

[00:00:01.160] - 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.

[00:00:10.000] - Melissa Corkum

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

[00:00:18.420] - Lisa Qualls

Well, friends, today I have a really special interview with a friend of ours, Kristen Thomas. And Melissa and I had the opportunity to meet her, actually, a couple of years ago now at the Renew Retreat. She is a former foster youth and an adoptive mom and so many other things. We just thought we would love for her to share her story with you. We could just explore some different topics around her story of growing up in foster care. Kristen, welcome to the podcast.

[00:00:53.500] - Kristen Thomas

Thank you so much for having me.

[00:00:55.340] - Lisa Qualls

Yeah, our pleasure. Well, I really think what most people want to hear is your story. So would you be willing to just start off with your story? And we'll just go from there, wherever the conversation leads us.

[00:01:09.130] - Kristen Thomas

Yeah, that sounds great. Absolutely. I was born prematurely due to domestic violence. My mom was a model, actually owned her own modeling business. And my dad was in special forces in the Navy. When I was born, I was celebrated and prayed for. My family just adores me. I know that there's so much love in our family, but unfortunately, there's also a lot of secrets. Our family was very well known in our community and church. My step dad was a deacon. My grandparents were elders in their church. I come from a Christian background of people who also come from also a lot of generational brokenness and abuse and alcoholism and addictions. And so while on the outside, growing up, you would think that I had a very blessed childhood. The reality is that I was born into a lot of brokenness. I was unfortunately abused and neglected to the point where even at eight years old, I tried to take my life, not even knowing what suicide was. And I remember distinctly just going to bed at night after abuse and just the silence of having to just sit and put myself to bed and just incredible amounts of physical and emotional pain.

[00:02:40.510] - Kristen Thomas

The silence in our house for just so much time, I know, left a huge impact on my development and my ability to relate to others well. I was very social, very outgoing kid, but I also at the same time felt very alone and very unable to really make friends. I would create these elaborate stories in my bedroom, daydreaming. And most of the time, those, unfortunately, would become outward. And just a kid who just didn't know who she was and didn't really know, felt almost like the matrix. The world isn't real. There's no way that this reality could be what people are experiencing when I go to the grocery store where people look just so normal. And that really led me into some really challenging behaviors when I would try to fit in a normal setting like school. I was in a private Christian school, and I would go to classes after I had started becoming sexually abused by a couple of step cousins and would just cry uncontrollably to the point of convulsions in class. And I know that they tried in the beginning to really figure out what was going on, but eventually they just saw it as attention seeking behavior and would step me out of this little stool outside the classroom to learn how to calm down.

[00:04:11.830] - Kristen Thomas

And when I was ready to not be a distraction, I could come back in. And oh, my goodness, that really just shaped my ability to ask for help moving forward. A lot of manipulation and just really confusing nurturing that I got from my mom because it was so sporadic. It actually, I felt, made it a lot harder to distance myself from her and to be truthful about my experiences for a long time just because there are really wonderful memories that I have of her that just really complicates it. So by the age of probably 11 or 12, I was to the point where I was throwing chairs at my teacher. I was not content

until she was crying, which is just completely different from the outgoing, kind person that I feel like I was most of the time. But there was just this rage inside of me from all of the just silence, I guess, that I just held in for so long from all the extreme abuse. And it really took that teacher to really see me and to want to try to get help. And I think that's when DSS really started to take notice of me and my family and we were... A lot of the abuses that I went through as a child sexually, the family knew about it afterwards and nothing was done. It was all kept secret. And so after so many instances, it was really hard for me to advocate myself when people were asking and starting to figure out things.

[00:05:50.840] - Kristen Thomas

I know that the computer systems at the hospitals, a lot of them started going online and talking to one another. So there was more just evidence of abuse. But unfortunately, there just wasn't a very clear cut plan forward. So I did stay with my grandparents for a while in middle school, and their perspectives, they have all both suffered horrendous abuse in their parents, and they felt extreme loyalty to them and has shared with me many times that if they had reported them for abuse, that they would have missed out on the good times. And I think religion was also used as a way to control, like honor your father and mother. And even the story, I think it was Noah who became drunk and one son turned his back on him and clothed him and he was blessed. But the son that shared his sins and made fun of him was cursed. And so that was used as a way to keep me in line with the family. But the problem was instead of getting me help and support in the hard things that I had to face, I was shamed. I was made to be punished, to be labeled as a troublemaker when it just really wasn't true.

[00:07:12.420] - Kristen Thomas

So around seventh grade, a lot of those outward tries for help turned inward, and I started self harming, running away. Thankfully, I definitely stayed away from boys, but that just meaning that I found comfort in things that were like books. But to an unhealthy degree to where I just wasn't really attached to reality. And by the Grace of God, I accepted Jesus when I was five years old. And I feel like that kept my heart somewhat soft. The journey that I had with him was just so intricate and beautiful that I know that he had wonderful things for me in my life. And even though I didn't see them then, there would be these little glimpses of hope and of joy that really kept me going. And so finally, when unfortunately, I had a parent die by suicide. And I think that was everyone's wake up call that I really needed help because that depression was so severe, I couldn't go to school, I couldn't really get out of the house at all. I was just really trapped in a lot of fear. And in that time was also suffering from a lot of just verbal and emotional abuse from my mom. And finally was able to vocalize, I need help. I am not going to survive this grief in this complicated mess, which having grief was just horrendous. But it gave me something other than my behavior and my shame for people to help me with. It almost gave me a window into becoming more self aware. The therapy that I got to go to allowed me to understand what I had been through and what I was currently going through wasn't my fault, that my behaviors were not who I was, that all of this complicated, jumbled mess that was inside of me, what people were seeing was just the tip of the iceberg. And being able to understand that gave me so much more confidence into sharing my truth.

[00:09:29.880] - Kristen Thomas

And so I did start sharing about things that had happened and was able to be put with a family that wasn't anything biologically related. I really thought that that was going to be my rescue. I thought that was going to be where I could start thriving. But unfortunately, when you've grown up in such long periods of silence and not really being nurtured or attended to your needs, being thrown into a house with eight other kids was just chaos. In my home, when things weren't silent, it was usually a sign of something bad to come. And so it felt like I was crawling out of my skin. And so then, unfortunately, people saw those behaviors of just being just completely unregulated, really nervous all the time, really shut down as me wanting to go home. And so there was a period of even having to go back into my mom's house for a season. And I just look back on all of that, if there had been trauma informed care, people would have really been able to put all of the nuances together. I feel like a complete separation and like a therapeutic foster home, which is what I became later as a foster parent, would have been able to have the tools and the understanding to understand that all I really needed was that felt safety that TBRI talks about. I just needed someone to understand what I had been through and what possible triggers I could have.

[00:11:00.140] - Kristen Thomas

And as soon as that all started coming together, I graduated high school at 16. I went on to get a full time job. I ended up living with someone after I turned 18 that has ended up becoming probably still one of my favorite humans on this planet. Her name is Barb, and she took me in for almost four years. And just slowly, even though she wasn't a mom, she still just taught me what it was like to just be okay and to just have the safety to go after and discover who I am and what I want. Because I feel like at that point, I had just become such a chameleon. And I had just tried so hard to fit in. And the harder I fought, the more I stood out. It never felt like the storms inside of me would end, and there they did. And all of the people who said I would not make anything in life, that I was just beyond hope, in three years, I just became a completely different person who I know who is my true self. And back to that little girl that loved people and could look people in the eyes and could just be generous and happy. And so I'm just so grateful for those experiences.

[00:12:18.770] - Kristen Thomas

I ended up going to school to want to be a counselor. I started fostering. I have adopted a young lady who is only 10 years younger than me. It wasn't planned, but it was so the way it was supposed to go. She's amazing. She's a sophomore at ECU. And just everything that I have learned about myself and up to this point has just made me a better mom, in general. But then also to a child who's been in the system and who's been part of in a really hard situations for most of her life. Yeah, I did go on, unfortunately, to lose another parent to suicide recently a couple of years ago, and I've just taken that other extra journey to navigate what that actually looks like for me and my own healing journey. Because people sometimes will look at me like, Oh, well, how are you such a success? And it's like, No, that's not the right question. That's not what I want people to see. I want people to see that when you age out of foster care, there's always going to be this tension of just really hard stuff and yet wanting to be productive members of society and wanting to do good things. But the weight of what we carry is so much heavier than what I think people understand. And I'm really proud of myself for the things that I have gone through. I own a home. I'm in grad school. I have a daughter. But at the same time, I still struggle with mental health. I still struggle with depression. There are very severe things that I still need help for. And I'm glad that I can give myself compassion for those things now. I can put them in perspective to what they are. I can meet those needs that I have, and I can fight others in as I'm reciprocating healthy relationships.

[00:14:08.450] - Lisa Qualls

Wow. I am so moved by your story, Kristen. There are so many things as you were sharing that I just thought, Oh, I want to ask her about this. I want to ask her about that. But overall, there's this sense of sadness for what you experienced that no child should experience. And also just this awe in the way that the Lord met you and held you. He was your firm foundation through it all. And that is so redemptive and so beautiful. And that you were never completely alone because God was with you.

[00:14:50.410] - Kristen Thomas

Amen.

[00:14:51.320] - Lisa Qualls

This gives me a lot of hope and a lot of gratitude. We do talk about how you don't have to be a foster parent to serve foster kids. And I wonder if you could talk a little bit about Barb and who this special person was and or is in your life and how she contributed to your healing.

[00:15:15.640] - Kristen Thomas

Absolutely. I'd love to do that. So I met Barb at Church. I was actually staying with my mom. I had just aged out because I had gotten really sick with bronchitis and my mom ended up unfortunately chasing me out of the house with a weapon. She was not all there. And so she remembers this incident, but it's not something I hold against her because I know that it wasn't fully her that was doing this. I went to church to hang out with my friend. I had fully attended just living in my car continuously. I got the weirdest peace, just going there and hanging out with him. And all of a sudden, this lady came up to me. And this was the first time I'd ever heard God do anything like this. But she said that God told her that I was coming home with her. And I never met this lady before, ever. And so I just looked at her and I was like, Well, I am desperate. If this is really you, God, then I'm just going to

go for it. And it was so beautiful. She gave me a key. She lives in this giant home with a baby grand in the living room. And my room is right above the piano. And so she leads worship at church, and so she would play these gorgeous worship songs. She taught me a little bit how to play the piano and we would sing together. It just felt like the first dose of normalcy. And what I talk about now is sometimes it's just the little moments. We don't have to jump into someone's story and be a savior. Sometimes our brains through TBRI, we've learned that they're neuroplastic. And sometimes the best way to change the neurons in our brain is through play, and through just joy. And I felt like I got introduced, just so much of that in her home. And learning how to cook, to that point, I still thought that you put frozen chicken in a microwave. So just tangible things that I got to learn from her and just mentorship. And it was just incredible to see so much of what I thought I was just strip away when you add just a little bit of intention and kindness and love.

[00:17:47.540] - Lisa Qualls

Is your adoption journey turning out differently than you imagined? You had so much love to give, but now you feel ashamed and bewildered by your lack of compassion. You may be experiencing blocked care, a self protective mechanism in your nervous system that you that makes it difficult to connect with your child and maintain compassion. When this happens, it's like your heart seems to have left the relationship. But the good news is you are not a bad parent. You can heal from blocked care and compassion can be rekindled in your heart.

[00:18:23.440] - Melissa Corkum

This episode is sponsored by our book *Reclaim Compassion: the Adoptive Parents' Guide to Overcoming Blocked Care with Neuroscience and Faith*. This practical and powerful guide offers a simple step by step process for reclaiming compassion for your child and yourself. Included in the book is a blocked care assessment, which is now free to you, our listeners. You can take the assessment at reclaimcompassion.com/assessment.

[00:18:49.920] - Lisa Qualls

What I hear when you talk about her and her home is that you felt a deep sense of safety.

[00:18:56.670] - Kristen Thomas

Absolutely.

[00:18:57.360] - Lisa Qualls

And we know that felt safety and when our nervous systems are calm, it changes everything. When you are in a fear state all the time, we don't have the ability to play. We don't have the ability to think complex thoughts. You're just surviving when you're in that fear state. So it sounds like for maybe the first time that happened for you.

[00:19:21.490] - Kristen Thomas

Absolutely.

[00:19:21.880] - Lisa Qualls

So can you tell me then, there's so many things we could talk about, but I would love to hear how you decided then to become a foster parent yourself.

[00:19:41.950] - Kristen Thomas

I had a brief experience with kinship care, a step niece that went into care, and I don't want to go too much into that, but just realizing that I wanted to make a difference in a way that I uniquely could. Not that anyone listening who is a foster parent, you don't have to have lived experience to be in foster care. But I feel like it did open doors and break down walls in a way. And I prayed and I asked God to bring kiddos into my home that really needed that deep sense of using less words with more understanding. And so far, the kids that have come through my home and young adults have needed that. And so I felt not that God uses any of our stuff in order to make a difference and to have purpose. But seeing Him just take my little yeses and my just willing heart. He's just done so much beautiful things in my home. And I talk about a lot of time that I feel like I co parent with the Holy Spirit. We're not the ones changing hearts. We're not the ones showing up and big miracles happen.

It's truly Him. But just feeling like this was a yes that made sense. And he's met me every step of the way.

[00:20:58.500] - Lisa Qualls

How many children have come through your home?

[00:21:01.390] - Kristen Thomas

I believe around seven or eight.

[00:21:05.700] - Lisa Qualls

And how long has your daughter been with you?

[00:21:08.300] - Kristen Thomas

She moved in the first time when she was 16. She was transitioning out of a foster home. And I had another little girl that I had with me but unfortunately had to go into long term hospitalization. She was able to move in for a month. At the end, when she was supposed to be coming back, they promised me they would not put her in a group home. But last minute they did. It just broke her heart because she had already been in a previous group home. And so I kept in touch with her. I was on her kinship list so I could go pick her up randomly and bring her home on the weekends and stuff. And so we kept in touch. There was a family that felt led to adopt her, and so they brought her into their home and just very early on realized that their intentions were to have a trophy kid, look at the good thing that we're doing. And so when it didn't meet their expectations, my daughter has very different beliefs than I do. We also share a very different religion and that just didn't line up in their home and their family. And so instead of making room for her, they were wanting her to fit in with them.

[00:22:31.730] - Kristen Thomas

And so in April of 2020, I just called a random realtor and was like, Hey, I need to buy a house really quick because I already had two kiddos with me. And by the Grace of God, within a month, I bought a four bedroom, four bath house for it is ridiculously low how much I paid for this house. And it was completely renovated. They thought the market was going to crash during COVID, so they rushed and sold way below market value. God truly made a way for me to bring her home into a home that I could be proud of. And that I could also open the door for more kids and young adults to come in. So it's definitely all him.

[00:23:20.040] - Lisa Qualls

Yeah, that's really lovely. And you said she's in college now. You're both in college, correct?

[00:23:29.930] - Kristen Thomas

Yeah. We were actually at the same college for a hot minute, but she is now at East Carolina University, and she's a sophomore. And I'm at R__ University as a grad student.

[00:23:39.000] - Lisa Qualls

That's great. And remind me, what are you studying and what would you like to do? What is your plan?

[00:23:46.620] - Kristen Thomas

Sure. I am going for clinical mental health counseling. I want to work with foster adoptive kids, of course. But I also really want to do more in research and just helping to shape overall conversations around foster care and adoption and childhood abuse, which is starting to gain so much traction and attention in our government, which is wonderful. And there's just so many opportunities to actually affect change on much bigger scales. So I would love to also do that one day. I just took a job with a foster care nonprofit that helps local and international, and going to be working with them and just learning from them and hopefully becoming maybe a counselor affiliated with them once I graduate.

[00:24:33.510] - Lisa Qualls

That's wonderful. Well, if there was one thing that you want people to take away from our conversation, and I know I did not tell you I was going to ask this, so no pressure to come up with the perfect thing.

[00:24:49.560] - Kristen Thomas
No, sure.

[00:24:50.320] - Lisa Qualls
But if there was something you wanted our listeners to take away from our conversation, what would it be?

[00:24:57.590] - Kristen Thomas
I think if you're working with foster adoptive kids, even if it's hard and it's messy, just really leaning into fun with them, being able to help give them the awareness of their story. Don't just put them in therapy. Really engage with them if they'll let you. And then too, if you're being entrusted with these kids, go the extra mile and get creative, like equine and art and just creating so many opportunities for them to express themselves. Because I know a lot of the kids that came through my home had a really hard time with opening up and being vulnerable and sharing and to the detriment of not being able to open up to anyone. And so I have one kiddo that came to me that was almost nonverbal and would just scream and yell and throw things as his way of communication. And all it took really was drum lessons and equine therapy to give him the confidence and that crossing the midline. And he started creating songs of his family and things that he had been through. And he started sharing to the horse things that he was afraid of. And man, that kid is like, he's just recently got adopted with the family that I love and cherish that also have his little brother, which DSS had said that they would never be able to be good together. And they're thriving together. I just fear sometimes fostering is so hard, and it's so all consuming, the last thing we feel like we could do is have the creativity in that. And so I would definitely say just lean into community and make that a priority because it does have such lasting impact and in creating that felt safety. So it's just in creating opportunities and experiences that bring together healing and fun.

[00:26:55.960] - Lisa Qualls
That's great. And you made a good point about community because therapeutic parenting can be very exhausting and depleting. And it's so important to surround ourselves with people who maybe cannot foster themselves, but they have the capacity to give in some way to help you in some way. Whether it's driving your child to athletic practices, or whether it's doing something special that their foster parent can't do themselves. We can create a team around us. And I think it's very important to do if we want to foster for the long haul, or if we're going to be adopting, we just need that support around us.

[00:27:37.210] - Kristen Thomas
Absolutely. And it goes back to just not the savior. It takes so many points of connection and safe adults to really meet all the needs that have been so absent or confusing for a child.

[00:27:50.930] - Lisa Qualls
Yes. Well, Kristen, thank you so much. It's been really delightful getting to hear your whole story. I had only heard little bits of it, and I'm just so glad that we had this time together. I am sure that our listeners are just really thankful that you were willing to share your story because there are really hard parts to share and I appreciate you going there with us.

[00:28:17.910] - Kristen Thomas
Well, thank you for having me and for listening.

[00:28:21.130] - Lisa Qualls
Our pleasure.

[00:28:21.890] - 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.

[00:28:34.490] - Lisa Qualls

Thanks so much for listening. We love having you. Remember, you're a good parent doing good work.

[00:28:40.990] - Melissa Corkum

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