moved from here sooner because it's ultimately not going to be permanency. And so now as you get in a rhythm of, yes, you're not going to keep me, it's like, okay, how can I get this to happen even sooner and you just get in that cycle?

[00:24:34.630] - Melissa Corkum

I think this is where as I learned my way all the way around the Enneagram in the last couple of years, it's been so helpful because now that I have the language and I understand kind of what dominant type eight look like in the world and they have the most energy on the Enneagram. And I think they are the most kind of outwardly stubborn and they can almost outrun outlast anyone. My brother identifies as an eight. I'm a seven with a really strong wing 8. And my mom was a nine, right, the least amount of energy on the Enneagram. And not that she was not the parent that we needed, but when I look at the dynamic, looking back, I think, man, she just didn't even know what she was up against. And I think it's so helpful for you to verbalize that. As a child wit understanding so much, you were aware of so much, and you have all the energy in the world. And I've often heard from other type eights that say, like, you know, keeping up with me is like a love language. Going toe to toe with me is like a love language. Not being intimidated by whatever I'm trying to accomplish good, bad, or ugly is where I feel respect, feel love. I need the people to go toe to toe with me and kind of out stubborn my stubbornness. And so I think that's really helpful because I think there are a lot of parenting kids that just feel like I don't know when it's going to end. And to know that down inside you're just aching for someone to be in it, as deeply committed to it as you are, is, I think, really important.

[00:26:27.550] - Gaelin Elmore

It's great to hear you put it that way, because this idea of keeping up with me, I think, greatly relates to my experience in foster care, right. There wasn't anyone willing to. And I think I even before you said that, use the phrase like, go the distance. And so, yeah, that's such a great depiction of how that shows up in foster care. And I think what I relate so much to with the Enneagram is just like this deep desire for justice, but being a kid that wasn't given a voice to even speak into those things, right. So there's so much about my experience in foster care that I just felt disregarded. And that is probably one of my biggest triggers in life in any situation. If I just feel disregarded just because it's going to frustrate me to no end and having a deep sense of justice, not even desire for it, but I think I have a unique ability to be objective about what justice actually is. And so to have those deep feelings and understandings like, well, that's not right, this is. To have those deep understandings and not be able to say anything or even be listened to was extremely harmful. And just like, kind of reinforced those eight walls that can go back up and made me really settle for being respected and not caring about love in the spaces that I could obtain that. In any space, like in school, on a team, when I got to play in those later, like with my friend groups, I was going to be respected above everything else. That was this tug of war, this feeling and need for control and the spaces that I could have it to try to make up for the spaces that I had no control in whatsoever.

[00:28:20.990] - Melissa Corkum

So you talk about being disregarded as a big trigger. You're really passionate about talking to folks about how they can help children in foster care feel a sense of belonging. So what does that look like for you? What's your belonging love language like? How do people help you feel like you belong?

[00:28:41.330] - Gaelin Elmore

Not to be cliché, but I really believe belonging for me is to be fully known and to be fully loved, still. There was so much about growing up in foster care, about living in, quote, unquote strangers homes, about not being with my family. All those things contributed to those two things, either I wasn't loved or when someone would get the chance to fully know me, they would choose not to love me. Those kind of became the measuring stick for me belonging. And for brief periods in my life, sports gave me that. It gave me this feeling of belonging, and because I was able to succeed at sports, I feel like it forced people to get to know me a little bit more.

[00:29:27.030] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. And you didn't just succeed a little bit at sports, Gaelin, like, you were in the NFL.

[00:29:32.630] - Gaelin Elmore

So I was more so saying, like, succeed in obtaining belonging.

[00:29:36.890] - Melissa Corkum

So I just didn't want to let that go by that you did that well, you did that really well.

[00:29:43.010] - Gaelin Elmore

Thank you, yeah. But what really became hard is because it became this kind of facade of what belonging was. It was one of the only places I could get it. And then when I later really understood, well, maybe I'm not really fully known and fully loved. Maybe this is all dependent on my ability to perform and who I am on the field and not necessarily off. And so then it really became this massive shift that I couldn't think about the game in the same way because I knew like, oh, you don't fully know me and you don't fully love me. This is all conditional. And so as I started to feel that my love for the game started to dissipate, and I started to become more increasingly frustrated with this obsession over the product and not the person, I would say going back to belonging, that is what it showed up for me, is like being fully known and fully loved and really not obtaining that until kind of College friendships. And now in adulthood, we have some really close friends, and additionally, my wife's, family and some other people that I've gotten connect with through the years that I really feel like I can experience that in.

[00:31:00.700] - Melissa Corkum

What were the parts that you feel like once people discovered you would feel rejection over that?

[00:31:08.050] - Gaelin Elmore

I was really passionate about a lot of things, that no matter the situation, that if I felt like it was going to make other people or myself better, that I was going to challenge people. I just felt like too many people thought I'd be difficult and too broken for anyone to spend the time of day to try to get to know me. And so for a long time, my biggest fear was that I would never get married because it was like, how would someone be willing to get that close to me and say yes to all of these things? And no one I've met yet that has been willing to stick around because I've been too difficult, too opinionated or too passionate about things that in other people's minds didn't matter. But everything to the smallest degree matters to me because I think it creates a ripple effect and that plays in this sense of justice, right. So if you have ten different scenarios and all of them mean that the outcome of each one of those scenarios means the same thing, but a one is level of impact, and a ten is like massive impact, all of those outcomes mean the same to me. They're equally important because today you might feel like one is okay. Yeah, it's not going to impact you. It's not going to change anything that much. But to me, that gives you license to then say, like, okay, a four is not that big of a deal two weeks from now or things like that. So I hold myself to a certain standard of trying to be as consistent and across the board as I can. Obviously, a lot of things aren't black and white. There's nuance to it, but trying to be as consistent as possible, because I think that is, in a lot of sense, a big component of what justice is. Yeah, I could talk about Enneagram in relation to my story all day. Again, have a lot of endurance about it and very passionate. Honestly talking about my wife, I don't think we would have gotten married if we didn't. We found the Enneagram while we were dating. My wife's, Enneagram two wing three, and we just are polar opposites. She retreats on conflict. She kind of shuts down and is passive and she feels attacked and feels like she's getting bullied. And I'm passionate about conflict, and I think conflict is something we need to push through to get to true unity, true peace. I rarely feel like there are situations where you can obtain, like, true and actual peace without the presence of conflict. When we would get disagreements, I would feel like I was bullying her. Like the way she retreated made me feel like a bully. And I deeply hate bullies. I cannot stand the idea of someone bullying other people. And so I started to not like myself in our relationship. But it wasn't until the Enneagram gave us language on how to know each other more deeply. And really as an eight, it was a godsend because I had never listened to anyone explain my deeper inner thoughts and most like deep feelings about who I am and my identity and my personality like I did when I read about the Enneagram. And it

just felt like it was a window to my soul for my wife to peer into and for someone else to give her that language because I've never felt like I've been able to give it to people was extremely profound.

[00:34:32.200] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, talk about being fully known, right. It's kind of the language that does that for us. I know you're also really passionate about the community being involved in the lives of youth, particularly foster youth. Did you see that playing into your story or kind of what you wish had been in place in terms of community support? Not just for you, but I'm also thinking about your parents. Perhaps this all could have had a different outcome if maybe they were supported differently. Because it sounds like they had a lot going for them in terms of how they cared for you and your sisters, but there were some missing pieces that ultimately, unfortunately left resulted in your removal. But perhaps, maybe if the first line of defense hadn't been to just remove you. And I'm sure that there are community services offered to them. But in hindsight, do you ever think, like, well, if this had been done differently or if this community organization had been in my life a different way? So what are your thoughts on that?

[00:35:36.090] - Gaelin Elmore

Well, interesting note. When we went back into foster care, after my parents had gotten all three of us back when we went back, it was actually because my dad went to a community organization to try to get help, and then they reported him to social services. And so that's when social services actually came back into our life because my dad and my mom had relapsed and he went to go try to get help.

[00:36:00.440] - Melissa Corkum

That doesn't feel just to you, does it?

[00:36:02.290] - Gaelin Elmore

No, absolutely not. Especially now being an adult that is advocating for it, but advocating for the people with the right. You can have community based services, but if their heart isn't in it for the people, then what are we doing? If you're more focused on the services you're providing rather than the people who are receiving them, then your heart's not in it for the right reason. So, yeah, I think about my family all the time, and I got to experience a lot in my life. I've been blessed to, like you said, get an opportunity to play in the NFL and things like that. So I've seen a lot and a lot of the biggest peaks in my life were met with feelings of like, man, what if I was able to experience this with my family being whole? So it's something that I always think about. Looking back, I think there's something that could have been done that could have been extremely helpful. I don't know. It's a different time, right? We're talking about the 90s. It's not the same approach. Like the Aces study wasn't even done yet. There's just a lot of things that I think where there's a big delay in our understanding of trauma and these certain approaches to families that were just way behind the curve.

[00:37:22.570] - Gaelin Elmore

But I am passionate about the community aspect in general because I think we underestimate the impact that we can have on other people, adults and children in small day to day encounters. There is a massive impact that can happen if you just take the role that you play in other people's lives seriously. I had glimpses of people do that in my life, but I never had a collective group do it at the same time. You know what I mean? It's just like, okay, there's this great person that showed up in my life at this moment for this year to this year, and then I kind of moved or things happen and another person stepped up. But to be mobilized as a community of people to serve, to help, to care for, to be in relationship with these vulnerable families, it's generational work, right? Like, you are not just impacting that child or you're not just impacting that parent. You're impacting generations after that. And, yeah, if you're a lunch lady, you may not think that your work has generational impact, but if we all can have that kind of perspective and hear stories and learn about other people who walked in the same shoes that we did, the impact that they were able to have, then maybe that changes your approach to what you do. And that's a big part of what I do and what I speak about. Like, there are so many unsung heroes that you wouldn't have thought would have played a big role in my life, but absolutely did. Going back to a janitor in elementary school, when I was in my abusive foster home, there were things that she did that I don't even know if she did them on purpose or not, but they drastically changed how I saw myself in that space and how I chose to show up every day. Bus drivers



too, lunch ladies in high school, like, there's all these different people who at the surface, you look at them like, oh, you don't really have a role that can be of impact or can add great value. You're just serving meals every day or you're just taking off the trash or you're just driving the same bus out every day. But when we start to see each and every one of those roles and the piece that it plays in the grander scheme of things, then we can start really having a community based approach to caring for vulnerable families. Now it's not just on one organization. It's not on one Church or one group of people to, hey, give your money or give your resources to do this and do that. It's a collective effort. And that's really what community is about. It's not just small pockets, but a greater goal by the bigger group of individuals that make up that community.

[00:40:07.710] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, so good. Do you have an example of what that looks like with, say, the janitor, what made such a big impact?

[00:40:17.070] - Gaelin Elmore

Yeah. So my janitor, she actually lived in our neighborhood when I was in this elementary school, and she had run ins with our foster parent, our foster parent, when she encountered people who weren't of status or esteem, she would treat them just the same as she would treat us. And we were physically and emotionally abused. So you can imagine how she would treat other people who didn't have status or esteem. So she had encounters with her, and she kind of knew the situation. And she didn't try to act like our mom. She didn't try to act like she was going to take us in and save us from all of our problems. But when I was walking through the hallways by myself or something, and she would be there, she would basically stop me to talk to her. Like she would check in and see how I was doing, ask me any questions. I was at lunch and maybe I was a school, like free lunch kid. And if all my friends were around me and they had snacks or whatever, she would go to the cafeteria and she would get snacks and bring them out to me. She would just do these small things that would make me feel seen. And we didn't have to have these profound conversations for me to know that, hey, she really cares about me and sees me as a person. She really saw through this guys that I had on for everybody else and that feeling of being fully known and fully loved when you are trying your hardest not to be, that is transformational and the smallest sense and the biggest sense. And for her, that had a really just that relationship that day to day consistent after the summer, like, seeing her for the first time, it was always super cool. And yeah, that relationship just changed how I showed up in that space. And it knew that, okay, someone believes in me. Someone is investing their time into me, whether it's just in the hallways and passing time between classes, that changed how I showed up in that space. So I didn't feel like, okay, I don't have to put my walls up when I'm around Peanut. That was her name. I don't have to put my walls up when I'm around Peanut. I can be me. And so that starts to show because now other teachers are seeing the way I interact with her and they're like, hey, he doesn't really act like that in my classroom. It just creates this ripple effect. That's where if we are committed to having the most impact we can in our role, it's going to be contagious and it's going to spread to other places. I think she is a phenomenal example of just someone who took her job very seriously and saw it as more than that she was cleaning bathrooms and taking trash out. She was a part of the family, for sure.

[00:43:14.300] - Melissa Corkum

Well, Gaelin, you have given us so much to think about, so much encouragement. I really appreciate the articulate way that you're able to share your experience with others. I think it's going to help so many people. So before we sign off, will you just tell people a little bit about your speaking where people can connect with you, where they can find you all of those good things?

[00:43:35.470] - Gaelin Elmore

Yeah, and we've talked a little bit about it with the belonging piece of things, but really the work that I'm doing, what my mission is to create and implement cultures of belonging for populations of people who have gone through trauma and adversity. And really, belonging, like a simple definition of belonging, is showing someone that they matter that they have value and that they're important. And so I'm trying to in any interdisciplinary way, if you're a professional that works with youth who experience trauma and adversity, that's my audience. So that's teachers, that's counselors, that's social workers, that's foster parents. Like anyone. I've literally ran the whole gamut where you can find

me, Gaelinspeaks.com that's my website. You can find my email or things off of that but I'm on Instagram I love to interact and engage with people on Instagram @giv.elmore. My initials spell GIV, so that always throws people off but that's my Instagram handle and then I'm on Facebook as Gaelin Speaks and yeah. LinkedIn is myself. So anywhere on social media you can find me. I love to have conversations to engage with people and really I'm in this work for to create an impact that gets back to the children. I know I can't impact every single child in foster care but I feel like me along with other people we have a much greater change if we impact the adults that run into them. That's what I'm trying to do.

[00:45:11.290] - Melissa Corkum

Well, I love it. I think you're going to do great work and thank you so much again for sharing your heart and your story with us.

[00:45:17.650] - Gaelin Elmore

Yeah, thanks for having me. It was a blast.

[00:45:20.890] - Melissa Corkum

Before you go, we'd love to connect with you on social media. Our new Instagram handle is @postadoptionresources. Or better yet, join our free Facebook community at [theadoptionconnection.com/facebook](https://theadoptionconnection.com/facebook).

[00:45:35.950] - Lisa Qualls

Thanks so much for listening, we love having you. And remember you're a good parent doing good work.

[00:45:44.170] - Melissa Corkum

The music for the podcast is called New Day and was created by Lee Roosevere.