



Episode 14 – “Empathy and Change: Advocating for Homeless Youth” Transcript

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Welcome to our podcast. I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. I'm your host, Melissa Turnpaugh, Youth Development Coordinator with the Center for Schools and Communities. I want to welcome Walter Harris, disabled, restorative justice volunteer, and Emma Grim Housing Coach at Westmoreland Community Action to the podcast. Welcome.

Walter Harris:

[inaudible 00:00:35].

Melissa Turnpaugh:

So, I am going to just explain a little bit for our listeners, just the connection with Walter and Emma. So we actually received your names from region five, Wendy Kinnear, who is the regional coordinator for her area that oversees specific counties for ECYEH, for students experiencing homelessness. So, she had said that you guys would be a great addition to the podcast and being able to share your experiences as being former homeless individuals. So, thank you again for being here.

So, I'll go ahead and get started just with our first question here. So Walter and Emma, I just want to thank you for taking the time to be with us today. We thought it'd be impactful to have a formerly homeless youth share their experiences and story with us in hopes to raise awareness about homelessness. So if we could just take a moment for both of you individually to share and start from the beginning about your personal journey with homelessness, what ended up putting you in that situation, and where were you residing at the time of your homelessness?

Walter Harris:

If you'd like, I'll go first, Emma. Hi. My name is Walter Harris. I'm 54 years old. I reside in Allegheny County of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on the South Side. So my first experience with homelessness, I was rather young. I just remember in my early, early years from as far back as I can remember to about 10. We were real stable in our home situation. I'm the next to the youngest boy of seven siblings. I have a little sister that's three years younger than me, and

then I have five other siblings older than me. So, I remember being stable. All of my sisters and brothers have the same mother and father.

My parents kind of separated, not fully separated, but my father started some mischievous behavior. My mom ended up in a coma. She took a bunch of pills. So, we started residing with my father's mistress. When my mother came through and we moved, from that point on my father was in and out of our lives. So, that's when we first started experiencing instability. That's a term that I just learned too recently. I didn't know that term until I started association with the COC.

So the first experience was coming home from school. I think it was maybe 1981. I was 11. Then seeing all of your belongings on the sidewalk asking, "What's going on?" My mom's saying, "We have to move." I was like, "Well, where's the moving truck, and why is all of our stuff outside?"

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Right.

Walter Harris:

That was my first experience with eviction, didn't really understand why. I just know that we couldn't pay the rent, and so they were putting us out. It was an embarrassing situation. The first time it was a shock, can't even remember how I felt. I know it was a flood of different emotions. This happened again. So the second time, I knew what was happening and I had developed a mindset to get me through it.

One thing with dealing with traumatic situations is once they start occurring frequently, you find a way to cope with them, whatever that is. You move on. So my mindset became, "Well, I don't care. I'm not embarrassed, whatever, because I'm moving to another neighborhood. It ain't like I'm moving around the corner. I know wherever I'm living, I'm going to another place. So the people, I don't have to worry about being teased about this in school tomorrow because I'm going to be in a different school a week from now."

So, that was my experience as a youth. I guess I could save the adult experiences for the incarceration question because that's how I experienced it as an adult.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

No, that would be great. Thank you for sharing that. I really appreciate it. Emma, if you could give us some background just what your experience was also?

Emma Grim:

Hello, my name's Emma. I am a child welfare and youth homelessness advocate from Western Pennsylvania. For me, my first experience with homelessness on my own was probably when I was 17, although I was still in foster care. So if you would ask Child and Youth Services or HUD,

I wasn't technically homeless, but I did live in a youth shelter. I stayed there for probably about three months, maybe longer until I was old enough to sign myself out. I turned 18 there, so I got sick of it. They had told me that they were going to find home with a family, but time had passed that I was tired enough of waiting and signed myself out.

I tried using a section eight voucher that I was given. The Children's Bureau provided it to me, but they didn't help me use it at all. I couldn't find anywhere that would rent to me without a credit score or a co-signer. So, I stayed at friend's houses for quite a while just couch-surfing. I'm not sure. I've been moving all around for as long as I can remember. Truthfully, I've moved more times than years I've been alive. So, I think that has definitely affected who I am as a person.

I have been stably housed for a while now. I became a student in 2019 before Covid, which is actually what got me out of that situation. When Covid hit, I was able to stay with my grandparents temporarily. We rekindled that relationship enough so that could happen. I was finally able to move out and live on my own. That's what's going on now.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Awesome. Well, thank you for sharing that. I appreciate that. So I know Emma, you just made a point about how you think it has shaped you as a person. How do you also think it has shaped your perspective on youth homelessness?

Emma Grim:

Well, for me, I think that I learned it's deeper than just the situation you see, and it continues to affect you even after you're housed potentially for the rest of your life. So housing instability for me is still a big fear, even though I have been housed consistently. It affects your mental, your physical health, and the choices that you make moving forward.

I also think people don't really understand that it can happen to anyone. It doesn't really matter if you grew up in poverty. There's a lot of youth that experience that just because of conflict in relationships with their family. That's something that I learned.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

No, that's important. Thank you for sharing those insights. Walter, I know that you hinted to our speakers about talking about the imprisonment. So, I'd like to move forward with that conversation. Just how was it for you during that time, and then how did this experience of imprisonment and then coming out really intersect with your struggle with homelessness, both as your youth self and as an adult?

Walter Harris:

So as a youth, outside of the times where we faced instability as a family, I really wasn't affected because the juvenile system and adult system is different. Whereas the juvenile system really, they're not as harsh. I'm going to use the word harsh for lack of a better term, and far as

approving your housing. If you had a home that you was removed from wherever you was sentenced, if that space was still available, then that's just where you went.

In the adult system, they want to inspect. So if there's another felon living at a house, you can't go there. If it's section eight or any type of state housing programs, you can't go there. There's a whole bunch of different reasons to have your home plan denied in adult system. In the juvenile system, you just return back to your house.

Something just occurred to me that I never even put together. I never correlated my experience with me and eviction with my choice to be self-governed. What I mean is when I was 13, I decided I was going to take care of myself. I wasn't going to rely on my parents. I wasn't going to rely on society or anybody, and I was going to do it by any means. The means that I had available to me at that time was boosting or shoplifting as I called it. So that's where my romance, for lack of a better term, with the system began.

I started shoplifting. My family couldn't afford housing. They couldn't really afford clothing. Even though my mom, she did buy school clothes, but the world was becoming materialistic. When you got a lot of sisters and brothers, there's not a lot of money. Welfare doesn't pay enough to really provide. So, I found a way to get nice clothing on my own.

I started learning how to steal it, and I started going in and out of detention center. With that came hanging with the wrong crowd that also got into trouble, so there was a lot of things happening. I had decided that I was going to take care of myself. I was going to provide for myself. I never connected that to my housing instability until just now.

In adult system, every time I got ready to come out of prison, it's funny because I went straight from the juvenile system to the adult system. So I was in and out of Shuman Detention Center, but I was never sent to a juvenile detention. Allegheny Academy was the first placement. It was a daytime placement, meaning I went to school. I lived at home, but after school I had to go to their program from 3:00 until 7:00. Then, I had a curfew.

So, I was dealing with Allegheny Academy for a year. I got extended there. I got in more trouble while I was there. That was '86. So from '83 to '85, I was getting away with stuff. '86 I got placed for the first time Allegheny Academy. I dealt with them until '87. Then in '88, I went to VisionQuest. During that whole five-year period, I was getting better and better at what I did.

I was an honor roll student when I went to school, but I left school because it didn't coincide with the lifestyle I was living. When I went to VisionQuest in '88, I turned 18 in Vision Quest. It's a program that can keep you until your sentence is done. So, I came home in September of '89. When I came home in '89, the whole world was different. Crack, cocaine was on the scene and everything was changed from that point on.

So I entered the adult system three years after I got out, and that became my pattern in the adult system. I went to prison the first. I got out of Vision Quest in '89. Then, I went to prison for my first time in '92. I got out of prison in '94 and I went back in '97. I got out of prison that time in 2007, and I went back in 2010. It wasn't until 2010 in federal prison that I decided to change my life and to live by a different code.

I found my faith. I started practicing my faith. I was in federal prison for 130 months. During them 130 months, I unlearned all my mischievous behaviors. I reprogram myself to live for God, for Christ. 130 months in federal prison became seminary to me. I came home and I got involved in restorative justice work and that led me to the COC.

Now, I sit on the Homeless Action Board, and I'm being nominated for co-chair for the Reentry Committee for Western PA's COC, and also belong to the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Committee. I volunteered for a whole lot of community organizations. I have a different perspective on homelessness now because what we see today, when you go downtown or anywhere all over the country, it wasn't like that.

Then, it's not just what we see. Like Emma said, it's what we don't see. We don't see the teenagers that's couch hopping. We don't see the women and children that's living in unsafe unstable housing. They're dealing with domestic violence, but they have nowhere else to go. We don't see the people, the women, the single moms that's being evicted, or the landlords trying to kick them out because they reported something that's wrong with the house to section eight. It's so broad now and what's being done.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Thanks for sharing that. Despite, I know you went through a lot from your young age to getting out of prison. How your whole life has just turned around and the perspective, and now you can be such a voice to those younger than you and those experiencing the same thing. So, I'm glad that you've been able to take the hardships and being able to use them for the better and that's awesome, and just developing who you are as an individual.

Emma, I know that you and Walter, there is age difference between the both of you. So I'm curious to hear how you think your perception and the challenges that maybe he was talking about, just how times are different even now or even when he came out of prison. For you being younger, what do you think are some of those different challenges that you may have had versus what he may have experienced just with times changing?

Emma Grim:

Well, I think there's definitely a lot of differences between 1989 and now. I don't think that that gets in the way of us working together in any way. I think as long as we're both willing to learn from each other, that it can come together in a very powerful way.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

I definitely agree with that. I think being able to have the different perspectives, and the different generations, and experiences, you definitely can lean on one another and share just the experiences you've gone through, and just being able to bounce those different perspectives and experiences.

Do you think that as a former homeless youth, I know that Walter just hit on it. I know that you did somewhat too. How the concept of how you guys are saying, "You don't always see the kid

that's couch-surfing, or you don't always see the mom and child that's in an unhealthy environment"? How can you elaborate on how society can do better at listening and allowing those experiencing homelessness or those in unsafe situations to better be heard and seen? Either of you can answer that question.

Emma Grim:

I think what could improve? The first step would be including people with lived experience in the processes of changing systems is the first step. That's why I began advocacy work. That is really what helped me, myself, even on a personal level. In that, my goal is that others will feel seen in the response system that is supposed to help them.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

So I want to piggyback on that real quick, with what you just said about wanting to become an advocate for change. So, how do you see yourself in your role right now? What ways do you best advocate for those experiencing homelessness? Are there specific resources or opportunities you provide? Are you providing different coaching? Can you explain a little bit more about how you're knee-deep in the work?

Emma Grim:

For me, I first became involved with an advocacy group called Advocates for Change. We basically work with the Western Pennsylvania Continuum of Care. Walter was talking about the COC. That's how we know each other. So, I serve as the co-chair of this Youth Action Board. There's probably 10 of us right now, and it's really cool being able to lead such a passionate group.

Alongside from that, I've been able to get a lot of support. So, I was connected with my current job. I work at Westmoreland Community Action. You said earlier that I was a housing coach and this was true. As of the beginning of April, I was actually moved into a navigation role. So, I'm doing regional navigation for any youth that's experiencing homelessness within the 20-county region of Western PA. I would be a point of contact and a person that would help them navigate the system because it's a lot.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

That's awesome. So, you mentioned the COC. So Walter, can you give us some background for our audience who may not understand what COC is? Can you just give a little bit of detail on what that might be and your role?

Walter Harris:

So we were just at a retreat, and we were talking about how we defined ourself. So the Continuum of Care is made up, the Western Pennsylvania COC is the 20 counties in Western Pennsylvania, excluding Allegheny where I live in Erie. Is it Butler or Beaver, Emma?

Emma Grim:

I think that it's Butler but also Somerset.

Walter Harris:

It's Somerset. It's a network of all the social resources in the area that's dealing with homelessness. Well, not all of them, of a lot of the resources. Their mission is to make homelessness rare and non-occurring. Did I say it right?

Emma Grim:

Rare, brief, and non-recurring. Yeah.

Walter Harris:

Rare, brief.

Emma Grim:

I think the goal would be to have all of the services in the same room just so we could create a coordinated plan throughout the community because I think that's really what's needed since it does affect on so many different levels.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah, definitely. Thank you for sharing that so that our audience has a better understanding of just that reference of that COC. Walter, I know in reading your bio, you're very heavily involved in the community. I know that you mentioned some things when you were sharing your story about redeveloping who you are as a person.

Something that really struck me was the Fathers on the Move that you're involved in and just the role that you take in that. Could you just explain some of the day in, day out of that program, what made you want to get involved, what you do within that role?

Walter Harris:

So when I was in federal prison, a program came. I was in a medical facility, disabled. I was diagnosed while in federal prison with muscular dystrophy. In 2013, the disease progressed. I went from walking, to walking with a cane, to walking with a walker. Then in 2018, being confined to a wheelchair. Just giving you a history, I went into prison walking and came out in a wheelchair.

I took a program called Fathers on the Move. It's a mentorship program. The CEO and founder of Fathers on the Move was incarcerated 24, 25 years ago. He walked out of a state prison and like me, he found faith. Faith changed his life and he wanted to give back. So he started a

program to help fathers become better communicators, and to deal with their issues and to set goals, and to create a space where men can really learn how to communicate.

So, the program was instrumental. I was already on that path. I already had a lot of insight to what I wanted to do or what I was called to do when I left prison. Fathers on the Move became a vehicle. So, I took the program. It's two levels. You graduate from the first level. You get a certificate, and you can go on and graduate from the second level and become a certified mentor.

So, I left the prison before I could take the second program. I stayed on a compound, but I went to a medical facility on a compound. Then Covid hit, and then I was released on compassionate release. I reached back out to Bishop Glover. He is a bishop in a church. So he was coming in with the program, which is not a spiritual program. It's not a Christian program or any faith, it's just a program for men.

Then, he was also coming in to the chaplain because he's a bishop. He's a church planter. He became like a surrogate father to me, and I reconnected with him. I got in the program. I graduated from level two. Then, I got trained as a mentor. I do a lot of other stuff with him spiritually. The program in Pittsburgh, I haven't actually launched it, even though I have been mentoring some youth. I do have some people from Pittsburgh that's graduated from the program. I'm trying to bring a team here.

Initially, I was going to take the program to George Junior. We had got the approval. We was just waiting to go take the training. It's a 12-week program. It's a level one, it's a level two. There's a Sisters on the Move. There's a Youth on the Move. Great program. He has a 98% recidivism.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Wow.

Walter Harris:

Meaning only 2% of people who complete the program recidivate, which is great. He was the first program that I've seen ever, the whole time that I was in federal prison where he had 120 people start the class and he graduated 110 people.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

That's remarkable.

Walter Harris:

It was people of all different faiths. Federal prison is a hostile environment. There's a lot of division when it comes to what people believe, far as faith. So, he had people of all different faiths in the same room for the first time. So I am a leader, and a site leader, and a certified

mentor for Fathers on the Move Pittsburgh. I'm slowly integrating that. I want to specifically target the youth, but I can't be selfish because the program ain't just for the youth. That's just-

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Where your heart's at?

Walter Harris:

My heart is for the youth. One reason if I'm not going over, is because when I was growing up in the '80s, there were guard rails in the community. There were lines that didn't get crossed, and it kept things from getting out of control. Well, again, when crack hit, everything changed. Over time, the guard rails got knocked down. Now the violence that you see is a result of my generation chasing crack dreams, spending decades in and out of prison, and the youth growing up without any type of role models or mentorship.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Thank you for sharing that. That sounds like an awesome group. I didn't even realize that there was a Sisters on the Move and a Youth on the Move. So, that's great that they're just targeting all populations. I really do hope that you can get your program up and running, even if you have to be selfish. You can have a passion for youth, but I think it's great that you're working with a diverse group of people.

So Emma, if you could answer this next question. Would there be any specific examples or insights from your own personal experience that have informed your approach to addressing homelessness?

Emma Grim:

So I think my work with the Youth Action Board has been heavily impacted by my work at Westmoreland Community Action, doing direct service and vice versa. I think I'm able to bring what I've learned about the COC, what I've learned about the programs through the Youth Action Board to my job. I'm able to advocate for the youth in our programs on a different level that most other people have seen.

I think it's unique for someone to experience a trauma and then go into that same field. I know other people that do it, but I think it's a good characteristic to have.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah, for sure. I definitely think it takes a special person. Who better to fit a role, who's someone who has actually experienced it and can give that insight and guidance? So, I thank you for that. So we're going to start wrapping up this podcast, but I do want to ask the both of you. If there are any words of wisdom or advice that you would like to share with our audience about advocating, listening, and/or how they can support youth experiencing homelessness in their communities? So, either of you can answer that.

Emma Grim:

Well, I'll go. About advocacy, I think if you have lived experience yourself, doing advocacy work has been so impactful on my life and healing experience that I was able to turn that into something actionable. So, I would always encourage people to do advocacy work, even if you're an ally.

If you're experiencing housing instability right now, I want people to know that there are resources. Even if it's hard to find, there's people out there that can help you, myself being one of those people. If you are a capable adult, you're able to be that resource yourself. Just having social support can mean the world for someone.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Thank you. Walter, what about you? Any words of advice, wisdom, ways people can advocate and contribute to their community?

Walter Harris:

I think just really not judging people by their situation or their background. I remember being at a DEIB meeting in the COC. We were talking about homelessness. A person calling the hotline in the middle of the night because they don't have anywhere to go. They're cold and they're hungry. The person on the other line being real insensitive, and telling them to go here or do this in the morning.

We were thinking about if there was a person with lived experience that was answering them phones, they would be more empathetic and they would have a more timely solution. So just people just being empathetic of when you come across, because when you look at what's going on in this country, it's like something that we didn't really talk about but dealing with lookism.

When I go downtown every day, there's a bunch of homeless people. There's a bunch of people down there with mental health issues. There's a bunch of people that people want to get away from. They label them as dangerous, or hostile, or whatever. They don't know what's going on with these people. If you just talk to some of them, you'll see that they're human. You know what I mean? They're just in a bad situation.

We have people coming into this country, and I'm not against that. That's what makes America great because they'll take people that's leaving hostile environments, but we got people right here in hostile environments that can't get help. You know what I mean? Then, it becomes a competition to who gets the resources. Not only that, when it comes to families, you got people that'll tear families apart.

You got a struggling mother that's on welfare and she's raising these kids by herself. You'll take her kids or her child and give them to somebody else, and give them \$1,500 a month to take care of that child. Well, why not give that mother \$1,500 a month to go with this welfare that she's getting and instead of breaking that family up?

So we just got to really rethink things in this country, how we're doing business, how we're dealing with our own citizens because if you're failing your own citizens, this country is failing at being a great country. You know what I mean? So we just need to rethink that. Everybody at the table just need to rethink how they're doing things and just make it make sense.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Put themselves in someone else's shoes. As hard as that, is to physically understand immensely. Be able to have that in full capacity. Thank you. I really appreciate that. So with that message, we're going to close our episode of I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope.

Thank you Walter and Emma for being with us today. I really greatly appreciate it. Just sharing your experience, wealth of knowledge in the field, and just how you guys are giving back day in and day out. So, I just want to say thank you.

Walter Harris:

You're welcome. Thank you all for having us.

Emma Grim:

Thank you.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Awesome. So to learn more about different organizations that Emma and Walter participate with, please check the resources for this podcast when you go to our podcast website. So, thank you for listening to I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. We hope you enjoyed this episode. Please check back and tune in again.