



## Episode 7 – “Transforming Lives One Cup at a Time: The Story of Monkey and Elephant Cafe” Transcript

### **Melissa Turnpaugh:**

Hello and welcome to our 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.

### **Matt Butensky:**

And I'm your co-host, Matt Butensky, Project Manager with the Center for Schools and Communities. Thanks for joining us for this episode of the I Will Be Your Voice podcast.

On today's episode, we are super excited to have Kamal Marell, executive director of the Monkey and Elephant Cafe in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, here with us to share in this dialogue about the work that he does in Philadelphia County. We want to welcome Kamal to the podcast. Welcome.

### **Kamal Marell:**

Thank you, Matt and Melissa, for having me. I really appreciate it.

### **Matt Butensky:**

Thanks so much for being here. We know you shared with us that you're on paternity leave and you have a newborn at home, so thanks for sharing in this dialogue with us. We are really happy to have you.

### **Kamal Marell:**

Thank you for having me.

### **Matt Butensky:**

I wanted to share that typically, our podcast elevates the stories and amplifies the voices and stories of students experiencing homelessness. But we know the work that you do with Monkey and Elephant Cafe really assists students experiencing foster care, aging out of foster care, but part of our work at the Center for Schools and Communities and with the Department of Education also really focuses on students experiencing foster care, too. We wanted to share more about the Monkey and Elephant Cafe with our listeners.

With that in mind, we'd love for you to tell us more about the Monkey and Elephant Cafe, the story of it, how it was started. If you can just share with us more about your cafe, that would be amazing.

**Kamal Marell:**

Yeah, so the Monkey and the Elephant Cafe is located in the brewery town section of Philadelphia. It's also known as North Philadelphia. And what we do is we employ and support young adults who have aged out of foster care between the ages of 18 and 24.

We have an employment training program, which also supports the young adults, of course, with employment, but then there's another component which involves or includes professional development. And that I think really is what's unique about M&E, which I'd love to call it Monkey and the Elephant the entire time, but I'm just going to say M&E Cafe is what we shorten it to. And that's really the crux of what we do at the cafe in the organization.

We've been around since 2015 at the Brewery Town location. Prior to that, Lisa Nicholas, who was the founder, put together popups throughout the city to gain notoriety for the cafe and to build support throughout the city. And we've just been moving ever since. Since 2015, we just celebrated eight years at that location. And of course, there's an interesting name. I mean, the name is interesting in its own way, and it has an interesting piece because of Lisa's experience doing volunteer work in Africa and supporting young adults who are aging out of foster care and dealing with some of the similar barriers that some of the young adults that we continue to support we're experiencing here.

**Matt Butensky:**

Cool. Yeah, you have a really unique mission at the M&E Cafe. And so why was your founder and why do you do this work in this cafe, and with all the programs that you have, why was it so important for you to establish this type of cafe with this model?

**Kamal Marell:**

Well, I think Lisa was initially interested in retail in a cafe space, and of course based on her experience doing volunteer work, she knew how important it was to merge, to just in some ways, give back to the community and to support those who had impacted her life so much.

And for me, it's really meaningful work because I understand how important that 18 to 24 age range is for young adults when it comes to how focused they can be and what their trajectory looks like for the rest of their lives. I know a lot of us growing up weren't necessarily aware of what we wanted to do at 18, 19, 20 years old, but some of us, along with peers that I have had support networks just to really say, "Hey mom, dad, I don't really know what I'm going to do after college, but can I come sleep on the couch or sleep in my old room for a little bit to really figure it out, to really take some time to actually understand what I want to do with my life?"

What I found is that a lot of the young adults that I've worked with who have aged out of foster care, a lot of those support systems don't necessarily exist for them. And if they do, they're not as strong as those of their peers. And so thinking about what it looks like for a young adult to really navigate that 18 to 24, 18 to 26 time in their lives is really important for us to really provide a support system for them, for us to really tap in and say, "Okay, well you may not know exactly what you want to do, but let's think about things that you may be interested in and what ways can we direct and guide you into those spaces and really have a better understanding about what it looks like to work professionally in those spaces and to conduct yourself as someone that wants to move forward in their lives."

**Matt Butensky:**

Yeah. And we talked earlier about how this podcast has a tie into students experiencing homelessness, and we know that around 40% of children and youth that have been in our foster care system have experienced homelessness. And so we know that there's really a strong tie between those two student populations here, and then when they do age out and exit out of the foster care system, their likelihood of experiencing homelessness is much greater. Can you tell us a little bit about the number of youth that are employed with Monkey and Elephant and how do they find you? How are they connected to your cafe?

**Kamal Marell:**

Yeah, so on average, we employ between 12 to 15 young adults per year. And we would look to grow that, but of course, the cafe can only hold so many staff members and young adults on the floor and whatnot. We receive referrals through AIC in Philadelphia, which is Achieving Independent Center, which is sort of like a support for young adults who've aged out of foster care.

We also make sure that if there are other organizations, [inaudible 00:07:30] LifeSet People's Emergency Center, which is HopePHL now, actually, they rebranded, Statin Manor. There are a few other organizations in the city that really are tuned in and tapped into really supporting young adults who are experiencing homelessness or who have aged out of foster care. And usually there's somewhat of a ... Of course, that intersectionality is there.

And so what we do is pretty much they would apply with us the same way they would with any job. If we do have room on our staff, then we would look to employ them. Some of the organizations that we work with help to supplement some of the costs of wages for the first three months or first six months of their employment. And if it's a good fit for them and it's a good fit for us, then we take them onto our payroll and they continue to work with us as part-time staff learning to be baristas, working behind the register on the POS, just learning everything that you would need to know just to work in a cafe.

And then there's also, of course, the component with the professional development, which takes place at least for an hour per week for the young adults. And the way I guess that we bring them on, we usually have them in cohorts, so between three to four young adults per quarter pretty much.

**Matt Butensky:**

Cool.

**Melissa Turnpough:**

That's awesome. What exactly is your role within the Monkey Elephant Cafe? What are your responsibilities day in and day out as you're working with these youth and just in the organization as a whole?

**Kamal Marell:**

My role, I'm the executive director, which means I'm more so working from an admin standpoint, making sure that the organization, both the organization and the cafe are being run efficiently, making sure that we are looking into specific grants to support the organization and the mission, and of course, making sure that I'm working directly with our leadership team to make sure that the cafe is being run efficiently as well as the programming.

I have four individuals who I work directly with. We have a cafe general manager, we have an assistant manager of the cafe, and then we have, excuse me, a program manager and a program coordinator. And so those two pretty much run the programming piece of it. And so for me, it's more so just making sure that as a team, we are doing our best to uphold the mission on both sides, especially for the young adults because at the end of the day, I think that's what it's really about, and yeah, just making sure that we're doing as much as we can, expanding our footprint in the city, but making sure that we are keeping in line with the mission.

**Melissa Turnpaugh:**

That's huge. And so did you step right into the role as executive director? Did you do any other roles within the organizations before taking on that role? Can you tell us a little more about how you got where you're at?

**Kamal Marell:**

Yeah, so I stepped right in as the executive director. I have about at least a decade plus of working with young adults families here in Philadelphia as an in-home protective case manager straight out of college to an adoptions and service worker, to a CUA case manager, which is a community umbrella agency case manager in Philadelphia, and working in a women and children's shelter in West Philadelphia as program manager for the Center for Parenting Children and Youth Services.

A lot of my work has been directly targeting just this population. I also know myself coming up, I actually became a young foster care parent after my mother passed away right after college, and so having to take on three younger cousins at the age of 17, 15 and 13, and I was 23 at the time, so a lot of that plays into what I do now and understanding the certain barriers that any young adult faces, but especially those young adults who have experience in foster care with limited ... I don't want to say limited resources, but resources that aren't always consistent and supportive as much as they would need them to be.

**Melissa Turnpaugh:**

That's impactful. I can't even imagine taking on three kids at the age of 23, so thanks for sharing that personal story, but also your professional career and just what got you where you are.

You did touch a little bit on just that employment training program. Can you just dive in a little more about maybe what the day in the life of a youth would look like in that role or how long the actual organization has them in this program, if there's qualifications, so on?

**Kamal Marell:**

A day in the life of an M&E staff member, it really depends on where they are, I guess, when they come in, but pretty much just learning from the jump, just learning what it means to be ... Customer service is important of course. We are a retail space, so understanding what that looks like, our standard of customer service is really important because I don't want people to just consider us just as a nonprofit that sells coffee. I want them to understand that we are a cafe and we still do that very well, and we also are there to support young adults, so making sure that they're aware of the standards that we have at M&E from a customer service standpoint, and then just learning the ropes.

A lot of our young adults, this may be their first job that they've been able to take on, so just letting them know about everything from the ordering system that we use. How are we cleaning behind the register? What does it mean between a latte and a mocha latte? Those things, small

things, you know what I mean, in a cafe. Anything I guess that you would consider somebody learning at Starbucks, but I think it's really important because what I want to make sure that they are doing is really engaging in the sort of discourse that happens between them and the customers that they come across. And so that's really important, and so everything from learning to make coffee. We bake pastries in the cafe as well. We also do catering orders, so understanding what that would look like from an ordering standpoint is really important.

And so what it would look like on our standpoint, I mean, on our end, they're employed for up to a year. We guarantee employment for up to a year at least. And so throughout that time, usually it really depends on how available the participant is when it comes to working. We guarantee up to 21 hours, but work is part-time. Of course, some of our young adults might still be in school. Some of them have other jobs that they are attending to. It's important for us to be flexible when it comes to that. But if anything, we want to make sure that they're getting as much as they can in our employment training program.

It's a system that my general manager has created and that the founder also helped to create. And that system really just goes through a training course of what they need to know week one, week two, week three. And of course with week one or week two, that could look different depending on how available they are. That employment training program along with the PD work hand in hand, and usually it's to take around six to nine months for the young adults to graduate. It may take a little longer, it may take a little less, but at least about 100 shifts on the cafe floor for them to graduate from the program.

**Matt Butensky:**

Cool. You still got to have good coffee, right?

**Kamal Marell:**

Definitely.

**Matt Butensky:**

You got to have good coffee. Learning all of those skills around working in a cafe, you mentioned that professional development, some of those other wraparound supports that you provide. Can you talk a little more about what that looks like? What are the needs of your employees that might differ from another cafe and how you help to close those gaps with those needs that your employees have?

**Kamal Marell:**

Well, I think about ... You mentioned one earlier, which is just housing insecurity and Philadelphia, and of course just in the US. Of course, affordable housing is not something that we really, a lot of us have access to. And so just that piece alone is something that we want to make sure that we support them with, so when it comes to of course, housing, how can we assist in making sure that when you leave M&E, you actually have a place to go and rest your head? Because of course, it's really difficult to make sure that you're on time for work if you don't have a place to really go home and get a restful night's sleep.

And so we make sure that we are working directly with realty companies in the area. A lot of them who have started out as informal support partners have become more formalized partners. That's been really important. We also make sure that any sort of housing resources that we have access to, we connect them with. And what's special is that a lot of the partners that some of the young adults have been referred through, for example, AIC, they also have access to

housing support. We just want to make sure that we are doing our best on both ends to support them with that.

So housing of course, and then of course there's any sort of mental health issues that some of the young adults may be working through. It's important that we meet them where they are and address those sorts of needs, any sort of trauma, whether it be a personal or professional. That can look different for everyone. We just want to make sure that we are addressing those things.

When it comes to professional development, we think about what goals we want to achieve the three months, six months, nine months, and that of course looks different for everyone, but we want to make sure that we lay those things out so that they have a plan moving forward. And what that will look like can be different for each person.

But the program team that we do have has been really successful and does a really great job when it comes to meeting the program participants one-on-one. So professional development, sometimes it could be two or three of the young adults at a time together, or it could be just one-on-one if that's what they prefer. We try to be mindful of that, giving them what they need and being intentional about those sorts of services.

Both of the young women on my programming team are amazing. One is a licensed therapist. The other one has at least 15 plus years in human services and working with young adults in different spaces, and so that's really something crucial that we want to make sure.

And then of course, another piece is how literate are they from a financial standpoint. What does that look like? Of course, it's great that they have a job and that they're employed, but what do they have access to when it comes to their financial situations? And if they do have goals, if they want to purchase a home or if they want to rent a new apartment, if they want to put money away in a savings account or if they want to open up a credit card, what does that look like? Are they aware of what's needed and what's not needed?

And so our curriculum helps walk them through that as well. And again, it's meeting them where they are, but it is also addressing those needs before they graduate and move on. And I think that's really what we want to make sure that they are able to do is once they leave M&E, it's not just us wanting to say, "Okay, they worked well at Monkey and the Elephant." We want to make sure that they work well wherever they decide to move on to, whether that's another coffee space or whether it's retail somewhere else or if they want to be an entrepreneur. We want to make sure that they're equipped with the tools that they need to succeed.

**Matt Butensky:**

Yeah, that's amazing. And that curriculum you provide and those staff that you shared provide that curriculum, that's super unique. I mean, most cafes, restaurants, retail stores, they don't have staff that are working with their staff to work on those other really important issues that they have.

And we talked about how that transition to adulthood and that time when youth are exiting foster care and they don't have access to the same resources, that's such a critical time for these youth, and so the fact that you help fill those gaps and are working with them is so incredible.

Also, you shared earlier that you have a human services background, your staff has a human services background, and what a gift for your staff that they can relate with you on a different level of understanding than most places that offer similar products. You're offering coffee and

cafe items, but it's really that deeper level that really is so unique to your model. And we're just so thankful that you are sharing that with us today.

Did you have any follow-up questions? I know we had a few more questions. Did you have something you wanted to say, Melissa?

**Melissa Turnpaugh:**

No, I am just fathomed by the work that you're doing there. I wish we had something here in central PA that was along more of those lines. I know we have some that do support foster care and homeless, but none that provide the whole background training and go in depth and walk alongside and prepare them through a one-year program or more or less depending on their development process. I just think it's needed more around PA and let alone the US.

**Kamal Marell:**

Yeah, no, it is definitely something that I like to think that we're solving an issue. I think a lot of organizations, it's so easy to really put a bandaid over just a lot of the wounds that we see in the city. But for me, I think the best thing is that one, we're not just saying, "Hey, we have a job site for you to go to for the next few months. We have this or that." It's that we're actually employing them, and in that employment, they're getting that sort of trauma-informed support that they need, which is really crucial because of course, as you both know, working in this space, and there's a range when it comes to what it means to be involved with foster care system and what it means to, of course, experience homelessness.

I mean, it could be couch-surfing, it could be, "I have never really had a place to live at all," you know what I mean, or it could be, "I'm unsure." There's a huge range when it comes to their experience. And I think what's important is that being able to identify one of the issues that we see just plague some of the young adults so much, which is really employment, and I think what healthy employment. I think we're not a chain restaurant. We're not like some of the coffee spaces in the area that just sell coffee. I think it's really important for retailers and business owners to actually understand who they're bringing on and finding a better way to connect with them, because I think that makes the experience that much more important and impactful at the end of the day.

And so while it's not everyone's responsibility, I think if anything, it's on individuals like us to really help to get that point across. And so I think the last piece is that I also find it important that not only are we preparing the young adults to move on and go into other spaces and work for other people or for themselves, I also want to make sure that I'm doing my best to prepare those organizations to understand the importance of who they're bringing on and to be able to not adjust, but just to adapt and have empathy, because that's really important.

**Matt Butensky:**

Yeah. And you speaking about that makes me wonder about, have you found that your model helps with your employee's retention rate, your employee's performance in general during the workday compared to maybe another cafe that doesn't offer the type of wraparound supports that you do? Do you have any insight on that?

**Kamal Marell:**

I think one thing I can say is that you see how meaningful your engagement can be when it comes to retaining those employees on a regular basis. As opposed to just saying, "Hey, three strikes and you're out," we're a bit more understanding, of course. And the staff that we have,

they understand that and they go above and beyond when it comes to the work not only at the cafe, but when it comes to professional development.

But they also return. A lot of them come back and of course, even after they graduate or if they decide to move on, they can all come back and get a staff meal. They can all participate in alumni events after. Of course, if they left and want to come back and figure, there might be an opportunity for them to work and we have space. That's something that we also do. I think it's important that we highlight that because I think the work is the work that we're doing, it's definitely making waves and they actually are receptive to it when it's done the right way.

**Matt Butensky:**

Cool. Thanks for sharing that.

And now a short message.

Registration is now open for the 2023 Paving the Way to Educational Success Conference. The conference is a unique learning opportunity to support children and youth experiencing homelessness and students experiencing foster care. This year, we have over 40 presenters from organizations including the Peel Center, HopePHL, the American Bar Association, the National Network for Youth, Youth Collaboratory, Voce, Kids Voice, the Homeless Children's Education Fund, Thriving University, and the Fred Rogers Institute.

Join us in Mars, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh, October 11th through 13th. For more information, visit [centerforschoolsandcommunities.org](http://centerforschoolsandcommunities.org) and find our events tab. We hope you can attend.

We wanted to provide another question around how the community or others can support your cafe or our listeners can support transition aged youth in general. How can we support the cafe in your community more broadly? A lot of our listeners are coming from all around Pennsylvania and outside of Pennsylvania. How can we support transition aged youth? So kind of a two-part question.

**Kamal Marell:**

Yeah. I mean, for the cafe, we have a few different opportunities. Of course, we have a donate button directly on the website for those who are interested in supporting from a financial standpoint. We have a few different campaigns that we run throughout the year. Our Giving Tuesday is huge of course, and there's an end of year campaign directly following the Giving Tuesday the month of December. And then we have a huge fundraiser that we have in May, which is Foster Care Awareness month. And so there are opportunities to support in all of those. And we have those on our website as well as on our social media handles as well.

I also think there are opportunities from ... It doesn't always have to be financial. At the end of the day, I always think that it's just as important to support through just engagement networking partnerships. There are organizations or individuals out there who think that they have a calling and think that it's important enough for them to say, "Hey, I might not be able to give, but I know an individual who may be able to support through financial literacy classes," or, "I know someone who may be able to offer you a leadership spot in a leadership summit coming up for one of your young adults," or, "Hey, I know someone who's" ... Those things are really just supportive.

I think if anything, not only is the employment piece important, but I think all of us can really understand none of us got here on our own. I think from a networking standpoint, internships



and mentorships, especially with the younger generation, I think it's really important for them to understand how crucial those things are to really be able to network, really be able to say, "Okay, I have a mentor that I can really give a call and say, 'Hey, I'm a little bit confused about what to do. What does this look like? How can I support in that way?'" I think that's really important. All those things are ... If somebody just wants to reach out to me directly, has a thought or an idea or an idea or an opportunity that they want to run by me, I'm more than willing to listen.

When I think about aged young adults who've aged out of foster care, I think if anything is just really being involved. I think there are a lot of organizations that do great things, not only in Philadelphia but throughout Pennsylvania that could really impact what the experience of young adults between 18 ... We work directly with 18 to 24, but I think it's an extended adolescence between 18 and 26.

And so finding ways to be what those young adults need, and similar, what you probably needed growing up, think about that. Think if you needed a mentor. How can I give? Think about if you need someone to say, "Okay, well, we may not need backpacks so much, but what do young adults need at that age to really thrive?" And talking to them is really important, finding a way and not saying like, "Okay, well, they're the issue. This is what I see on the news and I have to stay away from them." You learn a lot when you actually sit down and have a one-on-one conversation with some of the young adults that we work with and really finding out what their needs are and where they can be supported.

It's everything from finding things on Instagram or finding local organizations that are doing great things and really taking time and engagement. It doesn't always have to be through the dollars. I think if anything, building relationships are just as important for young adults.

**Matt Butensky:**

Awesome. Thank you. We also have a statewide campaign for National Foster Care Month in May, and we would love to highlight M&E Cafe in some way.

**Kamal Marell:**

Nice.

**Matt Butensky:**

We'll definitely reach out again and see how we can expand all of our footprints in this work because it's super important. And I think as you said, the relationships are what matter at the end of the day, so thanks for sharing that.

**Kamal Marell:**

Definitely.

**Melissa Turnpaugh:**

To piggyback, I think two important words you said were support and connection, and I used to do direct work specifically with youth experiencing homelessness between 16 and 24. And at the end of the day, you're right, having the conversation means more than providing them a piece of a snack or a toiletry or anything because they don't have the support and connections anywhere else until they're in your program or they have someone that's going to actually sit

down and listen. Instead of listening to respond, you're literally just listening. I thank you for echoing that.

But yeah, I just really want to thank you for being with us today and just for sharing your heart professionally and personally, and just the work that you guys are doing and just being able to learn about the impact that you guys are making on the lives of former foster youth in Philadelphia. Is there anything else that you would want to share with us, whether it's activities or projects? I know you mentioned a couple of the different campaigns going on, but anything that might be important for our listeners to be aware about?

**Kamal Marell:**

Just to pay attention to our Instagram. We have a lot of different events for the community. I think it's important that ... It's for the young adults we serve, but it's also crucial to open ourselves up to make sure that we're a hub for the community. I think a lot of conversations and important discourse take place over coffee and really, in certain communities, that's not really something that we learn until later on in life or some just don't. We may not be aware of it, but it's important to really create opportunities and spaces for that discourse to happen.

We have First Friday art shows, which we actually have one on the 8th of September coming up for one of our young adults who's currently a participant who will be doing an art show along with poetry that'll accompany that art. And so that art will be on the walls being displayed for the next few months. And so we have different opportunities for the community to be engaged.

And as far as updates, I think it's just a matter of just being on the lookout. And I think one more piece that I do want to add, while we're in this space, I think it's important that we create platforms for young adults to learn skills, to have their own agency and not to be the ones to we can advocate with them as opposed to for them. I think it's important, really important. I think that's one of the things that helps to solve a lot of the issues is giving them the opportunity and skills to experience that agency and to have access to that. That's just the last piece. I wanted to drop that.

**Melissa Turnpaugh:**

That's awesome. Thank you. That's so important for sure.

**Matt Butensky:**

What's your Instagram handle?

**Kamal Marell:**

M and E, so M-A-N-D-E, Cafe, at Instagram or not at Instagram.

**Matt Butensky:**

We got it.

**Melissa Turnpaugh:**

We know what you mean.

**Matt Butensky:**

We got it. Awesome. Thank you. Well, I love your mission. We love your mission. We also love coffee.

**Melissa Turnpaugh:**

Yes.

**Matt Butensky:**

Thank you for sharing that.

**Kamal Marell:**

If you guys are in town, if you're ever in town, stop through.

**Matt Butensky:**

We absolutely ... We have a couple of visits to Philadelphia this fall, and so we will definitely be stopping in the cafe to check it out and have some good coffee and just be there. Thank you so much. Thanks for being with us again.

**Kamal Marell:**

Yeah, thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it.

**Matt Butensky:**

Awesome. Well, with that, we're going to close our episode of I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. Thank you again for listening and for joining this dialogue and conversation today, Kamal. We really appreciate it.

To learn more about the programs and services of The Monkey and the Elephant, please visit [www.themonkeyandtheelephant.org](http://www.themonkeyandtheelephant.org). Thank you for listening to I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. We hope you enjoyed our episode today. Please check back and tune in again.