

Living Bridges Project Transcript

To Be Brave - Part 1: Starting to Take Action

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VOICEOVER: The following audio is part of the Living Bridges Project, an anonymous story-collecting project documenting responses to child sexual abuse. For more, please visit LivingBridgesProject.com.

[Music]

STORYTELLER: So, I guess thinking about community responses to child sexual assault. For me, I was really inspired when I think about other people in community. You sharing and other people who've inspired me to be brave. Just to name that I was abused as a kid and I didn't have language for it as a kid and being able to just come forward. At first starting with me, but I hesitate to say that it's just me because I definitely felt so much braver because of other people who have been brave also.

And so, for me it started when—I was assaulted by another child when I was 5 years old. And I knew it was happening and I knew it was bad. I knew I didn't like it at all. I knew it scared me and made me feel very uncomfortable. It was by a kid who I went to school with and who was also in my mom's family daycare. And so, as a 5 year old, I was really aware of my different experiences. Being assaulted at school, verses not being assaulted at home, but having to share space with this other kid who was also 5 years old and navigating that as a kid and really knowing—I mean I was angry, so I would try to create as much distance between myself and this other kid as possible at school. And then eventually it stopped. And it must've only lasted for maybe a few months, I would think, on and off in school.

And I didn't tell my mom was—my parents had just divorced and I think she was on the brink of a nervous meltdown. And I could—you know, when a mother is on the brink like that, you can't ignore that energy. So I think me and my sister were always on our best behavior to support her. So what I thought that meant was not telling her because I didn't want to stress her out. And so I buried it really deeply I think, until I was about 18 and I started learning about sexual assault in high school. In probably my senior year in high school, which is too late. And then I was like, oh, that happened to me, I'm pretty sure. I was like, did it? Did it not? And just wondering, what is going on? And then I was like, no, I know this happened and it's just been a long time since I've thought about it. And I never had language for it up until I was about 18. And then I just kind of processed it internally.

And then I was able to find even more language in college when I joined—there was a feminist club in school. So I joined that and it's called Feminists In Action, so it was very action oriented, which I loved. There were a lot of queer women in it. More and more queer women started coming into my life. I came out as queer. And I felt really just fierce about starting to take action towards my values. So, that included—I was like, I want to

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reach out to this person who assaulted me when I was 5 because I had learned about cycles of violence in college and how most of the time people who perpetuate cycles of violence have experience them. And having that perspective, really—I think that is what motivated me to reach out to him. Because I was like, here’s another 5 year old who has... who did these things to me. And it made me sad because I think he did them to other people, other kids probably. And it also made me sad because I imagine that there was an adult in his life doing that to him. Because I knew more about his family background than most people because my mom did family daycare for him and his sister. So I knew that his mom was also a single mom just like my mom. And that she had been dating a lot and my mom had said that their father was abusive and my mom had told me that when I was 5 because I hated this kid, I *hated* him. And my mom was like, “be nice to him. He is going through a lot at home; he doesn’t have a dad. Be nice to him.” So my mom would say that to me and I would, ugh! I would still be angry, but I would try to—you know, I was figuring out a lot.

[Music]

So, I’m in college and I’m like, ok I want to do something about this, I want to further explore this, I’m ready to do this. So it just started with a Facebook message and I was like, “hey, do you remember this happening? I do. I’d like to talk to you about it. My understanding is that people who do this, generally have experienced this harm themselves and I just want to say that if that happened to you, I’m sorry. Let me know if you want to talk.” And I didn’t receive anything from him and I never have. I think I reached out 2 more times after that, each time waiting maybe 6 months, to be like, I’ll do something after this. And I did. So I did follow-up and follow-up and then eventually when he didn’t, I thought, well ok, so I am looking to end child sexual violence and so what do I do next? This doesn’t—I don’t know if he has stopped, I don’t know anything more about that. But I knew within me that I wanted to do more.

So, I decided to report it to the school because one thing that I hear from—I’m also an educator, or I was doing more education work a few years ago and a lot of parents would say, “kids aren’t ready to hear about this yet at this young age.” So they’d say, “maybe when they’re in high school.” And so, for me having experienced this as a 5 year old, essentially upon entering the educational system, I know that there’s not such a thing as “too early,” ever. How you frame it will be different, but you can start as soon—real young.

So I wanted to report it to my school. I didn’t really know what to expect because it kind of happened on a whim. It was always the last thing to do on my to-do list. I was avoiding it. But I was tired one night and I had some time, so I was like, ok, I’m just going to send out this email to my school; forgetting that they had to report it legally and all these things. So, I got a really half-assed response from my school. Kind of expected it and still when it happens, it hurts and it’s disappointing. I gave them the details of how it happened in

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school and ideas that I had that would have helped interrupt that, including hiring more teachers of color because I was just in culture shock also upon entering a really white school. So they didn't really respond to any of that, but they did say, "we're passing this on to the police department. We're mandated reporters." So I was like, "ok." And I was really explicit that they not tell my mom in that email. So I said, "if you do report this, I want you to know that I don't live with my parents anymore, I live in Minneapolis, I don't live here anymore." And so, I was really worried about that.

I think it was ok. Some detective called me once. I called him back and he never returned the call and I wasn't interested in involving the police at all. I really did not want to have the police involved. And so they weren't. I messaged Jordan and said that I reported it to the school and that was it. So, that was like one period.

[Music]

Starting in a different place, different time. I'm in college, I'm surrounded by awesome queer women and it's so awesome. I'm exposed to this new level of vulnerability and power. And so I have friends who are being really vulnerable and they're sharing that and I was like, I want to do that! And I am also really shy, verbally. I used to be the last person to participate and now I'm much more vocal about that. So, for me, I was like, "ok, I'll start a tumblr." And within that, once I had responded to my school, I also posted the letter I wrote to my school on that tumblr page. And I had this moment where I was like, "should this be public? Should this not be public?" and I went back and forth, so at first I put the setting under private sharing so that only people who I shared the link with could see it. But I think I got more and more brave, hearing more people talk about child sexual assault and knowing how much sharing your story opens up other people's stories. And I was like, this helps me, I want to be a part of this narrative.

And so, in an act of courage, I clicked the little button and I made it public. And it didn't feel like a huge deal to me, but I knew that I was doing something bigger than I had before by just sharing with friends. So, I kind of forgot about my tumblr. I wasn't able to write as much. I knew it was there, but I wasn't spending as much time writing and sharing about my experiences.

[Music]

A few moths ago... It's august and it's Obon time, so I'm trying to decolonize and I'm trying to celebrate Obon, even though I don't know how to. And there's a lot of pain wrapped up in that too. [Sigh] so, it's really important to me to decolonize and to re-learn ceremonies. I'm Japanese, I'm also Irish, I'm mixed, fifth generation. I don't have that many resources in Minnesota to celebrate, so I was like, "ok, we gotta pull this together." So I invited most of

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my Asian friends and a few other Japanese people who are also mixed race, which is beautiful. And it's a really nice night and I feel like this night was really powerful and it was scary.

But about an hour into the celebration, I get a call from my mom. And normally I'll ignore phone calls from my mom because I'm just not ready and I'm a planner, so I like calling my mom when I'm ready. But I picked up because my grandma's health is not well and I was like, "well what if grandma's dying or something?" so I pick up the phone and my mom was like... I knew something was wrong.

And she is just like, "what is this I'm reading about Jordan." And I'm like, "what are you talking about?" and she's like, "why didn't you tell me?" [Deep breath] and I'm like... I don't know, I can't remember exactly what happened, but I pieced together that my mom had read my tumblr. I think I asked her, "how did you find out?" There's so much not-communicating communicating that happened in that phone call. And I was just like, "well how did you find out?" and she was like, "it's here online," or some—or she said, "I googled you," that's what she said. 'Cause my family has a bad habit of googling each other. [Laughter] Which is a product of disconnection, you know. That we're not connected. [Long sigh.] And I was like, "yeah, this happened to me and I chose to share it because I want to connect with other people and I'm not afraid to share it and it's really important that I do." And she just kind of repeatedly said, "why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you tell me?" [Deep breath]

And that was really hard because I didn't tell her to protect her, right? So there are all these layers of protection happening, where she [voice cracking] is sad—or she's grieving—because she couldn't protect me and she tried her best. [Deep breath] and I didn't tell her because I was trying to protect her. [Sigh] And here we are, finally... meeting. Meeting in this—this is reality, you know? [Sniffles] I think that trying to protect each other—I don't think that we can, on the individual level. And that to me is not real, so feeling protected is a sense, but it's not something that... you know, we can't create these walls that make us safe. [Deep sigh]

So here we are in this real zone where we both tried to protect each other and it didn't work. Because of the society that we live in, which is why we need to organize and why we need to connect. And why I push myself to share, even though it's hard. And so I had this really real conversation with my mom and it was amazing. So I told her, "thank you to years of friendship and community who have held me and taught me to ask for what I need." Because in that moment where she just kept saying, "why didn't you tell me." I was like, oh my god, I was so little and there were so many things going on. I can't answer that question. There isn't an answer to that question. So I was just like, "mom, I need you to tell me that you love me. I need you to stop asking this question. And I love you and that's all that I can do right now." I'm at a party. And she didn't quite listen, but she slowed down.

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So she slowed down and she got herself to a place where she's like, "I'm sorry, I need to rest." And it was a pretty brief, "ok, I love you, mom, goodnight" "I love you, good night." So, phones hang up.

[Music]

There's a bunch of people that I love inside the party, who were also like, "where are you?" and are texting me. [Laugh] and so I think I went inside and I grabbed my boo and I was like, "I need to talk to you." So we go outside and she hugs me and is like, "what do you need," and is perfect and amazing. [Sigh] And she's like "well, what do you need?" and I was like, "well, I'm just—I was really worried about my mom because she does not have people like I do. She's in a rural part of the Midwest and is an introvert. And does not ask for help. So I was like, "I'm worried about my mom, but I don't think I can be there for her. And she can't be there for me." So I felt super stuck. And so, they're like, "is there anyone who you can call, who can be there for her?" and I was like, "yes!"

And here comes my sister. So, my sister and I have this super tumultuous relationship where sometimes we really deeply understand each other because we're both mixed, we both grew up in this life path together up until we were about 16 [sigh] and then we also have really different politics and identities and we have a lot of conflict. But my sister knew about Jordan and what had happened. Because we had actually had this explosive fight where these truths surfaced for us. So she told me about how she had been assaulted and I told her and so we knew this about each other.

And so I called my sister and I was like, "mom just found out about Jordan. Can you be there for her, I'm really worried about her. She's really freaking out and I can't be there for her." And so, my sister [sniffles] she said a series of painful questions where I had to kind of ignore and just be like "ugh, stop."

She's like, "are you sure it counts as sexual assault?" and I was like, "yes." And then she's like, "do you think this made you queer?" And I'm like, "ugh! Like, I can't get into that." So she asked me this series of questions that she did in the past when this came up which are oppressive and hurtful, but I was also, in my head, like, you're about to help me right now and I know you are, so let's just get that going. So I was like, "can you just call mom?" and she said, ok!" [Laughing]

So we hang up and she calls my mom and she says that my mom is ok and then I feel ok. And it was like—I was like, ok, that was kind of good.

And then I start feeling really nourished because then my coworker is inside the party and she's like, "do you need some compression?" and I'm like, "yes!" and she compressed my

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head and it felt so good. And I felt stronger and I was like, should I go in—am I gonna go in and celebrate Obon after this? Part of me wanted to run away and be like, no I gotta go home. But I went back in to the party and it was... ok and I was able to—I was like, “hey everyone, can we do a go-around because I don’t feel great?” and I shared with people briefly what was up and why my face was red and everyone heard me and we just listened to each other in a circle and we shared how we were doing. And that was amazing.

Everyone who came to celebrate was struggling around belonging and acceptance and connection with the past, present and future and we were able just to share that and name that together.

[Music]

So, I called her the next day on her birthday. I was like, “hey mom, happy birthday. How are you doing?” she was like, “I’m ok.” She reiterated during that conversation in an indirect way, “if anything happens to you, tell me.” I mean, she’s 60, but she’s like, “I will protect you.” [Laughing] She’s still like, “I can protect you.” So she’ll do something and she actually did tell me something on that phone call where she said, “I wish you had told me because” and this is so round about. [Laughing] We’re talking, talking about food, doo and then she’s like, “you know I wish you’d told me because Jordan had been saying inappropriate things to other kids at a birthday party.” And she said, “that’s when I cut Jordan and his sister out of our family daycare.” I didn’t realize that had happened. I thought that I had just reached kindergarten and then my mom stopped doing family daycare and started working as a teacher. So apparently he had been saying inappropriate things to other kids at a sleepover that I wasn’t at. That parent informed other parents that that had been happening and my mom separated our families from interacting. Which, doesn’t stop—it doesn’t make it stop, so... I had asked my mom, I said, “do you mind me asking who? Because if I knew who, I would probably reach out to this other person and my mom said, “they don’t want for me to say.” And I respect that. [Sigh] Yeah.

[Music]

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