



Episode #1 - Replenish & Keep Growing to Advocate for Students Experiencing Homelessness Transcript

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Hello and welcome to our new podcast, I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. I am one of your hosts, Melissa Turnpaugh, Youth Development Coordinator with the Center for Schools and Communities. Our new podcast will amplify the voices and stories of students experiencing homelessness across Pennsylvania and beyond.

Matt Butensky:

And I am your co-host, Matt Butensky, Project Manager with the Center for Schools and Communities. We are very excited that you are joining us for our first episode of the new I Will Be Your Voice podcast. In our podcast, we will have conversations with practitioners and thought leaders in the field who are working to improve the education and lives of students and their families experiencing homelessness. We could not be more excited to have our first episode feature an incredible instructor advocate and professor, Dr. Rajni Shankar-Brown.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Dr. Shankar-Brown is an award-winning professor and the Endowed Chair of Social Justice Education at Stetson University. She is also president of the National Coalition for the Homeless Board and Executive Director of the Institute for Catalyzing Equity, Justice and Social Change. Dr. Shankar-Brown has been our guest instructor for our free virtual monthly restorative practice series. This series is called Replenish and Keep Growing and is part of Pennsylvania's American Rescue Plan Homeless Children and Youth Program work. We are now thrilled to introduce Dr. Shankar-Brown. Welcome Dr. Shankar-Brown.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

Thank you so much Matt and Melissa. Happy New Year and thank you so much for having me today. I am always grateful for any opportunity to collaborate with the Center for Schools and Communities and really excited to be a part of this new and impactful podcast.

Matt Butensky:

Well, we are so happy that you are joining us for the first episode. So, I think this is going to be a great first episode of our new podcast. So, we are going to dive right into questions for you,

Dr. Shankar-Brown, and we hope that this will be a fun experience for our listeners and for our leaders in this work throughout Pennsylvania and beyond. So, are you ready to get started?

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

Sure am. This sounds fun. Thank you.

Matt Butensky:

All right. So, we wanted to start off with a broad and a pretty big question, but can you tell us a little bit about yourself, your past and current work and how you became invested and really an advocate for people experiencing homelessness?

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

Absolutely. Matt, thank you so much first of all for this thoughtful question. Working to advance social and environmental justice specifically to end and prevent homelessness is truly my life's work. And I can tell you as an educator and artist, advocate, activist also as an Amma, Amma is actually, it means mom in Tamil, my first language. For me, this work is also very deeply personal and very much in my blood. Poverty and homelessness are a part of my family's journey and I have dedicated most of my life marching for human rights. Housing is an essential human right and in a nation as wealthy as the United States, to think that we have millions experiencing homelessness is unacceptable. Honestly, from my perspective, I would say it's criminal. Now, as a child, my parents raised me with a strong consciousness of community engagement and the idea that as individuals, we all have the agency to make our world better, that they can use their sphere of influence to help bend the arc towards justice.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

I always think about how Dr. King said, "The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice." And I like to add that it doesn't bend by itself. I think we have to be the ones to actually bend it, and I think youth actually have a lot of power and agency in bending that arc as well. And so thinking about this first question you asked and going back into my own journey, I would say a lot of different pieces have really brought me here to the work that I do today. Unhoused children and youth families are one of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population, and we are continuing to see surges in communities across the United States really magnified, especially in certain states, Pennsylvania, Florida, where I'm situated, California, New York, Washington, Nevada and more. And in fact, in collaboration with the research team in the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, I recently helped with the Nation's 2022 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report, the AHAR, which was presented to Congress.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

We just released this in December, and the data is deeply, deeply distressing, but not surprising to any of us who are on the ground. The data shows that on a single night in 2022, more than 30,000 people under the age of 25 experienced homelessness on their own as unaccompanied youth, and children under the age of 18 made up 59% of people experiencing homelessness in families with children. And of course, the kids count data by the Annie E. Casey Foundation really talks about the percentage of children being impacted in the low well-being in certain

states, and I'm going to zoom in here for a minute with Pennsylvania. So even in Pennsylvania, we found that child well-being specifically, thinking again about children with even mental and behavioral health challenges, depression, anxiety increased by 28%.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

And far more than 38% of children in Pennsylvania live in households with incomes less than twice the federal poverty line, placing them at severe economic disadvantage. So many are struggling to survive. And we have a host of research, demonstrating how poverty and homelessness adversely impacts our children and youth, physically, cognitively, socially, emotionally. For me, over three decades now of working with children and youth experiencing homelessness, I can really share that there is intense and layered trauma, layers of trauma at much higher rates than housed peers. And we see a lot of connections to ACEs or adverse childhood experiences. So there's a lot of work to be done.

Matt Butensky:

Thank you for that context. That was a lot of great information about the background of your work, but also what we see here in Pennsylvania. So, I think that really centered this conversation today. Perfect.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

And so I was thinking about the question you asked, and I love it. It's really a gift for me today to think about my own journey. And I just would say while I wear many different hats today, all of the hats I wear are with intention and focused on advancing human and civil rights. I do have the honor, Melissa mentioned it earlier, of serving as the President of the National Coalition for the Homeless Board, and this is the nation's oldest advocacy and direct service organization helping people experiencing homelessness and helping to create many different systematic changes in our nation, including the McKinney-Vento, previously known of course as the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, which was first signed into law in 1987. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is a federal law created to support enrollment and education of students experiencing homelessness to provide unhoused students the same educational opportunities as housed students by removing barriers to learning.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

And this is really important because we see so many barriers and children who are trying to survive, trying to have their physiological needs met. It becomes really important that we, especially in educational platforms and landscapes, are doing our best to help remove those barriers and to open up access and opportunities. Now, of course, while we have these laws, I just would say we still have a lot of work to do to ensure protections are in place and the laws are actually followed. The National Coalition for the Homeless, we recently launched a comprehensive grassroots campaign led by people experiencing homelessness and centering lived experience called Bring America Home Now, so you can actually go online and check it out, Bring America Home Now. And in fact, schools, individuals, organizations can sign on. One of the things we're trying to do is build really mass support and movement, really looking at how can we, again, build inclusive spaces and change public policy as well to help to end and prevent homelessness.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

Also, have recently another exciting kind of piece of this journey, how the opportunity to work with a team including Donald Whitehead and David Perry, an attorney. And Donald Whitehead is the Executive Director of the National Coalition for the Homeless. And we work together to really envision and design a curriculum buy-in for people with lived experiences called LETA, the Lived Experience Training Academy. And we're now piloting it. It's about to be launched across the nation next month and it's really wonderful. It's pretty multifaceted because in addition to empowering, educating, building kind of diverse leadership skill sets for people with lived experience, it actually is also creating jobs for people with lived experience, including our youth. So, there's a lot of different opportunities kind of rolled into this project, which is pretty cool.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

And then the final piece I would add is I'm also a professor and this Chair of Social Justice Education, a Teacher Scholar at Stetson University, which is a liberal arts college here in central Florida. And through these hats that I wear, I get to teach undergraduate and graduate community engaged classes and I partner with low-income communities and public school districts across the nation. I also get to engage in international work, and alongside that as a poet and an artist, I use the arts for activism to educate, to challenge, to shape, to promote healing, centered engagement. And I find the arts are very powerful. Writing, painting, music, dance, theater, poetry, including spoken word, have always played such an imperative role in social change throughout history and our world.

Matt Butensky:

Thank you. Again, you certainly wear a lot of hats, and I think in this work, so many of our homeless liaisons throughout Pennsylvania, other staff supporting these students, we have to wear different hats. And just...

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

Absolutely.

Matt Butensky:

... sharing your journey and how you came to be where you are today was really interesting to me and I'm looking forward to looking more into Bring America Home and LETA. I don't know a lot about them, but it sounds like something that we can really dig into a little bit deeper here in Pennsylvania. So thank you for sharing that as well.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yes, Dr. Rajni, thank you for sharing not only your professional journey, but also your personal journey and just the power of voice and the work that you're doing. It truly emphasizes and highlights your key factors that you stand for, such as social justice, equity, and healing. And so just working with students and families experiencing homelessness and talking about those three, how did you make that the focus of your studies in your current work that you're doing,

whether that's at the undergrad and graduate level or as the president? Just give us a little more detail about that.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

Thank you so much, Melissa. Another wonderful question, and I'm pausing here contemplating, and I have to say, so part of this is even as a child really seen injustices and experiencing injustice myself, really, really brought to the forefront how we all have to use our agency. I think this is collective work to prioritize equity and actively work to advance social justice. And today, especially now as we're sitting here doing this podcast in the new year 2023, I just would say we have massive humanitarian crises right now in our world from rising poverty and homelessness to environmental degradation, devastating wars, pervasive public health issues, really very much interwoven with what I would say is isms as well, right? Classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, linguistic bias and much more. And so understanding trauma is really, really important. And understanding systems and the need to dismantle oppressive systems and build systems that offer liberation and that push for equity.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

And this becomes really important, especially when working with students and families experiencing homelessness. Often with poverty and homelessness, there are layers of trauma. And so creating spaces for healing becomes really critical. And this came to the forefront of my work very early on, I would say not only from childhood experiences on a personal level, but then growing up and really starting to move into community organizing and into human rights activism, but especially came to the forefront as an educator, being in public schools, working in school districts, working with diverse communities, and again, seeing the amount of work that needs to be done to advance equity and to ensure that we are healing as we do this work in addition to being trauma informed care. We talk a lot about offering spaces for students that are centering trauma informed practices, but I think it's really important that we don't stop there, but we move into places that are restorative, places that offer healing.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

We have to center well-being in our work. And again, this is collective work that requires communities, schools, families, nonprofit organizations, all of the different stakeholders, if you think about it in that way to work together. Social inequalities continue to persist, but they're also widening, increasing. And I'd say this both thinking globally, but also in the United States, and the COVID-19 pandemic has really exasperated these challenges. So many children just thinking about all of the loss of life and so many children losing a parent or a guardian, mass evictions that have been taking place across our nation. The compounding realities now of inflation all compounded with lack of a fair living wage, a severe lack of affordable housing, pervasive equity issues, and all of these issues when we talk about equity and justice, often at the other end of that inequities and injustice harm our kids, our youth the most, and schools, of course are a microcosm of society.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

So, our schools are dealing with a number of challenges right now. And this goes back into, as Matt picked up on earlier, that I was talking about wearing many hats and how so many of us in the educational realm or landscape now are wearing so many hats, right? We are feeling

stretched and we are seeing that on so many levels, and we have to recognize also, there are some intersections that are so vital for us to pay attention to. So thinking about how historically and socially marginalized communities are overrepresented in homelessness as well in the United States, and so many times disproportionate representation from already vulnerable communities.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

And so we see, again, even if we're going to focus on children and youth over representation with racially and ethnically diverse students, LGBTQIA two-spirit plus students, and we have to understand intersectionality in this work because it's also critical. It's critical if we're going to start to dismantle injustice and start to build spaces that are inclusive for learning, for growing, so everybody can thrive. We have to talk more about generational trauma and community trauma, the increasing street violence, trafficking, hate crimes with people who are unhoused, including our youth. There is just a lot of work and healing is really something our communities need. I'll pause there, Matt, I know you were about to say something.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah, thank you. I think we began to talk about the restorative practice series and restorative practices, how they're important for children and youth. But in that vein, you've been working with us on our replenishing grow series, and a lot of your sessions have included educators and youth serving professionals. And so we wanted to think about why those restorative practices are so important and really beneficial to the adults that serve these children and youth.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

I love that. And I have to say, just getting to collaborate and work with the CSC on this project specifically has been so uplifting because so much of this work is so daunting and really, really heavy. And I find that our spaces that we're working to build in community with so many different practitioners and educators and youth service providers, they are spaces of hope. I'm so grateful for that. And so I'll just share. So as we're talking about healing, community care, life-affirming supports, it is so important that we don't forget to apply and make sure that we are prioritizing well-being not only for our students and families, but also for the educators and everyone who is working to support students and families. Often that's a missing piece sometimes in the larger puzzle of all this work. And yet it's so essential, and we are talking here, when we talk about healing and restoration, I really like to think about it as replenishment of the body, mind, heart, and spirit, all of that.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

And in fact, that's why we call it the replenish series. The idea is we want to replenish in so many ways, and that's essential for not only our well-being, but our ability to actually do our best and to show up at work and to be able to pour and invest more into others as well. In fact, in Sanskrit, one of the world's ancient languages that comes from India, we actually have a saying that if you replace the letter I in illness with we, W-E, illness becomes wellness. And so this is community work as well. And we are living in a time again where we have large issues and educators especially are feeling all of that secondary trauma, vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, burnout is very real, very real. And in fact, there are medical studies showing that many

folks in the educational field, our own mental and behavior health and even physical health is challenged and being affected in adverse ways.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

And so this is where I think we have to make a collective commitment to prioritize in well-being, and that means multidimensionally in every layer. And we need to understand that well-being, even joy is part of justice work, and we need spaces for that. And it's not easy work. It requires work and sacrifice. Again, going back, thinking about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, how he so wisely reminded us, human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Every advance in terms of advancing and making steps towards the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle. The tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals, and that's us, all of us. And it takes coming together and supporting one another to really make that happen. And I just want to share as we're talking about this, thinking again about our restorative practices and replenishment series, the fact is we are living in a time where our educational landscapes are really in a time of crisis as well.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

So we see that educational practitioners, teachers, school administrators, support staff members, counselors, social workers, advocates, community partners, district, homeless liaisons, everybody who's involved in so many ways, and that list continues, that if we don't care for ourselves as we are caring for others, there are really dangerous and grave implications to that and unintentional consequences that often unfold as well. And so our replenished series, our restorative practice series really is about providing opportunities for healing and growth, inspiration, health, finding ways to prevent compassion fatigue and burnout, especially during a time when our world needs us, all of us, hands and hearts on deck. We need folks not to burn out right now because our world has so many issues and we need folks to be solutionaries.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. And we have loved being able to offer the series through the American Rescue Plan Homeless Children and Youth Program with our Department of Education for I think over a year now. So that's been an exciting series to continue with you, and we look forward to keeping that series going for many months and through 2024, which we're excited about.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah, we are so excited that you have continued to partner with us and bring different topics to the table that really help to develop our educators working with this population. I love how you continuously brought it back to creating those spaces and how critical that was, and that's really important in this community that we work with. So Dr. Rajni, you are the president of the National Coalition for Homeless Board, and you are a champion for equity and healing center practices. If you had a wishlist, what would you put on that list to help those to improve their education outcomes, who are experiencing homelessness?

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

Oh, I love it. Oh my goodness. Your questions today are just, they're deep. They speak to my heart too on so many levels, and so thank you for that. So I have a lot of wishes on this wishlist, a lot of hopes that I hope as well will be manifested into realities. And one of those, I hope, first of all, collectively, we learn to listen to each other more, to learn from each other, from our students and families experiencing homelessness. We remember and honor our shared humanity, that in our educational systems, we also remember that as we're focusing on learning and Bloom's Taxonomy of learning, we all work in our communities, in our schools to first ensure that Maslow's hierarchy of needs is present, that every human being has physiological needs met, because we all need food, shelter, access to clean water and resources. We need this to survive.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

But if we want our students to thrive, it's essential, right? Really essential. And so I hope that one of my main wishes, I would say is as my heart aches knowing our children and our youth deserve a better world, I hope that students experiencing homelessness are moved into permanent housing. That is one of my first hopes because housing is a human right. I hope that every student experiencing homelessness have opportunities to recognize their inner light, protect their inner light, and that our students can keep their light glowing, hold on to hope throughout their journey, even when it feels bleak and when it feels hopeless. I hope that every student and every human being experiencing homelessness again, has access not only to resources, but resources that are also human support systems. Thinking about genuine advocates and educators who love them, that are students especially know that they are loved, valued, cared about, and also needed in our fractured world.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

That's one thing we have to be careful. It's not just we want to make sure we're not just operating from deficit ideologies, but seeing the promises and the potential that all of our youth carry. And I want them to know that inner light inside of themselves and our world really needs solutionaries. So I want our youth to be able to see themselves as positive change agents. I also hope that the well-being of those supporting students experiencing homelessness is prioritized, that everyone working to support students and families, there is also this intention to keep our own inner light glowing and alive because we want to model that for our students and our youth. We also want to make sure that we're keeping that light alive so it can start to spread and illuminate pathways. And we want to intentionally carve out spaces for sustainable self-care and healing.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

I think this is vital. So in that respect, I hope that all of us remember our agency, remember the power of equity focused partnerships, the beauty of unity in community, our partnerships, our collective commitment, when we come together and work together, it is powerful. And you can see examples, even looking to the civil rights movement, to many movements even today where it is making a positive difference, that even as daunting as so many of the situations in the world are right now, when we come together and work together in partnership, there is so much hope, so much potential, and we can improve educational outcomes, build a more just and loving world for our children and youth. And I truly believe, my hope is that we continue to march and change the world because I believe we can do that. In fact, I'll just share with you all as we're kind of closing out today, right?

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

My daughter, she is an avid leader and loves to learn. And I've been on this real focused push with her over the past year, especially as she's growing and entering her teens to really study some amazing individuals, trailblazers and lights in our world, pioneers, including many heroes, who have often not gotten credit in history, but have done some pretty amazing work. And one of those women is actually Margaret Mead. And so if you haven't heard about Margaret Mead, Margaret Mead is a pioneering cultural anthropologist. She had to break a lot of barriers in fact, and in her life, poverty was something that she experienced. And the other really fun fact, I think it's appropriate for today, especially with CSC located in Pennsylvania, Margaret Mead was born in Philly and was raised in Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

And Margaret Mead has so many beautiful words that she shared with the world, but some of those words that I share often with my daughter, and I hope, speaking of hopes, that my daughter will pass on one day if she ever has children are these words, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." And so I think we are that small group of thoughtful, committed people, and educators. When we come together, we can truly change the world, and our youth are part of that change too.

Matt Butensky:

Yes. And your hopes are making me hopeful. So, thank you for sharing all of those hopes, that wishlist is my wishlist, and you said that beautifully. So, thank you so much. And with that message, we are going to close out our premiere episode of I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. We want to thank you, Dr. Rajni Shankar-Brown, so much for being with us today as our first guest. That was a very rich discussion to kick us off. So thank you again for all of your time and consideration for our first podcast.

Rajni Shankar-Brown:

Thank you so much. Matt and Melissa, it really is a joy to collaborate with the CSC, and I want to thank everybody who's listening, everybody who's out there doing the work. It's hard and heavy work that requires us to roll up our sleeves, open our hearts every day, but it's such important work. So I am sending so much gratitude through this podcast, let it be radiating and illuminating out because I am grateful for all of you. Thank you so much. Namaste. Onward and upward together.

Matt Butensky:

Thank you. And we will see you soon at a future replenish and keep growing restorative practice series sessions. So to learn more and register for an upcoming session, please visit ecyehpennsylvania.center-school.org. Again, thank you for listening to I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. We hope you enjoyed the episode. Please check back and tune in again.