[00:00:00]
Joel Dresang: Welcome to Real Stories MKE brought to you as part of Ex Fabula's work to connect Milwaukee through real stories. I'm Joel Dresang.

[00:00:07]
Kim Shine: And I'm Kim Shine. Ex Fabula believes that everyone has personal stories worth sharing. We host storytelling workshops where community members can build their storytelling skills and their confidence. We also host StorySlams where true stories are shared onstage.

[00:00:22]
Joel Dresang: Yes. And today we're bringing you three stories on the theme of speaking up. So, Kim, speaking of speaking up.

[00:00:29]
Kim Shine: [Laughter] Yeah, speaking of speaking up, I do have one thing that I immediately thought about. It was back in high school. I was writing for the school newspaper, and we got some new librarians or something, I believe, two new librarians, and they were just so strict. I can't remember all the details, but I know how we felt as students. We did not like them, and we just thought that they should get fired, they should leave. So, everyone was complaining and because I wrote for the paper, my editor who was an adult and over the program, he encouraged me to write something about them. And so I did and back then, I guess, "viral" wasn't a word but it went viral [Laughter] inside the school. And the librarians, they ended up hating me, but all the students felt validated, including myself because they needed to know that the way they were treating us was not right.

[00:01:29]
Joel Dresang: Well, it's important for someone to speak up to say the things that other people want to say but they might not be courageous enough to do that. So, thank you for doing that.

[00:01:39]
Kim Shine: Oh, yeah.

[00:01:41]
Joel Dresang: And that's what our stories are about today.

[00:01:43]
Kim Shine: Exactly.

[00:01:44]
Joel Dresang: Our first speaking up story comes from Amanda Panciera. She put her name in the hat at a virtual StorySlam in October 2020. The theme for that slam was reimagining norms. Here's Amanda.

[Music]

[00:02:11]
Amanda Panciera: So, my elementary years were spent in a very conservative, very religious, tiny school just west of here in Waukesha. Our core curriculum was grounded in what we learned from the Bible. Math lessons counted disciples. Science was grounded in the miracle of creation in seven days by God. And amidst those lessons in curriculum, we were also learning our character. And those lessons, while maybe not intentional, were often grounded in shame. If we made a mistake, God was watching, and we needed to ask His forgiveness. If our schoolwork wasn't done appropriately, we dishonored God. So, everything was about pleasing this man that we were supposed to believe existed, and if we didn't believe it, well, also, shame.

So, there were many norms and expectations in the culture of the school that was grounded in this conservative ideology. Men led the household, women raised the children, everyone attended church, your body is a temple, marriage is forever, all these things. So, I worked really hard to be the perfect student, and maybe that's because I knew my family's secrets. My dad had been previously married, my mom worked in a male-dominated profession, both of my parents smoked cigarettes, and we also skipped church on Sundays. Ooh. So, I spent a lot of time praying and asking for forgiveness that these things would no longer bring me shame.

So, another big part of my classroom experience and culture was kickball. Our whole class played by choice at both morning and afternoon recess. If most of our day was focused on the Bible, the other focus was kickball. We talked about how we would divide into teams, who would make which play, if Mr. Wapelhorst , our teacher, would let one of us kids be the pitcher because he was always the pitcher. These were our main focuses of our discussions. And often the boys in our class would leave the school day with grass stains and dirt all over their pants because the most epic play you could make in kickball was sliding into base.

Of course, because of the culture of our school, the girls were expected to wear knee-length dresses or skirts, or longer. We had dress checks so we had to make sure that they were at least touching our knee. And so, of course, this inhibited our ability to really make those plays. And as much as I was committed to being a perfect student, I was also very committed to being excellent at kickball, but these skirts and dresses were getting in the way.

So, in those times when we were walking out to the kickball field and somebody would call, "Let's do boys verse girls," us girls knew this wasn't going to be our game to win. So, one day I had an idea. I pulled together all the classroom girls after our game and I said, "Tomorrow, bring your pants. We're going to change before recess so that the game can be equal so we can make our plays." And I gave this rousing battle cry for kickball equality. And the majority of the classroom girls agreed with me, so I was buzzing with excitement.

And then as we were dismissed for recess, us girls rushed to the bathroom kind of giggling with the excitement and anticipation of the fact that we were finally going to be able to play in pants. And we got ourselves ready and rushed out to the field and were the first ones to get outside. The field kind of was up this hill so we're marching up the hill in our pants, and the boys in the classroom are behind us kind of looking at us bewildered, like wondering. This is the first time, we're fifth graders, and this is the first time they've seen any of us in pants.

And at that moment, as I turned to kind of watch the reaction, our teacher comes out the door and he stops. And I could see his underbite of rage just, like, pull forward on his face, and there was this silence over all of the kids. And then his arm flew to his whistle, and he blew it hard and yelled, "Recess is canceled! Everyone inside now!" And he turned on his heel and he threw the door back open, and he disappeared inside.

And so all of us kids turn around and start slowly making our way back inside and I can feel the girls around me just like melting, and I knew I should feel ashamed because I had started this. I knew that I would take the fall. But for the first time, I didn't feel that shame. I traded that shame for an understanding that what I'd encouraged everyone to do was the right thing. And it was really the first time for me that I realized that even if everyone around me was doing one thing, I was allowed to think differently, believe differently, and act differently, especially if I knew in my heart that it was the right thing. Thanks.

[Music]

[00:07:29]
Joel Dresang: Amanda Panciera is the head of human resources at Milwaukee's Urban Ecology Center. She'll be giving birth to her second kickball activist in May. On her inner arm, she has a tattoo that says, "So it is better to speak," and that's from Audre Lorde's poem Litany for Survival. Amanda says it's a constant reminder to use her voice to address inequity in opportunity.

[00:07:52]
Kim Shine: Her second kickball activist, I love it.

[Laughter]

[00:07:57]
Kim Shine: I loved her story. It was great.

[00:07:58]
Joel Dresang: That's a great activist sport too. I just wanted to read the lines that led up to the tattoo on her arm. Again, this is from Audre Lorde, "And when we speak, we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak."

[00:08:20]
Kim Shine: Powerful. So, Joel, guess what?

[00:08:23]
Joel Dresang: UltraShorts?

[00:08:24]
Kim Shine: Yeah.

[00:08:24]
Joel Dresang: Okay. UltraShorts are the little, very brief stories that people give us at StorySlams and they're very brief, they pertain to the theme of the StorySlam.

[00:08:35]
Kim Shine: Yeah.

[00:08:35]
Joel Dresang: Let's read some of those.

[00:08:36]
Kim Shine: Let's do it. Go right ahead.

[00:08:38]
Joel Dresang: Okay. This is from Anonymous. "I always got bullied in middle school until one day I stood up for myself and I said, 'That's enough.'"

[00:08:48]
Kim Shine: This one here is from Kayla. Kayla says, "My dad raised me for most of my life, but when I told him I was dating a woman, he wasn't exactly supportive. I felt betrayed. And recently, I reconnected with my mother who I hadn't spoken to for 12 years. When I told her I was queer, she responded, 'Me too.'"

[00:09:06]
Joel Dresang: Here's an UltraShort from Madison. "In a show, the female ensemble had to laugh at a sexist joke. A collective decision was made to tell the director we wouldn't laugh. And we didn't."

[00:09:21]
Kim Shine: Our next teller is Margaret Henningsen. She shared this story in January 2019 at a special event at the Milwaukee Art Museum when the theme was Serious Play.

[Applause]

[00:09:31]
Margaret Henningsen: Oh, okay. I'm physically challenged. So, I was born in 1947. For those of you who are math challenged, I'm 71 and looking pretty blankety-blank good because...

[Laughter]

[00:09:52]
Margaret Henningsen: He said no swearing. But rolling forward to the present day, it's important for you to know how old I was because of what I'm getting ready to tell you. When I first saw the exhibit, I couldn't believe how cutting edge, how smart, and how ahead of his time my father was. We used to refer to him as the behavioral management specialist because he had to behavior manage his 10 children.

[Laughter]

[00:10:24]
Margaret Henningsen: Yes. There were 10 of us and I was the oldest. And when I walked around the corner of the exhibit and saw Tinkertoys, which the Rogers kids had, and Chinese checkers, which the Rogers kids had, and Colorforms which the Rogers kids had, and my brother John who to this day in his 60s, we still call him Play Baby, he used to take the Colorforms and stick them on his body which drove my mother insane. But my father really understood the concept of play as a way of behavior managing his 10 children and teaching them how to (1) get along, (2) stay out of his hair and his way because he did have a paddle, and a finger like this that would get on your forehead if you broke the rules.

But more importantly, he wanted us to understand what it meant for us to be in this world and how we had to take our love and concern for each other and communicate that to people that are around us in our lives. The most important thing he taught us in my mind that stayed with me until I was 71 years old – I'll be 72 this year – was following the rules. So, Daddy had some rules. His name was George Edwards Rogers Senior. He was 6'-2", very, very, very, very gorgeously handsome, and he knew it. My mom was short. Her name was Mary Pickford Bishop Rogers. Yeah, she was named after Mary Pickford the actress because my grandfather loved her. And between the two of them, they were able to communicate us the importance of playing with learning how to do things.

So, every year at Christmas, every year at Christmas, and there were eight of us born over a nine-year time period – 10, let me say 10 out of fairness to my mother – and every Christmas, we would come charging downstairs, every Christmas because we knew there were going to be things under the Christmas tree we wanted. But every year Daddy bought us two or three games. The Tinkertoys where he talked to us about building mansions with Tinkertoys. The Colorforms where he talked to us about how we could take those Colorforms and make shapes but that we had to work together as a team. The Chinese checkers which you better not, any of those marbles fall on the floor because if George stepped on one, it was over. It was either going to be the knuckle or the paddle. But through all of that, he also bought us other things – regular checkers, cards, Parcheesi, Monopoly. I loved Monopoly. I loved buying houses. And at the end of the day, the funny thing about it is I ended up loving money and houses, ended up being a banker and a real estate agent.

[Laughter]

[00:13:48]
Margaret Henningsen: So, go figure. But my point was when he was talking to us about these games, he had several rules. One is however many kids there were, we had to sit down and read the rules. We had

to learn the rules, we had to know the rules, and we had to follow the rules. And Daddy would say, "Do you know the rules? Then let's get going." And then we played by the rules unless, of course, it was me. And I was like, "I'm the oldest. I can make up the rules myself." Well, that didn't work with him. But later in life, these are the lessons you learn from serious play. Later in life whenever something happened to me, I thought about Daddy and his rules.

In the '60s when I was at UWM, I formed a group called the Black Student Union. This is why you had to know how old I was because you would be like, "The '60s? She was in college in the '60s?" But I was in college, and we started this group. We were marching through the old UWM Union, the Black students, and we were demanding that UWM give us space the way they gave the White group space. And we got into a slight altercation with some of the White students on campus and it erupted. Long story short, I got expelled for starting a riot. Which I did not do but I got expelled.

Back to George. I was of course scared to tell him that I had been expelled from college where he had put his hard-earned money from his three part-time jobs he had in addition to his full job so his daughter could go to college. And I got up every morning and went to school like I was still in school. And one morning as I was about to put my hand on the door, he said, "Margaret Jean, where you going?" I said, "To school." And he pulls this letter out of his pocket that I found out later was addressed to me and he said, "That's funny because this letter says you've been expelled." But in the end, he's called UWM and scheduled a meeting between me, him, and the dean of the school.

He marched into the dean's office with me and talked about how I was the oldest of his 10 kids and he asked his questions, "Do you have rules about students marching? Did Margaret break the rules? She knows the rules. She follows the rules. So why did you expel her?" Daddy's rules. And UWM let me back in. And to this day, it's on my record that I got expelled but that I got let back in. But I go back to the days when we were playing and Daddy was saying, "Do you know the rules? Do you understand the rules? Do you know the consequences when you break the rules?" And when I ended up graduating with honors after embarrassing him and having him go in and beg for them to let me back in school, that was the proudest day of my life when he came up to me and said, "I always knew you'd be successful." Love you, Daddy.

[Applause]

[00:17:23]
Kim Shine: Margaret is semi-retired but is still speaking up in a whole bunch of ways. She works with Ford Community Investments which invests in nonprofits that fight for racial justice and challenge the status quo. Now, she also shares her stories with her 50+ nieces and nephews and encourages all of them to speak up and break [Phonetic 00:17:42] the rules just like their grandfather would have encouraged them to do.

[00:17:47]
Joel Dresang: Yes. One of the things I liked about her story was the fact, I mean, it shows the difference between speaking up and just spouting off. There's a discipline to it.

[00:17:55]
Kim Shine: Yeah.

[00:17:56]
Joel Dresang: I mean, she worked. You have to work to learn the rules, to understand the rules, to know what the consequences are, and she did all those things, and that's very important.

[00:18:05]
Kim Shine: That's so true because if someone tries to catch you up or tries to lie about the rules, you know what they are.

[00:18:11]
Joel Dresang: Right. And if people are speaking up about things that they're ignorant of, that sort of undermines what they're speaking up for.

[00:18:20]
Kim Shine: I totally agree.

[00:18:22]
Joel Dresang: How about some UltraShorts?

[00:18:24]
Kim Shine: I think that's a good idea. Kate says, "Five years after my dad died, my mom was in her last days, in and out of consciousness. Suddenly, her eyes flew open wide, gaze fixed ahead, and she said with urgency, 'Wait up, Bud. I'm coming.'" Two days later, his invisible hand helped her to the other side. Knowing that they are together brings me deep peace." Wow. Wow.

[00:18:52]
Joel Dresang: This one's from Anonymous. "My grandparents are Italian immigrants. Before they came over, my grandpa said to my grandma, 'If you want to marry me, you have to come to America because I am going.' She did. My grandpa has since died, and I have been trying to give my grandmother the utopia she came for ever since."

[00:19:13]
Kim Shine: That's sweet. I love that one. This next one is, or it says, "I love camping, a taste I acquired before I got married. After many years, I persuaded my husband to go on a camping trip. Our first night out, we camped in Custer State Park in the Black Hills. I thought everything was perfect until my husband whispered in my ear, 'Sam, are you asleep?' 'No,' I answered. He said, 'I know what we forgot. Our bed.'"

[Laughter]

[00:19:42]
Kim Shine: "He never acquired a taste for camping."

[00:19:44]
Joel Dresang: Oh. Subtle way to tell her, right? Yeah.

[00:19:47]
Kim Shine: Basically.

[00:19:47]
Joel Dresang: At least he went through with that one trip.

[00:19:49]
Kim Shine: [Laughter] Right? You got to try it. So, we have one more storyteller, right?

[00:19:54]
Joel Dresang: Yes. That's right, Kim. Our final storyteller is Kerri Grote. She shared this story in August 2016 at a program for Northwestern Mutual employees. The event was planned months before. It happened to take place right after a weekend of unrest in the Sherman Park neighborhood of Milwaukee, and that unrest was in response to the fatal shooting of Sylville Smith by a Milwaukee police officer. Here's Kerri's story.

[Applause]

[00:20:23]
Kerri Grote: Hi. Good afternoon. I have lived in Milwaukee for 18 years and it's my home, but I grew up on a cattle ranch in Wyoming. We lived 35 miles from the nearest town. I knew how to ride a horse and drive a stick shift two-ton pickup truck before I knew how to ride a bicycle with gears. And my dad was like a true cowboy. I mean, he wore the hat, he wore the belt buckle, he had the grimy boots. And that thing you hear about cowboys being the strong, silent type? Yes. This was in our DNA. We did not talk about feelings, and we did not talk about hard stuff and messy stuff and uncomfortable stuff or awkward stuff. It just didn't happen in my family.

And there are so many examples. That time my dad got angry and backhanded me and I showed up at the breakfast table with a black eye. We didn't talk about that. Or that one time that my younger sister fell in love with a Black man and then got married. And a few years later, they had a beautiful baby, my niece McKenna, she's eight. And we have never had a discussion about that in my family.

I think when Terry, my brother-in-law, started coming around and becoming a part of our family, we just all sort of independently because we don't talk about this, we sort of all independently decided, "We're just going to pretend we don't notice he's Black. I think that'll work. I think that'll be okay. Right?" And we laughed and we think that's hilarious. But that's like someone deciding to pretend that I'm not a woman. It's an important part of a person's identity. Of course it's not all of their identity but we're all individuals. I think back to that and think we probably weren't particularly welcoming to my brother-in-law. We love him, but I am certain he did not feel truly welcome and truly in his place.

So, anyway, that fear of speaking up that I grew up with became more and more difficult for me to live with the older I got. And particularly over the last year or so, the things going on in our country and in our city related to racism and segregation and injustice, it pained me to stay silent and it was terrifying to speak up. And when this opportunity came along to apply for this fellowship, I knew that was the thing I needed to do to get me over that hump, and so I did, and it hasn't gotten any less uncomfortable. I'm up here with a knot in my stomach wondering, "What's everyone going to be thinking?" But it's important to me. So, I've been doing a lot of talking for the last year and sharing my story. And it's empowering and I think it's important. And I hope, I hope in some small way I'm making a difference.

But the other thing that I'm realizing more and more, and particularly in light of the unrest in our city most recently, is that it's also really important to just shut up and listen. To listen to other people's stories, people who don't look like me and most of you. And to really put ourselves in the shoes of people in the Black community and really have fierce empathy. That's a phrase that's been going through my head for myself, fierce empathy. And noticing, getting quiet and noticing what goes on for me, even as passionate as I feel about this.

The other night I was sitting on my front porch in my very safe neighborhood in West Allis. I've lived there for 12 years. Summer night and I hear some kids coming down the street and I realize it's a group of guys who were playing basketball at the school down the street, some young Black men. And they're laughing and joking around and elbowing each other and there's a few swear words here and there and they're minding their own business. And they walk in front of my house, and I feel this jolt of adrenaline, and I feel this shot of fear go up my spine. And I realize in that moment, if those young men were White, I would not have felt that visceral reaction. And that too some days feels like it's part of my DNA. And it's been really important for me, particularly this past week, to be quiet and not talk so much, but be quiet and listen and notice my own reactions.

A man I'm dating who's Black, we were talking about the unrest and the violence, and he's describing to me, he was seven years old, and he grew up in Racine in the inner city. He's describing to me the most horrible memory of his life which was watching a woman be stabbed to death on the street in front of his house. And having to stop myself and put myself in the shoes of a seven-year-old kid, a little seven-year-old boy watching someone die. I don't know about you, I've never seen anybody die in front of me, ever. And then imagining translating that into years of that and that kind of experience for a young person and what that might culminate into later on in life.

So talking, noticing my own reactions, listening. For me, these are the things in particular in the past week or so of unrest here in our city that have really been on my mind. And as much as they feel like they're part of my DNA sometimes, they're not. And I know, I'm certain, that that can change for me, and my hope is for others. Thank you.

[Applause]

[00:26:16]
Kim Shine: So, I really liked her story, Joel, and she said, I wrote this part down, "It's important to shut up and listen."

[00:26:22]
Joel Dresang: I love that too; I wrote the same thing down. I also liked, and this goes back to Amanda Panciera's tattoo, she said, "It pained me to stay silent and it was terrifying to speak up."

[00:26:34]
Kim Shine: Yeah.

[00:26:35]
Joel Dresang: Yeah. So, in fall of 2021, a message from Kerri appeared on her Facebook page. Here's a selection that connects with the idea of speaking up. "If you're reading this, this brain cancer probably got me. But let me be clear. I did not lose a battle. There is no shame in dying from cancer or any serious illness. Death is a transition that each of us will go through. I was asked by a shaman whom I spoke to after my second brain surgery, 'Are you running towards life or running away from death?' Whoa. That got my attention. There's a big difference. I got it wrong more often than not. Don't let fear fuel your choices. Live fearlessly, run towards life, don't worry about what people will think. Trust me – it doesn't matter."

[00:27:28]
Kim Shine: And that's great advice whether you're a storyteller or you're just living on this earth.

[00:27:33]
Joel Dresang: Yes.

[00:27:34]
Kim Shine: Basically don't let fear stop you. Now though Kerri is no longer with us physically, her memory and her stories remain and we're sending love to everyone who knew Kerri.

[00:27:48]
Joel Dresang: That's all the time we have today for Real Stories MKE, but don't worry, we've been at this for more than 10 years and there are more audio and video stories available at exfabula.org.

[00:27:57]
Kim Shine: Mm-hmm. And our website lists upcoming storytelling workshops and StorySlams, and we hope that you'll join us at an event and maybe even share your story with us too. You can also connect with us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

[00:28:09]
Joel Dresang: Yes. And thanks to everyone who makes this program possible including Ex Fabula staff, the storytellers of course, and as always, audio engineer Sam Woods.

[00:28:18]
Kim Shine: Dun-da-da-duh. You know how we feel about you. For Real Stories MKE, I'm Kim Shine.

[00:28:23]
Joel Dresang: And I'm Joel Dresang. Thanks for listening.

[Music]