

## TRANSCRIPT

### Through their Eyes: A Podcast Examining Youth Homelessness in New Britain, Connecticut

Introduction:

**(0:00-2:20)**

ZEBA: You're listening to "Through their Eyes: A Podcast Examining Youth Homelessness in New Britain, Connecticut." And I'm your cohost Zeba Kokan...

MELANIE: And I'm your other co-host, Melanie Gonzalez, a Research and Evaluation Associate at the Weitzman Institute. To start off our podcast I'll begin by providing a brief overview as to the purpose of this project.

With this project, we had a belief that our research needed to change. Far too often in research, technical expertise is flaunted in the light, casting shadows on the pearls of wisdom of those who have lived expertise. This is one of the ways that well-intentioned community interventions result in unintended and harmful consequences. With this project, we had a belief that our research needed to change. Each person has a light and a voice and a right to have opportunities to use their power, to shape how their communities, services and policies are designed. This photo voice project is a way that the researchers at the Weitzman Institutes utilized a community-based participatory research approach for a project aiming to understand what are the factors contributing to youth homelessness in New Britain. For this project, we worked with 14 amazing young people between the ages of 14 through 24, who each had at least one experience of homelessness or housing insecurity. They each took photographs to construct the photo narrative story, which we'll be featuring on the Weitzman website.

In this podcast, you'll hear multimedia content, including a song, poems and interviews from 5 of the 14 photo voice participants. We hope that this podcast helps you to understand the experiences of homelessness from the perspectives of those who live through it, the young people. Even more so, we hope that this podcast inspires change.

**(2:20 - 6:38)**

ZEBA: Hi, everyone. I'm joined by our guest, Wolf. And Wolf, would you like to introduce yourself?

WOLF: Hi, my name is Wolf and today I'm going to be singing a song for you and answering some questions about my art.

ZEBA: Okay, awesome. Thank you, Wolf, for joining us. We're really excited to have you here. My first question is, what do you want people who haven't experienced homelessness to know?

WOLF: Generally, I'd like people who haven't experienced homelessness to know or at least to understand the perspective of someone who's come from zero foundation to a success. And the trials and tribulations attributed to that are immense, such as my case, where I went from sleeping outside to having an apartment.

ZEBA: Okay. Thank you so much for explaining that. My next question would be what message are you trying to convey through your art and through your music?

WOLF: I think that the message that my art conveys is just the blend of my story and my personal ideal of what success is and visual imagery that conveys a human being's journey through life.

ZEBA: Yeah, that's really powerful. I can definitely resonate with that when I've seen your art and things like that. And then I guess my final question would be, what do you want people to walk away knowing from your art?

WOLF: Generally, I just want them to walk away knowing that it's not easy. Hell it might not ever be easy, but it's not impossible. That's the thing. If you have a dream, you should follow it. Even if people say not to, and even if people call you crazy, bottle up your passion. Use it as drive. Because you don't have to get stuck in the boring, gray, dull, bullshit monotony of life if you decide you're better than that, and if you decide that your dream matters.

ZEBA: Yeah. Yeah, your dream does matter. And that's really powerful, what you're saying. Now, let's hear the song you've written for us.

WOLF:

(Instrumental break)

(Singing) I was alone so long I forgot that there were others. They were so busy killing and robing one another. Just to realize that we have to live on this planet with each other. So if people in the street can't afford to eat, how can we ever compete with the elite? It's ourselves that we defeat. How can you not see?

(Instrumental break)

(Singing) A dollar bill might last an hour, but power of the soul is real power. And my soul stands strong like a tower out of all the demons and pain I encounter. And I scour the planet for others with the same mind who aren't cowards, people who want to change for the betterment of our entire race.

(Instrumental break)

Thank you.

ZEBA: Okay. Wow. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions about writing the song?

WOLF: Sure.

ZEBA: Yeah. So, I'm curious to hear, how did you choose your lyrics and what inspired you to write the song?

WOLF: I just thought about the subject matter and it came to me.

ZEBA: Yes.

WOLF: It was a late night. I was a little tired, but I just thought about how I feel about shit and just kind of wrote it down.

ZEBA: Yeah.

WOLF: Found the beat just by chance.

ZEBA: Thanks, Wolf. Now let's catch up with Jocelyn.

**(6:42- 14:00)**

JOCELYN: Hi, my name is Jocelyn. I am currently 17 and I've been doing the photo voice thing for a little bit now. In the beginning, we had to take pictures to help show our own experiences in the topic of housing insecurity and homelessness. I went through that myself a little bit, had to stay with not only my aunts for a while, but also had to stay with one of my mom's friends, as well.

I, myself, didn't like going through that experience and I don't like the idea of others going through it either. So, I am now here to advocate to try and fix that. The way I'm doing that is, I wrote a little poem for us to hear. This is the poem that I have decided to write.

(POEM) Youth go to school constantly. Learning things like English and geometry. But how will those things help teens in life? How will it help them to survive? What about writing resumes for job applications? It's not like life will give them a lifelong vacation. What about paying bills and finding a job that fits? Because without that, they will end up on the streets. No job to pay for a home and a family that won't provide. So many teen are homeless and struggling to stay alive. So, why don't we change that and help them thrive? Change things in school that help them to survive. Change math classes from word problems, to taxes and bills. Feeding teens to help them get their fill. Help teens learn skills for the job they love. These things will help them get above.

I hope you guys like my poem.

ZEBA: So, Jocelyn, first thing's first, I'm sure our listeners want to know what do you want people to take away from your poem.

JOCELYN: I want people to take away that there are a lot of teens and youth struggling to either get a house or struggling to stay in the home that they already have. So many teens, I know I will never know the exact number, but I know there will and/or possibly is, a lot of teens that are struggling to stay in the houses that they have or are already out on the streets. And I personally don't like the idea of that, and I don't want that happening. So, I was hoping people would take this poem and maybe try and think to themselves how they can help themselves to help teens and youth not have to deal with being on the streets or have to deal with the struggle of having to try and keep the home that they have.

ZEBA: Thank you, Jocelyn. That's really important words that you just shared with us. And then I guess my second question is why did you choose this topic specifically and the specific medium of poem to convey your message?

JOCELYN: I chose the topic because I feel like, especially nowadays, schools don't help teens or kids a lot in preparing them for life. Because a lot of things that school teaches us in like high school and such, kids forget it about three to four days after being out of school. It's things that they might be able to help use in their jobs, but it doesn't help them figure out how to get a job. And it also doesn't help them figure out how to do other things in life that people are constantly complaining about. Adults are always complaining about paying taxes, doing their bills, trying to find a way to get houses and all this, but no one is teaching the kids and teens themselves how to do this ahead of time, so that, when they get out of high school, they know what to do. So, I chose this topic, so then people can try and work to get, do that themselves, both in school and out. And I chose to do a poem because not only is it something that could be a little catchy thing, so then people remember it easier, but also because I feel more confident in explaining things through poems most of the time.

ZEBA: Okay. Yeah. Thank you for your astute observation based on your lived experience. And I definitely resonated with the catchiness. And I think we have another question to ask you just because of everything you're saying. What are some ways that you think schools can help prevent teens from experiencing homelessness?

JOCELYN: Some ways I think schools can help teens is in classes, like math, that deal with numbers, instead of having them try and figure out what  $X+2$  times  $Y$  equals, help them start figuring out how to file their taxes. Instead of having them deal with word problems, work in ways on how to help them pay for houses or how to help them do their bills, and other classes do the same, so that in areas where they collide. I know there are some schools that already have special programs to help kids already start learning this, but it's not in all schools.

I myself don't know if it's in the school I go to or not, but I do know it would be helpful and would personally help me a lot to know how to do my taxes, how to pay bills, how to try and get a home, so on and so forth, in my everyday classes. So that I don't have to use up more of my personal time to go to an after school program or a program that's not connected to school, just so, then, I can learn this myself.

I know as much as anyone who is having to deal with both school and work really do appreciate the little bit of time they have when they get home. So, then, they're able to relax. No one wants to give up that free time they have, just so that they can learn life skills that should be taught in high school and maybe even towards the end of middle school. So, then, the kids already start knowing about how to do this.

I just hope that people, after listening to this podcast, actually realize what they have and what they might take for granted, as well as, hopefully, people themselves start to choose to advocate, so then stuff like this happens less and less. Because no kid or teen should be out on the streets because schools end up not wanting to teach them basic life skills that they're obviously going to need.

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**(14:35 – 21:24)**

KAELYS: So my name is Kaelys Garcia. I'm 24 years old. I'm from New Britain.

MELANIE: So, tell me, what was it like to participate in this photo voice project and the multimedia advocacy project?

KAELYS: It was nice to share my story for awareness, and it was nice to actually go to Central and take the pictures. And it was like going back to my story and be in that moment again.

MELANIE: Yeah. So, what were some of the issues that you decided to talk about as part of this project?

KAELYS: Some of the issues that I decided that I wanted to talk about was my experience in college and what brought me to actually come here to New Britain and then go to CCSU.

MELANIE: I know in the essay that you produced for the project, you really dive deep and talk about that experience. Can you let the audience know why you decided to dive deep in that story and share your experiences?

KAELYS: My experience in college, people have this mentality of how homelessness look like. So, nobody's going to think that a college student, who just graduated and had a state job is going to be homeless and has a car. And I physically don't look like I am homeless, or I'm going through this stuff and I'm in a shelter.

MELANIE: You know, you raise a great point that, oftentimes, people don't think that college people are experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity. I know in your essay, you mentioned that there weren't really a lot of resources for you to get help, or prevent you from experiencing homelessness. So, what are ways in which you think colleges or other community providers can support college students who may be going through a similar experience, so that they don't have to graduate into homelessness?

KAELYS: In my essay, I mentioned that I was a student worker and then when I graduated, my supervisor promoted me, so that way I could stay working and having an income in college. So, that could be a resource for student workers, because student workers, they don't have that after they graduate. They can't work at school after they graduate. So, what my supervisor did, she just promoted me, so that way I could stay working and having an income.

MELANIE: That's a great point, thinking about how colleges can create those job opportunities for students, not only in other organizations or companies, but at their own school. And I know in your essay you also talk about mental health and what are some services and supports that you think colleges could provide, or ways in which colleges can enhance the mental health services that they provide? Especially to young people who may be dealing with challenging situations, such as limited income, in your case, coming into the state from a natural disaster, which was a traumatizing experience. So, how do you think schools could better support young people when it comes to their mental health?

KAELYS: They have resources for students, so they can have access to therapists while they're in college. But I feel like they should prepare students, after they graduate. For example, my therapist, she referred me to a psychiatrist. So, I would say having a plan before graduating, having an actual plan. When you graduate, you don't lose your mental health resources.

MELANIE: So, thank you so much for sharing your story through your unique experience at Central. We hope that colleges are working on better supporting young people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity. And I just hope that your experience can shed some insight and support them as they continue in their efforts. Is there anything else that you'd like to share with our audience regarding this project or regarding what they should do when it comes to working on eliminating the experience of homelessness in our society?

KAELYS: Oh, yeah. I would say not to depend on the system or any government help. The resources are there, but you can't depend on them. Because I've been

depending on this shelter and food stamps for two years, and I haven't received any help. So, I would say that would be my advice, to not depend on any government resource, and to be more proactive.

MELANIE: Yeah. I think that's really great advice, which is something that we had conversations about in our sessions. The fact that one of the main reasons why a lot of people were experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness, or things that they continued to experience during their episode, is the fact that resources can be really limited and sometimes there's challenges in accessing those resources.

KAELYS: Yeah. And also, I work for the unemployment. And a lot of people, they're having financing issues and homelessness and stuff, because they depend on the unemployment. They think the unemployment is going to pay them, and that they're going to get unemployment for two years. You know what I'm saying? Like all of these unemployment, food stamps. These programs, people think that they're just going to get paid. They just rely on that.

MELANIE: So, I think your advice, and really prompting people to be as independent as possible and not rely on those resources is great advice. And I think that transitions well to the next speaker that we have, who's going to be talking about maintaining independence through selling.

**(21:30 - 33:55)**

ALI BETH: Hello, everyone. Welcome. Welcome. Welcome. So glad to be here, speaking to you right now, and just being able to tell you a little bit more about myself, my story, and how I have experienced housing insecurity. My name is Ali Beth Cabretta. I'm from Puerto Rico. I'm 24 years old. I came to Connecticut four years ago. I am a health and wellness spiritual coach, relationship coach, business coach, and biblical life coach.

And I experienced housing insecurity last year. Did you know that, if you start seeing life differently, you can change the outcome of your life? Let me tell you. Yes. If you start observing life in a complete different way, you can definitely be sold in life, instead of be sell. Let's talk a little bit more about how I experienced homelessness. So, coming from a community that is Hispanic, I'm Dominican and Puerto Rican, sometimes in our island is completely different how people see survival. And when they come to a place like the United States, sometimes it can be difficult to find a way to survive easier, or a way that is following the standards of the society. My father wasn't doing the things how are supposed to be done. So, my father went to jail, and at the time that he got arrested, I was living with him, and I felt afraid of being in that place. So, I decided to leave and I started to experience housing insecurity.

Thankfully, I had a family that let me stay with them. I'm glad and I'm so thankful for them, but I didn't have a home for a time period, and where I was dating a person and our relationship, as a couple, it wasn't too healthy at the time. Regardless, he did give me a home at that time, and I'm so grateful for that. So, experiencing housing

insecurity was a really tough situation because having your own roof is a blessing, and I'm blessed to have mine right now.

But sometimes we don't appreciate the little things, and that is a thing that we all should appreciate more. There's a lot of people, currently, of my age and younger, experiencing housing insecurity. And even adults with children as well. And sometimes, as a society, we don't pay attention of how many people don't have a roof or a place to stay during the night. And that is something that should concern us all. And to make us think, "What can we do?" So that we can help more people outside of us to have a home, just to have a home.

This is why I would like to tell you guys a little bit more about how selling is the way of survival. Because I think that if we learn how to sell ourselves and not only to be sold, we can definitely, definitely, at all times, find a way of survival, find a way to make income, find a way to solve those situations that can become dangerous to ourselves. And this is what I'm here to tell you.

Selling. I definitely think selling can be another way to prevent homelessness, or to help homeless people to be able to find other strategies for them to use their imagination and create things that can be worth money so that they can find other options, so that they can get to where they need to. But beside of just thinking about selling, we need to also be sold to the people and different entities that can help us to be better with this community that is also suffering financial situation, homelessness, and maybe some other problems that we yet don't know. Because a person is not homeless just because. It's always a background behind of it. So, how can we do better? How can we do better? First, start by sharing the knowledge you just got today with those that you love, and start by thinking what can you do for yourself, so that way you can help others. And as God says to love others like how you love yourself, same thing. What can you do to help others so that they don't have to go through that, or so that you never have to experience. So, start using your imagination, thinking what can you be doing yourself?

Beside of that, suggest to the town of Hartford, Connecticut, and other towns in Connecticut. It's important for us to bring this awareness to school, job places, restaurants, any kind of place that people go to. It is important to bring this knowledge, not just by informing people with papers, but by bringing speakers, by bringing people, knowing an experience, like having a community that is more close to each other, so that we all can learn from each other.

There's a lot of challenge around you that you may not even know. And if we get to know all the situations going on, and if we get to know this in the news, in the TV, in the radio, or all of this media communication places that we are using, definitely really great to inform people about some other things. So, we never use this media, these places to inform people, how can they survive? How can they be making more money? How can they be successful? Why? Why are we not?

So, I think is really important for us as a community to start getting together, to inform people about things that they can use in life to survive. The real tools that people can use in a daily basis, to be able to bring food into their table, to bring a home into their lives. That's our situation that really are affecting us. But we are not speaking about this.



So, highly encourage people, schools, jobs, and different entities of the government to start implementing more knowledge into this. Because it is not for us to always be an employee. We can also be given opportunities to people. So, I think we all deserve an opportunity to start selling ourselves in a great way, that can lead you to the path for you to succeed.

Thank you everyone for listening. It was a great experience to just be able to inform you about something. And I think it is really important for us to use these tools and teach someone else today. If you want to continue knowing more of my story or different things, you can definitely follow me on Instagram, @veganfitlatina.

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MELANIE: So, can you tell me why you chose to talk about this concept of selling in relation to this homelessness project that we were working on in New Britain?

ALI BETH: So the reason why I decided to speak about selling is because it really got me a lot, on the moments of me just thinking, "What am I doing for the next five years? How can I survive and never go through the same problem that I'm going right now? What can I do?" Because sometimes in life we find ourselves not knowing, and don't know. Which is okay. It's perfectly fine.

But at the same time, it was really tough to just be homeless and not have a place to call home, and having to live with people, and having to live with, for example, at that time I was living with my ex partner. We really weren't good, completely. So, having to go through that each day was like, "Oh my God." And I wanted to solve the problem, but I didn't have a solution to the problem. And at that time, I didn't have a job. I didn't have the mentality I have now, which I knew if I would have had it at that time, it would have definitely been different. Even in my relationship, I think it would have been different as well.

Talking about sellings, it just changes my life. Really. Like selling changed my life.

And it changed the way I view myself and I and how I was capable to do things, because I maybe didn't knew how to sell myself and all the talents that I have. So, just the part of not knowing and seeing, meeting other people in Connecticut.

Connecticut has been a blessing for me, because I have met so many people that are into the environment of business or into the environment of just being awake, that it was like, "Wow, what happened to me?"

Since I'm Puerto Rican and Dominican, I didn't learn those things. I was just thinking, "Okay, I have a home. I have a job, and I just make it through that." But really, that's not what I want to do. I want to travel the world. I want to go around. I want to visit places. I want to be able to spend with my family. I want to have a jet. I want to have a plane. All those things, they need money. So, it's just the part of what I want needs money. What can I do now? What can I do to resolve this situation? So, learning how to sell is really about survival.

MELANIE: I really appreciate you sharing this topic because, as you know from our photo voice project, one of the things that pretty much everybody talked about was the fact that they have to deal with limited income, limited resources. So, it seems as if, based on your story and your experience, selling, being able to market yourself and do an inventory on your skillset, and think about how you can use your skills to make sales in the world. That's a way to really increase your power and build that self-sustainability, so that you won't experience homelessness again.

ALI BETH: Yes.

MELANIE: I really appreciate you sharing your story and your advice for listeners who will be listening to this podcast. And thank you so much for your very beautiful story and your presence, your energy, everything that you bring to our team.

ALI BETH: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, Melanie. I appreciate you so much. I appreciate this project. It really helped me a lot. I'm so grateful about it and I think we should continue doing this project, and bringing it to more expansion around entire Connecticut, and even more places. Because it's really important to bring together all these like-minded people that are going through this because all those minds have such an amazing knowledge in them that we can also create more things to help others. And this is what the intention with this podcast is, is the same thing, that the listener that is in the other side, listening, may have other people on his side or her side that can definitely make an impact to make this world better.

**(33:56 - 38:24)**

ZEBA: Hi, everyone I'm joined to with Marina. She is a participant in our project and she has written a beautiful spoken word poem.

MARINA: This piece is called "The Great Resignation." It's about the labor shortage going on in America regarding the pandemic. I hope this piece can reflect that.

(POEM) The Great Resignation. The Great Demand. The Worthy Stance. Year of COVID-19: pandemic, social distancing, April 2020, waiting on a vaccine. The virus. The spread. The fear. Newspapers. News stations. Doctors. Scientists. Government officials. There's no cure. Essential workers were furloughed, laid off, frustrated and fearing for their lives, biological and financial. Resigning to the reality that this could be the day I'm exposed to the virus. The helplessness felt in this perilous crisis, jobs people have spent years of their lives working for, employment people depend on to support themselves and their loved ones. Suddenly no security, suddenly no assured safety. Essential workers. We are essential to a functioning society in America. We, the minority yet we are treated with no priority, no concern or support. People want a living wage worth risking their lives in a pandemic for. People want flexibility in their scheduling and benefits giving more security and stability in their lives. Better wages, better living, better workers.

ZEBA: The first question I'm really wondering is why did you write this spoken word piece?

MARINA: I wrote this piece to reflect the labor shortage going on in America. After the pandemic, we've been economically impacted and people, lives have been lost. There's been a lot of chaos, and I just wanted this piece to reflect the labor shortages and people wanting to work for a more livable wage.

ZEBA: Thank you. Yeah. I definitely saw your words and what you described in your piece, and it was really critical for us to hear. My next question is how do you think this piece relates to youth homelessness?

MARINA:

Well, I feel like this piece relates to youth homelessness because it talks about minimum wage and what youths would be working for in our economy now, and how it is not enough. It's not a living wage. And this can be causing youth homelessness in our communities today. The fact that a lot of younger people are not getting paid enough to live is a problem in our society, and it needs to be talked about. And I hope that I can reflect that in a very artful way through this poem.

ZEBA: Thank you. Yeah. I definitely see you reflecting that. And then finally, my last question is what do you want people to take away from this poem?

MARINA: So, I would just say that I hope people are more informed about what's going on in America today, why people don't want to go back to work, and mostly it is these younger people, and it's because we want to be making better wages, for more flexible scheduling as well. We want to have more accommodating jobs in this pandemic. I think that's only fair if people are risking their lives and the health of them and the people that they care about, and are in contact with. And for being essential to a functioning society, we're not treated that way. I think that this needs to be treated with more concern and support by companies that want people to get back to work.

**(38:27)**

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