



Episode 9 – “Voices of Survival and Resilience: A Conversation with Author Rene Denfeld”

**Recorded at 2023 Paving the Way Conference, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Transcript**

Matt Butensky:

Hi, and welcome to this special episode of I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. In today's special episode, we are talking with Rene Denfeld, the award-winning author, speaker, and justice worker, and also a keynote speaker at our 2023 Paving the Way to Educational Success Conference.

Rene is the author of acclaimed novels, *The Child Finder*, *The Enchanted*, *The Butterfly Girl*, and the forthcoming *Sleeping Giants*. Her literary thrillers explore themes of survival, resiliency, and redemption. Rene was the chief investigator at a public defender's office and has worked on hundreds of cases, including death row exonerations, and helping rape trafficking victims. In addition to her work, Rene has been a foster adoptive parent for more than 25 years.

It was so cool to speak with Rene right after she delivered our keynote address at our 2023 conference near Pittsburgh, and we talk about her novels and what inspired her work, and importantly, how to nurture healing in the midst of trauma.

So with that, let's hear from Rene Denfeld, author of *The Butterfly Girl*. We hope you enjoy today's episode.

Well, hi, and welcome to our podcast, I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. We are live at the 2023 Paving the Way to Educational Success Conference here near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. And I have the pleasure of having a podcast today with our keynote speaker, Rene Denfeld, who is the author of *The Butterfly Girl*, among many other things which we are going to talk a little bit more about today.

I want to welcome Rene to our podcast. Thanks for being here.

Rene Denfeld:

Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure.

Matt Butensky:

Is this your first time in Pittsburgh?

Rene Denfeld:

I was here years ago, but honestly I don't really remember it.

Matt Butensky:

Okay.

Rene Denfeld:

Yeah. I was excited at the idea of coming out here.

Matt Butensky:

So you traveled from where?

Rene Denfeld:

Portland, Oregon.

Matt Butensky:

Okay. What are some similarities or differences that you've noticed in just your one day here?

Rene Denfeld:

My one day here.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah.

Rene Denfeld:

The fall colors. It's actually my favorite time of the year, and we're just really getting into the fall colors in Oregon, and same here. Yeah, There's also a very similar kind of rural working-class kind of vibe. Portland, Oregon doesn't have that as much anymore, but when I was growing up, it was a very kind of sleepy, blue-collar town with a lot of farms and rural stuff on the outskirts. Yeah. It's beautiful here.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah, we're just starting to get fall color. It's just mid-October. Yeah, favorite time of year for me.

Rene Denfeld:

Gorgeous.

Matt Butensky:

We are just coming out of your keynote address at the Paving the Way Conference, but we wanted to tell our listeners of the podcast who couldn't make it, if you could just tell us a little bit about yourself and about the novels that you've written. We'd love to hear about it.

Rene Denfeld:

Sure. I came in to talk primarily about one of my novels called The Butterfly Girl, which centers on a young girl named Celia who is homeless and living on the streets of Portland, Oregon. The novel is very much inspired by my own life experiences, as I was homeless as a young teenager. This was some years ago. Things are different now, but there's always similarities in the struggle.

Like a lot of the children you help, I come from a background with a lot of poverty and trauma. Today, in addition to other jobs, I am also a longtime foster and adoptive parent. So, so much of my life's work, my creativity, the stories I tell, as well as my actual day jobs, are centered around issues such as homelessness and children in foster care.

I came in today to talk about the book and how I was inspired by my own experiences, as well as to share some of the things I've learned from my own history, as well as my own work and experiences as a parent about trauma and how we look at it and how we can help children that have experienced.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. Yeah. When did you begin to start writing? What inspired you to write stories and get into being an author, and when did you start?

Rene Denfeld:

Well, as a little girl, I loved books. I've been a voracious reader since the time I was little, and it was always kind of my escape and my sanctuary, and I just entered into the world of books. In so many ways, stories saved my life because I just built an elaborate fantasy world, and when my life was very traumatic as it often was, I would escape into this fantasy world.

I also found just a lot of hope in stories and hope in books. I remember as a child reading books and realizing people had different lives than mine, kind of realizing there's this whole world out there that I could be part of. My life doesn't have to end up like the people I see and know on a personal level every day.

I spent a lot of time as a child reading and I always dreamed of being a writer, but I really felt like people from my background couldn't become writers. I had this idea that you had to have fancy degrees and have a certain kind of background, which I think is a very common myth that's out there. Nowadays, you meet a lot of people who think you have to have an MFA, for instance, to be a writer. And I think if you can afford it, and it's a possibility for you, and you want to do it, then by all means go for it. But I think it's also very much the case that we need to have more writers and voices from marginalized backgrounds, and a lot of people from marginalized backgrounds don't have the degrees, and I think our voices count too, and our voices and stories need to be told.

Long story short, I'd always wanted to be a writer. After I had been homeless and got off the streets, I got a work permit when I was 15, I was able to get a job at a McDonald's, and was able to get a little studio apartment. One of the differences between then and now is at that time, housing was much cheaper. One of the first things I did is I went and bought this busted up old black typewriter from a thrift store. I'll never forget it had a missing R key. So when you try to type something on this typewriter, the R didn't work, and I'd have to go and fill in the letter. I would actually write poems and I would leave them around bus stops and places on the streets for my old street friends.

I always wrote. I wrote a lot. I wrote a lot of poems and short stories. But it took me literally decades to feel like I had the right to show them to other people, that other people might actually want to hear my stories. And so I didn't actually end up publishing my first novel until I was in my 40s. It took that long to kind of heal the trauma that I'd experienced and get to the place where I felt like I could put myself out there in the world and say, "Here's the story I wrote."

The miracle was that novel was sold and published and won a bunch of very fancy awards. And wow. It was just an amazing experience for me coming from where I did to have that happen.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. The Butterfly Girl was your first book?

Rene Denfeld:

The Enchanted was-

Matt Butensky:

The Enchanted was your first book, okay.

Rene Denfeld:

The Enchanted was actually my first, and then I wrote The Child Finder, which was a big hit, and then The Butterfly Girl was the third novel.

Matt Butensky:

Okay. You actually shared earlier today about imagination and that imagination is a really powerful coping mechanism. And so hearing you speak about your journey from being inspired to write and how it was so important, it's interesting to hear that perspective. Did you want to say anything else about your message today about imagination being so important for these students?

Rene Denfeld:

Yeah, sure. It's a very special topic for me. I talked today about how I think we talk a lot about resiliency in our culture. I'm not always sure what that's supposed to mean. For me, imagination is the true resiliency. Because when a child has an imagination, they can imagine anything. They can imagine a different future for themselves. They can imagine what would it be like if I went to college? Or, what would my life be like if I wasn't a foster kid? What would my life be like if I wasn't homeless? When you're able to imagine these things, I think this kind of real miracle starts to happen. One is that in our brains actually, when we imagine something, it becomes real. In a sense, it can be part of what we feel is our destiny.

As a child, I would imagine a lot of things, and a lot of them were very fantasy-oriented, but they also kind of filled me with a sense of hope and determination because if in my fantasy imagination I was a warrior for instance, it would fill me with a sense of power.

When we encourage imagination in children, we give them this access to all these tools. We give them access to these emotions and feelings. We also, I think, give them a right in a sense. They start feeling like I have a right to exist. If I imagine a different future... One thing that naturally happens is say, you imagine I can imagine myself going to college. You start making those steps that are necessary. You can imagine the steps.

So I think just thinking imagination is this kind of powerful and often overlooked tool. And when you give a child that, you are basically equipping them to figure out their own destiny, and you're equipping them to create a future for themselves. Nobody can take that away from them. Once you have an imagination, it's like riding the proverbial bike. It doesn't go away. You always know how to use it.

Matt Butensky:

That's amazing. I'm wondering, and you sort of alluded to this, you spoke about how your novels were inspired by your life experiences. Is there a reason why you decided to keep those topics in your books and not write about something completely different? Was it hard for you to relive some of those experiences because they're in your writing? So if you can share anything about that.

Rene Denfeld:

Yeah, I think you've touched upon something very important, and it goes with the imagination piece. I find writing to be very therapeutic and healing. I think it's very helpful for survivors to write. When I'm working with children from foster care or people that are homeless, or anybody with a very traumatized background, I really do encourage them to write. You will hear that about journaling, for instance.

Actually, I think creative writing can be very healing, and it's something that can be another kind of tool in our toolkit. Because in writing things through the lens of fiction, you can take something that's actually happened to you, or it could be something you're afraid of happening to you or any of these experiences you've had, but when you're writing fiction, you can change the outcome. I feel that often by writing my novels, I'm changing the outcome of some stories.

For instance, my first novel, *The Enchanted*, part of that was very transformative and healing for me in that it's actually narrated by a person on death row. And for many years, that's been my day work. I work for the public defenders, and I work with people in prison, which is also very healing. It's healing to help others. When we help others, we're changing their story for the better, and we show up kind of as the adult that we needed to have in our lives. We may not have had that adult, but now we can show up as that adult. When I wrote that story, the outcome, I could change the ending.

When you're writing creatively, you can write about things that were very sorrowful or very hurtful for you. I think this works across the board. Like I say, somebody's going through a bad divorce, through creative writing, you can change the story, and maybe part of what you're doing is giving healing and redemption to the person in this story that's experiencing the divorce.

I think that's why I chose fiction instead of memoir, because I get to choose the ending. Also, I like fiction. I find fiction is a way for us to learn about each other that's very gentle. People love to read novels, they like to read fiction, so through a novel, they can learn about an issue like youth homelessness or people on death row or kids in foster care. They can learn about it in a way that's interesting to them, in a kind of a gentle introduction.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah, that's really insightful. I was wondering about, you shared that you're a foster adoptive parent, and nationally we have a lot of children youth in foster care. I think it's over 400,000, and the number of foster parents that are licensed is much, much, much, much, much lower than that. It's something I think in the 200,000 range. Why was that important to you to be a foster parent and go on that journey?

Rene Denfeld:

When I was in my 20s, I knew I wanted to have kids, but I'll be honest, the idea of a pregnancy never had any appeal to me. It sounded horribly painful.

Matt Butensky:

Same. I don't have that option, of course.

Rene Denfeld:

But if you did, would you want to do it?

Matt Butensky:

Probably not. Yeah.

Rene Denfeld:

Yeah. It felt like, gosh, that just sounds painful.

I knew from my background, I knew there were a lot of children in foster care, and I knew that their trauma histories wouldn't frighten me. To me, it was kind of funny. I was in my early 20s actually, when I decided this, and it made perfect sense to me. I thought, "There's children that need homes and I want to be a mom, how more perfect could this be?" I do remember telling some of my friends, who had more privileged backgrounds, about this, and I'll never forget the horror and sometimes consternation that people responded. I mean, there were a lot of people that responded like, "Oh my gosh, you shouldn't do that." Or, "Are you sure you want to do that?" I kind of ran smack-dab into all these cultural biases about kids from foster care, which didn't stop me, of course.

I think part of it was it's really important not to have some sort of savior model. I don't think that really motivated me. I thought, "I'm not phased by the histories these kids have." And maybe by adopting foster care, there was also a part of me that was telling myself, "You deserve a better childhood too." We all do.

The big surprise of the journey was, I talked about this today, was realizing I was giving myself the childhood that I never had. It wasn't something I was expecting, but by giving my children these love-filled, safe, solid, stable lives with plenty of therapy and giving them the help they needed and the love they needed, I ended up kind of giving it to myself. And that was a really a wonderful full circle moment to me.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. That's something one of our speakers, and we talk about, is that these students, they're not bad kids. They need support to heal. That's something that's always stuck with me that I keep in mind.

Rene Denfeld:

Yeah. Yeah, unfortunately, societally, I think there's a lot of racism and classism that goes into the stigmas about children from foster care. The truth is, we live in a very traumatizing society, and a lot of us are traumatized, and giving people help shouldn't be that hard. It's actually not. If the systems are in place, it's not that hard to give people help.

Matt Butensky:

It's about connection and relationships. We talk about the power of ordinary moments, and it could just be that moment that helps influence the future for kids.

Rene Denfeld:

I think that's one thing that really resonates with me because when I was a little kid, there were moments where a teacher would do something, encourage my writing, or some little moments, ordinary people, ordinary teachers. They didn't know that those little, tiny moments had a profound impact on me and would kind of carry me forward. I can look back now and think that teacher saved my life when I was in eighth grade or whatever, and they never knew that. I think we have just a really profound ability to impact each other in just very small ways that aren't actually that small. Yeah.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. I wanted to wrap up by asking you a little bit about your next book, which we talked about between us, about *Sleeping Giants*. But can you tell us a little bit more about what we can expect from your next novel?

Rene Denfeld:

Sure. My next novel is called *Sleeping Giants*. It comes out in March, Spring, from Harper Collins. I'm very excited about it. It's a little bit of a departure. It's not a story that's related to the other books I've written. Interestingly enough for your listeners, it's partially set in a youth center, a child center on the Oregon coast, kind of a glorified group home. Basically, we still have orphanages in this country. We just call them by different names.

There's a young boy named Dennis who lives in this place, who ends up going missing. It's a mystery and a thriller, a literary mystery and literary thriller, I guess I would call it. It's very much a story about how far we will go to find a sense of family. I think that's something a lot of us relate to, not just children from foster care or those of us from traumatized families that end up homeless, but we all so desperately want to feel like we belong somewhere, and that's what *Sleeping Giants* is about.

It's also about something else that I've learned a lot in my justice work and in my life, and that's about how much harm is committed by people who think they're doing the right thing. I really wanted to explore that because I think a lot of times when we're talking about bad things that happen in our society, we kind of want to turn the perpetrators into the other. But a lot of harm in our society is committed by people who at the time think they're doing the right thing. And how much we can learn by slowing down and asking the questions and being thoughtful and not rushing into cures or rushing into answers, which applies not just to children in foster care, but a lot of things politically and globally. Yeah.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. Well, I really want to thank you for having this dialogue and conversation with me today, and also for coming to Pennsylvania for the conference here.

What is something you're looking forward to in the rest of 2023 and into 2024?

Rene Denfeld:

Oh my gosh.

Matt Butensky:

I guess your new book is one of them.

Rene Denfeld:

My new book is one of them. Actually, I have a new grandbaby. My first grandbaby was born a couple of months ago; my oldest son. My kids are all doing amazing. I'm just so proud of them. I have to admit, I'm loving the grandma thing. So I'm looking forward to more of the grandparenting. I'm kind of a simple person. I like the homebody stuff. Yeah.

Matt Butensky:

That's awesome.

Rene Denfeld:

Yeah, so thank you for having me. You guys are all doing just great work. For the people that are listening, I just want to thank them too for all those little moments that they're giving children. You're not going to ever see the outcome, but it's there, and it means something and it matters. So thank you.

Matt Butensky:

Thank you, Rene.

Rene Denfeld:

Thank you.

Matt Butensky:

So with that, we are closing this episode of I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. Thank you for listening and tune back again for our next episode.