

Open Doors

Season 1 Episode 5: Stop the Judgment

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Shannon Fagan 00:05

Welcome to open doors a podcast from the Allegheny intermediate unit that explores the people, programs and partnerships making a difference in students' lives. I'm your host. Shannon Fagan, together, we're opening doors to learning, support and connection so every student can thrive.

Shannon Fagan 00:27

Some stories are born from heartbreak but grow into hope after losing their daughter Sienna to struggles with mental health and substance use. Sherry, Joe, Matt and Tom bott founded the stop the judgment project, a foundation dedicated to breaking down stigma and sparking honest conversations through workshops in schools across western Pennsylvania, the couple encourages young people to speak openly seek support and replace judgment with compassion. Good morning. Tom and Sherry, Joe, how are you guys today? Great. Thank you doing well. Thank you, Shannon, thanks for coming in for Open Doors our podcast at the Allegheny intermediate to talk about your program. Stop the judgment I've had the experience of having you guys come to an event and talk about the program, and it's so heartfelt and so important to get your message out to our school districts, our communities and the families that we serve. So I'd just like to ask you a few questions about stop the judgment. But I really want to start with the two of you and who you are and how this got started.

Sherry Jo Matt 01:29

For you Sure. Well, I'm Sherry, Joe, and we started this foundation after our daughter passed. Sienna had struggled with mental health issues. She had bipolar and borderline personality disorders, and she self medicated, and she passed away from a fentanyl overdose on September 14, 2020, so we decided we could either curl up in a ball and do nothing, or we could march forward and help others.

Shannon Fagan 02:01

Very powerful. Thank you. Tom, would you like to add?

Tom Bott 02:07

Well, certainly, Sienna struggles really is the the impetus for these educational workshops that we're going to talk about and share with you in a little bit, because that's what we share with the students. Sienna struggles her journey, and you know, some of the things that that we did right and did wrong with her, so, but yeah, it's, it's difficult. You know, it's when you lose a child, it the hurt never goes away, that loss never goes away. So, yeah, yeah. But I do think that Sienna would want us, as Sherry mentioned, you know, when you face a tragedy like that, you do have two choices. And I think Sienna really would be proud of us that we've moved forward and shared her story so we can help others.

Shannon Fagan 02:57

Yeah, yeah, she's from watching the videos of her, she was so full of light, and I think her story is, I don't want to say it's not unique, because we do have so many students that are facing these challenges right now. And she was in support. She had a team around her. And still, unfortunately, this happened, but your ability to take that pain and make it into something positive, so other students don't go through this, other families don't have to face this, is just admirable, and that's why I wanted to have you in again to talk about what stop the judgment is how you thought about doing this program like I know the tragedy of it, but what sparked your ability to do the sherry Joe in the face of this?

Sherry Jo Matt 03:45

Well, when I was writing, you know, it's not normal to write your child's obituary, but when I was writing Santa's obituary, unbeknownst to me, we would actually end up calling the foundation stop the judgment. We added project because it's going to go on for the rest of our life, and there's no end in sight to the work that needs to be done. But when I wrote our obituary, I talked about the shackles of mental health and the handcuffs of addiction or vice versa. But it's in there, and at the end, I put stop the judgment exclamation point. And when we were looking for a name for the foundation. I was like, oh, one pill could kill. Tom's like, Oh, that's a little angry sounding. I'm like, yeah, it is, but it's true, one pill can kill and does. But Tom has a softer side than I do, and he's like, No, let's call it stop the judgment project. And it was literally like, maybe three months ago, I was rereading her obituary, and it was right there at the bottom of the obituary, stop the judgment, exclamation point. So that's but I knew when I wrote the obituary we were going to do something Tom absolutely didn't want a foundation. I'm like, Oh no, this is happening, and he has, over time, absolutely embraced this and ran with. The educational portion of the program. Yeah.

Shannon Fagan 05:02

What does that mean? Stop the judgment to you guys.

Sherry Jo Matt 05:07

Well, we have immense guilt because we judged our own daughter and we shamed her. We're like, you're not raised like this. We, you know, I, if I could, if I had a lot of redos, I have a lot of regrets, we would absolutely redo a lot of things differently. We didn't know the extent of sienna's mental health, you know, with the bipolar and the borderline personality disorder, I thought it was all choices that she was making for her behavior, when, in fact, it was her mind making those choices for her. And the addiction became along because she was trying to silence those voices in our head. So now the judgment is not shaming and judging those that experience the same issues and difficulties that our daughter had.

Shannon Fagan 05:50

Wow, and I think people do that because they don't know they don't have the information, or they're just not really sure where to turn.

Sherry Jo Matt 05:57

Yeah, you well when you're in the midst of loving somebody with substance use or mental health. It's so difficult to see the sunlight through the the tunnel, because it's very, very dark. It's like going down a

well, because you go down with them, because you love them, and it's hard to get a grasp on it. And depending on how bad the mental health is it's literally like an AK 47 shooting you with a different subject topic every single day. There's so much to so many fires to put out along the way that you can't catch your breath and you don't know you're exhausted. You are so exhausted you don't know how to help them. You can't help yourself. We couldn't help our son. We couldn't help each other like the whole family suffers, we just don't want to see that anymore.

Shannon Fagan 06:44

Yeah, yeah. And you worry too. You kind of isolate, I would imagine, because of what's happening to you and you you want to keep it in the house or, you know, quiet, yeah, we,

Sherry Jo Matt 06:54

we did. I'm a very social person, and Tom is social as well, but I'm over the top, social usually, and I isolated. I didn't see my friends. I didn't talk to my mother. When I called her to say her granddaughter was dead, she had no idea.

Shannon Fagan 07:11

Blindsided. Wow, yeah, yeah. So you were doing a lot to protect your family in one respect, and then

Tom Bott 07:18

yeah, but in retrospect, or in hindsight, we were judging right and that that that's that stigma that is not helpful. In fact, it causes somebody to isolate themselves even further, which is what our daughter did. I mean, she started to isolate herself from from her family and friends. Wow. And that's when she migrated to a, you know, I'm not going to call them a friend group. It was to a group of people that really did not have her interest at heart at all, didn't care about her, didn't love her, but that was where she was getting her, you know, her attention from Jenny, and they were not looking out for

Shannon Fagan 07:56

her best interest. Yeah. So what brought you to creating this program, and how did you decide we're going to hit the schools? We're going to get out there and present something that students can benefit from.

Sherry Jo Matt 08:08

We had met with Allegheny Health Network through a mutual friend, and we found out about the chill room project that they have, which is an amazing project, and we partnered with them to start going into the schools, and it really was organic. The whole thing's been organic. It has been a wild, wild ride, getting the foundation started. And nobody plans on this, like, this was never like, Oh, here's our five year plan, or whatever. We wing it every day, and we're getting better at having a strategic plan, but it's everything's been organic to date.

Tom Bott 08:44

Yeah, I will say that. So we formed the organization a few months after Sienna passed, so we've been in this February, it'll be five years, and we didn't launch the educational workshop initiative until last year, and we had a our mission statement is to bring awareness to the stigma and judgment associated

with mental health and substance use disorders in adolescent adolescents and young adults, because we are targeting young folks. Because our daughter, she struggled with this through middle and high school, and she died at age 21 so she was very young, but people always believed in our mission, but they would say, Well, what are you guys doing? And we had, we had some smaller wins, as far as some legislation that we, you know, that we were pursuing for, you know, opioid overdose, how to recognize an opioid overdose and administer Narcan. We worked with the Allegheny County Medical Examiner's Office to they updated their website based on our experience and and really made it much more user friendly. So we had some of those wins, but this educational workshop initiative, as Sherry mentioned, it did come out of the introduction to Allegheny Health Network. And Dr will Davies is the brain child behind the show project. And we just love the. Dia. And then we said, look, we'd like to present our story, and we do our presentation in collaboration with Dr Thomas Brophy. So he's the medical director at the Ellen O'Brien geyser center in Butler, but he's also an ER physician, and he's got addiction specialist, and he also has an expertise in the neuroscience behind addiction. So Sherry knew Dr Brophy through Sienna he had, he had met with her through a mutual friend on several occasions, because he he deals with addiction. So I remember Sherry saying, Hey, let's go hear Dr Brophy speak, because I want you to hear his presentation. And when I heard that, it was like, you know, I think the two of us together, we can present something that you know, really together. I think you know, synergistically, we complement each other. And it's really, it's resonated very well with the students and with the schools. Because I think our educational workshop really first, I share the story of Sienna, and, you know, we have slides that will show the students and they don't know that Sienna is my daughter at the time, and I show pictures of sienna in how she just seems like she's lives a full life, right? I mean, she's, you know, she's athletic, she's very smart, she and she even has a big friend group. And then I asked the students, you know, based on outward appearances, would you say Sienna has a has a full life? And you know, most of the hands go up, but then the next slide is, she was struggling. And then I share the story of Seattle struggles that started at age 12. She was sexually abused by four boys, and that's really when she started to struggle with self esteem and image, and unfortunately, her coping mechanisms weren't healthy. She started to cut shortly after that, and then at like, age 14, she turned to alcohol, and there was binge drinking, and there was, you know, episodes there. And then once she got through high school, and she moved out of the house, and she migrated to this, you know, to this bad peer group, if you will, they introduced her to Percocet, and that became her new coping mechanism. And unfortunately, you know, she did take a Percocet pill. Turns out it was synthetically pressed and it had fentanyl in it, and that's how she died.

Shannon Fagan 12:30

Wow, so. And I think the important part about the neuroscience and bringing Dr Brophy in is there, when we think about addiction, we wonder, why can't they just stop what is it that that's going on, that it's just too hard, and people do have that judgment. So he brings in that aspect of what's happening in the brain and why it's so hard to stop and how it's such a challenge to get over that.

Tom Bott 12:53

Yes, yeah, he actually, and he he does a fabulous job with his presentation, but he'll ask the students, in the beginning, you know, is addiction a choice, or is it a disease? And after he gives his presentation, he asked the question again in you know, without exception, I think the students, after they hear that presentation, there's much more that say it's a disease than a choice, but it I think with the two of us, I

think our story opens the hearts for the students, and then it just segues nicely into the neuroscience behind addiction, and the fact that Dr Brophy knew Sienna personally, he can talk to that. And it's just been, it's been very well received by the students. I remember the first time. The one presentation we did it at one of the schools, there was about 450 kids there in the auditorium, and they all have their cell phones. And I'm just thinking, Yeah, you know, are they really, you know, how much are they going to pay attention? Right? Because the cell phone is such a distraction. But for an hour, you could have heard a pin drop, and it was the most empathetic group. Afterwards, they came up and they were telling me, you know, you're so brave to share your story, and yeah, it just really, really touched my heart that they had that empathy, because they've got their struggles, but that's been our experience with these with these students is that they want to hear this message. I mean this, this is something that is important to them and and I think with our presentation, in particularly me sharing Sienna story, is that I think human nature is we tend to think that we're alone in something, and this really makes them become aware that, look, you're not necessarily alone. There's other people that could be struggling and you don't know that. I mean, with with our daughter, Sienna, outward appearances were that she had it all. Turns out, on the inside, she was struggling. I share a story with the with the student. Students that Siena's best friend in high school. She did not know Siena struggles. And then Sienna, when she, after she graduated, and she, you know, got this new group of of we call them horrible, deplorable. Yeah, it was just a bad group of people. But at the end, about a month before Sienna passed, she she severed her, really her ties with these folks, she changed her cell number, and she moved back home, and she really wanted to make some changes in her life, so she reached out to her best friend from high school, and then she shared everything, and her best friend was like, Why didn't you tell me this growing up? And she said, because you would have judged me, and you probably would have stopped being my friend, and I was afraid. So it's that stigma, yeah, so when we share that story, I think that really resonates with the students, and afterwards we'll have a Q and A and there's always a number of students that come up and say, Your daughter's story really spoke to me, because that's how I feel, like I'm all alone and nobody knows what I'm going through.

Shannon Fagan 16:06

So yeah, kids are so afraid to share. They feel they're a burden to others. They feel that there may not be that relation once they talk about what's going on really with them, and that is something that we're working on through our programs at the IU, is to help stamp out the stigmas that happen give students and staff teachers, if you will, skills to notice when things are going down hill, if attendance is off, if appearances are off, if behaviors are different, and then How to seek help so that your program really falls in line with some of the things that we're doing, and our state is doing too. We're seeing more and more data of students who have family members that are affected by substance use, and when they go to school, they don't know how to talk to their peers because they again, they want to hide that from other people. You know, it's embarrassing, or it's, there's a stigma attached to it unfortunately, or, you know, they're seeing people die in front of them from this, or parents go to jail, or relatives friends. So it's, it's broader than people think. And so I think it's just amazing that you guys have been able to take a tragedy and make it into an educational opportunity. So other people, again, don't go through this. So when you are going into a school, what can they expect? So there's the presentation that you share your family story, and then Dr Brophy, but What? What? How do you engage the students?

Tom Bott 17:38

I mean, I think the biggest thing about our program is that we don't talk at the students. We we we talk to them and with them. This isn't a presentation where we say, you know, don't do drugs. It's the opposite. We're very I think, I think my vulnerability, sharing my daughter's story and in letting the students know that our mission, you know, stop the judgment, or, you know, the in stigma that's associated with mental health and substance use disorders, we came by that honestly, and I tell them that my wife and I, we did that. We judged our daughter, we shamed her, we did it out of love, but in retrospect, it was the wrong thing to do, because it pushed her away from us and from her friends, and we were the ones. You know, the one thing these struggles, it's not something you can do by yourself. Yeah, it really does take a village. So that's our message, is, don't keep this inside. You've got to, you know, you've got to share. And if there's less stigma associated with that, then I think there's going to be more of an incentive to do that. But I think with us going in there and really being vulnerable to these students, when I, when I go through the slides and, you know, I say, I want you to meet Sienna, and I show the pictures on the outside looks great. Then I tell her story about the struggles, and then I have a slide that says, Sienna, you know, died or passed on, you know, in September of 2020 at the age of 21 then the next slide is, it gives her name, and I said, that was my daughter. Oftentimes we get this collective gasp from the students, yeah, it really hits them hard. But I think that just opens up their hearts to then listen to the story, and then it also, it's a nice segue into Dr Brophy, given the neuroscience behind addiction. Yeah, so it's, it's something that, if I'm being honest, I didn't know where, where, where these programs would go, but now I really do believe that that this, this is in our wheelhouse, for our mission, for our target audience, with the students. And I always think that there could be that, you know. 1/10 of 1% where I might see a student five years from now, and they may come up to me and say, you know, you spoke at my school, and it changed my life. I doubt I'll ever have that conversation with somebody, but in my heart, I believe that it's, you know, our message is going to resonate with with with somebody. And you know, they may be at a fork, or, you know, place in their their life, where maybe by hearing our presentation and Dr brophy's presentation, that they'll make a different decision, a healthier decision, and ultimately, you know, save their life.

Shannon Fagan 20:31

And yeah, do you think the educators that attend also benefit? Are you hearing feedback from those people that attend

Tom Bott 20:38

the very much? So yeah, they are, they're very positive. They even provide feedback. We provide a survey to the students and to the teachers. And, you know, the educators are very, very complimentary. And it because, I think it also it that's what they're looking for, is for these students to share their struggles with them, right? So this, this just is, is a way to incentivize them to do that. So, yeah, that's but that's been very positive. We did a presentation at a at a school last year in we had two presentations on the same day. It was like just because they broke down the grades and they liked it so much, they brought us back three months later to do another presentation to other students. So I think that's the highest form of compliment, right? Is they, they bring us back that same year?

Shannon Fagan 21:28

Yeah. So can you share a little bit about what you offer? So it's an hour long, or, you know, you also do some work for families. You do the presentation.

Tom Bott 21:37

We do, we do. So the first program that we did, we did it after school, and the thought there was that we could bring in both the students and their families, because this message is, yeah, for the families as well, right? Unfortunately, it's difficult after school and at night time for students, for them to want to come back to school and for the parents, because it's we, we just long day. It's a very in just people are so busy with so many other activities. So the first school that we did, we were like, All right, we've got to rethink this. And the next session, we did an assembly in there, at least we wouldn't have the parents there, but we would have all of the students. So that's the model that we have now. We'll do the presentation, you know, for the students. There was one school that we just did where we did two presentations for the students, then we came back two weeks later for an open house for the parents. But again, the you know, there weren't many parents that showed up, yeah, you know. But so from our perspective, I like the fact with the assemblies during the day, because that really does give us all of those students to talk to, but to answer your question. Shannon, it's about an hour. My presentation is about 15 minutes. Dr brophy's about 40 or 45 minutes. And then we open it up for Q and A afterwards for about 10 minutes because it's during the day, you know, the kids have to go on to school, or they're, you know, onto the next class. So we don't have a lot of time for that. We also have a, I don't know if swag bags the right word, but, but we have a stop the judgment bag that we give to the to the to each student. And inside is, it's, it's a one page brochure about our foundation and our mission. Then there is also a resource page with QR codes so they can, you know, if they're struggling with whatever might be. There's, there's different hotlines that they have access to. And then the last thing we include is a, is a handout called language matters, and it really talks about the right way to speak with somebody that is struggling with mental health and substance use disorders. So it's not, you know, it's it's not, it's a very positive way to talk. So you're not shaming them, right? So we have that, and then we have a stress cube that we that we put in there with some motivational sayings on each face of the cube, and then we've got a wrist, a wristband that's got stop the judgment project on. So we give that to each student. I mentioned. We do have provide a survey for the students in the feedback we've gotten. It's been amazing. I mean, it's very the responses are very insightful, and it's, it's really been, you know, it's, it's been a pleasant surprise, because I didn't, I didn't know what to expect for students, if they would complete the surveys, or they right, you know, kind of like we're not going to do this. But no, based on their responses, it just reinforces that this is really, yeah, really resonated with these students and what age range

Sherry Jo Matt 24:42

I was just gonna say, these kids are really hurting, and they don't have an outlet for it. They don't know where to go. The parents don't know where to go, and we do encourage parents to come to our presentations. Unfortunately, they're during the day, and it's tricky for the parents, but they're not excluded from our presentation. Our. Presentations at all. We encourage them. But the ages, usually it's middle school to high school. We would absolutely go into colleges if they would welcome us. Okay, it's probably a little over elementary kids.

Tom Bott 25:12

Yeah, yeah, but, but it's very appropriate for middle school. We've, we've done quite a bit to the middle school students, and they get it. I mean, they're, they're, they're experiencing this themselves,

Shannon Fagan 25:22

yeah, and they're emerging into that peer pressure time, like the deep peer pressure, if you will. So and

Tom Bott 25:27

if they can establish, if you know, the the goal here is for them to learn healthy coping mechanisms, right? And the only way they're going to learn that is if they share their struggles, and then they can work with the educators. Absolutely, there was a situation at a school I spoke with the student came up afterwards, and he said, your story, your daughter's story, really resonated with me. He said, My dad, he was a senior, and he said, My dad just recently passed from a fentanyl overdose, similar to your daughter. But he was telling me that. I said, Who have you spoken to? And he said, Nobody, because he was afraid of that stigma and that shame. And then I, I shared that with the, you know, with the educator that we're working with, and she reached out to him, and so that that's, you know, that's one example where we know that a student, hopefully now, is going to be sharing his his struggles, and hopefully we'll get get some help.

Shannon Fagan 26:23

Wow, such a powerful story. Can you guys share with me? Because I do love the pictures and your theme of sunflowers. Can you share that with us?

Sherry Jo Matt 26:33

Yes, well, Purple was sienna's favorite color, and sunflowers were her favorite flower. So we, we kind of ran with that color and flower combination. But Baron batch is a he's a local Pittsburgh artist. I had the incredible honor of hosting his first two ever Arctic exhibits, and I got to know him when he was playing with the Steelers, and he has been a family friend ever since Sienna once she learned to drive and had a car, she would go paint and do music with Baron. When she passed, he called me. She passed in September, in December, he called and said, Hey, I have a gift for you. I'm like, Would you mind if I came and collected it with Dylan when he comes home from playing he was playing junior hockey at the time, and he's like, Yeah, sure. So he gave us this beautiful sunflower painting, which is now our logo. So that's how, that's how it all came about for the logo and the sunflower. And just a cool fact about sunflowers is, when it gets cold, they face each other so that they stay warm. And we try to encourage kids to lean on each other, to stay warm and get through the grief and get through whatever they're struggling through. So we're all like sunflowers. We're looking for the warmth of of a friend and somebody to guide us through difficult times.

Shannon Fagan 27:55

Yeah, that's part of the message to me for stop the judgment is that we need each other and we should talk. We should be there for each other without judgment. Yes, so, oh, go ahead.

Sherry Jo Matt 28:06

Sherry. Tagline, first stop the judgment is stop the judgment, or stop, stop the judgment. Start the conversation.

Shannon Fagan 28:14

Stop the judgment. Start the conversation. So if a school wants to start the conversation with you, how would they reach out? What's the best way to get in touch with you?

Tom Bott 28:24

I mean, the best way to get in touch would be through our website. They can go online. There is there's a way they can communicate that way. I'd be happy to provide my email address and phone number if they wanted to call directly, but we would welcome the opportunity to talk to anybody that that that's interested in our program. Talk to

Shannon Fagan 28:44

anybody, anybody and your foundation provides some support for schools to be able to have

Sherry Jo Matt 28:49

this assembly. Yes, we do. Yes. We've never charged a school to come in.

Tom Bott 28:53

That's amazing. Yeah, this is, this is a service that our fundraising efforts for the foundation. We use this towards, towards these programs, but this is something that we provide to the schools at no cost to them. Last year, we worked with a lot of under resourced schools, so we actually provided food too for them. So if it was in the morning, we provided breakfast. If it was at lunchtime, we got like, Chick fil A sandwiches for them. So that was, yeah, that was well received by that for them, so we also can do that for these schools as well.

Shannon Fagan 29:26

That's fantastic. And if schools do have available funding, it would be really nice to pay back if there's

Sherry Jo Matt 29:30

a possibility that would help us help other schools,

Shannon Fagan 29:33

other schools Absolutely, absolutely. Well. I appreciate you both coming in this morning to talk to us about the program. I think it's a great resource for school districts to pull you in, and I'm hopeful that we can get that word out, because stopping the judgment is so needed at this time, and the more students we can help, the more teachers we can give skills to, the better we will be. So thank you both. Thank you for hosting us. Yeah, thank you. Shannon. You.

Shannon Fagan 30:08

The Open Doors is produced by Emily Wiley at the Allegheny Intermediate Unit. Thank you to the Center for Creativity at the University of Pittsburgh for use of their podcast studio. I'm your host. Shannon Fagan, join us next time when we explore another inspiring program that's helping youth build resilience, empathy and emotional intelligence, until then, keep the doors open.

Shannon Fagan 30:34

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