

[00:00:01.390] - Lisa Qualls

Welcome to the Adoption Connection podcast, where we offer resources to equip you and stories to inspire you on your adoption journey. I'm Lisa Qualls.

[00:00:10.310] - Melissa Corkum

And this is Melissa Corkum. Don't worry, we get it, and we're here for you.

[00:00:18.930] - Lisa Qualls

This week, we're bringing you a recording from a recent workshop that took place in the Village.

[00:00:24.810] - Melissa Corkum

In case you haven't heard about it, the Village is our membership community where you can find support and training to meet your needs. For more information, head to theadoptionconnection.com/village.

[00:00:35.490] - Lisa Qualls

We hope you enjoyed the workshop.

[00:00:41.590] - Melissa Corkum

Jamie, do you want to go ahead and just give a brief introduction to the folks listening?

[00:00:46.450] - Jamie Engel

Yeah, absolutely. Hi, everyone. Thank you so much for having me here. I'm going through it right now. I have worked in the field of addiction for the last 15 years, and I have worked with many, many people. And over the last three and a half years in particular, I opened a transitional Silver Living residence here in Indianapolis, and one of my first long term residents and active alumni passed away on Friday night. And I was there. And so I'm super raw, and there's a lot going on, and I couldn't think of something better to do. I couldn't think of really anything better to do than talk about this disease and how it affects adoptees in particular. And I'm always happy to talk about my own personal experience and where I came from and how I ended up where I am. The brief synopsis on that is that I am from Minneapolis, Minnesota. I was adopted when I was about six weeks old. For the six weeks prior to that, I had lived with a foster, I was adopted into a wonderful family, very loving, very supportive. I really don't know that I was in a place to want for anything material or even emotionally from them. A lot of adoptees can relate to, even with all of that with all the positive love and care and support I had around me, there was always the lingering sense of abandonment, of a lack of self worth, a lack of identity, not knowing who I was, not knowing how I was supposed to be or show up, how I didn't fit in the religious community that I was adopted into, how I didn't fit in the school system that I went to, how I didn't know how to interact with people and express affection. I was a really physical person in the sense of, like, I didn't know how badly I needed to make contact with people, hug people, hold hands with people, to express how much a relationship would mean to me. And a lot of it came out in adverse ways. A lot of my friends with love jokingly say I was always really tended to be a violent kid. And it wasn't like really, truly intentional violence. It would be, I would see Dave or Brian or Scott or whoever, and the first thing that I would do is I would punch them because I was so excited and I had so much energy and I didn't know how to give it away to people and that kind of persisted through growing up. I got exposed to the concept of drugs and alcohol really early, like I think most people did. I'm 41 so it was kind of the birth of the Dare program when I was in 2nd 3rd grade and it was regularly introduced to classes and so I had drawn in my head of what I was supposed to do if I encountered something. And being a really fear driven child, I kind of jumped on the train and followed it for a while until I was in about 9th grade and I had a couple of friends who presented an opportunity and an experience that they had had with using drugs and alcohol that really sounded appealing. That spoke to my need to feel different, to feel accepted, to find my way into a group. And I think that that was probably at the beginning what hooked me the most. If you've ever had an opportunity to speak to people in recovery, most often the feeling that we talk about is that we feel like we've come home, like we've found our place, we've found our way to fit in and to connect. And all of those underlying feelings that prevented us from connecting with people are magically pulled off like a veil. And I think for me and for my other adoptees that I know and have relationships with and work with who also have some version of a substance use disorder, we all talk about how

the concept of coming home felt even more significant to us. Like in the process of losing ourselves throughout the course of growing up we felt like there was a place where we could go where it just felt okay. It was okay to be me, even though I had no idea what that meant. And being able to draw on experiences that I had prior to using in order to I guess morph into who I wanted people to see me as became one of my greatest, it became one of my greatest tools to help hide my addiction from everybody else and it became a game because it was something that I was already good at. And life progressed, addiction progressed and I kept trying to fill that void back in because like so many people talk about after the first time you use it, you chase it, you chase the feeling, you chase the high, you chase the escape that brought you to comfort in the first place. And it works as a solution for a really long time until it doesn't anymore. It doesn't matter how much booze you add or how many drugs you add and eventually it catches up with you. And through my work over the years and my experience, I found that it takes consequence to motivate us to make change. And it took quite a bit of them for me to make that change that I didn't get sober until I was 24. I tried a number of times before that. I had been through treatment a number of times. And I think a lot of my underlying trauma that I was unwilling to look at and unwilling to work on were the driving factors and why I couldn't grasp the concept of sobriety. And I specifically remember the last time being in treatment and working with a therapist who had actually had experience working with adoptees a lot and him taking the opportunity to reframe the narrative that I'd been telling myself from the time, any time that I could remember and changing that experience from the first thing in life that happened to me was I was given up on. And I find out much later in my story much later in life that I actually had information that my parents held that they were ready to give to me at any given point in time to let me know and find out more of the reasoning why my birth mother chose to place me up for adoption. But it didn't matter because the narrative that I told myself was that I didn't have that information. So my story that I told myself became the only truth that I know. And so he said to me, have you ever stopped to consider, even for a moment, that even if your entire narrative that you're telling yourself is true, which more likely than not, is it's not the truth, it's different. It's not this exact story that you've told yourself. Have you ever stopped to think about that? Through this process of adoption, there is another family in your life, a family that wanted you, that wanted to accept you and take you in and love you and care for you. And to them, you were the most important thing and you had more worth and more value to them than anything that they had ever experienced. And without minimizing my own experience with the process of relinquishment, I think it helped open my eyes to the opportunity to look at life differently and say, Maybe I can rewrite my narrative. Maybe I can look at this differently. Maybe I can stop to say that all of these expectations that I had set and had about who my birth family was and who my parents were and who I was could be different. And I thought, well, that solves that. It's all fixed now, move on, don't have to deal with that anymore, solution found. And it took until I was 33 and getting married and looking around my family to be that I started recognizing things like, I wonder what my kid might look like if I had a kid. I wonder if I have my laugh of my dad or my mom. I wonder where this attitude that I have originates from. And I think without shifting that narrative earlier, I don't know that I would have even been comfortable asking myself those questions and allowing myself the space that I needed to explore that topic. And my search began. And I have had many ups and downs through that process. I am not in any relationship with my birth family, not for lack of trying. Additional trauma has risen through that process, but I've been given opportunity and resources to be able to do that work. And what I focus my life on today is providing that same opportunity and those same resources to anybody that I can help guide in the process to rewriting their own narrative and finding space to grow and to change and to do the deeper work and look at our developmental trauma, our family of origin, our early childhood, and how those experiences have shaped us into who we are and how we make decisions in our lives today. Through the years in the field, I've done a lot of they call them salons and workshops and any number of other groups with other adoptees and adopted parents and birth parents, people in the triad who work in the field, who interact with clients and families every single day to help guide them to any type of help that we can make available. And there are a lot of options. There is a lot of help, but it is really hard to find. And more often than not, because this is such an under identified community in the world of treatment, often times even the best intentions to try to help people on the adoption triad go extremely wrong. And I like to use this example that my friend Thomas Hern brought up to me many years ago, and he works at one of the programs that really looks at a lot at attachment. And he says he used to ask people if somebody came to treatment and they were adopted, what would you do with an adoptee? And they say something to the effect of, oh, well, Susan's sister's, cousin's, brother was adopted, so she knows all

about that. So we give all of our adoptees to her. And I won't go as far as to say it paralyzes me, but it definitely shakes me to my core to know that it is such an easily written off piece of somebody's life that is undervalued for the weight that it carries in shaping identity. And through College, that was kind of my focus was looking at the adolescent and young adult problem of identity. And how do we identify, how do we connect ourselves to specific groups through our race, our religion, our sexuality, our sexual orientation, through culture, through sports, through drugs, through whatever it is? And then there's the conversation of adoptees and how easy it is to don a new cloak in every group that they choose to set into step into and how they'll tell you they feel perfectly comfortable here and perfectly comfortable there, while internally it's just enough to make them hold strong until the next group that they meet up with. We do have a lot of questions, and I tend to be a talker, so I'm going to pass it back to Melissa and hopefully structure this conversation a little bit more moving forward.

[00:15:54.990] - Melissa Corkum

I think there were so many nuggets even just in that answer, Jamie. So thank you for that. We find that the folks in our community are just some of the best, and they would do pretty much anything for their kids. And a lot of them are just wondering what anything is. And so as you look back and think about your narrative and your story and that need to belong, was there something that you wish your parents had done that you think would have helped you be at less risk of using substances to kind of fill that gap?

[00:16:30.690] - Jamie Engel

So that's a really good question, and it's a really hard answer. I personally believe that this is one of the harder questions that was posed because I'm a parent now and parental instinct is to shelter and protect our kids from being exposed to anything that may harm them when the reality is that they're going to be exposed to this no matter what we do. So my mom was an alternative school teacher, so she had a lot of interactions with a lot of kids that did not fit into societal norms. And there were a lot of people who struggled with addiction and behavioral issues in those groups. And, you know, she tried to do the best she could with the information that she had. And I try to tell families that all the time is that none of us are given a handbook. None of us know how to handle every situation that pops up. We do the best that we can and we move forward and that no matter what, all we can do is work with information that's been presented to us. And so from this seat now, if I were to be able to have a conversation with my parents about how to brace the topic, how to hold space to have conversation about it, I think that I would probably have asked them to be more forgiving to the questions that I had, to be, I guess, the best word is less abrasive with some of the horror stories that they've heard and tales about what it can do and where it can take me. It's important to talk about it. It's important to recognize, and it's almost more important to ask questions as to why do you think that this is coming up for you? What about it interests you? How is it being talked about among your friends? What does that conversation feel like? A topic that comes up over and over again in every aspect of the work that I do is what is the best way to have any type of conversation around it and honestly telling Melissa right before we hopped on with everybody else, I have done so much of my own work, and I think so much of myself has kind of now been shaped conversationally through how Renee Brown has put it in speaking and holding space lens that my language becomes that. So I guess I want to give credit to her for that. But the idea that it's our job to hold space for our loved ones, right. It's the number one tool that we have to keep people engaged. And holding space is going to look different in every family. And that it's not only important to do that listening while we hold space, but acknowledge where they're at and what they're feeling, because regardless of how we see it like this is the truth that they know and it's the truth that they understand. Another line that always creeps into my head is that we need to call on our courage to be truly empathetic in the moments where we feel the most exposed, the most scared. Because one of the biggest driving factors that I see laced through every relinquishment story, be it birth mother, adopted parent, adoptee, is this threat of shame for who we are, for what we did, for how we can't show up how we're not enough. And trying to rework the idea of shame, which is I am bad into a more palatable feeling of even guilt, because I genuinely believe guilt is and can be a really healthy tool to help guide us in our process of discovering our morality. And I guess that answer comes more from adoptee standpoint, obviously, than anybody else, because we do things, we make choices, we're trying to find our way, we're trying to find out who we are and how we fit in, and we're going to get a lot of things wrong. Right, we're going to get a lot of things wrong. And knowing that it's okay to be wrong and to make mistakes and

to try to help guide through what that mistake looks like is the best tools, I think, to minimize the risk. I think one of the hardest pills to swallow, sorry, is that the risk is going to be there no matter what. And I think it's being willing to know that no matter what you do, no matter what I do, we're not going to be able to wall them off from life happening and coming at them. And I think building safe space, space where children are comfortable enough to come and bring to you the experiences that they're having is the most important. And it's not that my parents didn't do it. It's just like the rest of us, they are so shaped by their own experiences that they almost didn't necessarily leave enough room for mine to exist.

[00:22:46.660] - Melissa Corkum

Yes. What I hear you saying is that when our kids come home and are like, Johnny had some pot in his backpack at school. Our typical response is like, he what? You don't want to do that. If you do that, you could this, this and this. Right, rather than what I hear you suggesting, which is the sense of curiosity, which is what Dan Hughes, who gives us so many other great tools, tells us is one of the four major important things we should do as parents. And it's so hard for fear not to be the reigning emotion and for that to be a reaction. And we know in our heads that we don't do our best parenting out of fear. And yet I think even when we're trying to remain curious, you know, our kids can feel all of the probably fear emanating off of us around, like, don't be friends with that kid. Stay far, far away from that. And so I appreciate that perspective a lot.

[00:23:45.360] - Jamie Engel

Yeah, absolutely. And kind of speaking to that point, the point of fear. And this drives all conversation and recovery in particular. And so much of the concepts and ideals of recovery and sobriety and building long term care for oneself, it's not exclusive to substances. It's not exclusive to substance abuse. Recovery looks a lot of different ways. The act of doing what we're doing here today is an enormous process of recovery. We're trying to educate ourselves, to look at and approach life differently. And when we are driven by our fear, we let it direct us where we're going. It does not allow us the opportunity to have faith in the people around us, to ask the right questions or to call upon their own courage to move forward. And when I talk to guys that I work with, like a sponsored sponsor relationship, I tell them all the time that this Pier is just a fog, it's a fog that keeps us trapped in the space that we're standing on. And we're so terrified to move that if we walk forward, we're going to hit a brick wall or we'll step back and we'll fall off the cliff, when more often than not, the fear is around us is 3ft and if we do call upon courage to walk through it and have faith that we can open our ears and open our hearts, that when we get to the other side, we see that there's a lot more directions that we can go in that are presented as an opportunity that we couldn't see before we stepped through it. Sorry, I live in the metaphor, you guys.

[00:25:40.920] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, no, we love visuals here. So that's great. Getting really practical when we're looking at the lives of our particularly probably our older kids as a parent, when do you kind of look at a situation and think we need to head towards treatment? And then you already talked about the gross misunderstanding of how important and adopt these beginnings are in this whole journey and how so much of this is the origin of why there's higher risk for adoptees in the first place. What do you ask where you go to find treatment programs that will perhaps recognize trauma in general, more importantly, adoption trauma or that complex relational trauma?

[00:26:33.270] - Jamie Engel

Absolutely. So a couple of step questions. So let's start with being at the beginning, I mean, finding resources like the Adoption Connection, obviously, I told Melissa, I am happy to be a resource to anybody getting communication with other adoptees, adoptive parents, birth parents who are a couple of steps ahead of us in any of these processes that we're going through is really important because finding an adoption competent therapist. When we look at treatment, I personally always look at trauma. As I've worked in the field and gone to continuing education conferences and sat and listen to expert studies, you know, we look and we see that in addiction, we consistently find trauma at the root of every client we work with. When I talk to families about looking for treatment, the number one thing that I say is look for treatment that is not adoption competent, there's not enough existence of that specifically, but traumainformed is what you'll see most often, and trauma focused

is what you want to look for. And oftentimes the question has to be asked. I see on your website and the people that I've been talking to said that you're a traumainformed program. How trauma focused are you on the process? Because in order to do the latter healing on the issue of substance use, eating disorders, gambling, any real type of process, addiction that comes from these traumas, we first have to get back to baseline and then look at what the underlying issues are. And although people say, yeah, I'm a traumainformed program, I recognize trauma. Recognizing it and working with it and building a treatment plan from that educational base is they're really many different things. You go into Psychology Today, for example, which is where a lot of people find themselves going to look for therapists. I do believe that if you click on Adoption and you look and you can see a history of adoption work and people talking about what they've looked at as far as trauma goes and how it plays a role in their therapeutic process is one of the most important tools that I look for first on just like an intro level, I think the next step after that, where we're looking more seriously at this might not be enough. We might need a higher level of care, some additional support. I tend to steer families towards therapeutic educational consultants. And the difficult thing there and Melissa, you and I have talked about this is that treatment is a costly process, and it makes it challenging, accessibility wise, to kind of get our needs met. But most of the educational consultants that I know, even if you're not in a position to be able to afford to hire them for long term services, they're people who very much do their work because it's their calling and they see the necessity for it. And so they try to offer support beyond themselves. So, oh, you can't hire me and you're looking at adoption. Let me tell you that these four programs are programs that I've toured and I've looked at, and they specifically look at developmental trauma, attachment, adoption. Before they even look any further into the mental health diagnoses that come up from it. It's kind of like a going back to zero approach. How do we start from the beginning and figure out before we can take just this top layer off, we have to find out what it's been built from. And they are few and far between, but they are available. And most of the programs, particularly for adolescents that I've worked with and that I know, do their very best to try to work with public school systems. There's state assisted funding for special needs of all kinds. And a lot of families don't know or don't understand that they have the right to petition for it and use funds that are supposed to be for their child to get to a program that can help them better than the school system that they might be in. There's always the process of intervention, and I think that intervention looks and feels a lot of different ways from having a professional step in doing a family intervention based off of reading guided material. Finding Information Deborah and Jeff Jay have written a book called Family First, and that's very much catered towards substance use intervention. But if you can take yourself back from the specificity of substances, you can really replace it with any other form of trauma mental health problem that needs to be addressed in a family system. It talks about how do we operate from a place of love and care and concern, and how do we do the necessary things that we need to set healthy boundaries for our family system, not just for us, not just for our loved one who is suffering, but for the entire family system. And unfortunately, as life progresses further, you run into interventions through hospitals, you run into legal consequences, and you run into conversations about forcibly sending somebody to treatment. Those are much more complex, and as much as I would love to talk long about each of them, I think that's kind of more of a specific question that needs to be answered on a family by family and case by case basis. And those beginning resources like finding a therapist, talking with a consultant, and from there, the other life experiences that have stacked on top of that can be better handled.

[00:33:37.930] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, I think that's great. And we do have a consultant that we love here at the Adoption Connection, so we'll link to her. She's also an adopted mom with an amazing amount of experience. We'll jump into a Q&A for the folks who are here live at the workshop in just a couple of minutes, but before we do that, Jamie, what's the best way for folks to reach out to you? And there's going to be a flood, probably, so don't give out your cellphone number probably.

[00:34:06.370] - Jamie Engel

No, I was going to say I like having emails. Like most other adoptees that I know, my anxiety level is much higher than the average person. So I like to have things put in writing for me so I can respond to them piece by piece. I'm happy to accept emails and gather information to start. And then from there, I do like to set up phone calls because just like I said, with you guys, with talking with family members, with talking with children, holding space is the most important tool that I have learned through all of

the work that I do. And 100% of my phone calls start by asking families to tell me a little bit about what's been going on. And that's partially because the release of being able to dump off what we're holding on to is really important because it frees us up to be able to take a breath again and then hear how we can take our first step forward. And then it also gives me a lot of information to be able to say, all right, based on where you're at right now and what's going on with your family, this is the direction that I think we should start, and this is who I think we should talk to first. So if I don't know the easiest way to do it, I'm happy to put my email up in the chat or if you want to send out a link, whatever is easiest for you, Melissa, I'm always happy to connect with people and help guide them for folks here on the call.

[00:35:43.180] - Melissa Corkum

If you could put your email in the chat, I think that would be great. And then for folks, if you're listening to the replay on the podcast, if you want to reach out to us through our contact form on our website and just let us know you're looking to be connected with Jamie, we'll pass on his email to you that way.

[00:36:04.490] - Melissa Corkum

We are so thankful for the amazing guests who share their wisdom and expertise in The Village. Adoptive parenting gives us both the challenge and the opportunity to keep learning new tools and perspectives.

[00:36:16.610] - Lisa Qualls

Each workshop in The Village is followed by a live Q&A with our guest. If you're not already a member of The Village, we invite you to join us for regular gatherings and workshops where you will find the tools you need for exactly where you are.

[00:36:30.350] - Melissa Corkum

As a valued podcast listener, you'll get 50% off your first month. Just go to theadoptionconnection.com/village and use the code PODCAST. Before you go, we'd love to connect with you on social media. Our new Instagram handle is @postadoptionresources. Or better yet, join our free Facebook community @theadoptionconnection.com/facebook.

[00:36:56.150] - Lisa Qualls

Thanks so much for listening. We love having you, and remember you're a good patient doing good work.

[00:37:04.430] - Melissa Corkum

The music for the podcast is called new day and was created by Lee Roosevere.