

COUNTING ON US | SEASON 1 | EPISODE 11

Discovering Your Inner Strength

Grown Too Soon: Sibling Caregiving and Homelessness

[00:00:02] **Alex Rameriz** When I was growing up and seeing the world around me, I realized who I wanted to be. Even though people had hurt me in the past, I didn't want to put that same energy into the world. I wanted to make— create a different energy; I wanted to help people.

[00:00:22] **Daniel Treviño** In Alex's family, there were no boundaries between parent and child. From a very young age, she took on the role of mother to her five younger brothers. The mental and emotional trauma from years of enmeshment only worsened once they became homeless.

[00:00:40] **Alex Rameriz** I always had to be in charge. I always had to help and raise my brothers. I cleaned, I changed their diapers, I fed them, I clothed them—and we were homeless and living in our van. It really, really sucked. It sucked because we couldn't take showers, and you don't have any way to keep up with your hygiene. That's when my parents had to pull us out of school.

[00:01:08] **Daniel Treviño** One day, Alex's parents were caught panhandling by the police and taken to jail. Soon, Child Protective Services were called to investigate the living conditions the children were living in and determined it was best to place them in foster care. Alex and three of her brothers then found themselves in a temporary group home, separated from the rest of the family.

[00:01:31] **Alex Rameriz** I was very torn and heartbroken, and my emotions were just conquering me. And so that's whenever I had been more depressed and depressed, and it led me to hurt myself. That day, they had arranged for me to be placed into a Behavioral Care Hospital. I didn't know anybody there, and I wasn't comfortable with sharing how I felt with those people. But when I returned, it seemed that we only had about two weeks to be at that placement, and after that, we had no idea where we were going.

[00:02:18] **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.

Learning How to Advocate for Yourself

[00:02:44] **Daniel Treviño** All youth want connection, but when their support network deteriorates, they may not know how to develop a healthy relationship. Given their life experiences, youth in care are four times more likely to consider or attempt suicide due to feeling alone. Indeed, these young adults are not only coping with past trauma but continue to face ongoing rejection and abandonment within the system, making it increasingly difficult for them to trust and allow others into their lives. After Alex returned from her hospital stay, her brothers were placed in various foster homes while she found herself at ACH's Morris Program. With the change came further uncertainty, stress, and anxiety.

[00:03:30] **Alex Rameriz** When I first arrived, I felt very lost. I was afraid of being away from my brothers and just afraid of what was going to happen. I just had a lot of worries.

[00:03:48] **Marcos Wiggins** Not a lot of trust there just because we're complete strangers. So she was really closed off, didn't talk much—honestly, she could go days without saying much at all. So it's like we were trying to engage and trying to make a connection, but we were just grasping at straws, and she's like, "Nope, that's not it."

[00:04:06] **Daniel Treviño** When Alex first arrived, Marcos Wiggins was the Program Supervisor for ACH's Morris Program. Morris provides a safe and nurturing home to a small group of six to eight teenagers, starting from fourteen years old, while they receive therapy, academic support, and assistance transitioning into independent living.

[00:04:27] **Alex Rameriz** At that time, I was very, very closed off and kept to myself, like I didn't have a voice or like I didn't even know how to use it.

[00:04:37] **Marcos Wiggins** What we call that in the trauma-informed care world is kids not having self-efficacy—meaning they don't feel that if they did speak up, people would actually listen and hear them out. That's a common thing with a lot of teenagers. They think, "No one here is going to listen to me," or, "All these adults just do whatever they want and don't actually listen to us kids."

[00:04:56] **Alex Rameriz** I wanted to tell them, "Hey, I'm not used to this, so you've got to give me some time." I basically had trust issues, and I didn't know who I could turn to, and I was never really able to open up growing up. With my parents, they didn't really learn anything about me until I reached 20, and that was the struggle—just trying to get all these emotions out of me.

[00:05:26] **Marcos Wiggins** And the cool thing about Morris is that we're seeing these kids every day for months and months and months. So we really have to work hand-in-hand with the counselor on what they're working on in session so we can keep that going. The biggest thing they were focusing on then was helping her speak up for herself. We would role-play difficult conversations for Alex—whether it was communicating with a teacher or with other kids in the group home.

[00:05:51] **Alex Rameriz** Those exercises helped me because they were kind of like sentence-forming for me. They were basically instructions that guided me toward being able to open up on my own.

[00:06:10] **Daniel Treviño** While Alex continued working on her therapeutic goals, she also enrolled back into a local high school near the Morris home. The obstacles that she would face in order to graduate at times felt insurmountable.

A Circle of Support: Navigating High School

[00:06:24] **Alex Rameriz** You know, my parents had always told me that school is important, and I took that very seriously. I always tried to make sure I had good grades. But my past with being homeless definitely set my education back, and it was overwhelming because I had to do a lot of catching up—and that was the hardest part.

[00:06:50] **Marcos Wiggins** You know, sometimes she'd go to counseling appointments and review how long everything was going to take and what courses she needed to complete. And she'd come home saying, "I don't know if I can do this. This is not something I want to do." Not a lot of kids would raise their hand and say, "Yes, I'd like to graduate at nineteen and a half or twenty years old."

[00:07:07] **Alex Rameriz** They always tried to ask me at the end of the day, whenever I came back from school, "How are you? How are you feeling? And, you know, if there's anything you need, just tell us."

[00:07:22] **Daniel Treviño** Morris Youth Care Specialist Briana Elder recalls one night when several staff members teamed up to help Alex with a particularly challenging assignment.

[00:07:34] **Brianna Elder** It was like nine o'clock at night—the shift should be ending, Alex should have been going to bed, and Marcus should've been gone long ago. And there we all were, working with her on some kind of science experiment with a battery and a paperclip or something. I just remember us all taking turns, like, "Oh, maybe if you do it this way... or hold it this way..."

[00:07:54] **Alex Rameriz** We were trying to figure out how to get the electricity to pass through so the light bulb would light up, but it never did. It was just funny because they were trying so hard to help me get it to work.

[00:08:10] **Brianna Elder** And I think that through those hard moments with youth like Alex, it really builds the relationship. Alex knows that even though it's something small—like homework help—I had four staff members who were all there with me, who cared enough about me to care about how I was going to do in my science class. I think that's something a lot of our kids haven't had.

[00:08:29] **Alex Rameriz** It definitely gave me insight because, you know, attention was never something I received growing up, and I didn't realize how good it felt to have people who actually care about me and want to help me.

The Deep Meaning of a Groundbreaking Graduation

[00:08:49] **Daniel Treviño** After many more late nights doing homework, all of Alex's hard work and determination pushed her over the finish line, and it was finally time for her to graduate.

[00:09:00] **Alex Rameriz** I remember it because everybody was being rowdy that day, and they were like, "Come on, get ready, we have to go—we have to go to Alex's graduation."

[00:09:10] **Daniel Treviño** Everyone at the Morris house?

[00:09:11] **Alex Rameriz** Yeah, everyone that was living there at the moment. So, to celebrate my graduation, of course, there were Morris staff, the kids, and my parents.

[00:09:21] **Daniel Treviño** And what was it like to have your parents there to see you graduate?

[00:09:26] **Alex Rameriz** It was really, really good.

[00:09:40] **Alex Rameriz** It was overwhelming, like I had so many emotions in me. But most importantly, I was proud of myself. Because my parents didn't graduate school—my dad had to start working when he was about seven years old, so he only reached an elementary education, and my mom became a mom early on. So they were very proud of me to see me go on and graduate and to be the first in the family to do it. So that just really made me feel proud for them and for myself for what I was able to accomplish.

[00:10:20] **Daniel Treviño** Following graduation, Alex continued staying in the Morris Program a while longer. She got her first job, learned new life skills, and she started to build deep connections with more staff and clients, including becoming best friends with her roommate.

[00:10:38] **Alex Rameriz** Yes, we actually connected the first time I met her. She and I had always been so close, and we shared things with each other. We knew everything about each other. But when the rift happened and we fell apart, and we weren't friends anymore, I felt betrayed and sad and lonely all over again. And that caused me to harm myself again.

[00:11:09] **Daniel Treviño** We'll be right back.

A Message from Wayne Carson

[00:11:14] **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.

The Strength in Seeking Mental Health Help

[00:11:47] **Daniel Treviño** Alex's relationship with her best friend was crumbling. Coming from a place where she had already felt so alone, losing her closest confidant caused Alex to fall back into old patterns of harming herself, threatening all of the progress she had made up until that point.

[00:12:05] **Alex Rameriz** So when the friendship fell through and I was at my lowest point, I already knew where this was going. That's when I went to the staff and told them, "Hey, this is how I'm feeling, and I think the right option for me is to be admitted to the Behavioral Care Hospital."

[00:12:29] **Daniel Treviño** I know that by that point, you had been practicing how to communicate your needs with the Morris staff. But was it still difficult for you to share how you were feeling?

[00:12:40] **Alex Rameriz** At first, it felt normal, like I was just starting a conversation with somebody. But then I realized—oh my god, am I actually telling them how I'm feeling? Wow. In the past, if I had experienced this situation without the tools I'd been given, I would have been a mess.

[00:13:02] **Daniel Treviño** When you were in the hospital, did you stay in contact with anyone from ACH?

[00:13:09] **Alex Rameriz** Yes, I remember this one time when a staff member—her name is Kaitlyn—came and played cards with me. That definitely made me feel better because even though I was in this situation, in the hospital again, it felt like I wasn't alone through it.

[00:13:29] **Kaitlyn Smith** I wanted to make it a point that, one, she's not forgotten. And I know, man—any child who enters this system has experienced some lack of care in their life. I never wanted her to feel that way while she was in our care. I wanted her to see that even in the hard moments, even when a decision is tough, her people will show up.

[00:13:55] **Daniel Treviño** At that time, Kaitlyn Smith was a Youth Care Specialist at Morris. Later, she transitioned to ACH's Behavioral Care Program. Every day, Kaitlyn works with clients who struggle with mental health, so she understands very well the fortitude it takes for clients to admit they need help.

[00:14:13] **Kaitlyn Smith** Going into it, she knew—"Hey, if I'm admitted, I'll be there seven to ten days. If I'm admitted, I'll have to be woken up in the middle of the night and assessed for meds"—all these things that are not fun. But gosh, for a client to recognize they need help? Wow. That takes so much strength and self-awareness. There aren't many 19-year-olds who would say, "Hey, I think I need help beyond what I'm getting."

[00:14:44] **Alex Rameriz** It definitely helped to have the staff there telling me, “Oh, you’re doing this.” And I always kind of disliked it when people told me I was strong because I never felt like I was strong. But looking back on that now—especially everything that I’ve been through, all the trauma, all... everything that I’ve been through—I can actually take those words into my mind and believe it now, because I’m still here, and I’m still alive, and I’m still going no matter what. What I learned from that was that I was definitely becoming this new person, especially this new person that I thought I’d never become.

Boundaries are Self-Care

[00:15:29] **Daniel Treviño** Eventually, Alex would stabilize her mental health and return to the Morris home. It wasn’t long before she finally moved into ACH’s LIFE Project, which is a Transitional Living Program for young adults aging out of the foster care system. Once there, 18 to 21-year-olds receive guidance as they navigate the challenges that come from becoming independent adults. For Alex, the experience of purchasing her first car proved to be a lesson in boundaries.

[00:15:58] **Alex Rameriz** I had the money for the car, and I paid for the car, but I didn’t get the car. He told me that I needed to send the money through the gift cards, so it was a scam.

[00:16:11] **Daniel Treviño** Did you tell LIFE mentors about the car ad before you started to pursue it?

[00:16:17] **Alex Rameriz** Yes, they were telling me, “Just be very, very careful. Ask them for this kind of information, like the VIN and everything.” But I guess I let my excitement get ahead of me. I was just like, “No, no, this is legit.” I wanted to believe it—and I did believe it.

[00:16:37] **Daniel Treviño** Cassie Morgan, LIFE Project Mentor, explains the approach staff take when coaching young adults through difficult real-world decisions.

[00:16:46] **Cassie Morgan** So, the approach we take as staff is that we can't ever stop a client from making a decision on their own—that's a huge part of learning to be independent. We don't tell them how to spend their money or how to save it; we just encourage good decision-making and show them what that looks like. Our first step is simply to listen and understand why they think something is a good idea. Then we guide the conversation by asking, "Okay, what do you notice about this that might be a little strange?" And Alex, with her compassionate side, could only focus on what the seller was saying—that they were in need, they were in trouble, they were hurting—and in that situation, it really pulled on her heartstrings.

[00:17:47] **Alex Rameriz** What moved me was that they told me the car had belonged to their son who had passed away. They said it had become an emotional burden for them to keep it, and I felt bad for them because I didn't want them to feel like they had to hold on to the car anymore—and I thought it would be in great hands.

[00:18:09] **Cassie Morgan** So Alex had a lot to learn in that area of boundaries and giving—giving of herself, her time, or her money—and being so young and coming from the background that she did, it was obviously going to be a long life lesson. So we focused on coaching Alex in the pitfalls to avoid and the red flags to notice when somebody may not have her best interests at heart.

[00:18:41] **Alex Rameriz** I feel like my background definitely played a part in this. It's always been about other people. For me, I just want to give so much—I want to help as much as I can in any way that I can. What's changed now is that I'm able to set that boundary, and I'm able to vocalize why I have to set it, and I'm not stressed as much.

Youth In Care Proudly Paying It Forward

[00:19:09] **Daniel Treviño** Alex did end up purchasing her first car, and by the time her stay at The LIFE Project was over, she had saved enough money for an emergency fund and a new apartment. But her greatest achievement was learning how to balance helping others with prioritizing her own needs. It was with this newfound confidence that Alex began making a real impact on the lives of others, including here on the campus of ACH Child and Family Services.

[00:19:40] **Alex Rameriz** I remember Cassie talking to me, and we were basically just coming up with ideas about what we should do during the pandemic. They thought about the garden over there—how it had been abandoned and no one really attended to it—and we were sad to see it like that. So we wanted to change it.

[00:20:03] **Cassie Morgan** So the Sprouts Club did a lot of garden work with the Wichita campus garden, which was just a pile of sticks, mud, and dirt. And Alex came in and really inspired her peers to pull all of that out and turn it into something absolutely beautiful.

[00:20:22] **Alex Rameriz** Even though there were times when people would complain or whatever, we eventually were able to have moments where we were laughing and actually having fun doing this together. It felt good because, you know, getting other people to do it with you is even better—you're like, oh, you caused an action and turned Sprouts around and actually have something out there forming a life. And just seeing people appreciate it and know that the kids here actually did this—it's something to be proud of.

[00:21:06] **Daniel Treviño** Why is that important for people to see what the youth here on campus are creating?

[00:21:14] **Alex Rameriz** It's important because I want them to know that even though we sometimes have a lot going on in our lives, we still want to be able to reach out and let people know that, hey, we're here. Even though we're not little kids or anything, we're still here, and we're trying to make a change.

[00:21:38] **Daniel Treviño** Alex, what advice would you give to someone who currently finds themselves in a similar situation to the one you were in a few years ago?

[00:21:49] **Alex Rameriz** You are not alone. There's definitely been people who have been through the same thing you've been through. And even though it feels like you want to give up so, so badly—because I know I've been there too many times—you can't let this life hurt you and keep on hurting you until you give up; you have to keep going. And so for anyone that's in the same spot that I've been through, I just want you to know that even if you may not know me and you're just hearing my voice, I care about you. And I can only hope that by hearing what I've been through, you might take a small step or two to help yourself, just like I'm doing.

[00:22:50] **Daniel Treviño** Thank you, Alex, for sharing your story of resilience.

Closing Credits

[00:22:55] **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 ACH staff Marcos Wiggins, Brianna Elder, Kaitlyn Smith, and Cassie Morgan. Mixing by Panoramic Sound. Thanks for listening!