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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.

[00:00:08]

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 host StorySlams where true stories are shared on stage.

[00:00:23]

Kim Shine: Yeah. And today we are bringing you three stories based on the theme Serious Play. They're from a collaboration with the Milwaukee Art Museum back in the fall of 2018. We presented some storytelling workshops and then had a StorySlam featuring stories inspired by two exhibits.

[00:00:40]

Joel Dresang: Yeah. One of the exhibits was called Serious Play: Design in Mid-Century America, and it included furniture, toys, textiles, films, posters, ceramics from over 40 designers whose creations included playfulness and whimsy in their design.

[00:00:57]

Kim Shine: I like that, I like that a lot. The other exhibit was Mrs. M's Cabinet created by the Chipstone Foundation. Both exhibits use works of art to explore history, culture, and the stories we tell about the society in which we live.

[00:01:12]

Joel Dresang: As we'll hear, the point of Serious Play is that children learn a lot from their experiences playing. Growing up, our play time exposes us to language and science and math. We learn about getting along with others, how to entertain ourselves, and we pick up cues to the culture around us.

[Crosstalk 00:01:29]

[00:01:29]

Kim Shine: How does...

[Laughter]

[00:01:31]

Kim Shine: You go first! How did this impact you? [Laughter]

[00:01:33]

Joel Dresang: Well, it made me think of what sorts of playthings I had when I was little. And I for the first time in a long time thought of the sandbox that my dad built. We had seven kids, I was the sixth of seven, and we had this sandbox in the corner of the yard, and he even planted some shrubs around it for shade. And I just remember spending all sorts of time there, digging in the sand, making landforms,

making stories of who inhabited those landforms and their relationships. I would be there by myself; I would be there with neighbors. We would just kind of meet there as a neighborhood and spend all this time. It was great. I can still feel the grit of that sand under my fingernails digging through there.

[00:02:18]

Kim Shine: That's pretty cool. I think about when I was a kid, and we always would play some version of house or something like that and I don't think I was ever the mom, but I always remember kind of being in charge of something. [Laughter] I just like to tell people what to do. You know? And then I did have a car. I had a Barbie car.

[00:02:39]

Joel Dresang: [Laughter] What was its name?

[00:02:41]

Kim Shine: I wasn't naming cars at that time, but you know I love to drive, and I swear to you – I think that's where my defensive driving started on the sidewalks.

[00:02:54]

Joel Dresang: Well, you were involved in serious play.

[00:02:56]

Kim Shine: [Laughter] Well, Joel, our first Serious Play story comes from Dr. Sarah Carter who was the curator and director of research at the Chipstone Foundation when we did this project. She's worked in and around museums since she was 13 years old and is very curious about the ways objects are used to convey information and tell stories. Here's Sarah.

[Music]

[00:03:26]

Sarah Carter: So, several weeks ago, I was driving north on 43, it was kind of a cloudy overcast morning, and I hear a little voice from the backseat, "Mom, I've been thinking." Now when my four-and-a-half-year-old son Paul says that, I truly have no idea what he is going to say next. His little brain is still this strange unfolding mystery to me, and I just never quite know what's going to come out of his mouth. So, I look up in the rearview mirror and I see him staring at his hands. He's looking at them front and back and just staring at them.

And he continues, "Mom, I've been thinking. Do you remember that time last spring when we went to that Milwaukee Day party and there was this really hot glue gun and you said, 'Do not touch that,' and I started playing with it and I burned myself really badly?" And I'm sitting there thinking, "Yeah. Yeah, I remember that pretty clearly, Paul." But I just kind of nodded and looked at him and he's staring at his hands.

And he continues, "And yeah, and do you remember that time last summer when you were at that meeting in Sheboygan and you had to drive home really fast an hour because I was in the emergency

room with Dad after I cut myself and I was trying to cut that bell pepper when Dad told me not to touch the sharp knife and I did?" And I'm like, "Yeah, I also happen to remember that horrible experience as well." But I don't say anything, and I just sort of nodded and I'm watching him in the mirror just staring intently at his two little hands. And he says, "Well, I've been thinking. I'm fine now. It was totally worth it, right?"

[Laughter]

[00:05:14]

Sarah Carter: "It was totally worth it. The risk was totally worth it. I'm fine. I mean, it hurt for a little while, but now I'm fine." And so I'm just driving along on 43 and I'm like, "Okay." And of course, I'm frantically imagining this future vision 10 years from now where he's like, "And I was totally fine, Mom." Right? And I'm just thinking, "How am I going to respond to this?" And I tried to remind him, "Well, there are these scars on your hands," but he just wasn't hearing any of it. And what struck me in that moment was how really serious he was in talking about this. He was so proud that he'd put these events together and was making sense of his play, was kind of making sense of his world through these experiences that he had and understanding the consequences, or in his mind lack thereof consequences, of this play that he was doing.

And I was reminded of Piaget, the psychologist who tells us, in the 20th century told us that play is the work of childhood. Right? When children are playing, they're working, and they're learning, and they're understanding the world, and that that work is pretty serious work. That's how they make sense of things. And as a mother, I know that to be true, that play is very serious. I know that also when I remember my own childhood games, which I took very seriously, but those are other stories for other days. And I also know that as a scholar, and I research the history of childhood, I write about the history of childhood. And I know very well that play and games and toys, yes, tell us a lot about children's experiences, but reveal a whole lot about larger cultural patterns. Things that might be hidden, things that we might not know right away or think about right away. But they're important cultural tools and play is very serious.

And when you walk into an exhibition like Serious Play with a child, they know that serious play isn't an oxymoron. It's not a fun title for an exhibition. Play is serious. And not just in the way that the designers who are talked about in that exhibition learn to create interesting and innovative designs. It's serious because it really is cultural work. So, when I walk through that exhibition, which I've done many times, and there are a lot of beautiful, delightful, fascinating things in there, I imagine those little hands in the rearview mirror, maybe opening the colorful furniture designed by Henry Glass, or building their own little house of cards, or playing with some of those interesting tops or blocks or forms. Serious play allowing someone to learn about the world.

But there's also play in that exhibition that's not just serious, that I think of as maybe grave, that I think of as maybe troubling. Play that I might not want my child to be engaging with. When I look, for example, at that small little totem pole, which when I first saw it in there, it was really shocking to me that it was just sort of sitting there. How do we think about ways in which people play with other cultures, right? What kind of power dynamic does that object suggest? A totem pole is supposed to be

an object that's about a community or a clan's story. It's not a toy. Or what kind of play were designers engaging in in the mid-20th century when they were collecting the works created by artists from Mexico or Peru or Honduras or India and bringing those objects back together again as a playful or whimsical, the word that's often used, contrast to shiny Alcoa aluminum. To create a different vision of corporate America with those objects. Playing with those objects, playing with the concepts that those objects represent.

So, that day when I was driving up 43 and taking my son to school, when we got there, I didn't go right into the carpool line to drop him off, but I pulled into the parking lot and I said, "Okay, I'm going to show him these scars on his hands. I'm going to help him try to see." Like, "Okay, actually, there was a cost to that kind of more dangerous play that you were doing. Just like there are these cultural costs and there are these cultural scars when those kinds of games are being played with people's stories and objects." And I tried to show him, but he wasn't interested at that point because in his mind, he'd already created a story that was meaningful to him about what had happened. He had taken these chances and he was fine, no problem. Right? He wasn't interested in that story anymore, but that doesn't mean the scars weren't there, and that doesn't mean I didn't know that they were there. So, thank you.

[Applause]

[00:09:59]

Kim Shine: Sarah is now an associate professor in design studies at UW-Madison's School of Human Ecology. We caught up with her and here's what she had to say after she did her story. She said, "I run the Center for Design and Material Culture. Our center has two fantastic galleries in which we continue to grapple with some of the issues I mentioned in my story." And she also told us that her son Paul, who's now eight because we all want to know about him, he has a few more scars.

[Laughter]

[00:10:31]

Kim Shine: I like her son a lot. I can see myself in him, like, "I'm fine."

[00:10:35]

Joel Dresang: I also like the restraint that she showed in not...

[00:10:38]

Kim Shine: Right. Not bursting his bubble.

[00:10:41]

Joel Dresang: Exactly. Yeah. And letting him learn this on his own, whether he did or not. [Laughter]

[00:10:45]

Kim Shine: Mm-hmm.

[00:10:46]

Joel Dresang: Our next Serious Play story is from Mel Miskimen. Her story was inspired by some children's chairs in the Serious Play Exhibit. Those chairs happened to be the same chairs she sat in back in grade school. Here's Mel.

[Applause]

[00:11:09]

Mel Miskimen: Okay. I am in second grade, Sister Mary Gregory's class. She got done telling us that we need to be prepared, and do you know why we need to be prepared? "Oh, oh, I know this, I know this, I know this. For the second coming of Jesus." "No. For the coming of the communists." Because according to Sister Gregory, any day now, they will be marching up Oklahoma Avenue, up the steps, in the Blessed Sacrament Grade School, they will round us all up, and they will march us to concentration camps where they will put hot poker in our ears and our brains will ooze out on the other side. That is, if we have any brains. It's very tense, everyone is tense. There's this scary little bald man on TV and he's hitting the lectern with a shoe. And there's this other guy with a scraggly beard, he's got this big cigar and he's yelling. And then there's President Kennedy and he looks all charming and dapper and smiling, probably because he just had sex with Marilyn Monroe.

[Laughter]

[00:12:19]

Mel Miskimen: Anyway. So, it's tense. My house is tense. I mean, I get it. My father's a police officer and he's been getting these phone calls and he gets in the car, drives like a bat out of hell down the driveway. I find out later that he's been driving to Hales Corners because the experts in the City of Milwaukee have said that the atomic bomb will be dropped on City Hall and that that is where the government, the new government was going to be set up in Hales Corners because I guess the fallout will be obeying city limits and will just come to a screeching halt in Hales Corners and I guess my father has to be there to write post-apocalyptic parking tickets. I don't know.

[Laughter]

[00:13:07]

Mel Miskimen: But anyway, so he leaves but not before he has given us specific instructions. Okay. We are to go in the basement, but if there's time, my mother, who is this big and weighs like 90 pounds, she's supposed to start digging up the backyard, and she's supposed to take all the dirt and pile it onto the foundation of the house. And then we are to go in the basement and wait for the all-clear. We're going to live on Campbell's Soup, we're going to drink the water from the hot water heater. Oh, and then this part. I can tell he's wincing when he tells her this. He gives her permission to dig a hole in the corner of the basement right underneath the Hamm's Beer sign. He just got done finishing our rec room and it's got this north woods kind of theme, and that's where we're going to pee and poop.

[Laughter]

[00:14:00]

Mel Miskimen: And then depending on how long we're down there, I'm going to while away the time making little fallout shelters out of my Colorforms. But anyway, that didn't happen. Okay, that didn't happen. Whoo! Bullet dodged; big atomic bomb bullet dodged. Oh, but not so fast. According to Sister Gregory, we got lucky this time. But next time, oh, and there will be a next time, the other shoe. She talks about this other shoe dropping, and I'm like, "What shoe?" Like there's this asteroid belt of shoes that just circle the earth and sure, there's wars and famine and pestilence, but those are just like loafers and maybe flip flops. But she says there's going to be this big heavy shoe. She doesn't know when it's going to drop but it's going to be bad. And it's going to be all our fault because we did not meet our pagan baby quota. Just Google it.

Okay. So, I grow up, I get married, I have kids, I buy a house, it's 40 years later. And I'm kind of always looking for this other shoe. But nothing's happening. Until one day my mother calls me. "Oh, my God!" she says, "Turn on the TV! We're under attack!" I'm like, "What?" I turn on the TV and I see that black smoke billowing out of the World Trade Center, and I'm like, "Oh, my God. This is it." And I am immediately transported back to second grade and I'm in a little bit of a panic, "Where's my desk? Where am I going to go? Should I start putting plastic on the windows? Where's this Flintstone lunchbox that I used to cover my head with? Oh, my God. I knew I shouldn't have gotten rid of that thing." Seriously – you know how much those are going for on eBay? I mean, really. So, I get into a little bit of a breakdown, and it was my husband who suggested that I may want to talk to a mental health professional.

[Laughter]

[00:15:59]

Mel Miskimen: Because, I mean, he came home, I was in the yard, I was digging the creeping charlie out of the lawn with a bobby pin. I thought it was soothing. It was something I could control. So, all right, I go talk to this professional and she's nice and everything. She kind of looks like that English teacher that would bring the Simon & Garfunkel records to class, you know that kind. So, I tell her about Sister Gregory and the shoe and how that like if this was the other shoe, then there's got to be another other shoe that's going to drop and like when is it going to end?

Well, I'll tell you how it ends. Okay. So, I kind of have this recurring dream where I'm back in second grade and there's this klaxon of the alarm, "Err! Err! Err!" going off. And there's glass flying and Sister Gregory's, "En, en, en." Up at the front of the class, "Meh, meh, meh," and I'm just like trying to get under my desk but I can't because I'm an adult and I can't fit under there. And that's usually when I wake up, but not this time. So, this time, explosions go off, everything gets quiet, and I'm like, "Okay. Well, I'm okay," and I'm afraid to look. And I look and there's Sister Gregory, kind of wicked witch of the west-style, underneath a large shoe, and I'm thinking, "Ah, problem solved."

[Laughter]

[Applause]

[00:17:24]

Joel Dresang: We followed up with Mel and here's what she had to say, "The anxiety of those days back in 1962 paved the way for a lifetime of worry and a dread that ultimately led me to therapy and antidepressants. I often think of kids in school today having to do active shooter drills, wondering what kind of effect they'll have."

[00:17:44]

Kim Shine: This is not even comparable, but I remember doing the tornado drills and having to go under the desk or in the hallways and stuff like that.

[00:17:52]

Joel Dresang: Yes. Right. Right.

[00:17:54]

Kim Shine: Similar but not, obviously.

[00:17:57]

Joel Dresang: Scarring. Hey, Kim. Let's do a couple of UltraShorts, which are short stories that people submit at our StorySlams and they relate to the theme. And they weren't from the StorySlam on Serious Play, but they relate to serious play. This one is from Anya, "Growing up in Cuba, I didn't have any toys to play with at the beach, so my favorite game was seeing if I can take off and put back on my swimsuit in the same wave. Once, I took off my suit, but the wave knocked me out and when I resurfaced, my swimsuit was nowhere to be found. My dad rescued me by deflating my friend's beach ball and using it as an improvised wrap to walk me back to our cabin, and that was the last time I ever played that game."

[00:18:45]

Kim Shine: [Laughter] Good memories there, I guess.

[00:18:48]

Joel Dresang: That's serious play.

[00:18:50]

Kim Shine: Well, this one here is from Anonymous. I love this one because I used to play hide and seek all the time, and man, you find some interesting places. Anonymous says, "When I was little, I played hide and go seek with my siblings. My brother decided to hide in the washing machine, but my mom had taken the wash out early so the spin cycle wasn't over. I'm pretty sure he's still scared of the laundry room." Do you want to know one of the places... I don't even think I was playing hide and seek. I think I was just... Because I'm just curious about everything so I used to get into everything and I kind of still do. The place where I decided to just hop in, we had a huge deep freezer in my house.

[00:19:31]

Joel Dresang: Oh, my goodness.

[00:19:32]

Kim Shine: Thankfully, it was on the main level, and it was packed with food. So, I don't know where the adults were because I lived in a family household, had aunts and uncles and stuff there with my mom. And somebody saw me trying to get into the deep freezer and trying to close it and got me out. And I got in trouble, but I just remember being on top of frozen food [Laughter] trying to close the top. But hey, it's a memory. [Laughter]

[00:19:59]

Joel Dresang: Well, yeah.

[00:20:01]

Kim Shine: Serious play.

[00:20:01]

Joel Dresang: Yeah, I'm glad you got out.

[00:20:04]

Kim Shine: [Laughter] So, we have one more Serious Play story from one of our storytelling coaches, De'Shawn Ewing. Here's De'Shawn.

[Applause]

[00:20:18]

De'Shawn Ewing: Jimmy Carter was president of the United States. At the same time, you had in New York City David Berkowitz, better known as the Son of Sam, convicted of murder. Jim Jones had us all paying attention to People's Temple as 900 mass suicides and murders occurred. Movie magic was being made. Jaws 2 came out, as well as Animal House, and on June 16th, 1978, the world was introduced to Grease. And on June 19th, 1978, the world was introduced to Garfield comic strip in 41 organizations across the world. And on June 20th, one day after that, 1978, the world got to know De'Shawn Ewing. I was born to Fred and Virginia Ewing in yes, 1978.

And I mention that because it was one of those time periods in which people are still debating, "What generation do I fit in? Am I Generation X or am I Millennial?" People have gone as far, if you believe it or not, to actually come up with a new term, Zennial. Seriously, they have. And it's somehow trying to put me in this box of Millennial and Generation X, they just basically say I don't have a place. That's my life and that's my story. But it explains a few things because they say because I'm a Zennial, I can be very pessimistic but also optimistic. They say I'm analog and digital. And it kind of makes sense.

Because when I was growing up, I remember being a kid that liked to play, to go outside and play. Begging to play, like that was my drug of choice, wanting to be outside in the heat, in the snow, it didn't matter. Running up and down the block, climbing the trees to the highest point to where actually we were scared to come down. Being able to run all energy out chasing one another around the block. Our neighbors understood, the block was full of children, so they didn't care too much about their grass unless you stayed on it for way too long. As long as you kept it moving, you were pretty cool.

I also remember some of those times there were those times when you would be on your bike, and you'd be chasing cars just because it was something to do. But you would get those special occasions when one of the drivers would see what you were doing and would stop. And they would look at you, let you catch up to them, and you would look at them. And without speaking a word, you would give each other the signal and they would accelerate. And you would begin to pedal as quickly as you could trying to catch them, and they were nice enough to let you just stay along just a little bit until they accelerated away. And you would give them a wave, happy as could be because they just gave you a thrill. And not everyone was willing to do that, but you had some still willing.

I also was part of that generation that had in-home entertainment, so you could feel the base of an Atari system and the joystick in your hand with a red button that would fire away. And you had Sega Genesis and Nintendo. My cousin had the Sega, I had the Nintendo. So, we would swap each other's houses to be able to enjoy the games that we couldn't get on our systems. We also would be able to have a Power Pad for my Nintendo. So, we became the celebrities of the block. Everybody wanted to play the Power Pad. The Power Pad was attached to the Nintendo so when you ran, your character ran with you. When you jumped, your character jumped. Virtual reality at its finest. This is how we grew up. Entertaining ourselves and also being entertained.

I also grew up in a time period of watching and seeing reality as it was. So, I'll be honest with you – maybe this is the pessimist in me – when watching the exhibit that I was able to see, it hit me that some of this was not meant for us, for us, for us. The reason I say that is not that the exhibit itself wasn't meant for us. It was the architecture and the design and some of the decor and some of those things that were to be fun in the home wasn't meant for us. Because during that time period, there was still discrimination, there was still redlining, there wasn't an opportunity for home ownership, so I guess not everyone was able to take part in the play. For a lot of us, it was still very serious.

And it moves to now as I look and I pay attention to the world around me and I believe it began in high school. When I'd be getting frustrated, got really, really frustrated with my homework. I was sitting at the oval table that we had, and my siblings were there with me as well and my dad said, "De'Shawn, just keep doing it, you got it, you can make it happen." And I was like, "No, I just want to quit. I don't want to do this anymore. Skip school." My dad gave me a look. I thought I might die at that moment.

[Laughter]

[00:25:17]

De'Shawn Ewing: My siblings gave me a look. They thought I might die at that moment. My dad looked at me and said, "Just keep working, do your best, and I'll come back and check on you." My siblings finished their work with ease, dispersed from the table one by one by one. I was there alone. My dad came back to sit next to me. He said to me, "Son, I want you to understand something. You are entering into a game that you didn't create the rules to. You didn't have anything to do with the setup or the design, but you have to be ready to play. So, maybe you should learn the rules, and the first rule is you need at least to have your high school degree. That puts you at least in the running for things that may be declined to you just because of your skin."

And he began to explain to me the rules, and this was the beginning of ongoing conversations that my father and I had about how some things are just not designed for us but yet we still have to enter into the fray, learn the rules, and be able to play. Also be able to play to an extent where we might know, like video games, the cheat codes. Sometimes you have to play the cheat codes to get what you want and where you need to be, and you have to be able to do it with a sense of integrity within yourself. My father taught me this lesson, to play within the rules, but get to a place where you can create those rules, so that you can bring in the next generation. That's why I dedicate my life to the work I do. Working with youth to be able to help them to understand this game wasn't designed for you, but you are equipped to play it. Learn the rules, be able to get into the systems that may deny you access, figure out how to bend those rules to put yourself in a position where for the next generation you create those rules.

[Applause]

[00:27:02]

Kim Shine: Now, when De'Shawn shared his story, he was the program's manager at the Parenting Network. Recently, he joined the City of Milwaukee's Office of Violence Prevention as the Family Injury and Violence Prevention Program Coordinator.

[00:27:15]

Joel Dresang: You know, one of the things that I liked in De'Shawn's story...

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Kim Shine: I love his story.

[00:27:19]

Joel Dresang: ...was the involvement, I mean, that it became a community story.

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Kim Shine: Mm-hmm.

[00:27:23]

Joel Dresang: That, I mean, the person driving in the car having this kid biking alongside...

[00:27:28]

Kim Shine: [Laughter] That was so funny.

[00:27:29]

Joel Dresang: ...got into the play of it.

[00:27:31]

Kim Shine: Yeah.

[00:27:31]

Joel Dresang: That's just so cool.

[00:27:33]

Kim Shine: It's generational too because, I mean, I can't imagine that happening now. Somebody in the car with a kid behind them, I don't know what they would do. They probably would just drive off. I don't think people would see the humor in that or the fun or the playfulness in that anymore because I think we've gotten too serious.

[00:27:48]

Joel Dresang: I hope you're wrong.

[00:27:50]

Kim Shine: I hope I'm wrong too.

[00:27:51]

Joel Dresang: While the Serious Play Exhibit is no longer at the Milwaukee Art Museum, you can see a few of the pieces in the Online Exhibition Catalog at [mam.org](http://mam.org). Mrs. M's Cabinet is still on view as part of the museum's main collection and at [mrsmscabinet.org](http://mrsmscabinet.org).

[00:28:10]

Kim Shine: Well, that's all the time that we have today for Real Stories MKE.

[00:28:11]

Joel Dresang: Oh.

[00:28:13]

Kim Shine: I know. It's really sad. It's always sad. But don't you worry, guys. We have been at this for more than 10 years and there are more audio and video stories available at [exfabula.org](http://exfabula.org).

[00:28:24]

Joel Dresang: Our website lists upcoming storytelling workshops and StorySlams and we hope you'll join us at an event and maybe even share a story. You can also connect with us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

[00:28:36]

Kim Shine: Yeah, and as always, we want to thank everybody who makes this program possible, including Ex Fabula staff, storytellers, and our favorite person in the world...

[00:28:45]

Joel Dresang: Yay.

[00:28:46]

Kim Shine: ...audio engineer Sam Woods.

Title: S1E8

[00:28:48]

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

[00:28:51]

Kim Shine: And of course, I am Kim Shine. Thank you so much for listening.

[Music]