

[Music]

[00:00:15]

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.

[00:00:23]

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

[00:00:40]

Kim Shine: And our theme this episode is comfort zones, and I got to tell you, Joel, I actually, I knew what I was going to say, like skydiving, all that stuff. That's not cool. That's way out of my comfort zone.

[00:00:51]

Joel Dresang: Okay, okay.

[00:00:51]

Kim Shine: I don't want to be pushed out of anything, including my comfort zone, but I actually, I want to say that, oh my gosh, I will tell when I go to certain engagements or parties or something, I have to mentally put myself in the right space.

[00:01:07]

Joel Dresang: Sure.

[00:01:07]

Kim Shine: Because it's outside of my comfort zone and sometimes I don't even know.

[00:01:10]

Joel Dresang: Yeah.

[00:01:10]

Kim Shine: I'm like, "Ooh. Who's there?" All right, what's your story?

[00:01:13]

Joel Dresang: Well, I was thinking about this and we're going to hear from a storyteller later who talks about moving to a different country to start graduate school, and I did that and that was really putting myself out of my comfort zone. But I learned through that that it takes some effort and some bravery on my part, but I can usually find people and groups who will welcome me and help me fit in, help me feel like I fit in, and I learned a lot from that. Ever since then, I've sort of reminded myself that when I'm entering that situation that I can find somebody.

[00:01:47]

Kim Shine: That's nice. Should we get to our story?

[00:01:49]

Joel Dresang: Let's, please.

[00:01:50]

Kim Shine: All right. Well, our first comfort zone story comes from Dr. Lia Knox. She shared this story at our 'I Decided' StorySlam in January of 2022. Here's Dr. Knox.

[Music]

[00:02:09]

Dr. Lia Knox: Good evening, everybody. Thank you so much for having me and I'll start my story. So, one day there was these two magnificent handsome young but really wise men that came to me, "Dr. Knox! Dr. Knox! Dr. Knox! Listen! We want to give group therapy to all of Milwaukee!" And I was like, "Wait, wait, wait, wait. We can't do that. Number one, that's unethical. Number two, we can't possibly treat all of Milwaukee." They were like, "Well, we got to do something! There's so many problems! There's things going on." Darius, "I've been protesting and I'm really, really tired. I don't want to do it anymore and it's just a lot. Our people need our help. The Black and Brown communities need our help and they need therapy." Also Corey, "You know what, Dr. Knox? You know you helped me a lot and so I've been telling everybody. They need to go to therapy and they all need to see you!"

I'm like, "You know what? Thank you so much, I appreciate that; however, no, we can't do that, but what we can do is offer group therapeutic experiences." They were like, "Well, all right, all right." And I'm like, "But wait a minute. I just want to let you know this is going to be huge. You guys are geniuses!" "Whatever, whatever, Dr. Knox. Let's just do it! But one thing, we want to offer it all for free!" And I'm like, "Okay. We can do that. But the other caveat is it has to be offered to our Black and Brown communities in beautiful and safe spaces."

Beautiful spaces – the reason why it needs to be in beautiful spaces is because it's dear to my heart. When I was growing up, all of you that are from Milwaukee and know the North Side and West Side of Milwaukee, I grew up in Hillside/Lapham Park, Lisbon Square, 22nd and Center, 27th and Galena, a lot of government-assisted housing complexes AKA the projects for those of us who lived there. In those facilities, people didn't have a lot of beauty. It was not a place where you would say, "Oh, my God! Look at these beautiful trees, these beautiful homes, it's just glorious here." However it was beautiful because the people there were beautiful. It was filled with love. It was filled with such a home. People took care of each other and made sure you were safe and loved.

My mom, a single parent. My brother was a year younger than me, they called us Irish twins because we looked alike and we were about the same height. A lot of times us and our neighbors had to make sure that we were okay. At Hillside and Lapham Park, we lived across the street, across the highway from places where it smelled so good. And so remember when we were growing up and our parents were not the type of parents where when we got a little sick or there was snow on the ground got a chance to

stay home from school. Absolutely not! You had to be on your deathbed. Chat it up and raise your hand if that was you.

So, when I finally did get sick, I got to go to Grandma's house. Grandma lived just a little bit away but still in Lapham Park and Lisbon Square. So, when we went to Grandma's house, my grandma was so beautiful. She had this long black hair, these emerald-green eyes, this smooth skin, and she would open the door, my mom would take the city bus over there and we'd be in tote, and she'd say, "Come on in, babies." And she'd open the door and it would smell like beef stew, chicken noodle soup, tea. And her caftan – who knows what a caftan is? It's a muumuu, so they call it, but my grandma would kill me if she was here today. So, it was a caftan. And she smelled like beautiful heaven-sent perfume.

And she said, "Come on in," and we'd go in with her and her caftan would be trailing her and we'd be trailing the caftan. And she'd sit down and she'd feed us wonderful food because generally we got sick at the same time. She'd be watching *Those Are the Days of our Lives*. And the wind would be blowing in because my grandma always believed in fresh air. And so the curtains would be blowing and they were sheer white and it would smell like across the street, the Wonder Bread Factory and the Ambrosia Chocolate Factory, and those smells together were beautiful.

And at noon, she would have high tea. No, we weren't from England, but you thought we were, and she'd have four drops of those sugar cubes and we'd just look at her glisten in the sun. And then it was time for us to go to bed because we were sick. And the next day, perhaps we'd be able to stay there if we were too sick. If not, my mom would come get us on the bus and take us home. But in those spaces, it was beautiful, and she treated us so warm and our bellies were so filled and I was in such a good mood. And at times, she'd tell us stories and make us feel so wonderful. Sometimes I'd even fake to be sick just to go to her house to get well.

Black Space is a space where it's beautiful and you go in and you feel so much better and it's safe and your belly gets filled and your mind becomes warm and safe and comfortable. And when you come to Black Space, it's beautiful. I facilitate the groups. I'm going to make sure I'm beautiful. The space is going to fill with plants and beautiful decorations because it's beautiful. When I open that door, I might not have on a caftan but I promise you this, I'm going to look good for you because Black and Brown people are worth it. I decided Black Space because this is what we deserve. That's why I decided Black Space.

[Applause]

[00:08:10]

Joel Dresang: You know, I enjoyed that story when I first heard it, when she first told it.

[00:08:15]

Kim Shine: And isn't her voice so calming?

[00:08:17]

Joel Dresang: Oh, my gosh. Yes. And she's just so captivating. And it was a nice story because she got into personal things too and it just really brings you in and helps you feel comforting.

[00:08:28]

Kim Shine: Exactly.

[00:08:29]

Joel Dresang: Yeah, yeah.

[00:08:30]

Kim Shine: Well, Dr. Knox, we don't have an update from her but just a little bit more about Black Space. So, they're at the Milwaukee Art Museum, they have a partnership. And I know that they did some classes and some group sessions in March but just for folks who are interested in the future ones that they do, they welcome all BIPOC, women, men, and LGBTQIA individuals, and all events are free. But you do have to register in advance. It's encouraged to do so at least.

[00:08:56]

Joel Dresang: That's a great service.

[00:08:56]

Kim Shine: Mm-hmm.

[00:08:57]

Joel Dresang: Our next comfort zone story comes from Melani Kaplan. She shared this story at our Deaf Stories Project StorySlam in 2022. Melani told this story in American Sign Language, so the voice you'll hear is the interpreter from Professional Interpreting Enterprise. The interpreter translates Melani's story into spoken English. If you want to see the story told in ASL, you can check it out on the Ex Fabula YouTube channel. But now, through her translator, here's Melani.

[Applause]

[00:09:29]

ASL Interpreter: All right. Hello, everybody. My name is Melani and I want to tell you a little bit about a struggle that I've had and finding my identity and deciding who I really am. I was born entirely deaf; I couldn't hear a thing. And when I was about the age of one, I started to gain some of the hearing back, and I could hear a little bit and I was what you would consider hard of hearing. I could hear some noises; I could hear that people were talking. Mom did use sign language with me but she could use her voice. Most of my early years, my education, I was at a couple of schools. I was in what you'd call a mainstream environment. That means it's all a bunch of people who can hear and then some people who are deaf participate in that school and were mainstreamed, were in the school and the program all together, all the classes. Is everybody in the back there, have you been to mainstream back there? Do you know what that means?

And then there's the environment that I experienced where I was the one and only deaf person in a group with a bunch of students who could hear. And they had their interaction but I was the lone deaf and I was kind of left out. I wasn't really a part of the school, a part of the kids, and the growing up. I

mean, when I look back on the experience that I had, it really is upsetting and unsettling and very frustrating. The struggles that I experienced going to school trying to get somebody to understand who I was and feeling like I was constantly running into a brick wall, that people just didn't get me.

When I was about 12 years old, I had an amazing moment. I saw some kids and they were deaf and they were using sign language, and I was like, "Hey. What's up over there?" And I'm like, "What are they doing?" So, they said that they were practicing for a drama that they were going to be doing. It was a deaf kids' drama group. I thought, "What? Are you kidding? I want it." I wanted it. "I want to join. Oh, my gosh. I am so excited. Those are my people. That is my community and a group of people that I could fit with." So, the next time they had a drama, I was right in the front line going, "Yep. Yep. I want to be in here." I practiced, I participated, I was thrilled to be involved in this environment. I mean, it was just a great, great opportunity, and they got me. And I just really felt for the very first time in my life that they saw me, they knew who I was, they could understand me, and it was just this wonderful experience.

At the same time that I was in that drama, the movie with Marlee Matlin called *Children of a Lesser God* was released and she won an Academy Award for that. And to see that and here was this deaf woman winning an award and I thought, "That could be me. That could be me." I wanted that to be me. So, I was just thrilled thinking about this opportunity. Now, there were a lot of different local theaters within the area. They did different productions of *Children of a Lesser God* and I would audition for each and every one of those. And I traveled around all over the States involved in some of these professional plays and I really felt at home on the stage and with this group of people.

And this is when I was in high school. I missed a lot of school but I was out traveling and performing and I loved it. I mean, sometimes we'd be in Vermont and Texas and just all over the place, but I really felt like this was a place that I belonged. But I knew that who I was inside wasn't settled yet. Am I a deaf person? Am I a hard of hearing person? Who am I? And I felt like I was really frustrated with a lot of the people that I interacted with that they didn't really understand who I was. When I was on stage, absolutely. But when I was in my regular everyday life, not so much.

I graduated from high school and went to the University of Illinois – Champagne, Illinois – and I signed up for their theater program. And I had to be auditioned for the program and I was accepted; however, it was on a probationary period. They wanted to see how well I would do, and they said that I needed to participate in speech training to be involved in their program. And I was like, "Okay. You guys know best, you're the professionals. All right." And I thought, "Hmm. I'm not hearing though, but all right." So, the first semester of school, I loved this class and this teacher, it was great. They taught us so much. We talked about meditation, we talked about imagery, talked about just creating things in your brain and that could you use onstage and I learned a lot from this teacher. But she still didn't really see me for who I was. She was focused on my ear and my mouth. Can I hear and can I speak? That was all that she thought about me.

So, second semester, we were taking a class which was talking about movement. How you use your body when you're acting, smelling, using all your senses and getting in touch with your body. Practicing like recognizing the scent of things and how you can incorporate that into your work. And one of the lessons, they talked about sound. And I was like, "Okay." Feeling a little anxious about what it's going to

look like. So, they passed out blindfolds for everybody and I was thinking to myself, "Do you seriously want me to put a blindfold on? You know that I can't hear." I mean, I couldn't hear, and then adding a blindfold to me made me feel very sensory deprived, I had no sight, no vision. I mean, the other students in class had the ability to hear and so they had other senses that they could work with, but I didn't really feel like I could do that. I was kind of being singled out. I wanted to approach the teacher and talk to her and explain where I was coming from, "You know that I'm a deaf person and you know how hard this is to ask me to cover my eyes?" But I didn't. I thought, "I'm going to follow along." So I put the blindfold on and I was terrified. I was terrified because I did have a sign language interpreter and I asked them to come over and kind of like help me, lead me around, or get me kind of situated in space. And I thought I got to where I was, which I was supposed to, and I took the blindfold off and I was like, "Great, I did what I was supposed to," and I thought, "All right."

The next day, they had a class, we sat in two rows of chairs facing each other, and the students were all blindfolded. And the teacher had something that she would throw on the floor and we had to listen to where it landed and then go and grab that item. And I'm thinking to myself, "Seriously? Again, I'm deaf. You're going to drop this item on the floor and I'm supposed to go grab it but I can't hear where it lands." Didn't want to make a fuss so I put the blindfold on and the teacher tapped my shoulder as, "You're the person that has to go out and try to find that," and I tried to grab the teacher's arm to say, "No, no, no, I can't," but I didn't. So, I went around and kind of crawling around trying to find the item that she threw on the floor. And what part of the game was is you were supposed to be able to grab the item off the floor, tap the other person, and then sit in their chair. And the other person grabbed the item, it was kind of a bar that she put on the floor, and then tapped me on the shoulder and they won.

And then they did it again and I was thinking to myself, "F you. You mother [Censored]. Really, are you serious?" You picked me again for this game. So, I thought I'm not one to give up, I'm going to be stubborn, so I just walked across. I didn't even try to grab the item on the floor, found the chair that was vacant and sat down and thought, "[Censored] you." So, in my mind, I didn't say it out loud, I didn't say it but I thought it in my mind, "Screw you, lady." I was pretty proud of myself. And the other students came up to me and said, "You can't hear. Why did she expect you to do that? She picked you two times." And the other students she didn't pick at all, but she picked me, I was the only one that she selected for this activity twice. And that is actually the first time that I really advocated for myself as a deaf person. So, now, very interesting, about a week later, one of the other fellow students came to me and said that she'd heard that the teacher thought that I had cheated in this activity and I was thinking, "Are you kidding? [Censored] you, lady."

[Applause]

[00:18:59]

Kim Shine: Melani's story was a good point, like she said about advocating for yourself.

[00:19:04]

Joel Dresang: Yes.

[00:19:06]

Kim Shine: But I still didn't get why the teacher did that.

[00:19:09]

Joel Dresang: Yeah. It was just so maddening to hear what was going on there. But good for Melani to stick up for herself. And to hear that story, just to share her experience that way.

[00:19:21]

Kim Shine: Mm-hmm.

[00:19:22]

Joel Dresang: And again, if you want to see Melani tell that story in ASL, go to the Ex Fabula YouTube channel.

[00:19:29]

Kim Shine: Our final comfort zone story comes from Alejandra Jiménez. She shared this story at CORE El Centro's 25th Anniversary Celebration. Ex Fabula storytelling coaches worked with the tellers prior to the event, served as emcees in English and in Spanish, and coordinated audience UltraShorts. Here's Alejandra.

[Applause]

[00:19:56]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:19:56].

[00:20:01]

Translator: Hi, hello everyone. My name is Alejandra Jiménez, or Allie, as a lot of you know me.

[00:20:06]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:20:07].

[00:20:13]

Translator: [Laughter] So, I was told there were going to be about 200 people but my eyes and my math skills tell me there's like a thousand of you.

[Laughter]

[00:20:22]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:20:22].

[00:20:27]

Translator: Thanks to CORE for the invitation and thank you all and I hope you enjoy my story.

[00:20:32]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:20:32].

[00:20:42]

Translator: I came to the United States in 2010 to do a master's degree in education and my plan was to stay for just two years.

[00:20:49]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:20:49].

[00:21:00]

Translator: When I had just finished my program, an opportunity to teach at Urban Ecology Center opened up and so, of course, I took it.

[00:21:08]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:21:08].

[00:21:22]

Translator: My plan had been that I'd finish school. It was time to party. It was time to explore. It was time to get rowdy. [Laughter] And of course, that was what I planned to do.

[00:21:34]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:21:34].

[00:21:47]

Translator: But then I got married and I had kids and I have my job and I bought a house and now, here I am 13 years later.

[Laughter]

[00:21:57]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:21:57].

[00:22:06]

Translator: So, the plan to party was no longer on the table and really my effort has been to put my roots down.

[00:22:18]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:22:18].

[00:22:28]

Translator: And since I've been here, I've been a part of many communities and they've received me well and met me with a lot of love.

[00:22:35]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:22:35].

[00:22:40]

Translator: And the community at CORE El Centro is especially important for me.

[00:22:43]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:22:43].

[00:22:48]

Translator: It's special because it's like having a little Mexico right here in Milwaukee.

[00:22:53]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:22:53].

[00:22:57]

Translator: It's a treasure, it's a secret that not everybody knows.

[Laughter]

[00:23:02]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:23:02].

[00:23:08]

Translator: Right now I am teaching children's folklore dancing at CORE El Centro.

[Applause]

[00:23:17]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:23:17].

[00:23:28]

Translator: And it's an opportunity not only for me to get my soul fed but also to share with Latino and especially Mexican children here in Milwaukee.

[00:23:39]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:23:39].

[00:23:48]

Translator: And when I say "feed my soul," I don't just mean listen to music and move my feet.

[00:23:52]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:23:52].

[00:23:59]

Translator: In the class, we learn about geography, culture, history...

[00:24:06]

Alejandra Jiménez: Culture.

[00:24:07]

Translator: ...and culture.

[Laughter]

[00:24:09]

Translator: I counted there was four.

[00:24:12]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:24:12].

[00:24:21]

Translator: And this is part of what feeds my soul, hearing a song from Mexico just makes me feel so great.

[00:24:27]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:24:27].

[00:24:32]

Translator: This is one of the reasons why CORE El Centro is the core of my body.

[00:24:36]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:24:36].

[00:24:42]

Translator: It gives me mental health, it gives me physical health, it gives me mental health...

[00:24:48]

Alejandra Jiménez: Body.

[00:24:49]

Translator: Body health. I said physical health, mental health...

[00:24:53]

Alejandra Jiménez: Everything.

[00:24:54]

Translator: Everything.

[Laughter]

[00:24:58]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:24:58].

[00:25:03]

Translator: And it's not just for me. I have two kids who are six and eight.

[00:25:06]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:25:06].

[00:25:09]

Translator: They're Americans growing up here in Milwaukee.

[00:25:12]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:25:12].

[00:25:18]

Translator: But their mother, that is me.

[00:25:19]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:25:19].

[00:25:26]

Translator: Is very proud of being Mexican and wants her children to be proud of being Mexican as well.

[00:25:31]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:25:31].

[00:25:39]

Translator: It's for the legacy of children that are growing up here, for them and for all children growing up here in Milwaukee.

[00:25:47]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:25:47].

[00:25:54]

Translator: And so it's thanks to CORE for providing the space for me and for Mexicans and for all Latino people.

[00:26:01]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:26:01].

[00:26:09]

Translator: And for all people who are interested in traditional Mexican dance and all Mexican and Hispanic cultures.

[00:26:17]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:26:17].

[Laughter]

[00:26:22]

Translator: I also opened at CORE something called the ponchipaquete.

[00:26:27]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:26:27].

[00:26:33]

Translator: Ponchipaquete is something in Mexico, it's a present that has a bunch of little things inside.

[00:26:38]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:26:38].

[00:26:44]

Translator: One of those gifts is this class of Mexican folklore dance.

[00:26:48]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:26:48].

[00:26:53]

Translator: And there are others that you can't read about in the newsletter.

[Laughter]

[00:26:58]

Alejandra Jiménez: [Spanish 00:26:58].

[00:26:59]

Translator: Thank you.

[Applause]

[00:27:05]

Kim Shine: A lot of our stories have been about moving and how we kind of resettle into finding our comfort zone, so I love the fact that Alejandra was willing to share hers. And even though there was like no conflict or anything like that, if you've ever felt out of place, I think it could draw you in.

[00:27:23]

Joel Dresang: Yes. So, Kim, our CORE work with CORE El Centro is an example of how Ex Fabula can customize storytelling workshops and experiences for organizations in southeastern Wisconsin. If you're interested in working with us, check out our website at [exfabula.org](http://exfabula.org) and click on Collaborating.

[00:27:40]

Kim Shine: Such a good word because Ex Fabula is making select public StorySlams accessible to Spanish speakers by offering simultaneous interpretation from English to Spanish using headsets. We welcome storytellers to tell their stories in Spanish as well. More details are available at [exfabula.org](http://exfabula.org). Unfortunately, Joel, we are out of time.

[00:28:02]

Joel Dresang: Oh, no.

[00:28:02]

Kim Shine: Oh no is right. But y'all know. We've been doing this since 2009 so there's more audio and video stories available on our website.

[00:28:11]

Joel Dresang: And that's at [exfabula.org](http://exfabula.org) and our website lists upcoming storytelling workshops and StorySlams. We hope you'll join us at an event and maybe even share one of your stories. You can also connect with us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

[00:28:25]

Kim Shine: Yeah. And we always thank everybody who is making this program possible which includes the Ex Fabula staff, our fabulous storytellers, producer Lauren Instenes, and audio engineer Sam Woods. We also would like to give some appreciation to our partner on this show – 89.7 WUWM.

[00:28:45]

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

[00:28:50]

Kim Shine: And I'm Kim Shine. Thank you, guys, so much for listening and please, consider telling your own story too.

[Music]