

COUNTING ON US | SEASON 1 | EPISODE 9

## Practicing Hope Through Patience

### A Fractured Journey through Foster Care

[00:00:01] **Tabitha Shipley** I was just really depressed, and I was just crying every night because I just wanted to go home.

[00:00:10] **Daniel Treviño** When you say you want to go home, what does that mean to you?

[00:00:13] **Tabitha Shipley** Going to live back in my very small house in Keene with my mom. That's what it means for me to go home.

[00:00:21] **Daniel Treviño** When Tabitha Shipley was fourteen, she entered the foster care system for the third time. She had brief placements when she was three and eleven, but this time she would remain in care for over four years. It would be one of the most difficult periods in her life, made even more challenging by her vision impairment.

[00:00:42] **Tabitha Shipley** I did end up like losing some trust in some people, because they wouldn't really treat me with the proper respect. Because they thought I was lying and stuff, even though I had paperwork to prove it. Even though you could just tell by looking at my eyes that there's something wrong. I get judged a lot because people think that if I have some vision, I have all vision.

[00:01:12] **Daniel Treviño** Tabitha struggled with keeping her foster home placements, often feeling misunderstood and disrespected by her foster parents. Eventually, Tabitha had nowhere to go.

[00:01:24] **Tabitha Shipley** The foster mom just had it in for me, and all the other ones did too—for some reason I don't know. Maybe sometimes I was in the wrong. I did have an attitude problem that might be the cause of some things. But I wasn't the one who's been disrespectful most of the time. I was given a 14-day discharge notice from that foster home, and then I went to the incredible respite home. And after those incredible fifteen days were over, I was really depressed, and I went to the ACH Youth Emergency Shelter.

[00:02:02] **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.

## A Shelter, A Lifeline

[00:02:29] **Daniel Treviño** The Pat O'Neil Youth Emergency Shelter at ACH Child and Family Services is the only 24/7 shelter in Tarrant County offering care for youth ages 5 to 17. For foster care youth like Tabitha, the shelter is a lifeline for those in crisis with no stable home placement.

[00:02:52] **Tabitha Shipley** The first day I was there, I was really depressed. I was so mean to the person who was signing me in—I was just such a jerk. Later that night, I apologized and said, "I'm so sorry. I've had a really, really rough time." And he said, "No, no, it's okay. We get that all the time."

[00:03:15] **Daniel Treviño** For staff at the shelter, being patient and empathetic comes naturally. Clients often arrive feeling alone, guarded, and distrustful of adults, so staff work hard to create a safe environment for youth. As Melanie Alexander, the team supervisor at the shelter, explains, building trust with clients starts from day one.

[00:03:36] **Melanie Alexander** The initial connection between staff and clients is really important because it lets the client know that we're there for them. We're there to meet their needs, to support them, and to help them through the things they're going through. Many of them haven't had anyone who's consistently been there for them when they come into the shelter. So we make sure they have someone they know they can go to, someone they can trust, someone who will meet their basic needs—and we show them that they have people on their side.

[00:04:12] **Tabitha Shipley** The foster mom was really petty and would get mad at me if I dropped even a few ramen noodles on the floor. I didn't tell my caseworker because my caseworker never listened to anything I said. I barely told anyone about this because, at the time, it felt like no one cared.

[00:04:30] **Daniel Treviño** Tabitha, what was your experience with staff once you arrived at the shelter?

[00:04:36] **Tabitha Shipley** My experience was really, really good. They were just so supportive and really nice. They really cared about my feelings and what mattered to me. They even found a book for me on the bookshelf, and I got so into it—I finished it in three days. It was about 500 pages, so that was a big accomplishment. They found things they knew I would like, and they even let me keep the book.

## School Stability for Homeless Youth with Special Needs

[00:05:05] **Daniel Treviño** For youth experiencing homelessness, the lack of stability and support at home impacts them academically. Threatening their social and emotional development. At the shelter, all clients are automatically enrolled in the on-site Fort Worth ISD charter school, but for Tabitha, staff had to make some accommodations because of her disability.

[00:05:26] **Melanie Alexander** Normally, when a youth comes into the shelter, they're automatically enrolled in Fort Worth ISD. But with Tabitha having a disability, we were able to keep her enrolled in her previous school, where she was already set up with the accommodations she needed for her visual impairment. Because the computers with Fort Worth ISD did not have the capability that the iPad issued to her provided.

[00:05:51] **Tabitha Shipley** It was good how they accommodated letting me use my iPad instead of those horrible Chromebooks. Oh, I hate Chromebooks so much. Their magnification is terrible.

[00:06:02] **Melanie Alexander** With Tabitha, education staff made sure that she stayed connected with the teachers at her previous school and also sat next to her during class in case she had any questions that couldn't be answered right away by the teachers.

## Failed Family Reunification: When Reality Hits Hard

[00:06:18] **Daniel Treviño** While the time spent in the shelter is short for clients, the safe, supportive environment often gives youth the time and space to finally feel without the fear of judgment.

[00:06:32] **Tabitha Shipley** The most helpful thing I got out of the shelter was just the love and support that I got from the staff. Even the peers—most of them— were really, really nice towards me. And whenever I was having a mental breakdown one day, all of them, all of them came over. And they were hugging me. They were telling me I was going to be okay. I was just crying in their arms. And I can literally cry right now. That was the sweetest thing anybody has ever done for me. All of them were, you know, saying, "It's going to be okay. We're here. You can always talk to us." It was so sweet.

[00:07:11] **Daniel Treviño** Why were you having such a hard time?

[00:07:14] **Tabitha Shipley** I was having a hard time. I just got hit hard in the head—mentally—realizing that I'm never going to go home. I'm never going to set foot in Keene again. And that just hit me hard, and I just burst into tears. I was shaking. I was really distraught, and sad. And they were all there comforting me. And the staff were there too, but they just let the kids do it, which I honestly liked better, because, you know, they're teenagers. They're going through some of the same stuff I am. So it was good that they were giving me encouraging words, hugging me, telling me it was going to be okay, and holding my hand. It was so sweet.

[00:08:11] **Daniel Treviño** That was the moment you came to terms that family reunification wasn't an option for you.

[00:08:18] **Tabitha Shipley** Yeah, and that's when I also came to terms that not everybody hates me. There are lots and lots of people who care about me, even if they're people I've known for just a few weeks. It's just amazing how fast you can build a relationship and how amazing that relationship can turn out.

[00:08:43] **Daniel Treviño** After thirty days, Tabitha's time at the shelter ended. She was then assigned—for the third time that year—a new foster home.

[00:08:53] **Tabitha Shipley** After my time in the shelter, I went to a foster home in Terrell, but that place was not successful. It was extremely terrible living conditions. The bathtub downstairs was full of spiders and bugs, and I ended up having to shower in it. So I ended up purposefully getting myself kicked out of that place. I did whatever the heck I had to do to get kicked out. So, I got myself kicked out. And I was literally, like, happy that day. But then I went to an even worse foster home after that.

[00:09:29] **Daniel Treviño** We'll be right back.

## A Message from Wayne Carson

[00:09:34] **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.

## A Voice that Yearns to be Heard

[00:10:09] **Daniel Treviño** Foster care was not working out for Tabitha. She was constantly moving in and out of homes due to claims of mistreatment and disrespect. It all began to take a toll on her.

[00:10:22] **Tabitha Shipley** I was really disappointed and upset because I could not stay in a home longer than a month. I just wanted to be in a place where I would feel loved, cared for, and treated properly.

[00:10:44] **Daniel Treviño** Running out of options Tabitha's caseworker decided to place her in the ACH Robert and Jane Ferguson Residential Treatment Center, known to staff as the RTC. Which is a unique facility in the state of Texas designed to help foster youth with significant behavioral or mental health challenges. Joshua McCullough, the rec coordinator at the Residential Treatment Center, talks about his experience working with Tabitha.

[00:11:11] **Joshua McCullough** Yeah, for Tabitha to be successful in RTC, the plan that we had for her was to get her ready for the real world and develop social skills. As her coordinator, I had a lot of responsibility with that. Tabitha needed to feel involved—she needed to feel a part of something. Even before we did anything, she already felt secluded. She was already in her own world, thinking, “Nobody wants to be around me. Nobody wants to relate to me,” when that wasn't true at all.

[00:11:50] **Tabitha Shipley** Really, my biggest need was attention. I'm one that needs extra attention, and I hate to say that, but when I don't get the attention I need, I start to feel unwanted, uncared for, and unloved. So I think really what I needed at that point—and what I do kind of still need today—is just attention.

[00:12:11] **Daniel Treviño** In his goal to meet Tabitha's needs, Joshua decided to have a talent show at the Residential Treatment Center.

[00:12:18] **Joshua McCullough** The clients who arrive at the RTC are extremely creative. I tell you masterpieces—they paint those all the time. Tabitha expresses herself creatively by singing; singing is her passion. She loves to do it all day, every day. And Tabitha got to show her talents off at the talent show.

[00:12:40] **Tabitha Shipley** My reaction to hearing about the talent show was pure excitement. I was really excited— like, I could finally sing in front of people and have them actually pay attention to me.

[00:12:50] **Joshua McCullough** When it came time for her to perform, she stepped up to the mic with all the confidence in the world and knocked it right out of the park. And it became contagious.

[00:13:03] **Tabitha Shipley (singing)** I guess we weren't meant to be. Maybe you were made for me. Boy, I have so much I want to say.

[00:13:11] **Joshua McCullough** So she loved it. I loved it. We all loved it. It was an amazing experience.

[00:13:17] **Daniel Treviño** Do you remember Tabitha's reaction after her performance?

[00:13:30] **Tabitha Shipley** (singing in the background) Can we be friends? Can we be friends?

[00:13:21] **Joshua McCullough** Extremely grateful—thankful for all the compliments, and thankful that people just listening and giving her their undivided attention.

[00:13:30] **Tabitha Shipley** (singing) Please don't leave me hanging by a thread. Can we be friends?

[00:13:35] **Daniel Treviño** What's the name of that song?

[00:13:36] **Tabitha Shipley** It's called *Can We Be Friends?* It's about my ex who broke up with me, and I'm like, "Can we still be friends?" He was always so supportive, but he broke up with me for a younger girl.

## Learning Life Skills for Independent Living

[00:13:51] **Daniel Treviño** After a couple months in the residential treatment center, both Tabitha's caseworker and the ACH staff felt it was best to transfer her to the ACH Morris Program. While the RTC is a lockdown facility, the Morris Program wants clients to enter the community, build a network of friends and support, and join the workforce. Briana Elder, the Morris Program Manager, explains how her team helps clients build the necessary skills to transition to independent living.

[00:14:24] **Brianna Elder** Overall, our goal for kids while they're at Morris is to get them ready for independence. But what that really looks like is making sure that they are comfortable doing grocery shopping, they have a bank account. A lot of times kids don't come in with a bank account, so we want them to learn money management—how to balance out savings versus bills, prioritize where their money's going, and then just the basic life skills. As far as how staff provided care to Tabitha, we did want to make sure that if she said she couldn't do something, we were quick to rush in and do it. But as we got to know her and build that relationship, we were able to kind of level up her skills and say, "Tabitha, come on, you can do this with me," or "Partner with me—you do as much as you can, and I'll do it alongside you."

[00:15:13] **Tabitha Shipley** I did improve on certain things, like washing dishes, sweeping floors, and learning techniques for using a washer and dryer. So, I did enhance those skills.

[00:15:26] **Daniel Treviño** One major milestone Tabitha achieved was getting her first job.

[00:15:31] **Tabitha Shipley** For my first job, I worked at Everman Supermarket stocking shelves. I would bring things from the back of the store to the front, or I would take things out of boxes and put them on the shelves. We would also dispose of the boxes—we'd break them down by pulling them apart at the seams, flattening them, and putting them in a cart. Then we would take the cart to the back and put it in this giant tub thing for the cardboard.

[00:15:57] **Brianna Elder** We really encourage our clients to start working because it gives them a chance to learn skills they're going to need for the rest of their lives—like learning how to interact with a boss, work with coworkers, and provide customer service. Those are skills you need no matter what job you have. I've found that when kids are working, they develop more respect for their money, and it builds a lot of mature thinking. I also think they learn lessons on the job that they're not going to learn at home. Bosses can get through to them in ways that we can't.

[00:16:28] **Tabitha Shipley** I learned that things aren't always as hard as they seem. I thought stocking shelves would be harder because I'd have to memorize the labels and find the ones that matched, but it wasn't as hard as I expected.

## From Burnout to Resilience

[00:16:45] **Daniel Treviño** Not long after starting her job, Tabitha turned eighteen and decided on her own to leave ACH. Unfortunately, like many youth in care who lack stability and housing, Tabitha ended her job at Everman Supermarket. She then moved into a Supervised Independent Living Program, but after four months, Tabitha failed to meet the requirement of either attending college or getting a job. Then, for the second time, she returned to the ACH Morris Program. I spoke with Tabitha by phone about her experience at that time.

[00:17:19] **Tabitha Shipley** I know they were, in the long run, trying to help me, but it felt like to me they were pushing me way too hard. When I got there, they wanted me to apply for a job every day. I kind of wish I could go back and be more productive, but honestly, I've been burned out. There's a difference between being lazy and being burnt out— like a huge difference. And people would always say I'm lazy when, in reality, I'm actually burnt out. And I'm still very burnt out— I'm trying to crawl out of that. It was too much. So, I signed out.

[00:17:59] **Daniel Treviño** What do you think you really needed at that time?

[00:18:03] **Tabitha Shipley** I think I really just needed a break. Because after four years in foster care, it's traumatizing. It's— change is hard. Some people can handle change very well, but apparently I can't. So, I was kind of not sure where I would go. But I ended up going, you know what, I am on a visit with my mom at this time—so why not just go there, collect my stuff, and come back? And that's exactly what I did. So I'm at my mom's house now. When I moved back home, I was literally bawling. I was in tears. I was like, "I'm home, I'm home." And sometimes, even now, I think, I actually



did this. This isn't a dream—I'm actually home. I actually survived through all this pain and trauma. I'm actually free. I'm home.

[00:19:04] **Daniel Treviño** How did you find the hope during those difficult four years?

[00:19:10] **Tabitha Shipley** I found the hope because of patience. I knew that God is going to make something beautiful, and I just had to wait. I just had to be patient. I just had to push through all of this. It's kind of like it's kind of like you're in the ocean, and you've lost all hope, and you can't tread water anymore. But then you see an island up ahead, and you're think, "If I could just push a little further. I can make it." And after years of pushing forward, I finally made it to the island— and I'm finally happy now.

[00:19:55] **Daniel Treviño** Thank you, Tabitha, for sharing your story. I know everyone at ACH is happy you're home.

## Closing Credits

[00:20:03] **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 Melanie Alexander, Joshua McCullough, and Brianna Elder. Mixing by Panoramic Sound. Thanks for listening.