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Hey, everybody, welcome back to the podcast, empower her wellness. I have with me Heather Hester today. And I'm so excited to talk with you, Heather.

So thanks so much for joining me today. Thank you so much for having me. It is such a delight to be with you and to chat with you about one of my very favorite topics in the whole world.

Thank you so much. Thank you. So Heather, you're also a podcast host, you have a podcast, Just Breathe, parenting your LGBTQ plus teen.

You're also author of the book parenting with pride, unlearn bias and embrace empower and love your LGBTQ plus teen. I get those right? You did. Yes.

Awesome. And for all my listeners, we'll put all those links down below in the show notes so they can reference that. But Heather, I would just love for you to start with your story, how you got into this line of work with parents of LGBTQ plus teens.

Absolutely. Yes. So it started way back about eight or nine years ago, when my oldest son, I have four kids, but my oldest son when he was 16, when he came out as gay, and we, my husband and I were, did not see it coming.

We were completely blindsided and blindsided. And the, I always have to say it wasn't that we were upset or angry. It was that we were, we were shocked.

We didn't, we had no idea. And then we were like, Oh, well, what do we do? How do we do this? Right? How do you parent a kid who, you know, a teenage kid who's gay? And, and so there were a lot of things that kind of initially came up in the first six, eight, 12 months after Connor came out, that really made it so obvious to us how underprepared we were and how little we knew about how to, you know, support a kid who isn't like your, you know, quote unquote, normal, typically developing kid. Right.

And he struggled with a ton of mental health struggles. He had substance use issues. There were, I mean, the number of things that just kind of kept piling up that we kept learning about in those first couple months were just more than we could keep up with.

Like we would learn about something and then we'd be like, okay, yes, we've got that. And then something else would pop up, but I'm sure parents, you know, all over can identify with that because that's not specific to having an LGBTQ kid. But anyway, about 18 months into our journey with Connor.

And once we were in a place where he was, was doing much better and, you know, kind of beginning this path of, you know, just really discovering who he was, appreciating who he was not hating who he was. I kind of could take a breath. And at that point, I was like, this is insane that it was this difficult for us to find support, to find, you know, people to talk to.

And when we live in a, you know, relatively progressive area, but we realized when he came out that really wasn't as progressive as we thought it was. We had no idea where to even

reach out. And I will say that, you know, there are many national organizations that are phenomenal and those were super helpful, but what we needed was like a place that, that had, you know, that had parents that had, you know, people who were educated on this topic who could really give us very specific direction or resources or information.

And that's what we really had a hard time finding. So that's why I decided to create it myself. And so this really started out in a very organic, like, I just want, I don't want other parents to go through what we did.

It was so hard. It was so frightening. We had three younger siblings who we were parenting and raising at the same time.

And it was just, the whole thing was just really, really difficult. And so I first created chrysalis mama which is just a resource website, essentially. I mean, now it houses all the things that I do, but when I started it, it was just, here's all of the great resources that I found and let me start getting this out into the world.

And then five years ago this month, I started the podcast, just breathe. And, and again, that I started it as a way to reach more people to get this information that I had learned about that I had found. And to just let people, parents and people who know and love LGBTQ people know that they're not alone, that there are others who are on this journey, because I've also found that oftentimes people don't want to talk about it.

People are very afraid to talk about it. They're not sure who they can talk to about having a kid who's gay or a kid who's trans or a kid who's non-binary and, and, and often don't have, you know, the under, you know, language to be able to describe. So that is how the podcast came to be.

And then I was fortunate enough to meet somebody who then introduced me to my publisher who helped me publish this book in this spring. And yeah, and I've just kind of added coaching in as people, everything has just happened in this very organic, lovely way. And it took me actually a couple of years to be like, oh, I could do this like as a job.

Like it was very much like, well, this is a really great, like passion project. Like it was so, and I still feel so passionately about it that I'm like, well, this is great. Like, I really love what I do, but I also, you know, a lot of the time I'm kind of on fire about it.

So it is, it's a little stressful. Well, we need, we need people on fire about this topic. And so it's what I think.

Well, thank you for sharing that story. So I'm curious, how does Connor feel about you sharing his story to the world? I love, I love that question. Because he, he, he's so supportive.

He's been actually a guest on the podcast. Oh, fun. Yeah, multiple times.

And I would not do any of this. In fact, I if I start, you know, if I kind of go into a new topic, or if I'm, you know, really digging into language and trying to understand things, I always go to him and, and his other, you know, his other siblings, because they're all either young. Yeah.

You know, they know things. They know things. Exactly.

But he's really good. I mean, he's been wonderful about sharing his story. And he's come on, actually, he's come on to my podcast and in the book, and shared very openly and honestly, from his perspective, which has been super helpful too, because of course, it's a completely different perspective than what the perspective is.

So well, I asked that question, I was super curious, because I know how kids are, and I was like, Oh, mom. He's been really, really great. And I think too, because, you know, I came from a background that was very conservative, both with religion and politics.

And, and over the years, like, I thought I had kind of gotten to a point where I'm like, you know, I'd really done some shifting as a, just an adult, and then as a parent. And, and when he came out, I realized, Oh, my gosh, like, I don't know anything. So and I think for them to like, kind of understanding how all of that works, like, having me like, really put work into learning everything I could learn and doing a ton of my own personal work.

And they've been just so awesome and supportive and happy that I'm doing this. So it's cute. Their friends are really sweet about it.

And yeah, it's, it's very nice. Oh, that's good. That's good to hear.

So I do have a question. I don't know how comfortable you would be with sharing this. But so you said Connor, didn't like himself, he has some substance abuse issues, where what, what did that stem from? Why did he have those those feelings? Hmm.

You mean, why did he not like himself? Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I, I, you know, and all the, the talking and the therapy and everything that you know, that he's done that we've done. It really stemmed from like this, the messaging that our kids receive, right? There was just this overall, and they are hit by it all the time, every single day, and a million different ways, telling them that being LGBTQ plus, wherever you fall in that is bad.

It's wrong. It's gross. It's, you know, fill in the blank with an adjective, right? And and it doesn't matter.

I mean, it's great to have parents who are supportive and loving, but there's still like, there's so much you're fighting against. And so the more we realize like, where it was coming from, because of course, that was our first thought was like, but we love you, and we support you. And how can you like think you're bad, right? And I think so many parents feel that way, because they're like, but I'm doing everything I can to support you.

And you're amazing. And you're wonderful. And this is beautiful.

And you're what all the things. And yes, that is extraordinarily important. And they're still getting all this stuff.

So that is where it stemmed from. And, and of course, now, thankfully, he's, you know, he has done enough work, and he has grown a ton. And, you know, it's all part of this process.

But he is to a point where, you know, yes, does it still bother him? Of course, like, you know, as it would any work human, he's human. But I think, you know, just having matured and having his people, right? And he lives in New York City, he has his people, he has, you know, others who have been through parallel, you know, coming out processes. So, yeah, I can't figure that was the answer.

I just was, you know, curious, because I know that, you know, it's, it's, it's a struggle for, for teens and stuff, regardless. I mean, where they are in life, they've got all this peer pressure and all these messages that they see, I will say, as you were talking, I was thinking about how I am glad to see more commercials and TV shows with, you know, like, gay couples and things like that. So I'm really happy to see those things.

And I'm hoping that Oh, yeah, yeah. And I'll make a comment once in a while, I'll be like, well, I'm sure that commercial piss some people off, but I love it. Oh, my gosh, I literally do that all the time.

All the time. And I, I will say, Okay, so I don't know if you've seen and I have not watched it yet. But it's the new documentary with Will and Harper.

Well, but my partner, Steve has watched it. Okay. I cannot wait to watch it.

I just need to set aside some time to watch that. But I when I saw it, when I first saw that coming out, I thought the exact same thing. I was like, Oh, that's really gonna make some people mad.

And Bravo, like so well done. Like it made me just love him even more. Yeah.

But yes, it's funny. I was just doing this talk a couple weeks ago. And this was like a big piece of what I talked about was the importance of representation and the importance of not just our kids, but LGBTQ plus people in general being able to look around and see themselves in media and, you know, in books and movies and advertisements, right.

I mean, it's for someone who, you know, who is cisgender that you don't even think about it, right. Because we're, I'm represented everywhere all the time. So it doesn't even faze me.

But when you think about, Holy cow, like the difference that makes, and especially for kids who are like, Oh my gosh, that person looks like me. Like that's, that's me. Right.

Like how huge that is. It's amazing. Yeah.

Oh yeah. That that's really important for, for kids. I agree.

And we're going to talk about the broader implications of all that further on in the episode, but I do want to talk about your, you support parents through this journey. And I was really curious about the four pillars that you have embrace, educate, empower, and love. Is that sort of like a process you move your parents through, or just explain a little bit about how that, how that helps, helps your parents.

Yeah. I, you know, it's funny when I, I was kind of early on, like looking for something that would like represent kind of what we went through. Like, so I took a lot of time kind of really analyzing like our process.

And then as I began to just talk to people before I even started working with parents, like learning, you know, about their processes and how, you know, what they, cause everybody's so different, right. It's not like there's this cookie cutter, like first you do this and then you do this and everybody looks the same. Like everybody's story is so vastly different.

So I knew that I needed to have, I wanted to have something that would really, that people could kind of embrace, but would really feel like a part of, right. That they could see themselves in each of these steps and be like, Oh, I connect to this specific thing. So, you know, I, they, they kind of came, they came to me really in a short period of time, but it like made sense over a longer period of that, if that makes sense.

I don't know. Okay. Thank you.

So I will say that, you know, the kind of the way that I always envision it is that you, so you have to do one before you get to the next, so in order to really fully educate, right. And I'll even take a step back from that and say, like, go into the title of my book, which is unlearned bias. So it's that whole piece of, we all have biases, every single one of us, that is not a judgmental statement.

It is a factual, we all have them based on a million different reasons. Right. But before we can even take a at our biases, right.

We have to embrace what's, what we have coming to us, right. We have to say, okay, my kid has come out to me as in our zip case, gay. What does that mean? Right.

Like I, and how am I going to approach this? Right. Okay. I love this kid.

I want to support this kid. I see this situation. I acknowledge that this is whatever that means to you, like that word embrace, like it can really cover a lot of things.

So you have to have that first before you can step into, okay, now, now I need to face up to like, what are the things that are feeling sticky or uncomfortable? Right. Like what do I need to like really take a look at and be like, why do I, why do I think that, what, where does that come from? And, and how do I let go of that? Right. And, and then what do I need to learn? Like, what are the things that I need to learn about? So that's kind of a two step process there.

And then you can't begin to empower yourself, right. Or empower others until you've done this whole kind of exercise or this, you know, experienced the unlearning and the relearning, and then that in and of itself empowers you. Right.

And then it allows you the opportunity to empower, whether it's your child or other people in your life, right. Encourage them to unlearn and relearn. And then I kind of, you know, love, even though it's the last one, I always picture it in my mind as being kind of like this surrounding bubble, right? Like the other three are inside of it.

But I don't, and this might be a little sticky of a comment or controversial of a comment, but I do not think that you can unconditionally love without understanding all of those pieces. I think that people use that word, that phrase, but I do love you unconditionally. I, I just don't, right.

Or, but, or, you know, all the things that people don't even hear what they're saying and they don't understand the implications of that, but it's so huge. And so I kind of have it, I have it at the end because you need to understand the other three pieces, but I always, in my mind, it's like the all encompassing, like big hug. I think that's a great, I don't think that was too sticky at all.

I think that was a great, great way to say that because I still agree. Unconditional is unconditional, right? So, yeah. So, you're talking about unlearning biases and stuff.

And so how difficult is that for parents? Cause I know that whether it's, you know, your religion or your family of origin, or, you know, just maybe your culture or something, that's gotta be extremely difficult for parents. And this really goes to the next question. So I'm just going to ask the next question.

You can like wrap this all up into that. But so what are the struggles that the parents of LGBTQ plus teens, what are, what struggles do they, do they face whether it's internally or externally? What are you, what are you seeing there? Sure. Well, I think, I think you teed that up very, very well because it does stem exactly from whatever their particular biases might be.

And I think that kind of the initial struggle with that is not recognizing that you have biases, right? It's just because it's something that is so subtle. It's something that you typically have were raised with or just, it was in your environment as you were growing up or as you know, into adulthood, whatever it might be. So it's something that people have a really hard time even seeing at first.

So it can be anything from, you know, religious beliefs, which you know, encompass a number of things there. It can be your political beliefs, right? It can be, I mean, those are the, the, the big two but it can also be just kind of culturally what is acceptable, right? If you are depending what your culture is it so many different things. But I, I kind of want to go back because I feel like I need to say a little bit more.

I kind of skimmed over that, but I feel like understanding like that step. So yes, we all understand it can come from a million different things and you can all, I'm sure as people are listening or like, oh yeah, it could be this, this or this. So, but being able like that step right there to be able to stop and think like, I can go back right now in the moment that Connor told me and he told me on the phone, he had run away.

I was 2000 miles away. I mean, this poor baby, I literally like, it still breaks my heart, but he, when I finally got in touch with him and he, you know, he tells me on the phone and, and I literally was, I still like, and I will never forget this moment for the rest of my life in that moment being, of course I was terrified because he had been missing for two hours and I was 2000 miles away. And my reaction was, thank God, I thought you were dead.

And in my mind, I thought there's no way this kid is going to hell. There's no way. And I like, I remember it's so weird.

Like when I think back to it and I've like written about it a lot and I think that's probably why it still sticks with me too. But I remember like, it was such a defining moment for me to be like, okay, I've got to examine all of this because this is what I was taught. And there's no way that can be true.

No way. I just knew in my gut and in my soul that that was wrong. And so, you know, not everybody has that kind of like, but you know, not everybody's kid comes out so dramatically either.

So, but that was like a, such a helpful piece for me. Cause what it did was like pull that first string. Right.

So once I started pulling on that and like pulling things apart, then, you know, as you, as they do like more kind of bubbles up and you're like, oh, well let me examine this. So I think that's really where parents, that's what's most difficult for them is their stuff, right? It's not that they don't love their kid. It's not that they don't want to support them in most cases it is.

They struggle so much with their own stuff. And so having, and it's hard to like face our stuff and, and be like, oh, well that kind of sucks that I feel that way. And I've always thought that, and I've behaved this way and I've said this out loud.

And so it's, it's hard to be vulnerable. It's hard to, to just go through all of that. And it's hard to go back to your kid and be like, Hey, oh my gosh, you know, I'm now realizing in the work that I'm doing that I may have said this, this, and this, or I did say this, this, and this, or I did behave in this way.

And I'm so sorry. Gosh, that sucks. And I probably made you feel like crap.

And I'm really sorry about that. Right. That's hard to do because, you know, it just requires a lot of shifting and we're all capable of doing it.

I did it. So many people I've worked with have done it. Yeah.

So it's interesting. You talk about people stuck in their stuff and having to work through that here where I live, we have a, um, uh, organization rare breed. It's part of the, the kitchen who work with homeless people, but they have set up a center for teens and runaways.

And a lot of them are LGBTQ because they'll, they'll be kicked out of their families. And I think maybe some people are just so stuck in their stuff that the first thing they do is like, you know, get out. I don't want it, which is, which is heartbreaking, but you have to understand that it is difficult for people, not that I excuse their behavior by any means, but it is really difficult for people to get out of their stuff, regardless of what topic we're talking about, you know? And hopefully, yeah.

And I will say to that, that I, um, you know, after all these years of doing this, what I recognize is that that is all steeped in such fear. And there's so much fear of the what if, right? So like, I think about some, some of my own family members who just can't like, they just cannot do it. And I've recognized over time, like it is such deeply seated, you know, all of this stuff is so that they can't see past it.

Like they are so afraid that it's just easier for them to, you know, it would be too much for them to like pull that apart. Right. I just, I look at some of the cases and I think, yeah, that's it.

I mean, a lot of the, you know, the hate and the ugliness comes from fear. You know, this might be a sticky, uh, part of our conversation too, but I, I have a hard time understanding the fear because I, I don't understand that. I just don't understand the fear.

Like what are people afraid of? Well, I think, okay. So I, I will just share this very, very honestly. Um, I, when I speak of family members, I speak of my own parents.

So I remember thinking like when Connor came out, I was like, well, it's their grandson. Yeah. Like I'm their daughter.

Yeah. Of course they're going to like be curious. Right.

Because I think that first step is like, just be curious. Like wonder, I wonder, um, I would like to know more. Right.

Just doing that little bit. And they were incapable of doing that. And I thought, okay, well maybe there's, they just need time, right? Because they're both very, very steeped in their, um, religious beliefs and their, um, just their belief system.

And I was like, we'll give them time. I will just share, gently share, right. As I, as I do all these things that I've been doing over time.

And I finally realized as I've done my own work and I've like, kind of, as I've separated and back and learned more and more that the reason why I'll back that up. So much of what I was taught was steeped in fear. So like all of our, and this is not for everyone.

And I'm not saying this as a blanket statement, I'm saying this is very specific to my experience, my, but I've found other people who connect with this. And that is, I was, I was controlled by fear as a child, as an adolescent, as a young adult, as a, you know, adult, and very much of the fear of like going against, right. So going against what their belief system was going against their religion, going against, you know, their God.

And, and I say that in quotes, because I don't, I see God very differently than they do. Um, and so the more I was like, Oh, that's what that is. Like, it just became more.

And I was like, they're so afraid. They're so fearful that if they even allow themselves to see Connor to say, Oh, I, this is really beautiful. How cool is it that he like has connected with his authentic self? How beautiful is it that God made him this way? Right.

How amazing, you know, to watch this and to know that no human being would ever choose to be LGBTQ plus, if you've ever known anybody who's come out, you know, that's not a choice, right? People don't choose to be persecuted and to go through all of the things, right. So I, it was such a light bulb moment for me. And I will tell you, it's only come in like the past 18 months where I've been like, Oh, okay.

But it is. And so then I've been able to be like, be able to see it in others as well and recognize when it comes like, that's where that's coming from. Is that just fear of whatever their flavor of fear happens to be.

Well, I appreciate your honesty in that, because like I said, um, I probably need to be a little more tolerant of people who maybe don't understand or fearful, not well tolerant, maybe not be the right word, but a little more understanding, I guess is the word I'm trying to think, because I, like I said, I just, I don't under, I don't understand the fear. So it's really hard for me not to just like be like, people, I, I a thousand percent agree with you. And I will say that, you know, and I am not here 50% of the time, but when I am in a really good head space, I can say, I have compassion and I, I don't understand it.

I don't think we have to understand. And I don't think we tolerate. Right.

But I think we can have compassion in the sense that, gosh, I feel bad that they're missing out. Like, right. Like they're missing out.

And, and, and gosh, it's sad to like, I have, I feel for people who live in such fear and who live in such judgment and such narrow confines of a belief system, um, that they miss out on like so much joy and knowing so many different human beings, different, you know, just such a diverse collection of humans. So, so many interesting people in the world to talk to so many interesting people.

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