

Intro: Hi there! I'm Haley and I'm Sophie and we're your Perspectives podcast hosts. The Perspectives podcast is a graduate run program exploring various public health topics in an effort to learn from experts in the field and the community from varied backgrounds and areas of inquiry. We explore topics within and outside of standard public health discourse, but our conversations relate to subjects that impact all of us on various levels of wellbeing. We're glad you're here and we're excited to learn alongside you.

Sophie: Today, we are joined by Lauren Roberts, who works for the Thriving Initiative. The Thriving Initiative is a 501c3 non-profit organization dedicated to inspiring resilience in response to violence by promoting holistic community healing initiatives. Thank you so much, Lauren for joining us today. To kick things off, can you tell us about yourself?

Lauren: Thanks so much for having me. I am the Executive Director of the Thriving Initiative, a non-profit that serves survivors of interpersonal violence, sexual assault, stalking, dating and domestic violence on college campuses.

Sophie: Could you tell us a bit about your educational background? Or how you ended up in this role?

Lauren: Sure. The Thriving Initiative started out of a scholarship grant that I actually received during my undergraduate career at UC Santa Barbara, and it was never expected to become a full non-profit. But when we started doing the work on campus, we really saw the impact and the need for services like this. Essentially, there was a huge gap in the aftercare for survivors of interpersonal violence on campus. We know that four out of five survivors on college campuses aren't receiving any victim services support and in trying to reach a situation where we could begin to address that issue, we really wanted to build a program that didn't *center* trauma. Many of the current resources are support groups where a survivor has to come ready to share some of the worst experiences of their life. Depending on cultural background, personality, just how you feel comfortable with that, so many people weren't feeling ready to access a resource like that. So we really wanted to create something where survivors could gain access to different coping tools, learn how to use boundaries in the aftermath of interpersonal violence and just build community together, and that's what became the Thriving Initiative. So my background really wasn't supposed to be in something like this, I studied Biological Anthropology and Italian studies as an undergrad, and once I started doing this work, there was no stopping it. I mean seeing the impact of something like this is transformative and for the past three years, I've been doing this work and supported by incredible mentors who have been doing this even longer and can give that educational background, so we have different therapists come in, and we're definitely leaning on the community element of the work.

Sophie: That's really awesome and really inspiring to how it came about. What sparked your particular interest in this work?

Lauren: The community need is enormous. I mean we've always known that so many people are affected by interpersonal violence, and the UN reports that one in three women, the CDC says One in four women in the US and one in 10 male identifying people, so it's something that indirectly or directly affects nearly everyone. And seeing the lack of resources in my community was really shocking to me, I think I always expected that, it's such a big issue, there's so many people working on it, of course there's gonna be resources for this huge need. And the reality was that although there are, you know, incredible people

doing incredible work, offering resources, it wasn't enough, we still had, in my community, definitely saw four out of five students not feeling comfortable reaching out for resources, and so we really tried to decrease the barrier of entry that so many people face, particularly people of color, people living with disabilities, LGBTQ community. Our programs serve those populations more than historically, other programs have, and that's something that we're really proud of and we really keep at the forefront of our work.

Sophie: Thank you, Lauren. What impact have you seen the initiative have on its participants?

Lauren: The impact of these programs is so important, it's the whole reason that we do this work to begin with. And what we see throughout the seven weeks of the workshop series is decreases in anxiety, sleeping difficulties, flashbacks, and these are issues that survivors spend their entire lifetimes navigating. And to see such a huge decrease in classic symptoms of PTSD, and anxiety, depression that often a company interpersonal violence was just hugely motivating in the beginning stages of this work, and then something that we continue to see improve throughout time. We've also seen increases and sense of safety, sense of community, and ability to use coping strategies, all the things that really support survivors and regaining agency over their lives and really helping that recovery process.

Haley: So zooming out to the topic in general, can you share a little bit more about what interpersonal violence is?

Lauren: Yeah, so interpersonal violence often refers to sexual assault, stalking, dating, and domestic violence, sometimes it can also be referred to as gender violence or a power-based violence. It's a huge public health issue in our community and around the world.

Haley: Yeah, absolutely. And how has interpersonal violence changed due to the events in the past few years, for example, COVID?

Lauren: That is the quintessential question of our time, and really I think the United Nations put it best, referring to it as a shadow pandemic. So essentially, you know we have the pandemic, which is on the forefront of everyone's mind. But what happens in homes when we're not able to connect with other people, when we're deprived of this innate social need that people have and the ability to access support resources, which is hugely important for survivors in the aftermath of trauma, whether it's a month, a year, 10 years, after the instance or instances, you really need to be able to access the support network, and so not only do we see increased anxiety and isolation for people who had already experienced interpersonal violence, but the rates of increased interpersonal violence were off the charts, and we can't even fully know just how prevalent it was. We know that statistics across the board are not representative, but one thing that we can really rely on is the organizations that are doing this work saw a huge increase in calls to hotlines and access to their services. And our organization was no exception to that, our rates definitely skyrocketed during the pandemic as well.

Haley: So your organization, you deal with managing and supporting victims in the aftermath of interpersonal violence, how can interpersonal violence be prevented in the first place?

Lauren: That's a really great question. Coming from such a Survivor-oriented work, my initial response to that has to be about survivors and what the perspective is there. So holding perpetrators accountable is definitely a huge step that we can take as a country, as a society, to be able to address that, and that definitely requires a revamping of these systems that do not support survivors by nature. So we're talking about the legal system, and on a university level, we work with student survivors often times, and the university is one system that you would think is supporting survivors because we have the education, we know that it's such a huge issue, we know that it disproportionately happens on college campuses, yet the Title IX process often betrays survivors in a very similar way to the legal system, and there's a huge inequity in survivors from low income backgrounds being able to have the legal support or even know that they need the support to be able to appropriately enter a system like that. So essentially, two of the key pieces from the survivor side and how we address this are: reporting and accountability. The other piece of it that I would share is just supporting and believing in survivors is a huge way that we can increase our ability to address the prevalence of the issue, which I think will help prevent it in the long term. And then education, of course. People need to know about how to have healthy relationships, what those signs are when a relationship is not so healthy, what consent is. And there's a lot of incredible work being done right now to increase that and to work on prevention efforts. The last piece of prevention to us doing this work, supporting survivors is definitely the after-care, like the aftermath of interpersonal violence, how do we support survivors so that they're feeling stable, so that they're in a safe place, so that they have the resources and coping skills that they need to not be in a situation where they might be vulnerable to another instance of interpersonal violence. And unfortunately, it's a huge statistical phenomenon that when someone experiences interpersonal violence, they're actually more likely to experience it again

Haley: Earlier you were chatting about how the Thriving Initiative doesn't use the normal approach to dealing with interpersonal violence, in that it's not solely focused on bringing back up those traumas. For anyone listening, I think it would be worth making that distinction between Trauma-centered and Trauma-informed services. So can you share a little bit of a difference between trauma-centered and trauma-informed care?

Lauren: Definitely. So for a lot of support groups, they're based around centering trauma and really creating a safe space to process that as a group, usually led with clinicians and licensed therapists who are prepared to discuss that. So that's trauma-centered, and it can be really helpful for some people. But for many people, what can be equally or perhaps more helpful is trauma-informed care, which is really a big term these days, you'll hear about trauma-informed yoga, a trauma-informed medical care, and it can extend far beyond interpersonal violence, but it's definitely crucial when taking a lens of being survivor-oriented and really practicing trauma-informed care. So that's the acknowledgement that people have experienced all sorts of trauma, including interpersonal violence, and essentially with that, you really want to be treating anyone they might have experienced interpersonal violence because statistically, it's very possible. So a big piece of that is offering choices, making sure that you're using language that's inclusive, that's appropriate, checking in with how someone's feeling, things like that. In our work really how this plays out is that we create a space where everyone is trauma-informed, where we're inviting in local clinicians, instructors who have experience working with survivors of interpersonal violence, and we train all of our co-facilitators in that way, so when participants come to us to go through a workshop series to participate in healing workshops such as gardening, yoga, journaling, art and things like that, they're

able to come to the space knowing that we're gonna have a trauma-informed approach, that we're gonna be respectful of everyone's boundaries, that there's the ability to navigate to say, I actually don't wanna talk about this, I wanna step out now, we really provide a lot of options to make sure that everyone is trained to be trauma-informed.

Haley: And unfortunately, interpersonal violence is not unique to college campuses, so are there any ways that this approach, that your services and that your practice can be expanded beyond those borders to reach more folks?

Lauren: Being trauma-informed is something that everyone can work to do, and it's a worthwhile investment in your education anywhere for anyone to make sure to really think critically about how your actions are making other people feel, and essentially, that's the basis of being trauma-informed is really coming from a place of how is what I'm doing gonna affect the mental or physical state of someone else? Being really conscientious about that, and it's definitely not a term that we coined, it's very famous, and a lot of people have been doing this work to extend it. Something that our organization has been working on recently is a trauma-informed workplace, so how do we create policies that make everyone feel a bit more comfortable, that really have our values at heart. And some of the things that we've had our people become more conscientious about is definitely language, so are we inviting people to come into a space or are we mandating it? So how do we create more choices and options for people, how do we use language that feels inclusive, how do we even set up a room so that someone who might be feeling uncomfortable if we're talking about something a little bit heavy can leave without it being a big deal? There's even little things that just doing this work for a long time, you'll start to notice make people feel a lot more comfortable, and there's tons of literature about it as well.

Haley: Lauren what have you personally learned from working in this space?

Lauren: It's really hard to answer that question and really make it short and concise, but I think the biggest thing that I've learned from the space is just the willingness from people to create change and to want to be a part of something that's positive. And I think as we're really navigating ways to increase healing and increase accessibility to these different resources, the willingness from a community to come together, whether that's the courageous act of choosing to participate in one of these workshops and come forward, perhaps for the first time as a survivor, to express interest in the first place, for our donors to put their finances into this as an investment in their community, and for all the supporters who have just offered advice or resources or other connections, I mean there is truly a limitless network with people who want to do good, and I think that's the most important thing that I learned in this work is that you don't need to be a genius. You don't need to have the highest degree to make a difference, and really there's so many community members who want to make that change, and there's infinite possibilities for everyone to do that in the way they interact with their day-to-day life and the way they spend their time or their money.

Haley: Absolutely. You don't have to be a genius. You just need to be a human.

Lauren: Definitely.

Sophie: Speaking of making change, how can students and others get involved in efforts like the thriving initiative?

Lauren: There are so many ways to get involved. If you're interested specifically in our organization, you can definitely go to our website, thethrivinginitiative.org, and reach out to anyone on our team to get involved, we're definitely looking for new campuses that wanna implement a program like this. So there's lots of opportunities there. But if you're in a community somewhere very far away and you're not sure this is the right fit, and you just wanna make the change, I encourage you to look into your local support network, Rainn is a really amazing organization that has lots of different local advocacy in different local support groups, so you could definitely start there. I think going back to my previous answer about how everyone wants to help, if you see a need in your community, whether it's interpersonal violence or something else, I really encourage you to look for mentors and people who can support you in that work. Feel free to reach out or visit our website or our social media.

Haley: And how can we support people who have experience with personal violence, how can we support them ourselves?

Lauren: That's a fantastic question. And really the best thing that you can do to support survivors is to listen, to believe them full-heartedly, to know that you don't need to have every detail, you don't need to ask every question to know that they've been through something horrible, and to be there to support them. Another big piece of it is support shouldn't just end after one conversation, and I think that's something that a lot of people fall into. It's like, Did I check all the boxes? I listened, I believed them like, okay, I'm good. And it's like, No. This is something that's going to affect your friend or whoever felt enough trust in you to tell you this, it's a really huge symbol of trust and respect, and it's your obligation as a friend or someone who is in that position to believe them to trust them, and then to make sure that you're following up with them to help them access resources that they might need to be open to, if they want you to walk them somewhere, I mean the options are limitless. Really just making sure that you continue to be there and that you're always open to just checking in, and it doesn't have to be specific to this, but I think the biggest things to do for someone who's experienced interpersonal violence is listen, believe them, help them access resources, and continue to support them throughout an extended period of time.

Haley: Those are small gestures that can have large and lasting impacts.

Sophie: So what are some resources for people, including potential viewers who may be currently struggling?

Lauren: I really encourage anyone who's struggling or know someone who's struggling with interpersonal violence to reach out to rain, so it's Rainn, rainn.org, and you can call their Sexual Assault hotline and they can connect you with the right resource, that's really the best national resource that I've ever come across, and I think it's something that everyone should know about whether or not it's important to your life, just write the number down, know it in the back of your head, so that you're able to reach out to them for more local support in the future if needed. Another huge issue that survivors often face, unfortunately, survivors are at an increased risk of suicidal ideation, so it's really important to also know that there is a 24/7 lifeline that anyone can call at any time, and these hotlines are definitely not just

for emergencies. If you just feel like you need to chat with someone I really encourage everyone to reach out, and that's called the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. There's lots of resources for everyone and anyone, and if you ever feel like you need help, know that you're not the only one, and that there's plenty of resources and people who really really want to talk to you to support you and to just know how you're doing.

Haley: So I think this kind of wraps things up. Do you have anything else that you'd like to add?

Lauren: I think that was probably everything.

Haley: Cool, well I just wanted to say thank you so much, this was really inspiring, and I know what you're doing is not easy, but really important work, so thank you for sharing some of that with us.

Lauren: Thank you, I really appreciate you taking the time, and I listened to some of your other podcasts, and I think they're really great. It's important work that you're doing to get all these different pieces out there, so I really appreciate that.

Outro: If you would like to learn more about this topic we've attached resources for you in the description of this episode. Thank you again for joining us today and we hope we'll see you next time.