Welcome back. This is Jen Lee, the creator and host of I Need Blue, survivors talk surviving. Visit www.INeedBlue.net for additional stories. As you listen, if the message moves you, share the story with friends and family. The more we share, the more we learn, and the more we can help.

Please note, I Need Blue does contain sensitive topics which could be triggering, please seek help if needed.

May is Foster Care Awareness Month. Today we are going to discuss this on a local level, Brevard County, Florida. My first guest is Keirra. At age 12 her life changed. She left her home environment where her mom was mostly absent. This led to her journey of multiple moves, several schools, drugs, prostitution an anonymous phone call, living in a safe house and much more. Now as a single mom, Keirra found hope, structure, and direction when she met Lisa Soloway with Lift Up Young Lives of Brevard County, FL. Keirra is going to school to become a criminal defense lawyer after being positively influenced by a local attorney. I am humbled she is here to share her story. As you listen you will be amazed the events occurred within a six-year span. She experienced more in those six years than someone will in a lifetime. She is resilient and quite the inspiration.

My second guest is Lisa Soloway, founder, and executive director of Lift Up Young Lives. It's a life skills program at Ready For Life Brevard. Lisa and her husband adopted their daughter Tiffany from foster care. During the process, they learned how many kids never get a forever family and are out on the streets once they aged out of licensed care. Lift Up Young Lives helps young people realize their potential and teaches them the tools they need to succeed in life. Thank you for being my guest today, Lisa.

Ladies, I cannot wait to get started. I really appreciate you sharing your story and sharing all this information. What you are doing is making a difference in our community.

Lisa

Thank you, Jen for having Keirra and I on today to raise awareness about foster care. We adopted our daughter out of foster care in Connecticut in 2000. She was eight years old, and very, very hurt. She is going to be 28 in June. It's incredible how fast 20 years went by. Through that experience, I learned how many kids never get a forever family and how many kids aged out of foster care, and they're out on the streets. It has always bothered me.

Keirra

I’m happy to be here. Thank you!

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I am Lisa Soloway with EXP Realty, 10X Home Team and also the founder of the Lift Up Young Lives Life Skills Program and VP of Finance with Ready For Life Brevard. When they age out of foster care, many of these kids become homeless. 1 out of 4, are going to be going to jail within the first two years after leaving foster care. Many of them don't complete their high school education and many won't go to college, but they need that high school education first.

For additional information, visit [www.readyforlifebrevard.org](http://www.readyforlifebrevard.org)

Keirra

Thank you so much. Hope is an interesting thing and it’s a huge part of my story. My daughter's name his Hope.

I was born in Vero Beach, Florida, where I moved to Satellite Beach, Florida, with my dad, my older brother, and my aunt. I lived there until I was 11 and a half, almost 12 years old. Around that time, we had an issue. My dad moved out, and so did my brother and me. I stayed with a family friend. I lived there for a year. I was about 12 and a half at that time, when I moved in with an extended family member. While there, I had been introduced to sex trafficking, and drugs.

Jen

With expose at such a young age, how did you not become addicted?

Keirra

I can't explain it. With addiction running in my family, I would have had inactive addiction. I can't think of anything else, but to say, by the grace of God, I do not get addicted and stuck.

Jen

At age 12, you leave your aunt's house, it is your first exposure to drugs to crack cocaine and prostitution.

Keirra

The extended family member, it was their way of life. They had lived 20 plus years of their life surviving through prostitution. I was exposed to this lifestyle while living with that family member. At that time, I was heavily doing drugs because it was right in front of me all day long. Prostitution was to keep up a habit.

Jen

Someone had made an anonymous report. Can you tell us about that?

Keirra

I had just moved in with an extended family friend when the report was filed. I had been with that family friend for about three weeks. I do not know who made the report, as you said it was anonymous. I do not know the exact words of the report, they would not give all the information. They did open a criminal investigation for that family friend and a DCF investigation regarding my dad, my mom and myself.

Jen

And what was the result of that investigation?

Keirra

I was removed by the Department of Children and Families and placed into foster care.

The foster care system was interesting. When you're first going into it, you don't know what to expect. They brought me back to their DCF office and started calling all my family members to see if I could stay with any of them. My aunt let me move back in temporarily while they found a place for me to permanently stay. It was a lot of moving around from group homes to youth shelters to safe homes; everywhere and anywhere possible.

Jen

What is the difference between foster care and being in a safe home? Can you explain the difference and how you ended up most of the time in safe homes?

Keirra

I'm more than happy to. There are multiple types of homes within the foster system. The way they organize them is by DCF licensing. Therefore, if they complete the licensing, they can have foster children. The difference between the group homes and safe homes, some take just females, some take just males, and others take a mixture.

The group homes are more unsecure. You have more freedom, more rules but you're able to bend those rules. At safe homes, you are in a completely undisclosed location. Family, friends, nobody knows where you are, except the people that are in the home with you. For 24 hours somebody was awake and monitoring us. Safe homes are locked down. They are specific to girls or women who have been sex trafficked. It's a means of protection versus just a place to live.

Jen

Why would someone be placed in a safe home versus the foster home?

Keirra

Many time it come down to labels. Unfortunately, I have a human trafficking label which will follow me for the rest of my life. You must have a human trafficking or sex trafficking label to be placed in a safe home. Safe homes are there to protect these women who were abused or trafficked. They do consider safe homes as a last resort if no other placement wants you.

Jen

Was that the case with you? Did you feel nobody else wanted you?

Keirra

They determined they could not find a normal, so to speak, foster care placement, therefore, they had no place to put me. They had found the safe home and used my human trafficking label to try to secure me there.

Jen

Can you describe your roughest placement, and how it made you feel emotionally, mentally, and any types of scars that it has left behind?

Keirra

My roughest placement was a youth shelter. It was one of my first more long term placements. I did go back there a total of three times. There was very little supervision. You could drink, do alcohol, drugs, smoke marijuana; it was your choice. They did not punish you for it. They more didn't “realize” you were doing it. It left the biggest scars on me, and it started a long streak of running away. That was the first place that I actively ran away from. It's difficult being in a place with that much freedom. As a kid or a minor, you're supposed to be protected from those things. This placement created a fear of new placements. Once you get an idea of what they're like, your first placement, then that's your expectation going to every placement.

Jen

When most people move or travel, they have a suitcase for their personal belongings which are important to them. What did you have to carry any items which were important to you?

Keirra

Garbage bags.

Jen

Wow, I can't imagine.

Keirra

I was fortunate enough to have family members who did get me a suitcase later. Many people do not have that. They give us garbage bags and about two hours and tell you to pack everything. One of the hard things about foster care is moving from place to place. When they move you, you get very little notice, and you get your garbage bags. You're told to pack everything you can in your bag.

They dropped me off at my foster home with a bag of McDonald's, I was in my pajamas, and I had prescriptions in a Ziploc bag. You're left with people who do not know your medical history. You're with a caseworker who does not know and does not have the information to offhand tell the caregiver, this young child has asthma. In my case, I was not told I had asthma but handed an inhaler. It's a very, very stressful time for everybody.

Commercial break:

Speaker 1

My husband and I moved to Florida three years ago. The first challenge we faced like many people, finding a realtor based upon a strong referral, we were introduced to Lisa who became the best part of our home buying experience.

Lisa

Thank you so much Jen. I really appreciate that. That means a lot to me. I learned about my company exp Realty was very excited to get started. I got my license few years ago. I really love the idea of helping people. Alison Roman, and I partnered to bring different buying and selling programs to our clients including performance guarantees. It's important we give the best experience we possibly can to our client. We support Ready For life Brevard. We give a portion of our commission to Ready For Life for the Lift Up Young Lives program.

Speaker 1

Thank you for not just helping my husband and I find our forever home, but for helping our community as well. Contact Lisa today at 860-416-5055

Keirra

Around age 16, I had a volunteer foster parent who took me to get my driver's license and helped me find my first job. It created some normalcy. At 16 and a half years old, I found out I was pregnant. I left my aunt’s house, where I had been staying for a month, and headed to a maternity home out of Sarasota. I had my daughter on January 30. When I moved back to Brevard County, I was then placed with another foster parent until I was able to move out on my own at age 18.

Jen

Tell me about the attorney who is very special in your life.

Keirra

Pam Bress was the first attorney I received when I went into my first foster care DCF hearing. She was my Attorney Ad Litem. They are expressed wishes and are there to help you navigate what you want and help you get your needs met. Pam was the first person took a chance on me. She used to pick me up and give me driving lessons. She brought me to get my identification, my learner's permit, and my driver's license. She visited me in every placement. It was a very, very important part of my life to have somebody who was always right there with you and is still here with me today.

Jen

Guardian Ad Litem are volunteers. That's what people don't realize. Those are volunteer positions; they don't get paid. Obviously, she saw something in you and really wanted to be there to help you.

Keirra

We need more Guardian Ad Litem’s.

Pam did work for a legal aid in Brevard County. Two years ago, she quit her job at that legal aid to open a youth center. The youth center has GED Fast Track resources, food pantries, clothes, and many resources for people like us. It is volunteer ran. The volunteers give us hope.

Foster parents are volunteers however you don't have to take a kid to be able to help. If you have 5 minutes, or 10 minutes, go down and look at your local DCF offices. They take clothes, donations, food donations; there's many people can do to help on a volunteer basis.

Jen

Through your relationship with Pam, you were then introduced to Lisa?

Keirra

Yes, Lisa became a part of my life. Pam brought me an application to Lisa's Lift Up program. I remember looking at the application and thinking there is no way in heck that I'm going to do this twice a week. But I filled out the application and said I would give it a try. I met Lisa shortly after for an interview to be part of the program. It's a warm and welcome environment. Lisa’s program is amazing.

Lisa

Thank you, Keirra. I'm so grateful that Pam introduced us, and I consider you someone near and dear to my heart. Hope is just adorable. I absolutely love her too. When we were preparing to move to Florida, 8 years ago, I started looking into how I can help these kids who have aged out foster care. I was involved in a program in Ormond Beach and then moved to the Melbourne area. I started Lift Up Young Lives November 2017. Then I was invited to help start Ready For Life in November 2019. We moved our Lift Up Life Skills over to Ready For Life this year in January. We have an incredible class right now of 13. It's been a joy and a pleasure to see this transition come to life, and the number of young people we can help. I'm grateful. It's a major blessing.

Jen

Can you explain the application process?

Lisa

The application was for Lift Up Young Lives, Life Skills Program. Basically, we wanted some references and every student had to write a short essay about their background, what they hope to get out of the Lift Up Life Skills Program. It is a first introduction. Then we have a meet and greet to ask questions and allow them to ask us questions. Everyone Keirra met with was very impressed by her. She was 15 at the time, not quite 16. Lift Up Young Lives, Life Skills Program is designed to teach things which they don't learn in high school, such as social skills, some life skills, how to create a resume, how to interview for a job, we teach them about financial literacy, professionalism, leadership, and we also teach them about how a car works.

When our students graduate the first semester, they get a laptop computer. When they graduate the second semester, they get a good used car. Those gifts are twofold. It helps them get through the program. They learn the information, which many of our students have felt was life changing. Our goal is to help them adopt a growth mindset, a mindset that their past does not equal their future. They're in charge of their future. With the car and the laptop, it really helps to transition them to adulthood, so they can go to school, get a job, and live a happier and more successful life.

We originally started the Lift Up Life Skills at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church here in Melbourne. I also helped to start Ready For Life Brevard. Pam Bress is one of the most incredible humans you ever meet. She is really the backbone of the entire program along with some incredible staff. We also help our aging out of foster care get housing using a sliding scale through HUD. They are HUD vouchers. Many of these kids become homeless, once they turn 18. They don't have the money for housing, and they end up on the streets, which breaks my heart.

I am proud of Keirra. She almost quit the program two or three times, but she always called me. As you can imagine, our program was challenging, and the goal was to help them grow by pushing them outside their comfort zone. Keirra would call and end up coming back. She successfully graduated from the program, which is essentially a college year. She was successful and got her car. She’s an advocate for foster care and is a huge part of change we want to see for these young people. By using skills, she learned, Keirra is making a difference in our community, in Florida and beyond. She is a great example to Hope who is part of her purpose in life. Your history is part of your purpose in life.

Keirra

Hope is now 15 months old; she has finally gotten her personality. She's a very feisty one and has her mother's attitude. She came at a time in my life when I needed her. If it wasn't for her, I don't believe I would be here talking to you today. Now, if you're a teenager, and you're listening to this, that does not mean go and get pregnant! Having my daughter, Hope is a blessing, but it's exhausting. You must work and provide, and you have a whole life in your hands. Every day, I wake up to this beautiful smile, and her jumping up and down and so excited to see me.

Jen

If there is one thing when you look at your daughter, and you say, I'm going to teach her this, I'm going to absolutely teach her this one thing. What is it?

Keirra

What you want and what you believe is right, is what you need to do. You don't look for other people's approval in anything because you will always have somebody standing in your way.

Jen

Lisa what is the web address for Lift Up? Ready For Life Brevard?

Lisa

<https://www.readyforlifebrevard.org/>

You will find into for both Lift Up and Ready For Life Brevard.

Jen

If somebody is listening and wants to help, whether financial, a donation of a computer or a car. How do they do that?

Lisa

They can email: [liftupyounglives@gmail.com](mailto:liftupyounglives@gmail.com) and that comes to me directly. Or call me directly at 860-416-5055

Or, info@readyforlifebrevard.org

Jen

Perfect, thank you for that information.

Lisa

Spreading the word and raising awareness about foster care is important. It is essential we understand what these kids go through. I think a lot of people don't understand so the more we advocate for these young people, the more we can help. I read a great story this morning about this couple who learned about respite care, which is giving foster parents a little break. They would have this young girl at the age of nine, come on the weekend, watch TV, movies, pizza and all that. She was going to be adopted along with their siblings, but then that didn't work out. She started visiting them again. One day she said, “I really want you to adopt me.”

They had not considered that. He said, I want you to write me a note as to why you want us to adopt you. He said he'll forever keep that letter. They adopted her. He carries a couple pictures of when she was nine and now, she's a young lady. It warmed my heart.

Jen

That's great. Thank you so much for all you do and your contributions to the community.

Lisa

Well, thank you so much for having me. I appreciate the opportunity.

Commercial break:

Lisa

Ready For Life Brevard offers help to aging out of foster care and financing homeless teens here in Brevard. The first thing they do is help them get their social security card, their birth certificate because many of them don't have that. We help them get housing through HUD 1 vouchers. We have the GED Fast Track program and mentoring to help them get their GED, career path counseling, and of course the Lift Up Life Skills Program and more..

Jen

Keirra, I would like to take this time to celebrate you. Tell us about where you are, your schooling and your advocacy.

Keirra

Right now, I am an independent legal advocate. I work with defense attorneys on individualized cases. I do mostly criminal defense, but I do volunteer work with family defense. I work with parents to try to help them communicate better, almost like a more relaxed version of mediation. I work with defense attorneys doing paperwork, I attend court dates, I meet with families, and I try to encourage people to get to learn their rights and know their rights.

Jen

It's so important because people don't think they need to know their legal rights until they're already in some sort of trouble, right?

Keirra

Yes, that is very true. The systems are flawed. There are flaws in the defense system just as there are in the foster care system. You may be put in a position one day that you never thought you were going to be in and having legal knowledge could be what makes it our breaks it.

Jen

Absolutely. What has been most eye opening within your career experience?

Keirra

My most eye-opening experience, from personal experience, I would have to say how disorganized the prosecution is in the state of Florida. The amount of time they take as they drag through your life, there’s very little respect given, not only to the person being charged with the crime, but the victim of crimes. I am a victim of a crime; you would think you would get a little bit more respect or you would be viewed as important in a way. They ask your opinions, but they don't really listen to you. The system is broken in many areas.

Jen

Five years from now, where do you see yourself?

Keirra

I see myself sitting at my desk, eating ramen noodles, with my face in a law textbook. I'll have my bachelor's degree and be in law school by then. I don't see myself doing an awful too much but studying and taking care of Hope.

Jen

I think that's great. I love that you said it with a smile and a laugh and I completely get the irony of ramen noodles and law books.

Keirra

It's a lot of work, but when it's over, you appreciate it so much more.

Jen

I'm assuming you like ramen noodles? What is Hope's favorite food?

Keirra

Lollipops! She took mine from me the other day. Gave me one lick before taking it and running off. It's lovely. Exactly. Much of the time there is joy, even during the bad times. Hope is the most important thing in my life. She pushes me every day to be the best person I can be. There are many joyful moments, even in the bad moments, you find joy, you find happiness.

Jen

I think sometimes people take that for granted. When someone like you with a story, the strength, courage, adversity, and the will to just keep going, shows how powerful never giving up can be.

Keirra

I definitely agree.

Keirra

Thank you so much for having me and giving me an opportunity to put my story out there and hopefully help some people.

Jen

Absolutely. Thank you so much Keirra and Lisa for being my guest today.

For more information on today’s topics visit:

<https://www.readyforlifebrevard.org/>

Or call Lisa at 860-416-5055

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