



[Image Description: A group of people wearing winter jackets and warm hats walk down a city street together on an overcast winter day. Their backs are to the camera and several wear drawstring backpacks that have that have a “Winter Walk” logo on them. In the foreground, a child walks in between two adults with a sign on their back that reads “WHY I WALK... To Share Love & Compassion! ... TO END HOMELESSNESS”]

Photos from Winter Walk 2020 were taken by Chris Shane, Evgenia Eliseeva, Stewart Ting Chong & Belinda Soncini.

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[music comes in]

Ari Barbanell: 1 in 10 young people are homeless. 1 in 10. Think of a youth basketball team – 1 in 10. A classroom – 1 in 10. In a cafeteria of 100 kids, chances are 10 of those young people are experiencing housing instability.

Within an already vulnerable population, youth experiencing homelessness often fly under the radar. They don't always fit into a stereotypical profile of an unhoused person doing all they can to hide the secret of their reality from others.

Elisabeth Jackson: *They have a lot of life to live, right. Even though they come in saying they're eighteen and their life is almost over, it's like, 'Oh my God, your*

life hasn't even started!' And really able to provide that path and build that path with them is very important for us.

AB: This is Elizabeth Jackson. She is the Executive Director of Bridge Over Troubled Waters, a Boston-based nonprofit organization that provides services to runaway, homeless and high-risk youth will learn more about Bridge Over Troubled Waters work later in the episode.

But I want you to keep that statistic in mind: 1 in 10.

Kelly: *...I guess, my entire life... pretty far back, maybe like four or five years old, I've always been aware that housing was an issue.*

AB: Meet Kelly. A decade ago, she would have been one of ten students with a hidden reality.

As a child growing up in Boston in the '90s, Kelly was acutely aware of her living situation. She didn't have the word for it, but she knew her family was going through a tough time.

Kelly: *I don't know all the details. When you're a kid your parents don't tell you everything, but something happened; we were evicted from our apartment in Jamaica, plain*

AB: Left without a place of their own, Kelly, her younger brother and parents moved on to the next best option – one she was told to keep a secret if anyone asked.

Kelly: *We moved into my grandmother's dining room and lived out of trash bags on a fold-out coach with me, my mom and my little brother in that one room. And... I wasn't allowed to tell anybody that that was happening.*

AB: Like so many children and young people who experience homelessness, the term didn't seem to match Kelly's reality.

Kelly: *I didn't know that I was homeless. My mom threw the word around a lot and said that we were, but you know, my grandmother was living there and my father and my uncle. So, I felt, I don't know, it felt not too bad because there was family.*

AB: She had a roof over her head, she wasn't on the street, she was going to school. And despite experiencing homelessness since as far back as she can remember, Kelly and her family would not have been counted in the system as an unhoused family.

The definition of homelessness used for the point-in-time count, a count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January, does not include families and individuals who are experiencing homelessness and living in doubled up or hidden situations, like Kelly's.

[music fades out]

A combination of factors like shame, trauma, and fear makes it difficult for young people to reach out for help.

But once they do ask for help, support is out there for young people to be able to look beyond day-to-day survival and into a future of possibility.

I'm Ari Barbanell. And this is Don't Walk By.

[theme music comes in] [montage begins - speakers share in quick succession: "I call it the university of life skills of support for our young people when they're ready and they want to" "You never know who's going to hear that one thing from your story that's gonna hit them in a certain way." "So, it's really our goal to provide folks pathways out of homelessness at this stage of development in their lives] [theme fades out]

Kelly: *I remember storage more than anything else from that time. My stuff was in storage. The things that I loved were in storage. Everything I owned... my books, my toys, everything was in storage.*

AB: Kelly shares memories from her childhood where the joys of being a kid, like coveting a collection of books or having favorite toys are inextricably linked to the instability of her life at that time.

Kelly: *Eventually, we lost the storage unit. So, I never saw those things again, but there was always that idea that I would.*

AB: Although Kelly and her family had moved into a more accommodating living situation, stability still felt temporary.

Kelly: *My mom secured housing finally... I don't know how she did it or what she did. She used to help with things what are they called?... maintenance! She was like a maintenance person.*

I think we were only there for a year. It was a really small apartment. It was me and my brother and my mom. My dad would be around sometimes, and it was just... it never felt like home 'cause it was always at the risk of being lost. The threat of being homeless again was always looming over our heads. So, that was very scary to think that we were going to lose it all again.

AB: The insecurity about housing she felt when she was younger didn't go away. And it stayed present in her mind with that move and each move thereafter, making it impossible for her to get fully comfortable in one place.

Kelly: *We stayed there for about a year and then we finally got some permanent housing where my mom did the same thing. She was like the maintenance person. But even then, the threat of losing the housing was always very palpable and present. [music comes in]*

AB: This constant state of anxiety about losing housing was validated by the pattern of housing instability Kelly experienced since childhood.

And this connects to a concept we first mentioned in Episode 2 in reference to Barbara's story: generational homelessness. Youth who experience homelessness growing up are more likely to experience it as young adults. As Kelly got older, this reality started to play out...

Kelly: *When I was seventeen, going on eighteen, my situation in the house living with my mom was abusive. It was abusive the whole time I was growing up, but it really started peaking around then. And I started realizing, 'Well, I'm about to be eighteen and I'm independent, blah, blah, blah.' So, I would couch surf and live out of a bag for like a couple days at a time. And then I would go home to my mom's when I needed to and get stuff. Slept in a car a couple of times, slept on a bench a couple times. But I didn't realize I was homeless then either.*

AB: By the time she was eighteen, Kelly knew she had to make the difficult decision to leave her living situation with her family to find a safer alternative.

Kelly's reason for leaving home as a teenager lines up with national findings. One of the most common reasons young people enter into homelessness is because they're fleeing homes characterized by physical, sexual and or emotional abuse and neglect.

A 2019 [report](#) from the Congressional Research Service cited family conflict, youth's sexual orientation, sexual activity, conflict at school, pregnancy, and substance use as the primary risk factors for youth homelessness.

I spoke to Elisabeth Jackson of Bridge Over Troubled Waters to learn more about the most common causes of youth homelessness:

***EJ:** There's not one cause, right. Bridge always deals with the age range of under the age of twenty-four. 85% of the young people we serve are under the age of twenty-one. So, they're young. Causes are anything from conflict at home, sexual abuse or trauma. There's poverty where parents cannot support an eighteen-year-old anymore. There is alcohol and substance abuse. Mental health is one that we deal with a lot. And when you're a teenager, you go through a lot. And when you don't have the support of the parents working all the time and you're out by yourself, you get caught up in things, right.*

And so, our young people have an array of different concerns. They're facing a lot of... decisions... adult- I call it adult issues that they're working with, that it's hard for them to maneuver themselves out of. And the adult that's in their family that's supposed to, or that's near them that's supposed to help them, are not able to for one reason or another.

AB: And once a young person escapes the immediate threats that lead them into homelessness, they often need services offered by organizations like Bridge Over Troubled Waters to gain stability.

***EJ:** Developmentally at this stage, I think being eighteen or seventeen-year-old and finding themselves with the basic needs of a housing or somewhere to eat and no guidance of where to get the services makes it harder. [music comes in] And Bridge is here to provide that- I call it the university of life skills of support for our young people when they're ready. And no one ever comes in or at least our young people come in and say, 'Can you please help me? I have no place to stay. And in my mom's living in a car.' That's just not the communication that happens.*

AB: Elisabeth is talking about the need for trust here. In order to even consider help, let alone accept it, a young person must believe that the providers and those offering help truly have their best interest in mind. And that process does not happen overnight.

***EJ:** When they show up, it's really providing and building that trust with them. And it takes us three to six months when we first meet a young person on the street to really get to know them and really build the trust with them to be able to work with them to through all their needs that they're coming through, because it's just not one thing.*

AB: And once that trust is built, possibilities start to open up. Young people are uniquely positioned to break the cycle of homelessness with the right support.

***Cameron Van Fossen:** It's a really critical intervention point, the eighteen to twenty-four the age range, in so many different ways. In terms of brain development for young people it's a really critical stage of their lives as well.*

AB: This is Cameron Van Fossen. Cameron is the Executive Director to Y2Y Network, an organization building a movement of student-led shelters to interrupt cycles of homelessness for young adults.

***CVF:** And so, having an affirming and inclusive, true community at that stage of life is really gonna affect how the brains of our young people develop and relate to community and other and other people. And also, that it's a critical intervention point because young people in homelessness are not yet chronically homeless individuals.*

AB: According to the department of housing and urban development, a chronically homeless individual is someone who has experienced homelessness for a year or longer, or who has experienced at least four episodes of homelessness in the last three years and has a disability. A family with an adult member who meets this description would also be considered chronically homeless.

Chronic homelessness is an important concept to understand here, especially when it comes to identifying critical invention points that can prevent a young person from experiencing homelessness long term.

***CVF:** That eighteen to twenty-four age range is not only really critical in terms of the developmental stage that young people are at, but also in terms of a gap in the service model around just aging out at that eighteen-year-old mark and there*

not being a ton of social services available to folks in that age range. So, there is an opportunity to get folks at that age range access to pathways out of homelessness that could end the cycle of homelessness in their lives permanently, in a way that's difficult to do for folks who have more contributing factors to their experience of homelessness than oftentimes young people do.

AB: In our conversation, Cameron also pointed out that within the community of youth experiencing homelessness, 40 % are LGBTQ+ identified.

***CVF:** We also know that LGBTQ+ young people disparately experienced homelessness. So, beyond that we know that young people in homelessness experienced culture shock, experienced bullying and harassment in adult shelters. And are often not affirmed in terms of their gender identity and sexuality, are misgendered, and deadnamed and that has real psychological effects on their wellbeing.*

AB: Before we continue, let's break down a few helpful terms. Misgendering means referring to or using language to describe someone that doesn't align with their affirmed gender. For example, calling a transgender woman, "he" or "him." And a transgender person is dead named when they are called by the name they were given at birth when they no longer use it.

***CVF:** Just by using folks' accurate pronouns and accurate names according to their gender identity, we can significantly reduce the likelihood of attempted suicide among that population. So, Y2Y is really critically dedicated to meeting the young people that we serve at the unique developmental stage that they're at creating an environment that is youth centered. [music comes in] And really specifically designed to serve young people with age-appropriate services. And it's a near peer model. So, they're getting to interact with a lot of staff who are also in their age range and relating to the stage of life that they're at. And beyond that, we have a very values-based model that is centered around inclusion and affirmation of folks of diverse identity.*

AB: Kelly experienced some of her most challenging and traumatic times during her transition from adolescence into young adulthood, a critical window of development that sets the stage for who we become as adults.

***CVF:** So, it's really our goal to provide folks pathways out of homelessness at this stage of development in their lives, so that we can prevent more people from becoming chronically homeless and experiencing homelessness for decades.*

AB: When we spoke, Kelly opened up about her own identity as a queer woman; and although Y2Y Network wasn't around when Kelly was a teen, she found her own affirming environment in one of her first professional experiences.

***Kelly:** The beginnings of my career when I was a teenager, when I was experiencing homelessness, I was – and still am – I was very a big activist in the LGBTQ+ community. I worked at the Department of Health as an administrative assistant with Youth Pride. So, I fell into doing that and really found a community, you know of... sometimes we all stayed in the same house together. There were a lot of us that had housing instability.*

AB: Kelly described her career to me as bizarre and beautiful. And I have to agree.

After a ten-year stint as a chef, Kelly returned to the non-profit sector advocating for affordable housing which led her to another pivotal intersection between her career and personal life.

***Kelly:** I had made a bunch of connections with people all over the city. And Boston City Councilor, At-Large, Annissa Essaibi George and I hit it off pretty well and she invited me to come work for her at City Hall. And I got to do lots of stuff with her, but one of the things that meant the most to me, and probably led me here to even talking to you today, was working with her on the homelessness and recovery committee. Conversations that I had with her a lot was– I was sitting in these meetings with people that have no idea that I'd been through this experience in my life...*

AB: And it was while working with City Councilor Essaibi George on the Committee on Homelessness, Mental Health, and Recovery, that Kelly started to warm up to the idea of sharing her personal experiences.

***Kelly:** It took me a while and I just only when I started working in her office started slowly telling people that I was formerly homeless.*

AB: For Kelly, opening up about her past has been a part of her ongoing healing process. And that process isn't linear.

I got my first apartment studio apartment in Jamaica Plain. It's one of the proudest moments of my life, and I love it and I'm so happy, but the leading up to it, I had a total breakdown. Like, until those checks got cashed for me to move, I

didn't believe it was happening. And I was so scared. And then I was like, 'Okay, once my stuff is in there, I'll feel safe.' And my stuff's here, and, uh, still scared to lose it all. [chuckles] Can't shake that. But yes— happy, grateful, one of the best decisions of my life, but it's always in the back of my head that it could just be gone in a second.

AB: Even now that she has her own apartment, a job she loves, and a solid network of support, Kelly lives with the residual trauma of her experiences. And as real as the pain is, so is the joy she reflects on each day from her window.

Kelly: *Every morning that there's a sunrise that can be seen, that's the first thing I see when I open my eyes. And there's usually a sunset too. And like, I don't know why, but that gives me the most hope ever. It keeps risin' and it keeps settin'. [laughs]*

[music fades out]

AB: Kelly has grown into an incredible woman. She's strong, vibrant, and secure. And even with zoom, windows, screens, walls, and miles between us, I felt her warmth and sincerity as if we were sitting next to one another.

The way her thoughts and memories flowed once I asked her to just jump right in, you'd never know this was Kelly's first time telling her story in its entirety. I was honored to be on the receiving end of what felt like a gift. Kelly has graciously allowed us to share her story with you today. And in her own words...

Kelly: *You never know who's going to hear that one thing from your story that's gonna hit them in a certain way.*

[theme music comes in]

I know it's like such a cliché thing to say, but you're not alone— more people than you probably think have experienced one, if not all, if not more of these situations in their life.

When I saw this place that I moved to and they showed me, 'Oh, here's the view,' I can see the pond. And I was just like— the first thing I thought was like, 'I slept there. And now I could sleep here.'

Next episode, we'll learn about a vital resource for folks experiencing homelessness: day shelter programs.

Don't Walk By is a podcast brought to you by Winter Walk Boston - an event and initiative raising awareness and funds towards an end to homelessness in Greater Boston.

Episodes are written and produced by Isabel Hibbard.

Audio production and sound design is by Kevin O'Connell.

This episode was made in partnership with Bridge Over Troubled Waters and Y2Y Network.

You can learn more about any of the organizations mentioned in the episode and how you can help at winterwalkboston.org.

I'm Ari Barbanell, the Executive Director of Winter Walk and your host.

Thanks for listening.

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END OF EPISODE.