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SPEAKERS

Omkari Williams, Nikki Patin



Omkari Williams 00:21

Hello, and welcome to Stepping Into Truth, the podcast where we have conversations about race, gender and social justice. I'm your host Omkari Williams, and I'm very happy that you're here with me today. This conversation was one of the last ones I did before we went into a stay at home order for COVID-19. I had intended it to be part of a series but then the pandemic happened and things changed. So I'm presenting it to you now on its own. Things do happen and we go with the flow or at least we try to. This was a great conversation with a really interesting person and I think you'll find it as thought provoking as I did.



Omkari Williams 01:01

My guest today is Nikki Patin, featured in The Guardian, Chicago Tribune, HBO's def poetry jam and on international television and radio. Peabody Award winning poet Nikki Patin has been writing, performing and educating for almost 15 years. She has performed at the National Black Theatre in Harlem, Brooklyn Museum, Links Hall, Black Artists Retreat and many other spaces throughout the United States, New Zealand and Australia. In 2014, she made history when she addressed the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland on behalf of Black women survivors of sexual violence in the US. Nikki Patin holds an MFA in creative nonfiction from the University of Southern Maine and is a recipient of a 3Arts

Make a Wave award. It is my great pleasure to welcome Nikki Patin to the program. Nikki, I'm so glad you're here with me today.



Nikki Patin 01:58

Thank you. I'm excited to be with you today.



Omkari Williams 02:00

Great. So you're one of those very lucky people whose day job is also a passion. And oh, yes. And your day job is the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, CAASE. And I'd love for, for you to start by telling us about CAASE and what you're up to there.



Nikki Patin 02:21

Sure. So CAASE, is an organization that at its core, provides pro bono legal services for survivors of sexual harm. In addition to that, we do a lot of policy work. So we've shifted quite a bit of legislation in the past six years. So we've done things like change the Illinois State law that makes prostitution of felony, we've changed that law to make prostitution a misdemeanor. We've made it possible for folks to expunge those felony convictions or vacate those felony convictions from their records. We have made it impossible to charge minors with prostitution and we've also made it possible for people to sue their predator in civil court. So for us, this work of providing free legal services to people kind of goes hand in hand with our legislative work, which is all about shifting the systems around us that we see that are really traumatizing people or not recognizing their humanity as they make their way through the criminal justice system. My role here is that I am the community engagement director. It's an inaugural position meaning that I am the very first community engagement director for CAASE which is exciting. They have never had a community engagement department before. And largely I see the goals of my department as shifting the culture, around rape culture, and also providing opportunities for survivors to lead their own advocacy as well as the sharing of their own narrative. So I think as an organization, we do really compelling, interesting work. We're a bit different from a lot of the other rape crisis organizations in the city. We also do things like prevention education work, and of course, we have a development department like any good nonprofit, but I think at its heart, we are an organization that is about following the lead of survivors and making not only policy recommendations and helping to write legislation that sort of follows the lead of survivors. But we're also very much interested in supporting survivors and uplifting their narratives with the direct goal of really shifting the rape culture that exists around all of us.



Omkari Williams 04:22

Wow, that is just so, it's so comprehensive. And I'm really taken aback by that because often, it's just not the case. Often, rape crisis centers are very narrow in their scope and want to understand stats and it's really cool that CAASE does so much more than that. It's really impressive. There are a lot of misunderstandings in the world around sexual exploitation. And I would really think it would be helpful to our listeners if you would talk about what you mean when you use that term.



Nikki Patin 04:46

People have a lot of different definitions for sexual exploitation. And so I think I'll begin with the one that I think people are most familiar with, which is somebody who is being exploited for money. And so folks call these folks all different kinds of things sex workers, prostitutes, hookers, there's no shortage of names, it seems, for people who sell their their sexual services, right. For me, I think of exploitation in a much more broad way. I think, you know, trafficking, and prostitution are certainly a part of it. But I also think about things like people being exploited for their photos. It's in terms of things like revenge porn, or people being sexually harassed at work, you know, and threatened with getting fired or not being hired if they don't engage in sexual activity. I feel like exploitation takes on a bunch of different forms. I mean, even in terms of pop culture, the way that women's bodies are displayed in magazines, and on TV and movies. Sexual exploitation, I think, extends broadly across a lot of different categories for us specifically in terms of what it means for CAASE, we're really talking about people that have been harmed by this kind of exploitation, right. So folks that have experienced being trafficked folks that have experienced being sexually harassed folks that have experienced things like stalking, or revenge porn. These are the kinds of things that we are supporting people with in terms of providing legal services for them, as they seek justice and as they seek healing.



Omkari Williams 06:31

That's really interesting, in terms of the broadness of your definition of this term, because I have to say that while I've been disturbed by what I see in film or in magazines, I never actually thought of it as exploitation. But when you say that, that makes perfect sense. You know, it's not at the level of someone specifically being targeted or someone specifically being attacked, but it is an exploitation and it creates a narrative that makes sexual exploitation in the culture as a whole, so much more likely.



Nikki Patin 07:08

Yeah, I mean, when I think of exploitation, I think of it like as a general term, I think of it as somebody profiting off of the value of someone else. And that person who is being profited from has no control over how they're being profited from, right. So, you know, when I think about that, that opens up so many more people in terms of like, who is being exploited, right. And so of course, you know, those are not things that we can, on a broad level, litigate, necessarily, but this is where our community engagement department comes in, because part of our goal is to shift the culture. And part of the way that we shift the culture is that we have got to stop thinking of especially women's bodies, and especially women of color bodies, and especially if I get even more specific Black women's bodies as just sites for profit as sites for You know, just salaciousness that we can just put their bodies out there and detach their humanity from their bodies and make money from that, you know, especially when they're not seeing a portion or even a piece of those profits or if they are, it's a very tiny portion and a piece of it. And I think in terms of the dignity that's kind of taken from folks in those dynamics, that to me is the most hurtful thing. I mean, money is money. But I think dignity is something that you can't pay for that. Right?



Omkari Williams 08:25

Right.



Nikki Patin 08:25

And so when I think of even dignity, it's not even something that somebody has to offer to you or give to you. It's how do you, you know, how do you feel inside about yourself? And the thing about it is that I think we make women feel really bad about how they express their sexuality, we, you know, denigrate women that seem to be in control of their sexuality. And if we, you know, can't make money from it, then we're definitely going to judge you and put you down for it. And I find none of that acceptable. You know, I feel like women you know, have the absolute right to do whatever they want with their bodies, right. They have the absolute right to go out in the world and live as they want to, and if this were a perfect world, they would certainly be able to do that. But this being an imperfect world, the problem is that I think when women attempt to do that when they attempt to even control their images or control how they're being portrayed, or control how their sexuality is being expressed throughout the world, there's going to always be someone who comes along and wants to make a dollar off of that. And to me, that is the point at which it becomes exploitation. And that is the point at which a lot of people and a lot of women who are exploited in this way are not able to then call the shots or not been able to say, I like this or I don't like that. And that means when it becomes

problematic.



Omkari Williams 09:39

That's fascinating. As you were speaking, I started thinking about adult film star and producer Stormy Daniels who has you know, been in the news because of Donald Trump. And one of the things that I have found so impressive about her is that she refuses to be slut shamed. She just won't let people do that.



Nikki Patin 10:01

Absolutely.



Omkari Williams 10:02

Yeah, you know, it's like, "this is my body. These are my choices. Yes, this is what I'm doing. And you can say wherever you want, and it makes no damn difference to me". And I so appreciate that. I mean, would I make the choices she's made? Probably not. But that's not for me to say. That's for her to say.



Omkari Williams 10:22

Yeah, absolutely.



Omkari Williams 10:23

And I think when we get out of that realm of giving women the freedom to make their own decisions around these things and slut shaming them, or taking the profits of their work from them, then we're just continuing a patriarchal system that keeps marginalizing, particularly women and girls, and people of color immigrants and the LGBTQ community. So yeah, this feels really important to me to address this in Equity and to start to break this down. How do you think we start to break it down?



Nikki Patin 11:07

Well, I mean, you know, I think part of it is what we do in our community engagement here at CAASE is that we let survivors speak for themselves, right. We let folks say what they like and what they don't like, what they have experienced and how it has been.

And we really listen to that. I think that people are, and let me preface this by saying I think that lots and lots of people have really amazing intentions in terms of how they want to support and help people, right. Like I think, you know, people's hearts are definitely in the right place. I think though, what happens is that when you are so invested in helping people and in wanting to help them find justice or wanting to help them find support or resources, what sometimes happens is that we stopped listening to the very people that we say we are trying to help and support and I see that happen often in our justice system. We actually released a report on what's called diversion court here in Chicago and diversion court is the court that you go to when you've been arrested for prostitution. And instead of you being sent in jail, or you give it being given a ticket, people will say, oh, attend eight sessions of this program or attend this all day session at this nonprofit. And then if you do that, your charges are then dropped or never filed, right. And so on its face, that's an amazing, possibly opportunity for people right, it gets them close to resources that they may need. It gets them to, you know, in relationship with support folks and advocacy folks, which is wonderful.

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Nikki Patin 12:35

But the problem is not actually that piece of it. The problem has to do with one how they're being treated by the police. So all those moments leading up to them having to go to court are usually extremely traumatic, too, because of the the trauma of those sort of like moments leading up to it. Those moments being so traumatic, the the folks that are then tasked with going through that diversion court process, often don't show up to court. because they're afraid of what's going to happen to them, they're afraid that they're going to be sent to jail. They're afraid that they're going to be treated badly. They're afraid that things will end up on their record and then they're not going to be able to get a job or to, you know, do some of the other things that they need to do. And so people usually just end up kind of ghosting the whole process. And so I think that speaks to how we have not held the humanity of folks that have experienced sexual exploitation in high regard.

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Nikki Patin 13:27

And so let me let me kind of give a little bit more context to what I'm saying. See, if we were dealing with like grown folks here, and just all grown folks, this would be a different conversation. The problem though, is that the average age of entry into prostitution in Chicago is aged 12. The problem is that we had to change the law to say that you can't charge minors with prostitution in the last six years. The fact that we would ever as a society think that that was a smart thing to do blows my mind. And so the problem is that the majority of people are experiencing this level of exploitation and experiencing the trauma of even the justice system as they are arrested for selling, because we don't really

arrest the buyers at the same rate. The problem is that the majority of those people are young black women. Usually between, like, you know, the ages of 18 and 30,



Omkari Williams 14:21

I'm stuck back on that the average age of entry into tuition in Chicago is 12. I'm still stuck there. But okay, I'm going to work myself past that.



Nikki Patin 14:35

Yeah, no, it's yeah, there's a lot about this that is really like eye opening. You know, I mean, I think because we are sold one story about how this is about how this happens. We are sold one image, one perspective, one stereotype about how and what exploitation is and who it affects and impacts. And the real story, the true story, is a story that you're not often going to hear not in mainstream media. Not in like a Tyler Perry movie not on Law & Order SVU, like, you're not gonna get to like what the reality is because those stories don't really make it into our mainstream Zeitgeist.



Omkari Williams 15:11

I think that if people understood how young, cause these are girls, 12 years old, you're a girl. Yeah, you're not even a young woman yet, you're still a girl in my book.



Nikki Patin 15:24

That's right. That's right.



Omkari Williams 15:25

That a 12 year old would ever be arrested and charged with prostitution as if this was actually a choice. When at 12 your brain hasn't even fully developed. So you are not actually capable of making informed choices about that kind of thing. So,



Nikki Patin 15:46

Yeah, this is yeah, we this is when I think we have to bring an intersectional analysis to bear right. So part of my background is that I used to be a case manager for homeless LGBTQ youth. And so you have to think about what would make a 12 year old quote

unquote "choose" to do something like this right? Like what conditions would have to be present in their life to make prostitution seem like something that they should do. And so a lot of what I have just experienced firsthand, and I've taught at the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center, I've taught at Rikers Island. I have taught you know, young people that have been detained for things like prostitution, I have taught young people that have been homeless and on the street because their parents kicked them out because of sexuality or whatever else. And especially when I worked at Center on Halsted it only takes 36 hours, so we're talking a day and a half, for a young person to be approached to trade sex for a survival need.



Nikki Patin 16:39

So what we're also talking about is not hard dollars and cents, we're not talking about young people that are going out and buying designer clothes or, or buying like Air Force Ones (shoes) or whatever. I'm talking about young people that are trying to get a meal. Young people that are trying to like take a shower, and people that are trying to like lay their head down for a night that's not like the red line, right? And so I think that's what people don't understand are all of the other intersections that make this actually not a choice for people. And so then when we get to somebody who is 18? Or who is 25? Or who is 30, you know, you have to look at the whole spectrum, the whole continuum that they're on, have they been living this life since they were 12? Have they been living, you know, these quote unquote, "choices", since they were basically children because they weren't given other choices. And you know, I know I'm being a little hyperbolic here. But what I'm trying to illustrate is that nobody winds up in a space where they are being exploited or even where they are exploring prostitution. The vast majority of people do not end up there because this is a conscious, intentional choice that they've made and the choice that they would make out of all other possible choices available to them. The vast majority of people are doing what they are doing because they are trying to survive. And unfortunately, the way our systems have been set up, they have been the ones who have been chosen to be criminalized for that.



Omkari Williams 18:01

Wow, this is so much to think about and so much to process, because it really does sort of put on its head a lot of the ideas that I think most of us walk around with about prostitution or about kids being engaged in. I mean, I don't even want to call it prostitution in a way because they're not getting money for it, they're just being used. And so it's I think we really need to take a step back as a society and reassess what's happening here, as you say, through this very much more intersectional lens and also just through a more a more realistic lens. I mean...



Nikki Patin 18:46

Absolutely.



Omkari Williams 18:46

trading sex for food. That is, that is a whole different thing than someone who decides they want to trade sex so that they can go on a shopping spree. That is not the same thing.



Nikki Patin 19:00

Yeah, and I, you know, I hate to I hate to sound like this person, but I do have a lot of friends actually who have, you know, either you know prostituted themselves or been prostituted or are, you know, making porn or, you know, any number of the things on this continuum of sex, you know, quote, unquote, "work" as it were. And I don't know, out of all of those people, none of those people that I know and none of the young people that I worked with, as a case manager, none of the young people that I worked with and at the juvenile detention center, I know no one who is engaged in this work, and then immediately been like, I'm going to go on a shopping spree. No, this is like, I made \$50 and I'm going to go get a hotel room for the night or I made \$100 I'm going to get food and I'm going to go get a hotel room and take a shower or honestly that perception of you know, people are just out here on the corner and making all thousands of dollars in my life that is not for the most part that is not what is happening at all.



Omkari Williams 19:57

Definitely not. I mean, if you're standing on a street corner, you're already at a level of desperation that puts that in a whole different category.



Nikki Patin 20:07

Yeah. Yeah. And the way it looks now, I mean, it looks, I think, really different. And you know, folks like Brenda Meyers Powell from the Dreamcatcher Foundation and other folks that have actually are survivors of the life as it were, because I'm not and so I don't, I don't want to speak for that community completely. But what I've heard those folks say like so folks that have lived this life, what I've heard them say is that now the way it looks, is that you'll have a young girl who maybe doesn't have like the best relationship with her family

or her family is super dysfunctional. And it'll be an older dude, who's just paying attention to her. Who in the beginning is taking her out to eat and buying her cute clothes or buying her whatever, and all of a sudden, the whole vibe will switch. And he'll be like, Well, you know, I bought you all these clothes. I got you all this food, you know, it's time for you to go work and give me some of my money back.



Omkari Williams 20:56

So, a grooming process.



Nikki Patin 21:00

Yeah, it's totally, there's totally a grooming process like this is a predatory process. And I think that our assumptions around trafficking has been so shaped, again by Hollywood and TV and movies, and what that looks like we think of some young girl getting snatched up and thrown into the back of a van. That's not how modern day trafficking works. It's much more sophisticated, much more nuanced, and much more about predators preying on the vulnerability of young people who are experiencing dysfunction in their families, or we're experiencing some other sort of oppression or some other sort of diminishment of their humanity already, which makes them vulnerable to this kind of manipulation. So it all works in concert together.



Omkari Williams 21:42

That's actually really terrifying because the idea of someone being kidnapped off the street and thrown in the back of a vehicle is one thing, but realistically, it's like, how often does that happen? But this what you're describing that can happen multiple times a day to anyone, anywhere. As you say, it's just about people paying attention. And those people know exactly what they're looking for. So, yeah, young people are very powerful. And you know, when you're young, it's not like your brain is firing on all cylinders. So you're totally vulnerable to those things in a way that someone might not be a little bit later on in life. And that's just horrifying.



Nikki Patin 22:31

Yeah.



Omkari Williams 22:32

It's just kind of horrifying.



Nikki Patin 22:34

Yeah.



Omkari Williams 22:34

I know that you are heading up a new initiative, at CAASE and I would like you to talk about that, and the impact you hope that it's going to have, because it feels like that's very connected to what you were just talking about.



Nikki Patin 22:51

Sure. I mean, again, I think what goes hand in hand with us thinking about prostitution and even as thinking about sexual violence. I think the folks that work on it, I think are traditionally, kind of all perceived as like, it's just white women or white feminists that are, that are working on this or that are staffing a lot of these organizations. And so the truth is that, you know, of course, Black women have always been involved in this movement have always driven this movement. And so one of the things that we're working on with Project Rise is that we are looking specifically at the South side, and at the South suburbs of Chicago.



Nikki Patin 23:22

I'm somebody who is a second generation South sider and spent a lot of my time as a teenager growing up in the south suburbs. So these are areas that are part and parcel of my DNA, and like my life, and so a theory that we have is that there might not be as many resources for folks on the south side and in the south suburbs of Chicago. We feel like that maybe when people try to go out and report that they were raped or report that they were sexually harassed our theory, or hypothesis, is that it's not as easy for them to do that on the Southside or in the south suburbs. I don't know whether or not this is true, but part of the work of my department is mapping what resources are available to survivors on the Southside, and in the south suburbs of the city, as well as to facilitate workshops on the rights that they are entitled to. Right.



Nikki Patin 24:12

So it's great that that CAASE has changed all of these laws, it's great that we provide free legal services to people. But how many people actually know that we exist? And how many people actually know that we have changed these laws? And I would wager not as many as I would like. So part of this is mapping what exists out there, part of it is letting people know what exists out there. And then the final goal is so that we actually expand our services to the Southside or in the south suburbs, and we plan on having you know, an office space in collaboration with another organization. But what we want to do is literally move our some of our legal services further south so that people don't have to travel all the way downtown to us in order to access the support that they need. And that is really important. You shouldn't have to travel across half a city to get this kind of support. You shouldn't have to feel like you have to leave your neighborhood just to seek justice and healing.



Nikki Patin 25:07

And so what we want to do is really dig in and find out, you know, really who's doing this work, because I also suspect that there are a lot of people doing this work that we just don't know about. And then beyond that, we plan on doing some advisory groups, some gathering of survivors, to ask them what their experiences have been, and also what they think the gaps are and what they think they need. And we're going to bring that information back to CAASE and in collaboration with our policy department, we're hoping to put out a couple of different reports on how reporting charging and prosecution the differences in the similarities, you know, between like, overall the city of Chicago, and what's happening on the Southside. So it's really, to me really exciting, exciting work, and work that like kind of takes a deep dive into things that we've always sort of suspected, but that nobody's ever put hard qualitative data to.



Omkari Williams 25:54

That's fascinating and you actually brought up something that I wanted to ask you about, which is one of the things that I really appreciate about the work that CAASE does is that they do actively seek out partners who can support them, and who CAASE can support in turn. And I think that that is so, so critically important. And in the work that I do with activists, I'm always encouraging them to look for those with whom they might create mutually beneficial partnerships. And I'm curious as to the role of that at CAASE.



Nikki Patin 26:30

Yeah, I mean, partnerships are incredibly important to us and our Community Engagement Manager Annika Sterling Flores is somebody who has worked in this field for a very long time and has a really good bird's eye view of the landscape of just support and resources for survivors of sexual harm. And so literally Annika's priority is our meeting with folks that have offices that have organizations on the South side in the south suburbs, we go to them, we don't ever ask. But to meet us here in our downtown office, we go out to the south side. And we meet with them. We have our community engagement events based on the south side of experimental station, which is at 61st and Blackstone in the Hyde Park Art Center, which is in Hyde Park. But it's incredibly important to us to have partners in this work, especially because not one of us have all the knowledge and insight about this, right? Like if we're going to get this done. And when I say get it done, my eventual goal is to put myself out of a job like if you want to know like, what my overall final goal is, is to make sure that I don't have to do this as a job, which I love it.



Nikki Patin 27:34

But I'm trying to eradicate sexual violence period. And so I've always been an incredibly ambitious person. So this is not surprising that that would be my goal. But that's my goal. And so in that way, what I know about that is that if that is my goal, then that absolutely is something that I definitely need to partner with, collaborate with folks on, listen to folks. You know, a big part of my job actually is shutting the hell up. It is, it's like sitting back. And it is listening to all the things that people have to say for good or for bad. And knowing down in the core of who I am, that I absolutely do not have all the answers on this. So partnerships and collaborations are really a top priority for us and for me, because we don't we don't get to the level of knowledge that we want to get to without understanding as many perspectives on this as we can.



Omkari Williams 28:25

That is just fascinating to me, because, well, hey, I love your goal, you know, put yourself out of a job that seems that seems about right.



Omkari Williams 28:36

That's right. Well,





Omkari Williams 28:37


I just love the broad views that CAASE is taking about this whole thing and I love also the


you take the simple step of going to the people who need you rather than making them come to you. And that feels so important because the more you make someone have to come to you, the fewer people you're going to get coming to you.

 Nikki Patin 29:01
Definitely.

 Omkari Williams 29:02
There are just too many obstacles for people. And...

 Nikki Patin 29:05
That's right,

 Omkari Williams 29:05
you do something that I think is really interesting. And that's you all host writing workshops. And you mentioned the one at the Art Center in Hyde Park. And I'm curious about the impetus to create those workshops. What was that?

 Nikki Patin 29:20
Sure. So I actually created, so our workshops in our open mic are managed by, I hesitate to call it an organization because it's a lot more lightweight than that. It's more of a it's more of a project. And I launched this project in 2014. So before I started working here, please, and it's called Surviving the Mic. And that came out of my years as both a teaching artist, a performer and a writer, you know, a huge part of the the Chicago writing community and performing community. And one thing that I noticed is that there were a lot of allegations around sexual violence, right? Like folks that were saying that they were being assaulted by fellow artists or assaulted by former teachers. And one curious thing that happened was that in 2013, a really prominent spoken word artist was outed as having assaulted several of his former students. And so when other survivors started showing up in open mics, they were turned away.

 Nikki Patin 30:16
They were either not let in, or microphones were turned off, or they were asked to leave.

And at that point, you know, I, you know, I've been working in this field since 2005. And so I'd seen all along, like how uncomfortable people were, whenever the word rape was brought up, or sexual assault was brought up. It's like, you'd be in a writing workshop. And somebody would say that or their work would touch on that, and everybody would just shut down, right? And I was like, well, that's not helpful because what happens is that when we start doing that, and when we start making people feel weird for talking about what they've experienced, usually that means that people just drop off, they don't come back. They don't participate, they don't feel comfortable.

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Nikki Patin 30:57

And so when this final sort of straw for me how In 2013, and I was pregnant with my son at the time, I decided that what we needed was a creative space for survivors themselves, and that it should be survivor led. And that it should be facilitated by people who were not going to make people feel like there was something wrong with them for talking about what they experienced and how they felt about it. And I was kind of tired of asking people to sort of do that work, and to be better about that, honestly. I was just tired of asking, so I just I decided to launch something myself. And so our original idea launched with a fellowship from the Loft Literary center out of Minneapolis, Minnesota, but the workshop happened here.

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Nikki Patin 31:38

And our initial offering was a 10 week workshop exploring both spoken words, so the craft of writing and the craft of performance, as well as the history of sexual violence, as it is impacted Black women and girls. And so our first cohort of people who were together for that full 10 weeks were folks who identified as survivors, folks who identified as Black as women and a spoken word artist. And for 10 weeks we learned together and we wrote together eventually some of us performed together. And I invited in five different guest facilitators to help co teach that writing workshop series. And so that was the seed of Surviving the Mic.

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Nikki Patin 32:16

As we got into that 10 weeks, folks that were participating said, "You know what, we need an open mic". And so I said, even though I had like a newborn baby, at the time, I was like, Okay, we'll do it. We'll do an open mic. And so we did an open mic. And our first one was at Vintage Underground, which is a used clothing store in Wicker Park, and we got in there because my bass player's dad owned it, and he said we could do an open mic, in this vintage clothing store. So at you know, against the backdrop of like vintage Gucci, and

Chanel, we like read these poems and hung out. And then eventually, you know, some other folks decided that they wanted to be part of like helping to make this thing happen, because I was also in grad school at the time. So we had some other survivors that that stepped up and said, you know, we want to help shape this and facilitate this.

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Nikki Patin 32:59

And so then we started doing writing workshops in it would kind of toggle between like some months, we would do an open mic some months, we would do a writing workshop. So then when I started here at CAASE as the community engagement director, my thought was, well, you know, how do you build community with people? And how do you build trust with people in a way that feels authentic, and organic? Well, in my mind, the way that we do that is that we give people the room to kind of talk about what's happened to them. And so a piece of that was, was doing open mics and giving people the space to, to perform and to kind of share their stories. But another piece of it and I know this can be a barrier for some survivors, is understanding the craft of how to tell those stories.

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Nikki Patin 33:39

And so what we do in our writing workshops is that we look at writing from other survivors, we do writing exercises, you know, we write work together. And another piece that we're about to add in is that we're about to start doing feedback specific workshops, where people can bring work that they've already created and then get some really great feedback from the group that will not be retronix ties into them or victim blaming in any way. So we have our own set of community guidelines and a rubric for how to keep people brave in both our writing and our performance spaces. And a big value of ours is that you do not dig into people's stories. We do not make people "prove up", quote, unquote, what has happened to them or determine whether or not they're telling the truth. That's not what we're here for. It's also not how art works some people might show up with a story that comes out in a haiku or comes out in a fiction story or comes out in some other way. But what we are there to do is support people as they learn the craft of writing and performance. Give them those tools and hopefully keep them feeling really brave and grounded, and hopefully they get some healing through this process.



Omkari Williams 34:42

I can only imagine what an incredible service that is to the women that you are helping. I can only imagine that just to be able to share your story in a space where no one is going

to challenge you at all, they're just there to support you and listen and be able to just speak your truth must be so profoundly important for those women, those survivors.



Nikki Patin 35:11

Yeah, I mean, I think it's been important for me too. Like I didn't really start writing about my own experiences as a survivor until I started Surviving the Mic in 2013. And then what I want to acknowledge too, is that we've had plenty of folks attend and participate and even lead our workshops who are not women. So that's another piece of this is exposing just how much people are experiencing sexual violence, and how far outside of the stereotypes of the assumptions we have about who this happens to, you know, we have Black men that show up to our workshop. Trans folks that show up to our workshops. People that are navigating disabilities that show up to our workshops. And these are the kinds of survivors and the kinds of folks that experience this, that I feel like never get a platform in the mainstream and so people never assume that this kind of thing happens to them. And that's why for me, these creative spaces are so important. Because it's a way for people to sort of even start to dip their toe into just talking about, "this is what happened to me". And hopefully to be able to do it in a way where, as you said, they do feel supported, and they do feel cared for and they don't feel judged or like there is something wrong with them simply because they've experienced being preyed on they've experienced violence. they've experienced somebody being maybe not so good to them. There's no shame in that.



Omkari Williams 36:28

No, no, they are not responsible for the actions that someone else took. And to give people a space where they can just express themselves around what's happened to them without being made to be wrong, is amazing. And I'm so grateful that you're doing that because I am sure that that has immensely improved the healing for the people who have gone through your process. So thank you. That's, that's just fantastic.



Nikki Patin 37:05

Thank you.



Omkari Williams 37:06

Oh, you're welcome.



Nikki Patin 37:06

It's been healing for me.



Omkari Williams 37:07

Oh, I would imagine it's healing for everyone in the audience, whether they are themselves a survivor of, of sexual violence or not. Just because stories connect us to one another and hearing someone else's story and seeing them overcome their story, it doesn't have to be our story. It's still inspiring. So thank you.



Nikki Patin 37:31

Yeah, of course.



Omkari Williams 37:32

So before we end, I wanted to ask you to give the listeners three small actions that they can take in support of the work that you're doing, if that is something that they are moved to do. And they're, you know, there may be people listening who are in need of a little direction or a little encouragement. So what are things that they can do?



Nikki Patin 37:57

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for offering That space for me to say this. So I think the number one thing that you can do is believe survivors, just believe them. Even if you don't believe them later, if someone trusts you enough, in that moment to say, this thing happened to me, and this is how I feel about it, just believing them and not doing the whole, like questioning and digging in and all of that. I know that's our instinct as human beings, but resisting that urge and just saying to someone when they are choosing to share their trauma with you, saying, I believe you. Saying I'm sorry, and then asking them, how can I support you? What do you need from me to feel supported or to feel as if I am advocating for you? To me that is everything and so different than what actually happens when people decide to share what trauma they have negotiated. So that that would be the first thing.



Nikki Patin 38:57

I think the second thing is showing up, right. And so this sort of isn't is not a plug for our community engagement events, to be honest, but we always need audience in our open

mic, people who can just hold space for these stories. So you know, if we're talking about believing survivors, I think the second piece from that is not shying away from survivors, if we have the capacity for that. Not shutting our eyes to what people have experienced. And again, that's, of course, if you have the capacity. And if you have the ability to do that, sometimes we don't, and that that's cool, too. But I think if you have a moment where you're like, no, what I really want to understand more about this, or I want to learn more about this, I think being willing to listen beyond our assumptions and stereotypes. And this is a lesson that I have not only learned, but I think continue to learn on a daily basis. So I think showing up for survivors is really important. So I think that's the second thing is being able to show up. And listen.

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Nikki Patin 39:54

I would say the third thing that we can do and this is I think the hardest one, right. I think the third thing is that I think that that we also have to get real comfortable, real good, real close with sort of navigating our own trauma. So even if you are not willing to, like, share that story publicly, which I totally understand, can you get it down on paper? Right, can you paint about it on canvas, can you in some way, express, this is the thing that I have experienced because a big piece of this and and it's unfortunate, but a big piece of this is so many people who experienced this feel so alone. They feel like I am the only person that this happened to or this happened to me because I'm a bad person or because I've done something wrong. And a big piece of that is because so many of us are walking around holding in our own stories of trauma, that we are not willing to share what has happened to us or we feel too ashamed. Or we feel like you know, we might not be supported if we share our stories. So I think if we start building this culture, so I told you like, part of my goal is to shift this culture. And a big part of shifting culture is that we have got to get over walking around pretending like everything is good when it's not.



Omkari Williams 41:12

Yeah.

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Nikki Patin 41:13

Because it's not because it's not helpful. It's not helpful for us. It's not helpful for the people who are perceiving us. We have to get real good and real comfortable, I think with admitting that these things have happened. Because I think when we can admit it, when we can like say, "Yes, this is what I've experienced", that is what opens the door to healing. That's what opens the pathway to feeling better, and then hopefully being able to support

other folks that are navigating this because guess what, this is a fact of life. To me sexual violence, most pervasive crime on the planet. It happens to more people in more places of more identities than anything I have ever heard of in my life. So that means we got to deal with it. It's not going away. It's not disappearing. As of right now. We're not getting rid of it and part of why we're not getting rid of it, because we have a hard time even admitting that it happens.



Omkari Williams 42:03

That is so true. It reminds me of something a friend of mine who was in a 12 step program would say, which is that you are only as sick as your secrets.



Nikki Patin 42:14

That's right.



Omkari Williams 42:15

And so when we can express what's happened to us, when we can talk about our trauma, then we're taking so much of the power that it's had over us away from it. And we're opening the door to our own healing. So absolutely, yeah, that's the hardest one for sure. And yes, it is so important, and I would just like you to reinforce so if someone does open up to you about their trauma, what should the person listening do?



Nikki Patin 42:50

Yeah, so I have a three point kind of system that I use. And I learned this through my work at the first rape crisis center that I ever worked for which was back in the day called rape victim advocates. Now it's called resilience and what I learned in my training, there was three points. The first is, I'm so sorry that happened to you. The second point is, this is not your fault. You didn't do anything to deserve this. The third point is, how can I support you? What can I do right now, that can help you in some way or support you in some way. And so the reason why these three points are so important is that one, I think it's always important to express empathy for what folks have gone through. And so just you know, I use the three point system with everything. My mom has a bad day at work. I'm always like, I'm so sorry, that happened to you, you did not deserve the way that your boss treated you. What can I do to make you feel better Mom, like that's the three points that I use, right?



Nikki Patin 43:46

So it actually works like in a bunch of different places. The second piece of that, which is it's not your fault, and you didn't deserve that is that we are real into victim blaming in this country. And I'll tell you why. One of the reasons why we're in the victim blaming. It's not because we're all jerks. I mean, we might be, but I don't think that's the reason I think the reason why we are so into victim blaming is that if we can find something that you did as a victim to, quote unquote, "Bring this on yourself", or the reason why it happened, right? You know, we want to find a way to control this thing.



Omkari Williams 44:17

Right.



Nikki Patin 44:17

As you said, feeling like there is no way or no rhyme or reason to this is the thing that makes it the most terrifying feeling as if people might have a way of manipulating people into exploiting them or to hurting them. And it's not just like through sheer physical force, is terrifying to people. Feeling like there are cruel people out in the world who will prey on folks just because that's fun for them. Not because I appeared vulnerable, not because I'm stumbling drunkenly, not because I walked home by myself or on a dark street or whatever. But because like this is what this person does. And if it doesn't happen to me, then they're going to do that to someone else. That's the terrifying thing. The way that I try to allay that fear is that I often tell people, or ask people rather. Do you want rape to not happen to you or your loved ones? Or do you not want rape to happen? And that, that is the question that I asked people to consider when it comes to victim blaming. Because if you're just worried about it happening to you and your loved ones, but you don't care about it happening overall, then I would say that you're cool with rape. And you're good with it. But if you are worried about stopping it overall as a problem overall for everyone, then that takes you real far away from victim blaming, because you will realize that it is not about the individual choices that quote unquote "victims" make, but about the choices that predators make.



Nikki Patin 45:39

And there's no amount of choices that victims can make, that will override the choices that predators are making.



Omkari Williams 45:45

Wow, that's, that's the perfect place to end this conversation because that's something all of us need to sit with and think about and look at the places where maybe we haven't been as open and compassionate as we like to think we are. So, Nikki, this was just amazing. And I'm so glad we got to talk. Thank you so much.



Nikki Patin 46:12

You as well. Thank you Omkari this was wonderful. And I appreciate you for just doing this the show and providing this space where folks it's, it's pretty awesome.



Omkari Williams 46:20

Oh, thanks. It's really honestly it's it feels like an incredible gift to me to do this and be able to reach out to all sorts of people and talk with people like you. So I'm so grateful we got to do this. I hope you have a wonderful rest of your day.



Nikki Patin 46:38

Thank you, you as well take care.



Omkari Williams 46:43

Thank you all for listening. We are in such a weird time in the world. And so many of the things that were the boundaries of normal life are disrupted at the moment. It grounds me to know that so many people in the world are working towards justice and that pandemic or not, they keep doing the work. Thank each of you for what you're doing to move us towards freedom and justice. And I want to remind you, change starts with story. So keep sharing yours. I'll be back with another episode very soon.