

## Living Bridges Project Transcript

### What Was Lost: Somebody Always Had To Work

[Music]

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](http://LivingBridgesProject.com).

[Music]

STORYTELLER: Between the ages of 8 and 11, I don't really remember because it's kind of fuzzy. But I can sort of put the benchmarks in there because I know when my grandparents immigrated to Hawaii, and then I kind of know when my grandfather got sick, is how I'm sort of like making those kind of... how I can kind of guess how old I was. So I can guess that between the ages of 8 and 11 I experienced childhood sexual abuse by my grandfather.

If I can put some, some time on it, or frequency on it, I think that it happened probably a little bit infrequently at the beginning, and then probably very close to daily towards the end. It was a part of my life, it was a part of my childhood, so I definitely grew up, sort of towards the end of my grade school years, with childhood sexual abuse in my life.

I didn't know that it was, and I didn't know what to call it, and even like my thoughts, my adult thoughts around it are still being formulated because I didn't openly talk about it or make art about it until about the age of 30. But when I think about the actual timeline of it, those three years, I think about, I was a kid and I had a brother growing up, who was about my age, we're only a year apart, so he's just a year younger than me. And then we had a best friend who was a neighbor who lived across the street, and he was about the same age as us too, and so we were always hanging out together, we did everything together.

And I do remember that when I was a kid the conversations that we would have around it did happen because my brother would ask me about it. He would ask me like, "What are you guys doing in there?" Or he would say that he saw that my grandpa was humping me. I think that's the word he used, because we didn't really have other, we didn't really know what sex or sexuality or sexual acts were, or abuse, or what that looked like.

[Music]

Because the abuse happened pre-middle school, this is before I had any sex-ed., and I definitely grew up in a house where we didn't talk about sex or sexuality or body parts or what made a body or where we should be touched or not touched or touching ourselves etc.

And so, one of the clues that I kind of reach into my memory to think about that time when we were kids we definitely showed each other our genitals. And I remember certainly that we like, I explored my own body, but also that me and my brother and our best friend

## Living Bridges Project Transcript

### What Was Lost: Somebody Always Had To Work

would do that too. Because we like didn't really know what to do or how to talk about sex or sexuality or you know, what touching ourselves was like. And so I have certainly have memories of us as little kids sort of trying to figure out our bodies with each other. And when I think about how I knew how to do that, it's probably because I was sexually abused, and that I knew like oh if I did this to myself I would feel good. If I like, you know touch, you know my genitals.

I'm not sure if I like, now I'm trying to think about what kind of conversations I had with my actual grandfather about it. And I actually started making some art about this, just so that I can try to remember myself. Like the simple act of just writing down just any sort of scraps or pieces that I can remember— journaling and that sort of thing. And when I sat down to write about it, I do remember I had, I probably had many conversations with my grandfather about it. Because I, a lot of times as a child, I wanted those, the abuse to happen. Like I wanted him to touch me, or I wanted him to be doing all these things to me.

And until now, I hadn't actually put the pieces together that, you know, these are things that are perfectly healthy for a child to want and do, but I probably should have been doing them to myself and exploring my own body. So if I, you know, that's something I feel like he took away from me, is the ability to have like my first sexual experiences by myself, or consensually with another person. Or I know even like the ways that I was probably talking about it with my brother and our friend, our neighbor, you know what didn't happen for me like in an organic experimental way just, it's very influenced by the sexual acts going on with my abuser.

I previously thought like maybe I was a child who wanted sex or sexuality and that's like, I previously thought maybe I even had some agency over wanting that, but its, it probably would've happened anyways. Like I would've been exploring my body, and having sexual activity, you know, anyways just not influenced by like an adult. So that's really great for me to actually think through and to realize, that I wasn't a child that had sexual desires for an adult in my life. That it was sort of like, placed upon me therefore I desired it, therefore I associated it with him.

[Music]

You know, part of why I think it was very difficult for us, for me to have conversations with my grandfather about it is because I grew up in a Chinese-language household, but I was going to English school. I didn't actually grow up in an environment where my parents were like you have to, you *have to* learn English, though I knew I had to learn English because I was the oldest child and I had to do all the official things for my parents. And my parents were never around because they worked night shifts, they worked holidays, they just worked a lot. My parents worked working-class jobs, like McDonald's, and jobs that require you to work overnight shifts and that sort of thing. And so they weren't around and so our caregivers were our grandparents, our teachers, and pretty much each other. Like

## Living Bridges Project Transcript

### What Was Lost: Somebody Always Had To Work

we just let ourselves in and out of our house. We signed our own field trip forms. We just like were kind of on our own a lot.

The language that my grandfather spoke was Chinese but the language that I spoke was English and Chinese like, sort of like 50% capacity. And I do remember when I was a kid I did talk to him about it because I would ask him, to like do things to me. Or I would ask him, I would say like, "Are we gonna get caught?" Because I probably knew that other people weren't supposed to see what we were doing because he never wanted other people to see what we were doing. And so I guess I did ask him like, even as basic as like, "Why are we closing the door?" that kind of stuff. But an extensive conversation was pretty hard to have because I couldn't even have an extensive conversation with him about what we were having for dinner, so how were we going to have an extensive conversation about like, I don't know, like sexual acts.

And I feel like sort of like a little complicated about the whole time because it happened for approximately three years or four years, I really don't remember. I just can't. I used to also feel a lot of like shame about not being able to remember my childhood, but I didn't know that if you have a traumatic childhood you sometimes don't remember. I didn't learn that until kind of recently. But I guess it makes sense that I don't remember much of my childhood.

But my grandfather got really sick. So he got really sick and he had to go to the hospital like two or three times a week. And because I was the oldest child and I was the primary, you know, like I was really responsible for a lot of things in my house. I'm gonna guess he stopped he stopped abusing me because there's no way he could have had the energy to do that. Because I remember there was a shift in our relationship, so we weren't like I guess like having sex or doing sexual things anymore and I was taking him to the hospital all the time. And so I would take him to the hospital, I would talk to all the people in English, I would like advocate for what his health needs were. So suddenly from being sexually abused I'm like actually watching him die and keeping him alive at the same time as like a little kid, I'm like eleven or twelve years old. And I didn't think anything of it, you know I really just thought like all right, we've got to take care of grandpa now.

And so I really suddenly shifted from childhood sexual abuse to being like a healthcare giver, a caretaker. And so maybe that's also part of why I didn't even think about the abuse until I'm like 30 years old, is because when I think about my grandfather, my first memory of him or association of him was not always about the abuse. It was always about like oh, I used to take him to the hospital and I watched him die very slowly. And like, had to like see all this like gross stuff in the hospital, like blood and needles and death. And like, you know like if you're a person who experienced a lot of death when you're younger, which you know I had like a lot of my immediate family members pass away like when I was a child. You just get accustomed to the smell and sight and rituals of death. And so I always think, when I think of my grandfather, that he's like this guy who died early that we all took care of.

## Living Bridges Project Transcript

### What Was Lost: Somebody Always Had To Work

[Music]

Now that I'm like circling back to thinking about language and being immigrants, and talking to my brother and my neighbor about it, some of the things that I wish that we had the tools for as children are like, yeah like I wish like the adults would talk to us a little bit about our bodies or even if it was like in pictures or something. And I guess I wish me, my brother and my neighbor talked to each other a little bit more just about like sexuality and sex and what that was if we had the ability to talk about it with like the language around it.

This is a silly thing to want to go back and do but I just wish that I spoke better Chinese. I wish that the conversation maybe happened in Chinese and then maybe we could like gather our thoughts about it. I don't know if like anybody else in my family knew what was going on. I do remember a couple times like that my grandma would be upset that we were doing something privately, but I don't remember knowing what she was saying that well, because we didn't speak the same language. So I think that she probably had a clue that something that wasn't supposed to be happening was happening behind closed doors with us, but I wasn't clued into that conversation because I just couldn't understand it.

And then all of a sudden he died. Then he was sick. I'm trying to think like I wonder even if like, I wonder if I would have wanted to tell like teachers about it. And I don't even think they could've understood what was happening because my teachers didn't speak Chinese and my teachers wouldn't even have been able to talk to my grandparents, they probably would've just like thrown him in jail or something. Which I don't think would've helped because probably nobody in jail speaks Chinese either, so I don't know if that was going to be like a rational solution to trying to talk about it.

Because in school I remember like my parents they definitely didn't go to the parent-teacher conferences. And like I think they tried to once but I had to be there too. And definitely not both parents, like I think my mom might've shown up like really late to like half of one or something. But yeah. Like they couldn't even have a parent-teacher conference about how I'm doing in school. Like they definitely couldn't have had a conversation about like abuse at home.

[Music]

I remember in sixth grade too, I brought in a book. Oh now I'm really putting the pieces together here. I brought in a book, that was like an adult book. It was an adult novel, and it was about a group of four girls who were teenagers who raped another girl and set her body on fire and left her out to die. It probably wasn't from our time period if it had been turned into a book, so that was the 90's, maybe it was from like the 80's or 70's. And it was just like, just the book that told sort of like the story of this girl's death and what happened to her.

## Living Bridges Project Transcript

### What Was Lost: Somebody Always Had To Work

And I was an avid reader at the time, like I read a lot of books. It was really the only thing I liked to do, was read. And so I don't know how I got my hands on this book.... I do know! My mother was a hotel maid, that's why she had to work night shifts a lot. She worked night shifts pretty much the whole time she was there. And she would bring home, she knew I liked books so if there was a book she would bring it home, and I think she brought home that book from one of the tourists. And you know, she didn't check, she didn't read very well, so she didn't check these books and see what they're about, she just gave it to me. If I had a book, that was a score already that was a win in our family if we could get books, because we didn't have a lot of money either, we were like super poor because we had so many people at our house and so little people with jobs.

And so I took that book to school. I was reading that book. It was probably towards the end, because I knew most of the story, and I remember the teacher was like so pissed. She was so pissed that I was reading this book, because of the sexual content, the graphic nature, the death part of it. I didn't think it was a big deal.

I remember she took the book away from me, but she didn't tell my parents about it. So like I feel like if I was in an English-speaking household, there would've been a parent-teacher conference, but because my parents, because they didn't even go to regular-ass parent-teacher conferences about like how awesome I'm doing in school. They were definitely not gonna you know, she definitely knew like I can't get in touch with this kid's parents. They won't even understand me so what's the point.

But like she took away my book and I was really mad because I was definitely almost done with it. And I remember that being like a memory that I had about like sexuality in school, and thinking through that. And so maybe like, even if we didn't have the language to speak to each other, it probably would've been helpful for them to try, and not to like give up on us. Because somebody somewhere they could've found like translation service, or an interpreter, or even some of the kids in my class were better dual-language speakers than I was. But they didn't try very hard, I don't think that there was a lot of support around like trying to translate any sort of like parent-teacher interactions at all.

So I guess like when I think about like oh what as a kid could have helped us, talk to each other in our family, maybe like somebody else trying to like talk to, somebody else like the "authority figures" in our lives right, because teachers are such authority figures to my family, they knew everything and we knew nothing, because they're like the school teachers, and I went to public schools all my life. Which were highly under-resourced. These teachers also they have so many kids, our classrooms... There was this one grade I had during the abuse, definitely, that was like three classes in one, like 90 kids in a classroom. We had a triple teacher situation. And I remember when we were kids they told us it was cool. They were like, oh you're lucky, you're in the triple teacher classroom, but that just meant 90 kids in a classroom, taking turns being indoors. Like, okay.

## **Living Bridges Project Transcript**

### **What Was Lost: Somebody Always Had To Work**

It was very hard to talk to each other, very hard to relate to authorities, authority-figures in our lives, very hard to bridge a language barrier.

[Music]

What would I have wanted to happen... I think I would've, if I could think about the best response in our, very specifically our family, as a response... You know the first thing I would've wanted to do was talk to my brother about it and have like a child-response to it. And see if we had any, see if it happened to him too, and see how he felt about it. And then for us, to have like talked to the adults in our family, and to have like a family meeting about it, I think it would've been best for our family to talk about it ourselves.

You know we didn't have access to a lot of other elders, like the grandparent generation out there is not like adults but like older folks because we were very poor and we lived in a community very far from other Chinese people. Because we were very new immigrants, all the Chinese immigrants that had more wealth and resources and like family generations that had been established in the place we lived in were in neighborhoods that were not affordable to us as immigrants. So we lived in a neighborhood with non-Chinese language speakers. So if my grandparents had been around more community for themselves, I think it would've been helpful for our family too, to have more access to the elders that are like in our communities.

[Music]

My family lived in such isolation. When I think about our family unit that we didn't live by a lot of other families that spoke the same language. We didn't live in a community with a lot of resources. You know, I guess I, when I think about what happened, when I think about like the chain of events, my family was running from the communist revolution to go to America. Then when they got here, they didn't speak the language. They worked super, you know, overnight, working-class jobs, that displaced them from their own children. And then their own parents, that they eventually brought over from China as well.

You know, I... This is such a dream, but some, you know, family planning too, but I don't even know if that's possible when I think about it. Like, what, what does it mean for our, if my parents had said like, "oh here's what it means for like our grandparents to come live with us now," or to even have had like any time for us to have like a meal together.

I don't, definitely don't remember a single time in my childhood where like my brother and I, plus our grandparents, and my parents had a meal together. Not even on a special occasion, because somebody always had to work. And so, maybe more connections around just being a family would've been I think helpful for us, just because we never ever felt like a family unit, we just felt like a bunch of people living in the same house together all the time.

**Living Bridges Project Transcript**  
**What Was Lost: Somebody Always Had To Work**

And yeah certainly on a macro level when I think about, you know, immigration and diaspora and connections to like the kinds of cultural communities that would've been good to have... It would've been nice to live around or live near other folks that we could talk to as well. Even in my, as a child, I was one of the very few new immigrants that was actually I was born in China and moved when we were, as a kid. Even being around other immigrants, was something that we didn't have. So, the ability to talk to other immigrants or to like hang out or have a conversation about where we came from or what was lost or you know, how to talk to each other, was something that would've been I think helpful for every single person in our family.

[Music]

VOICEOVER: This 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](http://LivingBridgesProject.com).