



COUNTING ON US | SEASON 1 | EPISODE 10

Creating Space for Youth Voice

Introduction

[00:00:00] **Daniel Treviño** Just a quick reminder: if you haven't listened to the previous episode, make sure you do, since that story will be part of this episode's conversation. All right, enjoy the show.

[00:00:15] **Daniel Treviño** Here on Counting On Us, I get the opportunity to share the stories of those who have found the hope to push forward and overcome the challenges of their lives—like gaining independence, building a family and healing from trauma. But how universal are their stories? And what are the threads that connect them with other ACH clients, and what does ACH's team of caregivers and professionals really want you to take away from their stories. I get help unpacking these questions from the members of the community ACH serves, and directly from those whose mission it is to help them.

[00:00:53] **Daniel Treviño** On today's episode, my conversation with Peaches Smith and Dionne Roberson about a recent story shared on the podcast. I'm Daniel Treviño, and you're listening to Counting On Us, a podcast presented by ACH Child and Family Services.

Tabitha's Story Recap: Coming Home for Good

[00:01:18] **Daniel Treviño** Previously, on episode nine, a young lady named Tabitha got frank and shared her struggles with feeling misunderstood and judged while in foster care. By the time she first arrived at ACH's Youth Emergency Shelter, she had already experienced the alienation and rejection the resulted from several failed foster home placements. However, things would change once she finally received safety, hope, and love from ACH staff and clients. With this newfound support, Tabitha was able to persevere until she eventually found the opportunity to move back home.

A History of Instability and Neglect

[00:01:53] **Daniel Treviño** My first guest is 18-year-old Peaches Smith, who is currently in ACH's Transitional Living Program, Morris. Before her gran became her caregiver, Peaches was briefly placed in foster care as a baby due to her mother's substance abuse. The youngest of seven sisters, Peaches did have warm memories growing up in Jackson, Mississippi. But everything would change when she and her gran moved to Texas in search of better educational opportunities. During the next seven years, she would experience persistent housing instability, neglect, and deteriorating living conditions under her gran's care—so much so that her journey would lead her to ACH's Youth Emergency Shelter.

[00:02:34] **Daniel Treviño** Welcome, Peaches, to Counting On Us.

[00:02:36] **Peaches Smith** Hi, thanks for having me.

[00:02:39] **Daniel Treviño** Peaches, can you tell me when exactly things changed between you and your gran?

[00:02:44] **Peaches Smith** It started to when I turned fifteen. She started being abusive around that time.

[00:02:51] **Daniel Treviño** Like physically abusive?

[00:02:53] **Peaches Smith** Mm-hmm. She would yell at me. She would hit me. Sometimes I would get beat with random things, and I'm just like, "This isn't right."

[00:03:01] **Daniel Treviño** Do you feel like you lost trust with her?

[00:03:03] **Peaches Smith** Yeah. One time she got so mad she locked me in my own room. She changed the locks, flip the doorknob, and locked me inside. And to make sure I wouldn't get out, she would put tape on top of the door, like where the door opens. She said if she saw that tape move, she'd open the door and beat me. And I'd just be like, okay... and sometimes she'd like, go days without feeding me.

[00:03:28] **Daniel Treviño** Days without feeding you?

[00:03:29] **Peaches Smith** Yeah and there was this one time. She didn't let me out for like a week. I had this computer in my room—a desktop—and I guess that's what also helped me with finding my career path, because I was bored. And I would take down the computer and put it back together and get it to start working.

[00:03:44] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah.

[00:03:45] **Peaches Smith** And I'm like, "Okay, cool." I started getting interested in that.

[00:03:48] **Daniel Treviño** Uh huh.

[00:03:48] **Peaches Smith** And she'd let me out. She'd tell me to clean the kitchen, like grab a bowl of cereal or grab something to eat before she put me back in the room.

[00:03:56] **Daniel Treviño** And what was the reason for locking you in your room?

[00:04:00] **Peaches Smith** I really don't know. She said it was disrespect. And she didn't want me leaving the house—like going outside anymore.

[00:04:08] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah.

[00:04:09] **Peaches Smith** And kids will come and be like, “Can Peaches come outside?” She'd say, “Nah, she's in trouble.” And they will come to my window and ask, “Peaches, what's going on?” I'd be like, “I don't know.” It's like she had a switch inside of her. It flipped every time.

[00:04:23] **Daniel Treviño** Did you ever remember asking for help?

[00:04:29] **Peaches Smith** No, because I feel like if I did, they would go to her and be like, “What's going on? Peaches said she needed help. Peaches said she didn't like it here.” And then it would be like, “Okay, Peaches didn't like it here.” And she will come to me and be like, “Do you want to leave? You can leave.” Some days, she would say to me, “Like, you can leave. You don't have to be here.” But at the same time, I was young. I didn't know where to go. At this time I was fifteen. If I was to get put out, where would I go?

[00:04:53] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah.

[00:04:53] **Peaches Smith** That's the question. And I knew I couldn't go to any other family but my sister, because she was closer and she understood. My other family would say, “You've got to go back,” so they wouldn't be able to take me in. But I'm glad my sister did.

Overcoming Trauma and Finding Hope at ACH

[00:05:06] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, thankfully, your sister would eventually come and take you to live with her for some time. But that wouldn't last, because one day after school she dropped you off at ACH's Youth Emergency Shelter. Can you tell me more about that day?

[00:05:25] **Peaches Smith** I didn't know I was leaving, which was crazy. I remember turning the corner and I saw her, and I was like, "Why is she here? She's here too early—it's not five yet." She came to me, and she was like, "Come on." I got in the car. And she was just like, "I can't do it anymore. I've been taking care of you, and it's just beginning to be too much, so I'm taking you to the shelter." And I was so shocked. She kept saying, "You're going to the shelter." And that's all I heard. And she just kept talking, but I didn't hear that. The only thing I heard was, "You're going to the shelter," and everything else was blocked out. I'm like, "What am I going to do?"

[00:06:01] **Daniel Treviño** The same day she picked you up after school, she dropped you off at the shelter?

[00:06:05] **Peaches Smith** Same day. When we got there and I went inside, everything just felt different. It was so different. I was just standing there, shook. They started asking me questions, and like I said, I was stuck — I didn't have anything to say. She asked, "Are you okay?" and I just sat there and looked. I didn't have an attitude; but I was just like—

[00:06:29] **Daniel Treviño** You're in shock.

[00:06:30] **Peaches Smith** Yeah, like, "What's going on? I don't even know where I am right now. But I know I'm on a different side of town."

[00:06:38] **Daniel Treviño** How long did you stay in the shelter?

[00:06:40] **Peaches Smith** For the whole three months.

[00:06:41] **Daniel Treviño** Three months. Okay. And no one in your family decided to bring you in, right? So once that became clear, you entered foster care. Did they find you a placement?

[00:06:56] **Peaches Smith** I knew about places because there was this one girl I shared a room with. She told me about this place called Morris. And she was like, "I'm going to Morris. It's going to be so great. They let me have my phone, I get to have a job, and do all this—"

[00:07:11] **Daniel Treviño** That's ACH's other program, yeah?

[00:07:13] **Peaches Smith** Uh-huh. So I'm like, okay, Morris sounds like a great home. Boom — I was stuck on Morris. They would ask me, "Do you know anywhere you would want to go?" And like I said, this was all new to me. So I was like, *Morris, Morris, Morris* — I was so stuck on Morris. I would write about it, and I would pray about it. I'd be like, "I hope I get into Morris," because it sounds like a great program, and I can get a job. And maybe after that, I can move out, get my own apartment, have a car — everything.

[00:07:41] **Daniel Treviño** Get your life started.

[00:07:43] **Peaches Smith** Uh huh. Right now it's going really great— like, I love it.

[00:07:46] **Daniel Treviño** So that's what happened—you didn't get like a placement in a foster home. Instead, you were placed here at ACH's Morris Program. That's where kids get therapy and also learn independent living skills so they can eventually be on their own.

Crisis Management in the Shelter

[00:08:03] **Daniel Treviño** So, all right, let's transition now and talk a little bit about Tabitha's story – the episode I had you listen to. What stood out to you, or what could you relate to?

[00:08:16] **Peaches Smith** Really, what stood out to me was how she was able to get through every situation while also dealing with her disability. It was really crazy, because I heard her say that at one point she had to get herself kicked out of a placement since no one understood what she was going through. They thought she was faking, and I was like, that's really sad. I couldn't imagine going through that – I would cry every night if that happened to me.

[00:08:48] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, people didn't believe her. So by the time she came to the shelter, she just didn't know who to trust.

[00:08:57] **Peaches Smith** Right.

[00:08:58] **Daniel Treviño** And did you have a similar experience? Like, did you still not know who you could trust when you first got to the shelter?

[00:09:05] **Peaches Smith** Yeah. Like I said, I was in my room for about a month and a half. They would come check on me and be like, "Are you okay?" I'd be like, "Yeah." And with me, I have to really watch my surroundings, because all my life I had to look around me and make sure nobody's like—

[00:09:23] **Daniel Treviño** What? Going to hurt you, or what?

[00:09:25] **Peaches Smith** Yeah, I was mostly focused on whether somebody's like going to hit me or something, because at the shelter people come and go, and they have a lot of emotions. There would be a lot going on — like, almost a fight breaking out. So I had to watch my back. And then everybody's cool, like, "Come play board games," and then I'd be in school... it was just a lot.

[00:09:46] **Daniel Treviño** When Tabitha was in the shelter, I feel like one of the key moments in that episode is the moment she realized that family reunification wasn't an option for her— that she wasn't going to go back with her family even though that was something that she really wanted. Do you remember that moment when it became clear that you weren't going to go back with your family?

[00:10:15] **Peaches Smith** So Erica tried to get in touch with my grandma, auntie, my other sisters. I guess they can look everybody up. So they were trying to call everybody, and they would come and tell me, "Hey, they're not answering. Who else do you think else is going to answer?" And I was like, "You can't get in touch with my gran? She answers the phone for anybody. Like that's crazy." And then it just hit me— "Yeah, I'm going to have to figure out what I'm going to do next, because nobody's going to be there. I don't have anything. I've got to figure out something really, really fast.

[00:10:45] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, Tabitha said she had a breakdown—like a mental breakdown. But it was also kind of beautiful, because in that moment, when she was having this crisis, all the kids came around her and they just started hugging her. The staff were there too. And it made her realize that even though she wasn't going back with her family—which was something she really wanted—people still cared about her. And these are people she just met. Did you have a similar experience? I mean, with the people you meet here at ACH, whether it's the clients or the staff.

[00:11:25] **Peaches Smith** Like I said, my guard was always up. So there was this one time I had written about the whole situation, and I just started crying. I didn't want to cry, because I was like, *I'm in here. I'm not going to cry. I have to figure something out.* It was like fight or flight. So I walked back out, and I had to ask—because you have to ask to use the washers and dryer—so I went up to Mr. Bryan right after. I wiped my eyes. I thought I had it taken care of, like you couldn't tell I'd just cried. And Mr. Bryan was like, "Are you okay?" And I was like, "What are you talking about? I don't know what you're talking about. I need to use the washer and dryer." And he was like, "I can tell you've been crying." And then I just started bursting out crying, and he sat with me. And then Ms. Melody came, and she was like, "It's gonna be okay. We're gonna find you somewhere to go." And I was just like...

[00:12:11] **Daniel Treviño** Uh-huh.

[00:12:13] **Peaches Smith** Right now I feel like I'm going to cry...

[00:12:15] **Daniel Treviño** I know.

[00:12:17] **Daniel Treviño** Well, again, those moments resonate with me because they taught me a lot about what ACH does. The great thing is that it gives kids the time and space to feel. Because, like you said, you didn't feel comfortable enough in your previous situation to express your emotions, right? Because if you did, did people get angry with you?

[00:12:47] **Peaches Smith** I wouldn't say angry. I would say just like, "Okay... push off."

[00:12:52] **Daniel Treviño** Brush you off.

[00:12:53] **Peaches Smith** Yeah. And then that's when it clicked— nobody's going to listen. So you just keep to yourself or you write it down.

[00:13:02] **Daniel Treviño** Uh-huh.

[00:13:02] **Peaches Smith** Just like now— if I feel like I'm talking to somebody, I fear they're not going listen. They're just going be like, "Okay, I understand." But do you really? That's the question. You can hear me talk, but do you understand what I'm saying? Do you understand where I'm coming from?

Inside ACH: Creating Safe Spaces for Vulnerable Youth

[00:13:15] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah. What do most people get wrong about foster care youth?

[00:13:20] **Peaches Smith** Well, you know in the movies, it's like they show kids being treated the way Annie was — you know, she was an orphan, and she used to get mistreated. But it's not like that. They really care. It just takes time. And they understand that it takes time for you to heal, and it takes time for you to open up and talk to them about things. So they'll let you go on about your business, but they'll still check up on you. I mean, you can say you don't want to be checked on, but they'll still come and say, "Are you okay? Are you sure you're okay? Do you want to talk about it? You don't want to talk? Okay, that's fine. I'm here if you need me." And they'll keep checking on you to make sure you're okay. They won't judge you, because everybody goes through situations and tough times. So they understand everything you're going through, even if they didn't go through the same thing themselves. They understand where you're coming from.

[00:14:11] **Daniel Treviño** The staff here at ACH?

[00:14:13] **Peaches Smith** Yeah. And I really feel like Ms. Melanie... I think she cried for me one time. And I'm just like, "Why is she crying? But then I realized she understands— that she feels it. It's just a lot for one person to go through, and especially since they're in and out. They listen to a lot of stories, so that could be lingering in their minds. So they'll try to help you, and they'll come to you and ask if you need help. Take advantage of that.

[00:14:37] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, no, that's true — the people here at ACH genuinely want to help you. I'm so happy that you got that message and that you're taking advantage of the help and making a change in your life. I wish you all the success, and I want to thank you for speaking with me today. And yeah... best of luck.

[00:15:01] **Peaches Smith** Thanks for having me.

[00:15:03] **Daniel Treviño** We'll be right back.

A Message from Wayne Carson

[00:15:07] **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 to learn more about what we do, how to get involved, or if you'd like to support us. Now back to the show.

Why Attachment and Trust Are Critical for Healing

[00:15:45] **Daniel Treviño** And we're back. I'm here with Dionne Robertson. She works here on ACH's Wedgwood campus, which is where you'll find several of ACH's residential programs, like Morris.

[00:15:55] **Daniel Treviño** Welcome to Counting On Us.

[00:15:57] **Dionne Roberson** Thank you.

[00:15:58] **Daniel Treviño** Alright, so Dionne, can you please introduce yourself and tell me more about what you do here at ACH?

[00:16:05] **Dionne Roberson** So I am Dionne Roberson. I'm the Residential Treatment Director on the Wedgwood campus. Basically, my role is to make sure that treatment services are happening for all our clients on the Wedgwood campus. That can be anything from making sure they receive individual therapy and medication management, to ensuring that if they're on psychotropic medications, those medications are monitored and taken consistently. I also make sure our clients have recreational services. So if they want to play volleyball, basketball, cheerlead—anything like that—I try to ensure we can provide those services. I also offer support and advocate for our clients. That pretty much sums up everything I do.

[00:16:57] **Daniel Treviño** Okay, can you talk about the type of environments many of our clients come from before they arrive at ACH?

[00:17:06] **Dionne Roberson** Like right before they are placed in care?

[00:17:09] **Daniel Treviño** Yes.

[00:17:09] **Dionne Roberson** A lot of what I'm seeing could be neglect — lack of food, lack of supervision, medical neglect. Maybe you have a child who really needs therapeutic services, and because of the stigma, the parents are like, "No, I'm not going get it."

[00:17:27] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah.

[00:17:28] **Dionne Roberson** A lot of domestic violence, physical abuse — there's a lot of substance abuse out there. And a lot of times, those parents struggle with substance abuse, and they can't take care of the kids, but they also can't take care of themselves. So they need services — wraparound services for the whole family. That's what we're seeing a lot when we get these kids.

[00:17:51] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, you mentioned neglect, and you know neglect can cover so many different things — like you said, it can be medical, physical, or environmental. But what I've noticed with a lot of our clients is the interpersonal relationship neglect — you know, developing close connections with their family or their friends. Can you talk about how not having strong relationships affects our clients?

[00:18:24] **Dionne Roberson** Yes, so if you look at development, when a child is in the womb up until about age two, that's a critical period — that's when the attachment phase starts. And for a lot of our clients, they don't have that attachment phase; that attachment phase was skipped, especially when it comes to neglect, whether it's emotional or due to lack of supervision. And so what you see is that a lot of the time, these kids who don't have that attachment phase grow up not knowing how to cope. They don't know how to cope, and they don't experience what it's like to be loved or to have that connection with a parent. And that comes back to what you said about relationships. On the Wedgwood campus, we preach: you've got to connect, you've got to connect, you've got to connect. Because when you have a relationship with a client, you're able to support them better, and you're able to truly work with them.

How Instability Affects a Child

[00:19:26] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, so now let's talk about the episode I had you listen to, which was Tabitha's story.

[00:19:32] **Dionne Roberson** Yes.

[00:19:33] **Daniel Treviño** So, was there a moment that stood out to you?

[00:19:37] **Dionne Roberson** She was very insightful. I knew Tabitha when she was on her way out of Morris and going to SIL, and then again when she came back. And just listening to her, I felt like she was very misunderstood. And that's easy — sometimes you get a client who's acting out, and you think, *Well, they're just doing this for attention, or They're doing this because of something else.* But hearing her talk about her story made a lot of sense. And she was accountable. She took accountability for sometimes not being on her best behavior. But she also helped me understand where her trauma was coming from — why she had certain behaviors. And if I could get all of our clients to open up like that, it would be so much easier. But again, that's the relationship and trust-building you have to do.

[00:20:26] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, that's interesting. So you said you came into the picture toward the end of her story here at ACH?

[00:20:33] **Dionne Roberson** Yes.

[00:20:33] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah. Because, like you mentioned, she went to a different Supervised Independent Living Program. She didn't go to The LIFE Project here at ACH.

[00:20:41] **Dionne Roberson** Right.

[00:20:41] **Daniel Treviño** She went to a different one. And one of the requirements there—just like here at The LIFE Project—is that you have to get a job or go to college. And that just didn't happen for her. So when she came back here, of course they were pushing her to get a job. But she had been dealing with so much instability—her housing, moving through all these different foster homes, even within ACH, moving from one program to the next. And she said she just felt burnt out. When I talked to her, that kept coming up: *'I feel burnt out.'* And she was trying to make it clear that there's a difference between being burnt out and being lazy. Is that something you've heard other clients say? Or do you understand what she means by that?

[00:21:29] **Dionne Roberson** I haven't heard other clients say it, but I definitely understand what she means by it. When you have multiple disruptions in placements, when you're having to start over so many times, when you're having these big transitions, that can burn you out – not just physically, but mentally. So I definitely understood where she was coming from. And again, when she came back to Morris, we had new staff, and that relationship piece was tough. She had a hard time building that connection. And man, I just wish I would have heard her say that in the moment. Because then we could have put together a plan for her to help with that burnout, but also to encourage and motivate her to go out on her own and be independent. But it was very insightful.

Their Future, Their Voice: Why Listening to Youth is Important

[00:22:22] **Daniel Treviño** What other moments in Tabitha's story stuck out to you?

[00:22:28] **Dionne Roberson** When she finally got to live with her mom, and that was like her goal.

[00:22:32] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah.

[00:22:34] **Dionne Roberson** That was it. I don't know... it just stood out that she said, "That's my end goal. That's where I want to be." You know, when kids come into care, we think we're doing what's best for them – we're providing safety, we're providing stability – but we don't always realize that sometimes, in the end, those clients still want to go back to where they came from.

[00:22:55] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah.

[00:22:55] **Dionne Roberson** So it kind of makes you think: although we work in the best interest of the client, if that's the client's end goal, then why not start working with their families and including them? That way, everyone is supported and advocated for.

[00:23:12] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, that's family reunification, and it's always a big topic with kids in foster care. But earlier in her story, when she was at the shelter, she came to the conclusion that family reunification wasn't going to happen. Even Peaches experienced something similar – that moment of realizing, *“Okay, none of my family is returning these phone calls.”* So when it becomes clear that going back home isn't an option, how do you work with clients to prepare them for that next chapter in their life?

[00:23:50] **Dionne Roberson** Right, I think that's why I liked the Morris Program so much. It's a Transitional Living Program, and not only are we teaching them independent living skills, but we're also working toward transition. I'm constantly asking our clients, “What do you want to do when you leave here?” If college isn't an option, would you be interested in SIL? If you want to live on your own, then let's get you connected with PAL's services. Sometimes PAL's has funding that can help with expenses. That's why I like the Morris Program – you have so much time to work with them before they reach that point.

[00:24:28] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah.

[00:24:29] **Dionne Roberson** And a big thing is, for example, we encourage our kiddos to get jobs – and yes, I use the word *kiddos* a lot. We work with them on saving, too. I'll go to a client and say, “Well, you spend a lot of money. What about a car? How are you going to get around?” I'm putting these things in their mind so they can better prepare for the future. And when we do plans or service meetings, we're talking about transitions, goals, savings – and what other life skills they feel they need to learn. That's the beauty of the Morris Program, or any Transitional Living Program, because even if a client wants to go back home, and even if they do go back home and realize it's not working, they still have the skills they need to tackle things on their own.

[00:25:14] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, so what do you think we can all learn from both Tabitha's and Peaches's stories?

[00:25:23] **Dionne Roberson** Well, I guess that it's so important for you to have a voice. I think we sometimes forget that—we don't want to speak for the clients. We want them to tell us what they want their situation to look like, what they want their treatment to look like, and what they want their outcome to be. And I think that's something we forget sometimes. We think we know what's best for them, when in actuality the client is often very aware of what's best for themselves. So always let the client have a voice. Because, as I said earlier when Tabitha was telling her story, I had no idea that was how she felt. So it's important to make sure we understand that they have a voice—and that we're allowing them to use it.

[00:26:16] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, the way I see it is, you know, our clients are the visionaries.

[00:26:21] **Dionne Roberson** Right.

[00:26:22] **Daniel Treviño** And we're here to help make their vision come true. So we have to figure out: What's your vision for your life? What do you want to happen? And I think we're all here as a team, trying to make that happen the best we can. Is there anything else you'd like to share regarding the podcast or foster care in general?

[00:26:48] **Dionne Roberson** No, I think this is a great podcast, by the way. I love that y'all interview clients — I love it. As for foster care, not really. Like I said, I just wish everyone could see the positives behind the negatives, but I'm pretty sure this podcast will highlight that moving forward.

[00:27:10] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, and you're a big part of that, so thank you for that. So thank you for all your hard work and thank you for speaking with me today. Take care.

[00:27:20] **Dionne Roberson** Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

Closing Credits

[00:27:24] **Daniel Treviño** That's all for today. But make sure you like and subscribe so you don't miss the next two episodes we release every two weeks. And if you enjoyed the show, please share, rate, and write a review. It makes a huge difference. Also, 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. Counting On Us is a podcast presented by ACH Child and Family Services written, edited, and produced by Daniel Treviño. Special thanks to Peaches Smith and Dionne Roberson. Mixing by Panoramic Sound. Thanks for listening!