

Cyntoia Brown Long

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SPEAKERS

Lauren Pinkston, Cyntoia Brown Long

- L** Lauren Pinkston 00:52

So this is the first time that we are joining live for a podcast recording Centaurea brown long is with us and I am so excited to have a conversation with her today it is I am confident going to go into a lot of interesting places and it's a joy to use and Toya it's been a joy to get to work alongside of you, as a colleague get to then continue that on and friendship and you're someone that I have followed and admired for a long time and to be able to hold you in my circle of friends and my trusted network is that means a lot to me so thanks for being here today.
- C** Cyntoia Brown Long 01:30

You're the sweetest.
- L** Lauren Pinkston 01:32

I love you a lot.
- C** Cyntoia Brown Long 01:33

I love you too, Lauren.
- L** Lauren Pinkston 01:36

As I've told Cyntoia and as you guys know, we have been down a lot of different rabbit trails in terms of addressing how Christians, especially in North America, should be rethinking the orphan crisis and even that phrase is debatable how we should be rethinking, how we respond to kids who have adverse childhood experiences. And I felt like if there was anyone who could

shed light on that issue, in a way that would invite people into a narrative that would challenge our norms, but also be able to put words to things that so many of us don't really know how to wrestle through, it'd be you. So I mean, I trust you. So, what we're going to do today is kind of talk through what those childhood those adverse childhood experiences can do to someone. What experiencing, you know, the foster care system and adoption might bring up in a child and then how those connections to our criminal justice system are kind of woven into the story of so many kids who have experienced trauma. So, we're gonna go there, but before we go there, is there anything that you'd like to say or share with listeners that might make them a bit more familiar with who you are and why your voice is so trusted in this space?

C Cyntoia Brown Long 03:05

So I have actually experienced everything that you just spoke about. When I was maybe eight months old, I was actually adopted from my biological mother who was heavily addicted to drugs, in and out of jail, could not take care of me in any shape, form or fashion. And so I was adopted by a wonderful family, who's my only family, the only family that I know. And, you know, as much as they really made me feel welcome, I always really struggled with this identity crisis ever since I found out you know, that I was adopted and my skin color didn't necessarily match their skin color. And so that really just sent me along this path of having a lot of conflicts in school which put me on that pipeline, the school to prison pipeline. I ended up being on the streets and I was on the streets and I was 13 years old, in and out of state custody. I spent a short time in foster care, but mostly it was in residential treatment facilities and group homes.

L Lauren Pinkston 04:11

And that was after your adoption?

C Cyntoia Brown Long 04:12

Yes, it was. And I went through... so when it comes to state custody and those residential treatment options, you have like different routes you can go if you are what they call them "in a neglect" meaning you don't really have family who can step in and take care of you. But then you can also go the juvenile justice route, and you're all in the same facilities together. I went the juvenile justice route because I had caught charges in juvenile court stemming from a time in school. And so running away from those facilities because their horrendous, no one would want to be there ever. Definitely not places of treatment. That's what ended up with me living on the streets by the time that I was 13 years old.

L Lauren Pinkston 04:56

I think that when we look at the crisis of mental health in the United States, and the options that kids have, when it comes to treatment, especially for adoptive families, they find themselves in this moment of wanting to do everything that they can for their kids and also realizing that access to treatment is not there. And sometimes... I don't know your family's story specifically. I don't know if your adoptive family had to turn over parental rights in order to share rights with the state in order to get treatment.

C

Cyntoia Brown Long 05:32

Well, they didn't turn over anything. They took it. The judge sent me to be in state custody. My parents would have never like agreed to that because you know my family they did have means to get me assistance. And so even when there are resources available to you, they're not really resources available to you. So my mother was constantly in call to the school and she was that mom or it's like I want to do everything I can to try to help my child what is it that I can do? She's not a trained professional in that field. She doesn't know and so she's really relying on the people who are supposed to be. And what she found was, you know, this entire system that is just so eager to shed pills down your throat. The treatments that they offer, they're not real treatment. And so that really started even before I was in custody. And to be quite honest with you, I feel like some of the, the treatment that I was receiving from, you know, the psychologists, psychiatrists that actually really aggravated a lot of the things that I was experiencing because they were never really addressing the real issue, which was the identity crisis, and I couldn't necessarily voice that, you know, that's what was going on to me. I was a kid. I didn't understand it. But anybody looking at my background, and who was sitting talk to me about some of these things should have been able to assess that. You know, I didn't need all these prescriptions they were given me. But that really aggravated things, and I really struggled even more in school. And so that's what led to me getting kicked out of school, numerous times suspended, expelled, sent to alternative school with other kids who were already in the system. And then I ended up being put in the system because of my association and my forays with them. And that's where I received the state custody treatment.

L

Lauren Pinkston 07:18

Okay. So, a couple of things... If if you guys haven't listened yet to our episode with Dr. Patti van Eys, I highly recommend going back and just listening there after this conversation to better understand where we are with our diagnosis of developmental trauma and how even the the public health system in the United States has not caught up to the research that we have. I'm wondering what you would say to teachers who maybe are not equipped with the same set of skills as... or knowledge of diagnosis and so we've placed labels on kids like Oppositional Defiant Disorder, or or just kids with behavior problems, and they are easily labeled by the time that they're in first or second grade. I can say that as a previous fourth grade teacher, we would always hear you know what kids were coming up and teachers would, they would say like, oh, you know. What do you wish that teachers knew about kids who may have behavioral presentation, that would be considered defiant or considered challenging?

C

Cyntoia Brown Long 08:29

I would say that there's always something that you can't necessarily see and I think for the most part, teachers kind of get that. But like shout out to teachers, my mom was a teacher and I actually just spent some time with her helping to prepare Thanksgiving for her kids and she actually teaches Special Ed and so they come with a lot more, you know, things that you have to be patient for, than, you know, some of the other kids in general population, which is weird to me that they call that that in the schools and they also call them the prison, but there might be something there. But, you know, teachers, they're there to teach. That's their job. And it can really be difficult to have all the things that they have to do. Sometimes they don't even get

lunch breaks because they have to have meetings. They have to do their planning and things like that. So it's already overwhelming, but there needs to be other people who can really step in and help them and come up with those plans. And what I found while I was there with her was that, you know, in her particular county, they have consultants that come in, these behavioral consultants, that can actually work with the child and then make these recommendations. But she was so frustrated when she was telling me because she said so many of the teachers they don't actually take those recommendations and they don't actually do the things in the plan because they figure out you know what, he's just bad. He's just not gonna listen and he's just not going to get this until he does this. It's like you actually have to open yourself up to listen to the people who are professionals because for such a long time, I said that, you know, the school needs to allocate resources to have people who are specialists in that field to be able to tell the teachers, to tell the parents how to deal with this. But you have to meet them halfway. So if that resource is there, then you have to actually follow through with that and do what it is that they're recommending for that child. And so just know that, you know, even if there's something that you may have done for years, for centuries, and maybe that worked with your own kids, like everybody has individual needs and so you really have to have like this, this approach where you're listening to other people who may be professionals in that space that may be their thing, that they're really good at, like trust that you know, that's the gift that God has given them, and if that's the direction they're telling you to take, go with that.

L

Lauren Pinkston 10:39

You know, I don't I don't ever want to just make this a political podcast, but the ways that we think about our neighbors and the ways that we think about public policy are really impacted by the ways that religion infiltrates our our political conversations and the ways that people even push forward their political campaigns. And recently in Tennessee, we're sitting here in Nashville. Recently in Tennessee, there has been a lot of conversation around education about denying federal funding for education, and in in my county, south of here, last year, we heard one of our school board members call social and emotional learning the "Trojan horse" that would bring in wokeness into our school system and they saw social and emotional learning in some of these behavioral programs as a threat to kids. How would you respond to that?

C

Cyntoia Brown Long 10:39

I mean, I guess it just depends on what it is. Right? So a friend of mine from Texas, she actually sent me, she text me she says, "Well, what do you think about you know, my son, who he's 10 going through this course that the school is offering talking about, you know, abuse and all of those things and identity." And I was like, oh, you touch on that identity thing. That's what I'm kind of like, I was like, "Well, let's look into it and let's see what it is." And so I actually looked at the course and some of it was okay, but some of it was like, I'm not sure that I want a stranger, teaching my child that especially like with the age that we're in, like, what are you trying to teach them about identity? Like, do you understand that their identity is in Christ? Like so that that that can kind of get kind of murky. Like I'm not a religious person. I am a follower of Christ. So if what you're doing is in alignment with everything that Jesus said, for everything that Jesus taught, I'm all for that. But all that other stuff that that is going around now. And masquerading under the guise of you know, tolerance and things like that. No, I'm not for that at all. So I

mean, I don't know. I don't know if I'm the best person to speak about this because, you know, I believe there should be prayer in school. I believe that you know, people should be teaching kids about Christ. And I mean, that's just who I am.

L Lauren Pinkston 13:04

Well, and thank goodness we have options for what we are able to offer to our kids. I've homeschooled my kids, I've got one kid in private school, I've got two in public school, and...

C Cyntoia Brown Long 13:16

Public school is a scary place now.

L Lauren Pinkston 13:17

It is a scary place. And it's a place that is trying to meet a lot of needs for a very diverse community. And we don't always have a diverse community that's making the decisions about what those kids need. And so it's a complicated, nuanced.

C Cyntoia Brown Long 13:34

Well I feel for you, for sure. I can tell you just the thought like I don't have kids myself, but like the thought of it like it terrifies me, like knowing all these people who... What are you trying to indoctrinate my kid? And so it's like, for me, it's like "Oh, my kid is not leaving the house. Like, I'm teaching them everything they need to know right here in the home."

L Lauren Pinkston 13:53

Well we do a ton of that and you know, our my afternoons are, and my team at Kindred Exchange knows that after 3pm I'm pretty much checked out until 9pm, because my kids are I mean, we are in conversation. What were some things that came up today? Were some things you heard at school? And I will say to our listeners, for my kiddo in private Christian school, we have just as many conversations about things that she learned as my kiddos in public school and there's no place that can parent your children for you. I just had... we've had to make the decision to pull a kid out of public school because they couldn't meet those social and emotional needs that she has. So don't think that just because you're in you know...

C Cyntoia Brown Long 14:38

Poeple think that because you're in a Christian school or religious school like that's just going to solve everything. Not everybody who professes to love Jesus actually loves Jesus actually follows him. And so like there's that

L Lauren Pinkston 14:51

Well, you may know that better than anyone. Are we ready to go there? So talk us through what happened once you were living on the streets and you found you found a different community that you were wrapped up in? Are you willing to kind of take us through what happened when you were around the age of 15 that led you into your relationship with criminal justice system?

C Cyntoia Brown Long 15:14

Yeah. So when I was 13, I was a runaway. If you think about it, like we all have needs, we need a place to stay we need to eat. We need clothes, our back and as a 13 year old kid, no ID, on the run - options are very limited. I actually met up with a group of older women, adult women who allowed me to stay there but they were all that time teaching me, you know, this is the way to get your needs met. And their way was, you know, you give your companionship, so to speak, to men and then you get what you need in return. And so they really taught me like you know, this new identity and so and that was that such a formative years for that. So they were teaching me that my identity was caught up in how other people valued me the value that they placed on my body. And that was pretty much it. It was all about what I could give to other people. And that led me into this two-three year stretch of being on the streets and being with these grown adult men who are paying me to have sex. And a lot of people might not look at that as trafficking. And so I think we're just now starting to think of it and that term, but for a long, long time I was called a teen prostitute. And so 16 years old, about June, July-ish, I ended up meeting a man who I consider to be my older boyfriend at that time. 24 years old, I was still 16. And you know, he was actually the first person that would be considered a trafficker. Which if you look at how everything shaped, those women were traffickers as well because they were grooming me, they were shaping me into that and they pretty much made his job very easy. But that was like the first time hardcore that I had somebody who was actually you know, putting his hands on me sending me out to the streets to go meet men to pick me up here in Nashville. And one of those men that I met, he was 43 years old. He picked me up and I ended up shooting him at night after he really made me feel uncomfortable. Definitely didn't feel like I could just leave the situation. And I ended up getting charged with first degree murder for that at the age of 16. And so that's how I ended up in the criminal justice system from the juvenile system.

L Lauren Pinkston 17:35

So you were tried as an adult?

C Cyntoia Brown Long 17:38

I was.

L Lauren Pinkston 17:39

And you sat you sat in prison for two years, waiting on your trial, is that right? But even then, you know were you in an adult prison

you know, were you in an adult prison.

C

Cyntoia Brown Long 17:48

I was. So when you get charged with certain offenses, they have the option to try you as an adult and that means that you will get the same amount of time that any adult would for that same exact offense. No consideration to your age, no consideration to any of the circumstances as it relates to your impression ability with the adults in this situation. None of that is taken into consideration. You get the same exact time. Now they're actually trying to remove that option from Juvenile Court Judges, so it's just automatic, but at my time, they had that option. But when you go before the judge for those those transfer hearings, she really doesn't have that much of an option because juvenile justice jurisdiction only lasts until you're 19. And so if you're somebody who's trying to think okay, well, what kind of treatment services can they offer this person? How much time do we have? If you look at that three year window, and then you look at my previous history, where the Department of Children Services failed to rehabilitate me in the first place, you don't really have that many options. And so our only option at that time was to transfer me to be tried as an adult. And so after I was transferred, I was immediately taken to live in the adult jail, even though I was a child. And because I was a child, surrounded by adults and by law could not be within sight and sound of them. I had to be housed in solitary confinement. And so I was in solitary confinement for two years, until I turned 18. And that meant that for 23 hours, every single day, I was in a box. It's not even as big as you know, most people's bathrooms. And so I was in that box. The only human interaction that I would have would be from the guard who was bringing the food tray if they decided to say here's your food or not, sometimes the tray would just appear in the pie flap. My mother would come on the weekends and every now and then you would get church volunteers that would come to our projects with things like that, but for most of the time, it was just me alone. And then for one hour I would get handcuffed and shackled and allowed to walk around in a dog kennel outside or take a shower, use the phone, whatever I felt like I wanted to do within that hour.

L

Lauren Pinkston 19:59

So what what goes on in your mind during that extensive time alone? I mean, you're already you've already experienced an inner turmoil that has pushed you to the street. And then you're alone with your thoughts. What what was going on inside of you?

C

Cyntoia Brown Long 20:20

Yeah. So your mind kind of just really just takes over that and it really kind of turns against you. Because everything that you've ever dealt with, it's like it's on replay, it's on repeat. And so you have all of that is really coming at you and you're trying to process everything that's going on and you really don't even have the time and the space to process everything that's going on. And so that was really a struggle. And on top of that, then you have the "mental health services" there at the prison which are really just, you know, a way for them to figure out what pills that they're going to try on you next. And so I was on prescriptions of all kinds. There was some times that, you know, I couldn't even get out of bed. There's one thing we call the "Thorazine shuffle" where you can hardly walk because you're so doped up. And I remember they had me on a combination one time where it was like I literally couldn't see. And I was

freaking out. I said, because I... my vision. Where's my vision? I can't see." And so all they did was keep me on the medication, but give me some Benadryl on top of it. So it's like that's what you're really dealing with. And those things really aggravate a lot of the other things that you're going on. If you ever look at the commercials and you hear them say, oh side effects include suicidal thoughts, homicidal thoughts, those pills are really messing with your mental and so you have all of that on top of everything else. And so it was just really, it was really intense. And so there's a reason why even grown men can't spend two weeks in solitary confinement without being affected by it. So imagine a child. And all across the country, you have children who were put in those situations and I remember when I was finally allowed to be around other people my 18th birthday. I don't even know how to have conversation, right? And so this right here, like this is a testament to how good God is. Because I couldn't even have a simple conversation with people. I had to sit at the table while they were playing cards because everybody in jail... if you've ever been in jail, hopefully you haven't. Like all they do is play cards like non stop, but that's what I would do. I would go out into the lobby and I would sit with them while they play cards and I would watch how they talk to people to actually learn how to have conversations and interact socially with other people.

L

Lauren Pinkston 22:35

So how long was it for you before you felt like those social cues and your ability to communicate kind of came back to you and you learned how to be in a room with people?

C

Cyntoia Brown Long 22:49

Oh, I don't know. Because the older I get, the less I like to be social. So I don't know if I've still done it. Communication wise, I don't know a few months maybe. Um, my husband tells me sometimes I still say inappropriate things like, you know, you can't say that out loud to them. Like you can't just tell people that. Oh, well, whatever. I don't know. It could possibly be still impacting me. So yeah. But to be honest, I think just maybe within a year, I was back but again, like it's hard to say because I was still dealing with everything else. So who's to say was that you know, where that was really coming from a lot of my difficulties.

L

Lauren Pinkston 23:30

And your social network is also dealing with what they're processing and working through. And so the social cues and the prison are going to be different than the social cues at, you know, at this location at that location. And so it's a whole different skill set to learn how to communicate in different rooms with different people.

C

Cyntoia Brown Long 23:46

Yeah, especially in a prison filled with women, filled with women because it's rough. Like you have to think like these are people that are away from their kids. So you have moms trying to be mothers over the phone and through visitation and all that frustration that's building up and worried about all of that and it was it was a lot and then I don't know about you, but like there's

like a regular schedule, you know, in my in my time in this world, where I kind of get a little bit more aggravated than usual. And so people's schedules are a little different when it comes to women and so that that kind of adds to all of that. And so there's there's a lot going on.

L

Lauren Pinkston 24:24

Yeah, that is a lot. All right. So as we as we think about the types of experiences that people have had that have led them into maybe a situation or a relationship with with the justice system, and I know that we could even debate whether the justice system is the right word for what's going on with prisons in the United States. It's clearly a business model. A lot of it is privatized. And yet the New York Times has recently come out with a new podcast that is focused on what happened in Murfreesboro, and the kids and that were in prison, and they're just east of us. So we know that this is an issue. You have a unique platform now to be able to speak... Well, maybe I'm going to come back to that question because I think it's important to to hear how you got to where you are now and what happened in the years following following your conviction that led you to now being able to live... I would not say free because you're still working on some of those, some of getting rid of convictions that were placed on you. Is that still something you're in the process of? What's the, I'm losing the word. You haven't exoneration, right?

C

Cyntoia Brown Long 25:45

I'm still considered a convicted killer. I still have that conviction of first degree murder on my record. I'm still on parole. So I mean, it's still there. But it just doesn't define me. Right? Like because God has set me free from that.

L

Lauren Pinkston 26:01

Right. Right. And so regardless of what the state says, God has, you know, who you are and the truth but you were able to convince our governor to release you from prison.

C

Cyntoia Brown Long 26:16

Well I didn't convince him. All I did was pray. So like the Lord did all of that. Which is crazy. I'm actually going to probably going to be seeing him here in a couple of weeks. He and my husband and I have met several times with him and his wife and we've had dinner we've had lunch, but he always talks about how that entire time you know, God was just really speaking to him full on and I had never spoke to him no one that you know, was connected to me had I ever really had a conversation with them. Like this is something that he was going through with the Lord. And so I mean, it was the Lord that convinced them all I did was pray every single day, super hard. But yeah, he ended up granting me clemency and so from that 51 year sentence, I had meaning that I would have been 67 years old before I met with a parole board. He reduced that to 15 years, which is what I had already served incarcerated, and then 10 years on parole. And so I was released about seven months after he made that decision.

L Lauren Pinkston 27:25
So this was Governor Bill Haslam at the time?

C Cyntoia Brown Long 27:28
It was Governor Bill Haslam. So he's the one that granted me clemency and that was in 2019. Yes, January 7, 2019. And then I was released August 7, 2019.

L Lauren Pinkston 27:43
He has a fantastic podcast, by the way, where he and our previous governor, I believe, Phil Bredesen is on there with him. Have you listened to their podcast?

C Cyntoia Brown Long 27:54
I have not but I have his book, Faithful Presence and it is so good. Like his book is so good.

L Lauren Pinkston 28:01
So good, so good. I could be wrong. It may not be Governor Bredesen. But I, if I remember correctly, that two of our previous governors in Tennessee who one was a Democrat, one was a Republican, and they sit and talk about really contentious topics and how they can come together to make our state better and it's produced by the University of Tennessee I believe it's a it's a really great listen. He's awesome.

C Cyntoia Brown Long 28:21
I don't know if he'll ever do it. But like, I really, really, really would love for him to run for president. Like, I don't know if he's into all that. Like Chrissy may hit me for saying that. Like he really gets it really gets it.

L Lauren Pinkston 29:51
So clearly, your story made an impact on him and made an impact on the way that he felt like we should be governing, especially children who have been wrapped up in this system. You've also been invited to tables with organizations and businesses that run prisons systems and they have they have said, "Okay, maybe we have not been doing this the right way." What are your conversations with those private businesses that make their money from running juvenile detention center or prison system? What are your conversations with those folks look like?

C Cyntoia Brown Long 30:26
So I don't have a relationship with anybody who runs juvenile facilities. I have spoken with

So I don't have a relationship with anybody who runs juvenile facilities. I have spoken with some people who do run those. So just to name up a True Core so I've actually gone to some of those facilities. They actually run one of the facilities that I visit, on a weekly basis to teach classes for kids in custody there. And it's interesting. I think that a lot of the issues that were present when I was in those those situations, they're still running amok. Staffing is a big issue for them, so they kind of just settle for whoever is going to take the job. And this ends up being people who have their own trauma. So many times I go on there during the week and the girls are, you know, speaking about staff members you know, getting into altercations in front of them get in and talk to patients with them and the things that they've done, and playing you know, into all the childish games and the gossip and stuff and it's like, what is happening here? And so there's a lot with that there's absolutely no training within that company for the people. They don't have their own resources. I think that, you know, if you're going to run a business like that, I'm not against privatization, because I've seen what the state can do and what they don't do well. But you have to be able to provide a service that is better than the alternative. Don't just be, you know, a landlord, somebody that's collecting a check for a bed. What can you do with that money that your company is earning that's actually going to invest into this population that's actually going to help them to know to better themselves to have better outcomes and so that's what I really look for. And unfortunately, with that, which is the only juvenile system that I've ever dealt with any company that runs within the juvenile system that I've ever encountered. I don't think they're doing a very good job with that. On the other hand, I do actually work with an adult facility, adult company company that runs adult facilities, and you know, they're a private company, but what I've seen that really kind of changed my mind is I just had a conversation with the CEO where I was talking about some negative experiences that I had gone through while in one of those facilities way back in 2004. And he could have just taken that on the chin and just walked away. It was at a speaking event, but instead, you know, he actually invited me down for a conversation. It was like, "Well, tell me about this and tell me what we should be doing differently." And so that just began this relationship where you know, I've learned more about, you know, what they care about where their heart is what they're actually doing, and I've actually been able to contribute in that. And so that really kind of changed my mind. I think a lot of people love to throw it out there all abolish prisons, and, you know, stop the privatization. That's not the answer. Like hold them accountable. What a lot of people don't understand is like these companies because of laws that have been passed, which I'm glad for that. These companies cannot keep their contracts. If they're actually just being someone who's just providing a bed. They actually have to meet different benchmarks and so recidivism comes into play just the services that are being provided comes into play, they actually have to make an impact if they're going to keep these contracts with the government partners. And so I think that that is something that we really missed the mark on when we kind of just attack these companies. Like learn a little bit first about how it works, and then learn like how you can participate in that and how you can kind of say, well, this is something that you could be doing differently, because what I found is they're actually open to receiving that when, you know, their contracts are based on that they're incentivized by doing better. And so they want to be the person that's actually getting it right because that's what the people we the people and, you know, the state governments have been demanding that now we actually need to make an impact on these people's lives.



Lauren Pinkston 30:26

That's so encouraging to hear and I think, what people may not understand, and what you're teaching me is that even as a citizen and as a voter if this is an issue that I care about, or and I think it's an issue we should all care about, but one that may not have impacted our lives

directly. But as people of faith and as people who want to be assured of justice and our Shalom type of justice, in our in our communities, these are things that we can be asking our elected officials about, you know. Are we putting forth policies in our state that are holding these private companies with your government contracts accountable to these type of benchmarks and these type of markers that would show that you are not just a holding facility, but you are a rehabilitative facility, from state to state that's different, right? This is still a state jurisdiction of how they choose these contracts. We're not talking federal laws, right?

C Cyntoia Brown Long 34:29

I mean, it just depends. So like, if you're a private organization, you can have state contracts, but you can also have federal contracts. And so this particular organization does have both

L Lauren Pinkston 35:26

Okay. All right. So we're talking about this at a state level and a federal level. That's really helpful for those of us to have talking points. What's at stake? Cyntoia, if we don't get this right, if we don't change the way that we address our understanding of childhood trauma, if we don't put all of our resources around kids who have had really traumatic experiences as infants, as small children, who are working through those identity crises as as preteens and as teens, what's at stake if we don't figure this out?

C Cyntoia Brown Long 36:06

I mean, I think you're looking at it. If you look at like the state of, you know, our country, the culture, like everything that's going on. It's gotten so much worse. And because we didn't fix it back then like, I can remember like, it was such a culture shock for me just to see what things were like out here. And it's like, what is happening like this is just mayhem out here in the world. And it wasn't like that before I went in some of the things that are permissible, that wasn't you didn't do that that wasn't socially acceptable when beforehand and so like, it's just like, rampant now. Like, it's just, it's, it's out of control. And so if you don't have these checks and balances in place, that can actually provide, you know, different approaches on the front end to kind of prevent that from happening to the generations that are just now coming up. And then something to actually assist those other generations that are already experiencing already kind of deep in it. I mean, you're gonna have more of the same and then amplified. So I mean, it's we have we have to stop it at some point. We have to figure out something you have people who are going in into the schools and and here they ended up being in the states as they go into state custody. I can't tell you how many people I met in prison that I had known from state custody. It's just like, it's just this pipeline and it's not like a narrow, narrow pipe. It's like it's growing as time goes on. There's so many people that are getting caught up in this system. And if you think that, you know, oh, my child goes to church, like all the time and I do all the right things that's not going to happen to my family. Just you know, these other people who don't have that. Honey, I went to church every Sunday morning, every Wednesday night. That happens. My mother, my father, they have never been involved in the justice system, ever. My father has never even gotten a speeding ticket. He loves to brag about that, to this day.

L Lauren Pinkston 37:57
I wish I could brag about that.

C Cyntoia Brown Long 38:00
To this day and he was a truck driver. So he was always on the road to after he left the military.

L Lauren Pinkston 38:06
And the man that you killed was an employee or highly involved in a church as well.

C Cyntoia Brown Long 38:12
Yeah.

L Lauren Pinkston 38:13
So churches or not a going to church is not a, yeah, check the box and there's so much more that goes into it.

C Cyntoia Brown Long 38:19
So I love the way like when you talk about like the conversations that you have the girls with your kids, the way you have that conversation with them the relationship that you have with them, like ya'll talk about the good, the bad, and the ugly, and like they're so deep, like way deeper than I am. So like you have like these little philosophers that are just so aware of themselves, their feelings and what's going on in the world and how that's really impacting them. They're voicing that like I think that's so important. And like we really need to learn how to do more of that in our homes. And you know, if you actually go out and you mentor like learn how to do that with other kids who don't necessarily have that in their home, step in that gap, I really think you should be teaching them honestly, because you're really good at it.

L Lauren Pinkston 39:02
That's kind of you. I was on the phone with my mom and my sisters before I came into the office this morning and just kind of catching them up on some things that the kids had said and some conversations we were having this week and I don't think about this often because I do kind of reject the whole old-timey way of women just being the homemakers and being, you know, at home with the kids and I love being a working woman. But they said "Lauren, you think that your work is global, but you're doing the Lord's work in your house." And sometimes we we have to be reminded of that.

C Cyntoia Brown Long 39:37
That is your first responsibility.

L Lauren Pinkston 39:39
It is it is who cares what.. who you save outside the walls of your home if you lose the heart and the trust of your family. You know, I think that that's really a testimony to who we are. If our family doesn't trust us if our family doesn't feel safe with us if we're not investing first there yeah...

C Cyntoia Brown Long 39:58
You need to do a masterclass.

L Lauren Pinkston 40:01
Well maybe one day, I will have some good things to share there. Right now, I feel like I'm in the depths of it.

C Cyntoia Brown Long 40:11
I don't think you give yourself enough credit.

L Lauren Pinkston 40:13
You're very kind. So that that then leads me to another question for you. So many times we address a system that's at the end of that pipeline that you talked about. And there's warranted conversations about the way that we run our prisons, the way that we run our legal system. What could people have faith and North America if they were going to have the most impact and bringing peace and wholeness to society today? Where do you think they should be spending their time in order to address some of those issues of of loneliness and shifting social norms? Where would you say that they should be spending their time in order to make the most impact?

C Cyntoia Brown Long 41:02
I definitely don't want to discourage like the whole prison ministry because that's absolutely necessary. But we need to have separate ministries that are actually working with kids who are in schools and their homes. Like you need to have that in place to like they need the mentors. You don't necessarily know what is going on, you know, in their home and like maybe they do need somebody to talk to and so then you can be that person that they can talk to, and then you can actually work with that parent too. I think that like you know, a lot of times you think,

okay, well I'm just going to help this person. Like no, the whole family unit has to be helped. That's something I really realized from working with the girls in the system because you think if they get in the system, and like you can give them all these classes early teach them you can work with them, then you know, you're going to fix them all up and you send them right back home. They're gonna you know, be perfect but no, like, it's, it's basically like if you take something that's dirty... So if I think this cup and I just roll it around in the mud, right, so it's dirty I'm gonna clean it really nice, make it really shiny, and then I'm just gonna throw it back in the mud. And so it's like, no, it's gonna get that on it again. So you really have to address like the whole issue and like that can be done outside of the system, like, especially if this is somebody that's a part of your church. And so if you're having a conversation with these kids, if you are on the ministry, if you do outreach there, you can get to know and like develop that relationship with the family and you can really influence them and like I was telling you teach them like how to talk to their kids how to develop that relationship with them the appropriate responses things, the appropriate, you know, lessons that they need to know about, like social interactions and handling their emotions expressing that. So really get involved on the front end. Like it may seem kind of messy, but like that's, that's where the work needs to be done, because we've all heard it like an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. So let's work some more on the front end instead of like, focusing so much on the back end, which we need to focus on the back end because you know, those are Jesus people too. But let's start up here. Let's start working through all of that. And so when we're talking about like, from a system, perfect perspective, we talk about, you know, all prisons and privatization. Let's talk about the schools like let's just talk about like the resources that are available. So even though the one county which is Montgomery county here in Tennessee actually has these consultants, like there's only like, I think she said either four or eight of them for the entire school system. And so they go in like once a week or once every other week, but it's just them who are doing this work. We need to invest in more of that people who are specialists who can actually work because not only is it you know, those are going to be a great resource to you know, the kids and the parents, but it's going to take so much out of the teachers like we put a lot of burden on teachers like you have to teach them phonics. Have you ever tried to teach somebody phonics?

L Lauren Pinkston 43:51

Yeah, it's terrible. I didn't want to teach my own kids. It's rough, it's hard. And trauma impacts the phonics part of your brain and that's to what we like teachers don't understand as a kid who has experienced significant developmental trauma. That limbic part of their brain is severely impacted that blocks the phonetic awareness and their ability to even form sounds, and to sound out words that are more than two or three syllables. And so we see kids that get to third grade and they can't read and because education data says a kid that can't read by third grade, they have X number, I don't remember the statistic but it's a significantly much higher percentage of going into prison.

C Cyntoia Brown Long 44:30

Wow.

L Lauren Pinkston 44:31

And so that's why we saw that was changed in Tennessee last year where the trauma and it all comes back to trauma with the law. So last year, our state legislature passed a law that if third graders do not pass their state standardized testing, they are held back in third grade. Because the education data, and this is old data from when I was in college 15 years ago, that if you cannot read by third grade, you have such a high likelihood of entering the prison system. So rather again than addressing what's going on in those kids lives, maybe looking at developmental trauma and the understanding that we have of how that's affected to or how it affects, you know, our neuroplasticity, and our and our neurological functioning. We are punishing these kids for not being able to read.

C

Cyntoia Brown Long 45:17

I had no idea they did that but I'm going to tell you another thing, another reason why Bill has to become, to be president is like he and his wife like they were at the forefront of that introducing ACEs training about talking about childhood trauma, adversely educating everybody on ACEs around the state of Tennessee, right. It's called the the Building Better Brains Initiative. And so they were the ones that were behind all that in addition to making sure everybody can get two years free of college and the state so let's just talk about that. And so it's like, I had no idea that you know, that was actually linked to the trauma so like you just educated me. And so just like thinking about you know how that goes hand in hand. It's just wow. So I'm very hopeful in the direction that we're moving in, very hopeful.

L

Lauren Pinkston 46:05

But and you've encouraged us all to get involved earlier, and my family and I've been hosting a house church for the last three years or so two or three years in our home and we had been a part of a larger church for a while. But we went into a really difficult spot where we didn't really know where we would even be from Sunday to Sunday and just being in a social environment that was not trauma informed was difficult for us and we didn't know how to communicate to people who looked like they had it all together in a church environment, what we were going through as a family. And so we kind of pulled back and found other families that were looking for that and we recently a few months ago started attending on a Sunday morning somewhere and a friend from college said where have y'all been and why did you stop, why did you stop coming? Or why'd you stop going to church or why have you been doing house church? And I said honestly, I didn't know how to be honest and safe and disclosing what our family was going through. And our room full of people who looked like they had it all together. There wasn't space here for us to be honest about our family situation and the crisis that we were in. And so we had to create that safe space for ourselves. And I think that there is a place and it's time for the church to be a safe place for folks to actually bring all left and forgot to be okay to bring trauma informed policies into our gatherings to create spaces where people can find safe communities of faith to be able to talk about what's really going on in the human experience.

C

Cyntoia Brown Long 47:44

No better place to have therapy than a a church. Well yeah because we can't separate our spiritual selves from our emotional selves. It's all connected. All right, well, what you said that you feel like there's hope. And let's end our conversation with some hope. What are you saying

and what are you what are you encountering today that's making you feel hopeful? Man, um, I'm just gonna be honest with you. I just like I put my hope in the Lord. And so like, I know that he does things just like thinking like the way all that was connected from what you just told me. Like, you know, the fact that now they've passed that law and the third grade and it connects with the data about trauma in third grade so that lets me know that they're actually taking seriously the trauma and how you know, when Haslams put that into effect, just seeing how that connected so neatly together. It's like God has got this. And you know, one thing I know for sure, like he cares about kids more than more than we can imagine. And so he's gonna make sure those babies are okay. And so that's just that's just where my hope is until even you know, when it looks like mayhem, which it does. It does. I just, I just hope and so I just look at myself, as you know, while I'm here, like Lord helped me to plant seeds, and I'm just going to trust you to do the rest. And you know, I really think that that's what he calls us all to do. So we plant our seeds and he does all the growing and the watering.

L Lauren Pinkston 49:12

That's good. Well, I would be remiss if I close to this conversation without pointing people to your foundation, to JFAM. And to your work to your book, Free Cyntoia. To your Netflix documentary. I mean, not that maybe know that when I only watched half of it I felt so bad being your friend and like, you remember me asking you permission. So here's my only ask. And so because like because of the way that it was done was really crappy. Like, you know, for me and just I really don't even feel like they put the whole picture to it because God got no glory through all that. All I ask is that read the book, like read my story, and then watch it, feel free to watch it. But like, just read the book, like let give me that grace to tell my own testimony. So read the book, and then a soap company that I have to actually fund that that work to the foundation that I do. Soap and Water Organics is something else... You're basically a chemist like when you use words that I cannot comprehend. It's, it's fascinating. It isn't the best stuff like it feels so good on your skin. It feels so good on your face, your clay mask, or the charcoal mask.

C Cyntoia Brown Long 50:26

And it's all natural, like that's what like is so crazy. It's like, man, we do all this thinking about oh, we need to put this God has created everything that we need to heal ourselves to be well to have the good skin like he's created it you just have to figure out like how it goes together and how it plays together. Like you don't have to do all that you don't have to put all those petrochemicals.

L Lauren Pinkston 50:47

And if you're listening to this on a podcast platform instead of watching this come to YouTube and see Cyntoia's skin because it's a testimony to how oh gosh, it's just flawless. And you teach me so much about that. So Soap and Water Organics. You can buy online.

C Cyntoia Brown Long 51:05

Yes. So right now I have it like with a custom order. So like you can buy like 10 whole bars or

res. So right now, I have it like with a custom order. So like you can buy like 10 whole bars of so which is a whole lot of it's gonna last you for your family. You don't have to worry about ordering it back to back. You can just order it. I'll make it to your specification. So all the good stuff all the great oils I love the good oils, I don't make cheap soap. So a lot of people that put out I'm gonna use canola and pump. No, we're using butters for use and the good stuff, the shea butter, cocoa butter, pasu butter, the mango butters.

L Lauren Pinkston 51:37

Things that I didn't even know Yeah. So good. You're the handsoap stays in my kitchen. And I love it all and then my girl, Hope, will come through the house with a with a charcoal mask. I'm gonna self-care. That's good. We're big fans of JFAM as well. As you guys are kind of looking at 2024, what would be helpful if people wanted to partner with you there for a tax-deductible donation, what would some of those donations go towards?

C Cyntoia Brown Long 52:08

So right now we're really focusing on supporting Epic Girl and so because Epic Girl is actually doing the case management and so they're going into the facilities. And so we actually partner with him and that and a fantastic organization. But I'm just going to be honest with you like sometimes it's like man, can we even keep this thing afloat? Right? Because how are you going to have people to manage cases if you can't pay them? Everybody isn't in a position where they can just do that work voluntarily. And so that's that's really been a struggle. You have to think about rent and so it's really it's really a big thought where it's like, "Oh, you just get grants. There's all this free money." No, no, no, no, no. You may be able to get grants for certain things like for programming and stuff like that, but actually getting funds to pay for salaries to be will actually work the organization actually pay for like a brick and mortar to house so you can meet with the kids so the kids have a safe place to come to. That is like pulling teeth. And that's the whole reason I started that soap business because it's just something that you know, it's just like, what else?

L Lauren Pinkston 53:17

Yeah, and people will give to businesses and money's tight for a lot of nonprofits but I'll I'll speak to Epic Girl and the work that they do. I mean, forensic interviews and getting the right information from kids, especially who have not had a trusted, safe place to be believed and to have suppressed a lot of really tragic memories, to create those safe places to get the information that is needed in order to continue getting them the services that they deserve. I mean, that is that is an art form. And it's a relational dance that not everyone is equipped to do. And those types of interviews - taking place in a safe environment is really critical.

C Cyntoia Brown Long 53:58

And then there's a relationship building which is the biggest part of what really draws me to Epic Girl because they stay with you they stick with you and when I was speaking about that holistic approach, like the love on your mama, like everybody has a home and so it's just like so much that goes into that and you know, it's a nonprofit organization, but like Jesus is in the

mists because the woman who runs that organization. Every woman who works in that organization loves Jesus wholeheartedly. And so that's, you know, this family desires to plant those seeds. And so that's why I really love it. So yeah, they can go to my website, which is jfamfoundation.org and donate there but you can also go directly to epicgirl.net and donate there as well.

L Lauren Pinkston 54:41

That's good and for those of you who know and know my background in human trafficking, I mean, the the director of this organization spent time in Cambodia. She's done case management at the global level, but now she's here in Tennessee and is top notch she's focusing on prevention.

C Cyntoia Brown Long 54:58

That's right.

L Lauren Pinkston 54:59

Well, Cyntoia, you are such a joy, and you give me hope. And my mind floats to you so often when I think about what I want for my own kids, when I think about what I want for society when I think about what tangible faith looks like. I'm just so grateful that not only have you done the work to free yourself, but you have so generously shared your story with others and you don't owe us anything. But you're always so generous to be a part and to sit around tables where people can have their minds opened and their their ways of thinking changed.

C Cyntoia Brown Long 55:40

Well listen, when the Lord has done for you what He's done for me, you won't have no choice but to tell somebody about it. So I can't help myself.

L Lauren Pinkston 55:48

Well, that's a perfect place to end. Thanks for being with us today.

C Cyntoia Brown Long 55:50

Thank you.