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Kim Shine: Welcome to Real Stories MKE, brought to you as part of Ex Fabula's work to connect Milwaukee through real stories. I'm Kim Shine.

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Joel Dresang: And I'm Joel Dresang. Ex Fabula believes that everyone has personal stories worth sharing. We host storytelling workshops where community members can build their storytelling skills and confidence and we present StorySlams where true stories are shared on stage. Today, we're bringing you three of those powerful stories.

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Kim Shine: Yeah. In this episode, we're highlighting stories about mental wellness as part of our efforts to deepen the narrative around depression and mental health. Now, please note that there will be mentions of depression and suicide in this episode. Incidentally, if you need support for your own mental health, you can receive free help via the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. If you need that again, it's 800-273-8255.

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Joel Dresang: You know, Kim, I think one of the most gratifying parts of a group therapy session or even just sitting with a bunch of people and talking is when I share something personal, problems that I'm having with myself and I see heads nod. I really sort of feel that that's what these stories are doing today on our show. That it's the people approving of what you're feeling and saying that they feel that way too of saying you're not alone.

[00:01:28]

Kim Shine: Exactly. That to me, that feeling of not being alone is what kind of sometimes can help pull you out of whatever dark place you're in. So, very true, Joel. Our first story was told in February 2020 at Lakefront Brewery where the theme was — In My Mind. Andrea Ruffier had just come to watch but then felt compelled to share her own story. Here's Andrea.

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Andrea Ruffier: All right. I didn't even know this existed like a couple days ago. So, super duper nervous but here I am. Thank you.

In April of 2019... Also, shout out to 2019 being like the worst year ever. If you know, you know. But April of 2019... Well, first off, I'm 25 years old. I feel like I've been through a lot that maybe a 25-year-old shouldn't have had to go through. In April of 2019, I lost my older brother, RIP, unfortunately, to suicide assisted, police... Police-assisted suicide. Thank you. Sorry.

My brother was in the Navy. My parents, we were all shocked the day that we got the call. It was the worst day of my life, the worst day of my parents' life. Our family was always small. It was always just my brother and my mom, my dad and I. So, losing him was one of the most difficult things. He was 26 at the time and had kind of had a rocky start but we were so proud of him when he entered the Navy. He

was doing so well and then life happened, I guess. Unfortunately, he didn't reach out the way he should have.

But being in the Navy, there's so much paperwork that comes along with it to which my parents were supposed to handle. Me being the daughter that I am, I was like, "Nope." They asked me if they could sign over power of attorney. I took care of everything. I planned my brother's funeral. I did all of this all while thinking that I was handling everything on my own and just fine the way I had done my entire life anytime something bad had happened or something had gone awry in my family.

So then push come to shove, after the funeral, everything is done, kind of up until that point, it was go, go, go, go, go, go. It's a job. I got to get it done. I got to do this for my parents. They're mourning. They're hurt. It was their son. It might be my brother but it was their son. I got to take this on. I got to take all the heat. So, I did that and I treated it like a job. Little did I know I went from... I thought I was in my mind, I thought I was handling it but I was actually out of my mind, I went from having all these great days to having one or two or three bad days. I went from that to having just every day was bad. There was one or two good days sprinkled in them and every day it was like why am I alive, why am I doing this? Why is my brother dead? Why did this happen?

With all of that, I never saw a therapist. Not even right after he passed away until I got to the point where this fall semester had started and I couldn't handle it with school. So, I went to go see my school therapist at UWM. Shout out. Love UW Milwaukee. Being there still, I thought therapy was for people that were broken, that needed help that couldn't live without it. Little was I wrong. I still didn't think I needed help. I never wanted to be medicated. I didn't want to have medication for my anxiety. I didn't want to have medication for my depression. I thought I was in my right mind. I was doing the right thing until one day, I just broke down to my therapist after talking about a few feelings that I had had and just told her that I was tired of feeling this way. I was tired of crying every day and waking up and not knowing like what's the point of it all because that's not how I thought before. I was very bubbly, happy girl.

I realized after going to therapy and seeing a psychiatrist and all of those things that I wish I would have gone to therapy before anything bad had ever happened in my life. Whether you are struggling, whether you just hate your boss, whether you're just annoyed with a sibling or something like that, I have learned that therapy is not something that is for broken people. It is for everyone. I genuinely sincerely think that everyone should have a therapist. I think everyone should talk to someone who's professional and has an unbiased opinion. Sometimes you don't necessarily leave feeling better. It's not every time that you do. Sometimes you leave feeling worse but the best thing about it is you always leave with a different perspective and more clarity on your situation.

[Applause]

[00:07:03]

Kim Shine: You heard Andrea say that 2019 was the worst year ever. Well, we checked in with her and it turns out 2020 was challenging too. Now she told us that in March she had a breakdown after stopping her meds and therapy for reasons she didn't understand but then she reached out to an old therapist

who referred her to an outpatient program at Columbia St Mary's. She did that for seven weeks, three days a week for three hours a day.

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Joel Dresang: Now she says "I'm doing well. Obviously mental health has an ebb and flow. Nothing will ever be perfect. No emotion is meant to last forever whether it be happiness sadness or anxiety but learning to handle and understand what you're thinking and feeling is what changes lives." Andrea said she's starting a graduate degree in psychology after discovering it is her passion. How cool is that?

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Kim Shine: Yeah.

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Joel Dresang: Andrea, thank you for bravely sharing your stories and we wish you the best of luck with your studies.

[00:08:00]

Kim Shine: We sure do. That's awesome. A number of mental wellness stories have organically made it onto Ex Fabula's stages over the years. Recently, however, we've become more intentional in our efforts to combat stigma and to promote conversations about mental health. A few years ago, Executive Director, Megan McGee, began corresponding with some mental health researchers and those conversations turned into Ex Fabula's Mental Health Storytelling Project.

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Joel Dresang: Yes, Kim. She actually wrote a really good blog about that.

[00:08:28]

Kim Shine: Yes.

[00:08:29]

Joel Dresang: It's on the Ex Fabula website if you go to the blog portion that's at the top of the page. Just look under mental wellness and you'll find Megan's blog about that. I thought it was really good.

[00:08:41]

Kim Shine: Yeah.

[00:08:42]

Joel Dresang: So, with funding from the Charles E. Kubly Foundation and Ex-Fabula's members. Ex-Fabula was able to partner with the National Alliance on Mental Illness for Southeast Wisconsin, the Grand Avenue Club, and Black Space to present mental health storytelling workshops. Participants who were interested in sharing their stories got to work one-on-one with an Ex Fabula storytelling coach. Then they told their stories at a virtual story slam on January 27th, 2022. We'll be sharing two of those stories from that event starting with this one from Cate Miller.

[00:09:25]

Cate Miller: [Burps] Oh, excuse me. If you're laughing, that's okay. Laugh away because honestly, [Burps] excuse me, I thought it was funny too when I started to burp constantly after a hernia surgery. The comedy wore off as the condition continued for the next 12 years. I was burping doing Ex Fabula StorySlams. I was burping during 12 of my 24 years as the emcee of the French cooking demonstrations at Bastille Days. When I had to burp, the air would come piling up in my throat demanding to come out. So, I would lean my head away and [Burps] off the side. I had to stop going to Early Music Now concerts because they were quiet and I was not.

You see, in 2004, I had cancer which left me with a long scar where my stomach used to be. Three years later, that scar herniated, which required the surgery and the burping that followed. I, of course, went back to my surgeons asked him to go in and see what the problem was and fix it. He refused. I scoured the Midwest for help over the next 12 years, begging at least half a dozen doctors to go in surgically because the tests weren't showing anything. They all refused. Now, long before I began all of this stuff, I had decided to disclose my bipolar diagnosis with all my doctors. After all, honesty is the best policy, right? Well, we'll see. On my bipolar coaster search for a cure, I have subjected myself to every test the doctors ordered, including a very bizarre procedure called autonomic manometry in which I had to swallow fluids for a half hour with a tube stuck down my throat. Well, this is legal. Who needs waterboarding? I'd have given up my grandma.

The Mayo Clinic didn't waste the tongue depressor on me. They sent me to behavioral health without an exam. Now, my psychiatrist had written a letter to their top gastroenterologist telling him that my psychiatrist felt that this was not psychiatric. Nonetheless, I was sent to behavioral health. Now, see, I'm bipolar. I'm not crazy. My psychiatrist, of course, was disappointed in the response but he wasn't surprised because even psychiatrists are not well-received in the medical community. Frustrated, exhausted, and honestly, angry too, I had given up when I saw a new family doctor named Dr. Gina Doriniano. She believed me. She heard me burping and said, "What's with the burping? Why are you having that?" I said, "Well, it's just something that I live with. So what?" She said, "You shouldn't have to live like that." She referred me to Dr. Nick Armstrong who is a surgeon who actually believed me too. Went into my stomach and found a mass of adhesions to remove and a foot of my bowel stuck to the hernia mesh that he had to free. Thanks to those two doctors, I breath normally today and I am so grateful to them. But I had another medical misadventure some years earlier that almost cost me my life.

A friend of mine noticed that I was having symptoms of diabetes, like thirst and frequent urination, and fatigue. She said, "Cate, you've got to talk to your doctor." I called him the next morning. He didn't ask me to come in to see him. He didn't ask to take my blood sugar. He didn't send me to ER, but he said I could come in after work and see him. I slogged through that day of work and dragged myself over to his office, and again, he didn't take my blood sugar, he didn't send me to ER. He had no suggestions. So, I went home. When the doctor called me to ask me to come to ER, I could no longer walk. I barely made it to the hospital, and when I got there, they put me through regular admitting instead of ER, and I passed out. Fade to black. I awoke lying on a cold steel table as my spirit began to separate from my body and rise. A cold white mist encircled me like a shroud. Down below, I could see the doctors and nurses were frantic because they were going to lose me, and it was hospital's fault. I knew I didn't want to die. I

wasn't ready, but I was calm and peaceful, and I accepted my journey as I rose counting in seconds as I had a sense of time for some reason.

One one thousand, two one thousand. I was completely enveloped in a thick white fog that I could almost barely see below me a doctor who stabbed me in the butt with a needle of insulin, and whoosh, like a vortex, my body grabbed my spirit out, and I've passed out again. Fade to black. I awoke the next morning surprised and grateful to be alive. My cousin Ken was so funny. He was lit. "Oh, Cate, dude. That is so cool..." He's from California, "...that you had a near-death experience." I'm like, "Well, Ken, dude, I almost didn't live to tell you about it." I have often wondered if any other patient would experience what I have in doctors' unwillingness to believe me and act in a rational manner to what I think is normal perhaps. But I do think that deciding to tell my bipolar diagnosis to the whole medical community did have a factor in my conditions. I feel that the people with mental health diagnoses are treated differently in a system that's supposed to help us be well. I didn't choose bipolar or diabetes, but I'm treated very differently for each one. That difference almost cost me my life, and it's a life I love. Thank you so much for your valuable time. [Burps] Excuse me. I did have a little chili today. Thank you.

[00:16:50]

Joel Dresang: After sharing her story, Cate emailed us to say — having the curated experience was wonderful because working with Karen Kolberg helped me tremendously. I haven't had one-on-one coaching before and the experience was immensely enriching. Karen Kolberg is our master storytelling coach and she's just a wonder to work with.

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Kim Shine: Yes, I agree.

[00:17:12]

Joel Dresang: Hey, Kim, guess what?

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Kim Shine: What?

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Joel Dresang: UltraShorts?

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Kim Shine: I think it's time.

[00:17:16]

Joel Dresang: Okay. The ultra shorts are brief little stories that people share at our events, and they get into the story slams, and there are a couple of lines that people write based on the theme of the event. I've got one here from Pam.

Pam says — My most memorable gift occurred when I was 33 and depressed about myself and my future. A co-worker said, "You know, Pam, you're a really good person." And I burst into tears because

that idea had never crossed my mind before. I sobbed with relief and gratitude that it might be possible I was basically good.

[00:17:55]

Kim Shine: Nice. This one here is from Bella.

Bella says — I was always a sad kid, but, on the inside, I told myself that I had to be special, that my sadness is special. Today, I remind myself that you don't have to be damaged to be good enough to be loved and to love. My depression still creeps up like a dark shadow on the wall. It's a wave, but I'm here, and I wrote this, so this has to mean something.

[00:18:21]

Joel Dresang: And it does. That was special.

[00:18:23]

Kim Shine: Now our final mental wellness story comes from Corey Fells who co-founded Black Space along with Dr. Lia Knox and Darius Smith. Black Space is working to normalize therapy for black and brown people.

[00:18:42]

Corey Fells: Hey. Hey, everybody. Thank you for having me. People may know me as Corey or some people may know me as Dontrell. In small industries, some people may know me just only as Fells. But I want to be able to present a story to you all as to how these three different individuals were able to overcome a lot and pretty much just now are in a different circumstance where they all are needed to become one person in order to be able to provide.

I want to start off my story with Corey. Corey was a young boy that was raised by his mom. Literally the only person that ever called me Corey was my mom. Everyone else always called me Dontrell when I was a kid and that was essentially my first name. So, of course, everyone's going to call me Dontrell but my story starts off with Dontrell understanding for himself who he was. Elementary school, was not the most popular, did not really play sports and I just generally just kind of stayed around areas where people just wouldn't really pay attention to. And then that moved on to middle school and high school where pretty much Dontrell started to take a turning point for another identity to come about.

In this particular time, Dontrell started to really hone in on this loneliness that started to kind of create about myself. When I was in middle school there was essentially this program or this rule they wanted to institute at this particular school here in Milwaukee. They divided kids between blue tie, red tie and red and gold tie. Red and gold tie meant that you were an honors student. Red tie just meant you were just a regular basic student. Blue tie meant that you were to completely isolated from everyone else because you were labeled as a troubled student. Unfortunately, I was a blue tie and I was a blue tie for a whole entire year. That meant that when it came to birthday parties and kids brought in cupcakes, everyone got one but me.

When I was told to have lunch, everyone was able to eat lunch with the regular students and I had to eat lunch with my teachers. There was completely no participation able for a young kid that was in blue tie that was accessible, even if it came to raising your hand in class to participate in problem-solving. That transcended over to me being dropped in the middle of a pretty much a suburban all-white school. I felt isolated. I was already kind of trained in that way, but every single day after I got home from that school, my mom would ask me, "Hey, did you have a good time? Do you like anything new about the school?" I would have to lie just kind of make her feel good about this.

But up until then, I was recognized as Dontrell until my mom passed my junior year, and the only person that ever called me Corey passed away. So, that vague Corey just to kind of like make me feel comfortable. My mom would also call me Dontrell whenever I was in trouble. I kind of never heard it for almost three or four months up until graduation rehearsals. Many of you may know they put your full name on the brochure. A good friend of mine pretty much tapped me in my shoulder and said, "Your name is Corey?" The way she said it vaguely sounded like my mom. So, ever since then, I told everyone now my name is just Corey. Don't even bother with the first name anymore. However, right out of high school, I went into the military. The military, well, a lot of people may or may not know this, but the military only recognizes you by your last name.

So, that chapter of Dontrell translated into Fells. I was in the military for about eight years, and from 2011 until literally 2020, Fells was mainly the only name that kind of like really heard a lot. But in this particular time, Fells was also a period in time where I practice loneliness, and I practice being self-sufficient because, in the military, that's exactly what you needed. Mind you, the only thing that I had when I was in the military was an obituary my mom because I didn't have no photos. So, every time I completed a task that I felt like it was too much for me, I kissed my mom's obituary, and I completed the task and will hopefully pass.

So, when it came to this one particular point where I was in the military, there's this southern guy by the name of Jeffrey Lee. He was 35 years of age, transferred from the Navy over to the Army and out of nowhere, the man came up to me. Mind you, I practiced loneliness pretty well. So, that meant my privacy was everything to me. No one knew anything about me. But this man told me, he said he had a God's whisper. He told me that he had a dream that there was somebody that came to him that told him to talk to me to tell me, hey, whatever chip he has on his shoulder, please tell him to let it go. Out of nowhere, Jeffrey was telling me this. I was like, "What are you talking about? Who's come to you in your dream?" He was like, "I don't know. Just take it, and I promise you it's only meant to help you."

That same exact day, that obituary I used to kiss of my mom every single day, we took a 12-mile ruck march, and they told us, "Hey, dump all your clothes in the washing machine and make sure you shower and take a nap." Well, that day, I was in such a haste to be able to take a nap because the 12-mile ruck march with 100 pounds of gear would tire anyone out. But however, I laid down the bed for about maybe a minute or two and realized quickly my clothes has, or at least in my pocket was where my mom's obituary was. I quickly hopped out of my top bunk, ran over to my washing machine, and realized that someone moved my clothes from a washer to the dryer. When I opened up the dryer, I saw that the obituary of my mom had folded in to the point that if I unfolded it, it would brittle away. So, at that particular time in my life, I wanted to get out the military because I want to be able to not practice

loneliness anymore. When I got from the military over to the civilian world in 2020, this is the perfect story, right, 2020 pretty much I'm trying to practice not being lonely, and we eventually all have to be lonely during this time.

But however, I experienced a great person to help me out when it came to practicing that and just practicing some mental anguish that I received. That person ended up being Dr. Knox. Went over and had the beautiful conversation via Zoom, and it felt like I was just really talking to a friend. At that particular time, I was also practicing a lot of like anxiety and anxiousness that would have in the real world come conversing with possibly co-workers, partner, and just regular day people. I say at that particular time is when Fells transitioned to Corey.

Corey wants to be a person that is more connected, a person that is cathartically expressive through his art. The person that is also very much so wants to help and be a part of everyone's growing of age story or just whatever story that they're trying to construct. That helped me out immensely. So, this person, Corey, is looking to also pull in Dontrell and Fells to hopefully become one because, in about six or seven months, I have a little one that's coming about that wants to be able to have a father that's whole. So, I present to you all Dontrell Corey Fells because I need to be able to do that because not only for myself and my little one but also because I am partnering with Dr. Nelson Darius with a non-profit organization called Black Space that wants to be able to do those same exact things for many other people across the country. So, I decided Black Space.

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Kim Shine: Joel, I really liked his story because I could identify with the three names and like the three identities and just trying to put all of them into one.

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Joel Dresang: I love how we use that to tell the story to separate those into three separate times of his life and three different feelings he had about himself and how he's bringing them all together now. It was a great story.

[00:27:15]

Kim Shine: I agree. I agree. Should we get to some UltraShorts right now?

[00:27:19]

Joel Dresang: Okay. Here's an ultra short from anonymous.

I lived with anxiety and depression for 12 years before I realized that there was something very not right. At age 24, I met the love of my life at the pharmacy refilling meds. We were filling the same prescription. Walking into that CVS was the best decision of my life. We are now happily boyfriend and boyfriend.

[00:27:45]

Kim Shine: Awesome.

Title: S1E10

[00:27:47]

Joel Dresang: Thanks again to the Charles E. Kubly Foundation for supporting the project and to the event sponsor, Copyright Magazine. Thanks as well to our project Partners as well as everyone who participated in the workshops and bravely shared their truth.

[00:28:02]

Kim Shine: Yeah, thank you to everybody. Unfortunately, this is the 10th episode of Real Stories MKE which means it's the end of our first series. We're crying back here now but we won't let you hear it but we are. Don't worry, though. Ex Fabula will be back in a few months with 10 more episodes.

[00:28:20]

Joel Dresang: And this went so fast. Meanwhile, you can visit exfabula.org to stream stories learn about our live events, and sign up for our e-newsletter. You can also connect with us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. We hope you will.

[00:28:35]

Kim Shine: A major thanks to everybody who makes this program possible, including Ex Fabula's staff, the storytellers, and our favorite person, audio engineer Sam Woods.

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Joel Dresang: Yeah. Thanks, Sam. We love you.

[00:28:47]

Kim Shine: We love you, Sam.

[00:28:48]

Joel Dresang: For Real Stories MKE, I'm Joel Dresang.

[00:28:51]

Kim Shine: And I'm Kim Shine. Thanks for listening.