

COUNTING ON US | SEASON 1 | EPISODE 1

## Pursuing Your Passion

### Searching for Direction: Foster Care, College, and Doubt

[00:00:04] **Daniel Treviño** Growing up in Houston, Keya looked up to her grandmother. She was a doctor, her best friend, and the best baker she had ever met.

[00:00:13] **Keya** So, my passion for baking actually came from my grandmother. When I was a kid, if she wasn't at work, she was at home baking something. Like, I would just walk in the kitchen, and I will see her making all these bundt cakes and all these cobblers and all these pies. And at the time, you know, I was like only like five or six, so I couldn't really help her. But she like just like, come in Keya, you can, like, help me do this or like, you can whisk the eggs into the baking stuff.

[00:00:36] **Daniel Treviño** Keya would take that love of baking with her once she entered the foster care system at eight years old. She would then spend the next 10 years largely separated from her family and struggling to connect with others.

[00:00:49] **Keya** The first couple of years, I was kind of like confused and scared. Because one I was away from my family, like, I don't know these people, why am I here? Up until like a year ago, I didn't even know why I was placed in CPS custody. And nobody wanted to be friends with me because I was just like a little foster kid, and I was wearing like hand-me-down clothes. So definitely, I had to get comfortable with myself, like being alone at like a very young age.

[00:01:13] **Daniel Treviño** Anxious to start a new chapter, Keya decided to move to the Dallas–Fort Worth area after high school to attend Texas Woman's University, all awhile still receiving support from extended foster care services.

[00:01:26] **Keya** I chose to go to Texas Woman's because like in the back of my mind, I always want to be like a chef. But everybody was telling me that was like that's not a lot of money. You're gonna be overworked. So I went to Texas Woman's, and my major was political science. And I was sitting in the class taking all those history classes I had to take and, I was like, this is so boring. So, like, after that, I went back to my dorm, and I just started thinking I was like, is this really what I want? And I said no. So once I left school, I talked to my case manager about all of my options, and I decided that living on the ACH campus for LIFE project was the best choice for me.

[00:02:06] **Daniel Treviño** Welcome to Counting On Us, a podcast presented by ACH Child and Family Services, the show where we share the stories of people navigating life's challenges with ACH alongside them every step of the way. I'm Daniel Treviño.

## The Transformative Power of Mentorship

[00:02:24] **Daniel Treviño** Every year, more than 20,000 youth age out of the foster care system in the United States. With little support, former foster youth are left to navigate from adolescence to adulthood on their own. In 2009, ACH started The LIFE Project to encourage self-confidence and self-sufficiency for young adults aging out of the foster care system by providing independent living housing options and skills development. Stephanie Henry, one of The LIFE Project mentors, has first-hand knowledge of the struggles these young adults run into.

[00:03:07] **Stephanie Henry** I mean, even if you had the perfect life, just that transition from being a teenager to a young adult is difficult, but especially if you've come from very broken backgrounds where there was a lack of proper nurturing and structure and that sort of thing. It's terrifying because you don't, you don't really have the foundation that you need to make that transition smooth.

[00:03:30] **Keya** I was confused and a little bit scared. Because again, I moved to Texas Woman's, and I didn't know anyone. Then I moved here, and I didn't know anyone. And at the same time, I was trying to force myself to open up to people. Because you know bottling up is not good for anyone.

[00:03:44] **Daniel Treviño** Who did you turn to for support?

[00:03:47] **Keya** No one actually, like my foster mom dropped me off here, right. And I only spoke to her like on holidays and special occasions. And I didn't want to basically tell her that I kind of, sort of, dropped out of college, because I didn't want her to be disappointed in me. So, I kept it all bottled in. Until, like, Easter, when I finally told her I was like, "Hey, I dropped out of college." And first, she was disappointed, and then she was furious. So yeah, I definitely just kept it to myself.

[00:04:19] **Daniel Treviño** What about your caseworker?

[00:04:21] **Keya** Yeah, I did talk to her about it. But I was basically giving her facts and not like emotions at that point, because I'm still like new to opening up to people.

[00:04:32] **Stephanie Henry** So, for our LIFE clients, it is difficult for them to open up, especially in regards to emotions or even trauma, because they all struggle with trust issues. If you're not sure if the other person who is listening really cares or that they have your best interest at heart, you're not really going to want to open up.

[00:04:50] **Keya** Being a kid in foster care and, most of the times your emotions is not going to get you what you want. Like if you throw a tantrum, they're probably just gonna give you anger management classes or something. So now I'm trying to reprocess and reevaluate everything so I can make friends better and be a regular 20-year-old; instead of being cooped up in my room all the time.

[00:05:12] **Daniel Treviño** At The LIFE Project, clients are encouraged to participate in life skills and house meetings as well as family dinners. The goal of these activities is to aid the young adults in improving their social skills and build bonds with the other clients; and especially with LIFE mentors. Development research shows that having at least one caring adult in your life increases the likelihood of becoming a healthy productive adult.

[00:05:39] **Keya** It's really important because it builds bonds with everybody. And the first month that I was here, I didn't like going to them or talking to people because you know, again, I don't know how to make friends and open up to people. But it kind of created a rift with me and the girls; because I stayed in my room all the time, so they didn't know me. And once people don't know you they build their own ideas of you. And most of the time, they thought I was stuck up, or I thought I was better than them. So it's definitely important to come to the family dinners, because that's where we can joke around, have fun, and just let everything go.

[00:06:10] **Daniel Treviño** What has it been like connecting with the LIFE mentors?

[00:06:13] **Keya** Definitely, the mentors there, Cassie and Stephanie, they're really open about us confiding with them, especially Stephanie. She was in the system herself, so she knows how hard the transition can be going from CPS to the real adult world.

## Navigating Crisis: Grief Arrives Without Warning

[00:06:28] **Daniel Treviño** Those connections proved invaluable because, months after moving to The LIFE Project, Keya's grandmother passed away.

[00:06:34] **Keya** So my grandmother passed away last year on Halloween from breast cancer. And I was devastated because, one, I saw her a month before and she looked fine. And two, because my favorite grandmother had passed away and on my favorite holiday of all days. So I was actually in the middle of baking something. I think I was making a chocolate bundt cake and my uncle called me. He was like, "Hey, your grandmother passed away." And I could not think. I froze up and left the bundt cake in the oven, and burnt it.

[00:07:06] **Daniel Treviño** Did you tell anyone?

[00:07:07] **Keya** I actually went to Stephanie. I was like, "Stephanie, I won't be able to join," because we were doing a Trunk or Treat that night on Halloween. And I was like, "I won't be able to join the Trunk or Treat anymore." And she was like, "Why?" And I was like, "Because my grandmother just passed away." And I just bawld-faced cried. And I think that was the first and only time she has ever seen me cry.

[00:07:24] **Stephanie Henry** Well, she was very down. And you know, of course, when a client, really anyone, loses a loved one there's not really anything that you could do. So my best choice was to be here to sit in the office with Keya, offered her something to drink, offered her a snack, and just to be here present with her.

[00:07:42] **Daniel Treviño** What was it like opening up to Stephanie?

[00:07:45] **Keya** She let me talk with her. She let me basically go in the office and like cry with her. At first, it felt kind of weird because my mind didn't know what was happening. Like my half my mind knew like I needed to cry, because I lost like my best friend. And the other half of me was like, "Why are you crying in here, they're not going to understand you like you understand you. Nobody's ever going to understand." And like, that's mostly what I tell myself all the time. And so, I had basically had to force myself to let somebody help me.

[00:08:11] **Stephanie Henry** It is very important for our clients to be able to express themselves, and open up, and talk about their feelings. Because otherwise, what happens is they're continuing to hold on to that baggage. They're continuing to hold on to those struggles. It deteriorates their mental health, it impacts how they interact with their peers, and ultimately, it becomes a distraction so that they can't even focus on their basic goals.

[00:08:33] **Daniel Treviño** Keya, how did Stephanie help you at that time?

[00:08:36] **Keya** When I spoke to Stephanie about it basically helped me with confronting my feelings, because my grandmother was the first death in my family. And before that, I did not know what experiencing a death felt like, especially one that's close to me as my grandmother. So, she basically told me, "It's okay to cry. It's okay to feel sad because these things are natural. And not only is it natural, but it was also somebody that was really close to me. So, it was okay to just let things go and be sad for once."

[00:09:02] **Daniel Treviño** At the same time that Keya was grieving the loss of her grandmother, she was also struggling to find a job. When clients enroll in the LIFE Project, they are required to either be in school or working, and for Keya, the deadline for finding employment was rapidly approaching. For that reason, it was important that she find healthy ways to process her emotions.

[00:09:23] **Stephanie Henry** So after getting the news, Keya utilized one of her coping skills. After we had just kind of sat in the office for a little bit, she went downstairs to the kitchen and started whipping up something. I think she'd made a cake. But we talked about how when she bakes it makes her feel close to her grandmother. And how she just feels a release and a sense of joy when she's baking.

[00:09:52] **Keya** I love to bake, and she loved to bake, so I felt closer to her. And my grandmother never feared death anyways, she welcomed it most of the time. So, while I was baking, I had to tell myself, "Okay, she's happy now. This is what she wanted. She wasn't scared." And that one day, I'm pretty sure I made like two dozen cookies, and I made brownies, and I made cakes, I made a cobbler. So, I definitely just drowned myself in baking.

[00:10:20] **Daniel Treviño** Keya, how did the death of your grandmother affect your job search?

[00:10:25] **Keya** For like three months, I could not find a job for some reason. And at first, I didn't really care about the consequences of not finding a job or like not being in school, because I just wanted to relax a little bit. And then, my grandmother passed away. And during that time, I didn't want to look for a job anymore. Because I was thinking to myself like, "My grandmother just passed away. So, what's the point in me getting a job?" I got really depressed with it, too. I was thinking to myself, "What's the point in the job if I'm going to die anyways?" And so, I was definitely having, not only an identity crisis, but like a life crisis. I didn't want to do anything.

[00:11:00] **Daniel Treviño** We'll be right back.

## A Message from Wayne Carson

[00:11:05] **Wayne Carson** Hi, it's Dr. Wayne Carson from ACH Child and Family Services. I hope you're enjoying the podcast. Here at ACH, we know that the community is Counting On Us to get it right. So, for over 100 years, ACH has remained true to our mission of protecting children and preserving families. Follow us on social media or visit our website, [ACHservices.org](http://ACHservices.org), to learn more about what we do, how to get involved, or if you'd like to support us. Now, back to the show.

## Rebuilding After Loss: Keya Begins Her Job Search

[00:11:39] **Daniel Treviño** Keya was in crisis; the loss of her grandmother, coupled with the deadline for finding employment, caused her to shut down. For Stephanie, the challenge was balancing Keya's grieving process with the need to get her ready for financial independence.

[00:11:54] **Stephanie Henry** So when our clients do experience tragedy of any sort, the primary goal of us as mentors is to, first and foremost, be mindful of their mental health and well-being. Because we know that that's something that many of our clients already struggle with. I think it was about a week and a half after [Keya] had gotten the news. And she was kind of walking at her own pace going through the grieving transition. I knew that she was ready to start communicating again because she came to me. And at that point, we were able to start talking through their goals and remind them what their purpose of being here is.

[00:12:33] **Keya** I didn't feel rushed. I did feel pushed because, you know, they saw my potential. And they also saw that I was like wasting away being sad in my room all the time. So, it did push me to get a job. So they, basically, I sat down with them, and I was like, "Hey, I don't know why I'm not getting these jobs? Maybe there's something wrong with my resume?" And there were a lot of things wrong with my resume. One, it was like really discombobulated. And two, it didn't look professional. So they helped me with that. They helped me with my cover letter, how to dress for an interview, what to say, and how to act.

[00:13:03] **Daniel Treviño** The LIFE mentors soon informed Keya of a local food service learning program named Fort Worx, which is a collaboration between the Tarrant Area Food Bank, Taste Project, and The Culinary School of Fort Worth. It was a chance for Keya to pursue her passion for the culinary arts while receiving training and paid work experience.

[00:13:23] **Keya** Not only are you getting a free education that's sponsored by The Culinary School of Fort Worth, but you also get paid to attend, so \$10 an hour. And then, when you complete the apprenticeship, you receive an ACF Fundamentals Cook License, a Food Handlers License, and a starter knife kit. So, I applied and I signed up for the interview process.

[00:13:45] **Daniel Treviño** How did it go?

[00:13:46] **Keya** I was nervous at first because, although I am a good talker, I don't like talking and I don't talk a lot. So, they asked me a bunch of questions about like, "Why should I be good for the program? Why am I here?" And I didn't want to give them the whole backstory about my grandmother yet. So, I told them about the scene in Ratatouille and how Gusteau, the ghost chef, is like, "Anybody could be a chef!" And I was like, "Okay, I'm going do that."

[00:14:12] **Daniel Treviño** It worked! Keya got accepted into the 16-week Accelerated Learning Program. Soon, she was waking up early, five days a week, to catch the 50-minute bus ride to the Tarrant Area Food Bank to attend classes.

[00:14:25] **Keya** Okay, so a typical day of the first eight weeks, you will go in at the food bank, and you will sit down in the classroom that they have there. And we will learn a lesson plan for like an hour on, say, different nutrients and vitamins that are in the food. And then at The Taste Community restaurant, we will get there, and we'll cook, and we'll work on the line for the entire day. So, you'll get there at seven. And you basically have two hours or three to prep your line for all the fruits, salads, and stuff you will need to. Basically, that's what it was.

[00:14:57] **Jason Abelson** My name is Chef Jason Abelson, and I serve as the program coordinator for the pre-apprenticeship portion of the Fort Worx's Food Service-Learning Program. I'm saying this with a smile on my face. But Keya, from her entire time throughout the program, was always about excelling and growing. She wanted to know, "What was next? How can I learn this? How can I do more? How can I go faster?" And so, her biggest strength is her initiative. If she sees that something needs to be done or that something can even be done better than they're doing it, then she's going to offer up that opinion and herself to do the work. She's not afraid to step up and get something done. And do it in a manner, in which, not only that she can be proud of but the program to be proud of too. So, it was apparent early on that she had a passion for culinary arts that's just comes every once in a while. So, you find it in a student, and you just want to ignite that passion and send them on their way.

[00:16:00] **Daniel Trevino** Even though Keya was excelling in the program, the apprenticeship still had its challenges.

## The Transformative Power of Mentorship

[00:16:06] **Keya** I did have a lot of difficult moments. Ninety percent of the time, I wanted to quit because the other apprentices I worked with realized if they slack off, I would pick up the slack. Also, some of my LIFE peers were quitting and dropping out of the program, which is more work on me. So like, as we got further into the program, that frustrated me a lot. Since they didn't take it as seriously as I did. I was like, "Why am I even here? I might as well quit."

[00:16:32] **Stephanie Henry** It is actually very common for our clients to not stick with a job or an apprenticeship. And that is predominantly because they lack coping skills and perseverance. So, if clients are falling behind on their goals, as LIFE mentors, we're watching them as they're making their decisions. So, if we start seeing them kind of slowing down, or maybe just backing away from a goal, we will tend to meet with them one-on-one and ask, "What is going on? What are you struggling with? Is there something we can do to help you accomplish this goal?"

[00:17:10] **Jason Abelson** For Keya, she just needed to be reminded that there's so many people behind her, pushing her forward, pushing her towards her goals, and that we believed in her. I don't think she realized, until midway through the program, that her skill set extended beyond just cakes and baking. She was great at savory, appetizers, working on the line, and in prepping. And I think the biggest growth point for her was realizing that "I can do more. I just didn't know it."

[00:17:39] **Keya** My biggest motivation, as Chef Jason said, is that I'm now starting to realize I do have a passion for this. He convinced me by saying, "You have a natural-born talent to be in the culinary industry." He could see me going really far— having my own restaurant or becoming an executive chef one day. Sometimes, he would slip how proud he was of me and those moments were real tear-jerkers. I thought, "This person who is my superior thinks I'm this great." So I decided, okay, I guess I'll stay.

## A Graduate Reflects on Her Achievement

[00:18:11] **Daniel Treviño** With the support of the LIFE mentors and her culinary instructors, Keya found the strength and determination to persevere. In the end, I had the opportunity to join a group of ACH staff and mentors to attend Keya's graduation dinner from the Fort Worx Culinary Program.

[00:18:32] **Keya** I'm at The Taste Community Restaurant and today is my apprentice graduation.

[00:18:35] **Stephanie Henry** It's very important for us to show up for this graduation to show that Keya has support. We know for a lot of clients within our organization they lack the support piece. So just by us being present here today makes Keya feel real special.

[00:18:57] **Joan Denton** My name is Joan Denton, and I'm the chef instructor for the Tarrant Area Food Bank.

[00:19:01] **Robyn Frascella** Hi I'm Robyn Frascella, I'm the production chef at the Tarrant Area Food Bank.

[00:19:06] **Joan Denton** You know, one thing that I loved about Keya, is that she is very humble and she has a very teachable spirit.

[00:19:17] **Robyn Frascella** Talented and intuitive, too! She started out a little quiet and really kind of blossomed. And now she's like smiling all the time. So, her confidence definitely has shot way up.

[00:19:36] **Robyn Frascella** Ok, we have a token of appreciation for the chefs that went through the program. This is a knife kit that was donated by Mission Kitchen to us. It has some tools in it that will help you on your journey. We hope that you add to it. This will become part of your extension. And here are some flowers, too. Now we're going to cut the cake.

[00:20:01] **Keya** This is an eight-inch boneless chef knife. And it's good for me because I have tiny hands and it's really hard to grip knives correctly. And then they gave us a three-inch paring knife, which is also good for cutting fruits or vegetables. Completing the course has definitely raised my self-confidence like through the roof. At first, I didn't know how to accept compliments. I would always downplay myself. So, I definitely accept it now and know my worth.

[00:20:37] **Daniel Treviño** Keya, what do you think your grandmother would have thought about your graduation?

[00:20:41] **Keya** She definitely would have been proud of me. Well, she would have been mad at first, because I did tell her I dropped out of college and she was disappointed. Although I knew my grandmother would have been proud of me for doing something that I wanted, I still had a little voice in the back of my head saying, "I'm doing all this and nobody's paying attention." But I told her— I visited her grave like a couple of weeks ago and said, "Hey, I'm basically graduating, and I'm finally doing what I always wanted to do." That kind of made me feel a little bit happy, you know?

[00:21:09] **Daniel Treviño** Why do you say that?

[00:21:10] **Keya** I've never been like too religious, but I do believe in spirituals— like the idea that people who have passed away can still listen to you. So I felt like I told her, "Hey, I finally did. I'm doing something that you love and I love, and I can make money doing it. So why not?"



[00:21:31] **Daniel Treviño** Thank you, Keya. Your story is a model of perseverance that we all can look up to.

## Closing Credits

[00:21:37] **Daniel Treviño** If you feel inspired and would like to support ACH in its mission to protect children and preserve families, then you can donate now at [ACHServices.org/Donate](https://www.ACHservices.org/Donate) or you can find the link in the show notes. Also, if you liked this episode, please share it with a friend, follow us, or write a review. It makes a huge difference. Counting On Us is a podcast presented by ACH Child and Family Services, written, edited, and produced by Daniel Treviño. Special thanks to LIFE mentor Stephanie Henry, Chefs Jason Abelson, Joan Denton, and Robyn Frascella from the Fort Worx Learning Program. Thanks for listening!