



Storied Lives

Episode 1: Saving Grace

Full Transcript

Introduction

Narrator: *Please be advised that the following podcast explores intersecting themes of poverty, mental health, and physical disability. You may find some scenes distressing.*

Before you continue, if you haven't already, please complete our listener participation survey by following the links in the show notes.

Welcome to Storied Lives. A podcast that looks at the lived realities of poverty from an intersectional lens. This is episode one. Saving Grace.

[musical intro]

Story

Composite Storyteller: I come from up north. Way up north. Worked thirty years at a pulp mill. I never fully retired, you know? Just, semi-retired. My pension's not enough. Mostly, I only eat one meal a day so that I can still pay the rent. I work odd jobs in construction, mostly roofing, to make ends meet. This one site is a total death trap and the foreman treats us like human jackhammers, always spit-screaming to work faster, grinding his teeth about how he could have a Mexican or Honduran in for half the price, "like that!" – and snapping his fingers in your face. And he cuts corners – mostly around safety. Long story short, I fall three stories when a rusted-out scaffold collapses – I land on a pile of bricks and my back explodes into a million pieces. There's not enough resources to support my recovery up in the bush, so I move down to south Ontario.

But I'm not used to these many people. I go into big glass government buildings all echo-y and white and all of a sudden, I can't breathe and my vision goes fuzzy. Takes me months to stand it long enough to fill out a single ODSP form. I stay in a small township down the road. Friend of a friend rents me a couch in his mudroom, and on disability, I can't barely afford even that. Money bleeds out. Fast. Can't afford a car so I cab 90 minutes to doctor's appointments every week. I gotta walk to the expensive grocery store instead of driving to the nearest town with a discount grocery store. The little grocer in town, they don't have regular food there. It's all for the people in the multi-million-dollar mansions off the highway – they call it boutique and artisanal. Fifteen dollars for a tiny salad and I don't even know how to pronounce half the ingredients so all the young girls behind the counter snicker at me. I'm not an idiot, I just never seen that stuff up north. Maybe they laugh 'cause of how I count out the dimes and nickels for a coffee, or 'cause that time I smell like bed bug fumigant, or 'cause I only own one pair o' jeans with the back pocket ripped off. Either way, I don't even bother anymore.

Sometimes my back is so bad, I can't walk there anyway. The guy I rent from, sometimes he drives me to one of the big food marts that have coupon flyers. But, every time he offers, my gut sinks and I think maybe it's easier to just give up. Getting into his car feels like I'm not my own person, just an inconvenient charity case. That little voice, *'you're a burden; you're a failure,'* fogs up my mind till all I can do is sleep.

So mostly I don't have food in the house. Just a little tuna can or an apple. Coffee and cigarettes suppress your appetite, so that helps. Even finding new socks. I had to get a ride 'cause you couldn't even buy socks or underwear in my township. Meanwhile, the couch is tearing my back apart and the mudroom's hardly insulated so I'm only ever wheezing and hacking and shooting pain through every nerve I got. I'm on a waitlist to get housing in town, closer to more job options, closer to a real hospital. I don't hear back. Tryin' to find a real home is damn near impossible. No one will rent to me on ODSP. I put in an application – and all of a sudden, the rent would jump up. They just don't want me there.

On top o' that, I got a dog. And you know, it's hard out there. Some people, they don't make it out alive. I've lost people, good friends I made along the way. They're not with us anymore, suicide. They couldn't take it. Anyway, this dog helps me get up in the morning. I call her Grace, my saving grace. But no one wants a dog in their apartment.

I finally get into this unfinished basement – I call it the boiler room. A mattress next to the hot water tank – laundry down there too so landlord always has an excuse to come down and hiss at me at what I should be doing with my life. I hide my medications too. She thinks I'm an addict and pretends to lose things so she can come down and rifle through my stuff. Later, I found out from the utilities company, they say, *'you've been paying for her alarm system and her water and...on and on.'* If I took legal action – which I could never afford anyway – then nobody in that town would rent to me. I'd be blacklisted. Landlords all talk and golf together. After rent, I can barely afford to get to my appointments. I limp

around with old painkiller prescriptions crinkling in my pocket for months 'cause I don't have the money to fill them. Eventually, she kicks me out to reno the basement and double her profits.

I get a lead on a full-time job in the big city. But I can't afford a moving truck so I leave all my stuff behind, and I still have to take out a money lender loan to pay for first and last and the security deposit and buy a used twin mattress so my back don't seize up sleeping on the carpet. When I get to the jobsite, the foreman's been replaced, and the new guy tells me he don't know nothing about me, he don't need me anymore. And every hour I'm not working I feel the money lender interest creeping up and up. When I finally patch together enough part-time jobs and contracts and temp-work, it still takes forever to pay it off.

In the meantime, Housing from before calls me: I don't get no housing. I hang up before they can tell me all about the rules and how they wish it were different. The big city grinds me into the dirt. I got nothing left. So I come back to town, and guess what? Housing calls me from the city. Missed it again. One last time I apply in town. Nothing. Six years go by on the list and I never get housing. When I arrive back in town, I'm paying thirteen hundred dollars a month to live in a hotel room until my buddy and I find an apartment. The rent is over twenty-two hundred. I can barely scrape together the first month. Miraculously, my social worker gets me rent bank – and I get my entire last month's rent paid. They literally saved my life that day. Still, the second month, my roommate couldn't work, he got sick and took to hospital, so I had to pay double. It nearly killed me. But rent's been killin' me for years.

[musical interlude]

Interview with Elsa Mann

Elsa Mann: So my name is Elsa Mann. And I'm team lead for something called the Rural Wellington Community Team. And we are made up of outreach workers that support individuals that live in rural Wellington. Some of the things that we do first and foremost is we listen to the people that we support, ask them what's most important to them, and we help them to put a plan together to achieve the things that are on their list. And I know this term, 'meeting people where they're at,' is the social work buzz, but it truly is; you have to be with people that are living that life in order to understand how they're living, how they're managing, how they're coping, to help them find the tools, the steps, the skills to get them living a better and healthier life. I struggle with the term social safety net. Our culture, our public, feels that a social safety net is a really good thing. And, I have flipped in my head in terms of thinking about that term. It is a social safety net, but it's not a net that actually catches you. It's one that entangles you. For those people that get on Ontario Works, we watch people's health deteriorate, if they're not engaged in their community, if they're not doing meaningful work, if they're not seen positively in the community. And so, we have many times seen people slide from Ontario Works to the point where they're unwell emotionally, or mental health wise. Or they've begun coping with substances, then they get to a point where we're assessing whether they have a disability under the criteria of Ontario Disability Support Program; I can definitely see a mental health decline in people

that stay connected to social services over a long period of time. It's harder and harder and harder to climb out of that 'net' that's supposed to be a safety net. It's not until *you* have to experience that, or you know somebody close to you and your family and your friends circle or whatever, you get enraged with, 'well, how are people supposed to do that? How are you supposed to live on, you know, \$733 a month? Where can you actually rent a room? Where can you rent anything? How do you eat? How do you, you know, how do you function?' And sometimes people don't find a place to live, and then they're forced to couch surf or whatever, and if you don't have a place to live, you can't get a shelter allowance, you can get your basic needs. So now you've got \$343 to live on over the course of the month. How do you crawl out of that net? It's really unbelievable to think that some people do. I have to say the majority of people don't. We don't have any way of transitioning people that really is significant. There are some — some ways that our system needs to shift in order to help people move forward and out of that net.

[musical interlude]

When I hear people say things like, you know, 'they just need to get a job.' There are so many barriers to just 'getting a job.' How do you transition from being on Ontario Works to working? It's that emotional lack of confidence that might come with being on assistance for a long period of time. It's about the judgment you might feel if people know that you've been on assistance and are now there at work. How do you get there physically? You know, what kind of work is available? If it is shift work, how does that lend itself to families or single parents? The whole childcare thing? So many people that are experiencing a disability that live in poverty have a complex situation, because it is a cumulative effect that has created their disability. Those pain meds are often there to manage the — the pain of the trauma, not just the physical manifested pain in the back. And although on social assistance and ODSP, you do have benefits covered, not all medications are covered. So sometimes people have to choose between food and medications. Those are really hard choices for an individual to make.

I wanted to touch on WSIB. The employer is always going to be reluctant for a WSIB claim because it means having to change something on their end or having to be without an employee for a period of time. And all of those things are a hassle and cost money. Right away, as the employee or the client, you feel like the problem. The process takes so much time to get ironed out. They never seem to know 'when is your money coming? When am I going to be approved, what is happening?' It's very demoralizing. With their limited income, they may find themselves living in unsafe or substandard housing, they may end up staying in a bad relationship, because there's nowhere else to go, they may start to cope using substances. And the thing that I have seen on a number of occasions is people returning to work in pain, and returning to work with abuse in the workplace. Because they feel that being without that income is worse than being exposed to that — that injury again and again.

So, another part of our system that's a little bit broken is that you have to wait until you've depleted almost all of your savings, before you're eligible for some of these supports. There's no sliding scale,

where you can be eligible for a little bit of support, if you need a little bit of support. No, we have to wait until you're right on the flat on the ground in terms of your financial situation, and *then* we'll pick you up, but we'll *only* pick you up this far. So, in some communities, I see people losing their homes after having an injury or you know, having a disability set in. And I see them going from having a house to losing their house and depleting their savings and then coming back to me a few years later. Now they're flat on the ground, and they need that support to lift them up. Which is horrible to think that that's what has to happen.

[musical interlude]

It's another thing in rural communities, that you don't see the way you do in urban centres, is you tend not to see people out on the street, in a rural community, that homelessness is often quite hidden. People are flopping at different places at different times, people are living rough in the woods, people are sleeping in their cars. When I think about the person in our story, sleeping on the couch, having back pain, not having a good night's sleep, you need rest in order to heal, you need food. And if you don't have those things, we don't have that rest, you're just living in a fog. A lot of people that live in poverty have been experiencing that fog, they don't have a safe place to stay, so they're always moving. They have no security that way and knowing where they're sleeping that night, or they're sleeping on a couch. And any one of those things in and of itself may not sound like a big deal, but for 365 days of the year has a huge impact on your health and wellbeing. The whole notion of poverty comes with huge stigma, but to envision what it's like for somebody to live rurally, who lives in poverty, it's exponentially more intense. So, if I'm living in poverty, and I go to the grocery store, I likely know that cashier. If I have to put food back because I don't have enough money, that person knows me. They probably know my family. With accessing food banks and food pantries rurally, that stigma piece really can come to the surface there. Having those volunteers means they probably know you or know of you, you also have to do an intake sheet. That intake sheet, you have to identify what your income is, what your rent is, how much your utilities are, how much are your other expenses — so you feel very exposed and can feel very 'less-than.' When we support people rurally, one of the things that we really try and combat — because of that stigma piece — is isolation. Because there's a direct correlation between that sense of connection and — and belonging and wellness. If programming and events and community gatherings are more inclusive, people living in poverty become part of the community as opposed to a separate group of people. They become seen as just like everybody else in the community.

[musical interlude]

So one of the things I wanted to touch on from the story was when the individual is asking for a ride to get to the grocery store, and it makes me think of all the uncomfortableness that goes with getting around in a rural community. So in a rural community, it's not like you just hop on a bus because there's no bus. You can't get a cab because it's too much money. Getting from community to

community, there isn't anything available for that, that is cost effective. Fortunately, we have recently experienced some transportation kind of infrastructure programs, but it's a direct line, so if you are in any community that's offline, you might as well be in another province. We also have a new ride program, that's kind of like a rideshare. You've got to book in advance, you've got to have a registered account, you've got to have a credit card, you've got to have a cell phone so you can navigate where that ride is and when, you've got a two-minute window when that ride arrives to get in the car, or they leave. So, for those people living with complexity, anything that's that rigid is just really not an option for them. In smaller communities, we've got small food banks, they run on really limited time, they're likely only open a day, a week. In our rural community, in addition to how food banks and food pantries operate, a lot of our services are only Monday to Friday, nine to five sorts of services. So outside of your nine to five Monday to Friday, your only supports available to you if you're feeling unwell or unsettled or whatever is to call a crisis line or to show up at the ER. And neither one of those is necessarily the — the right fit for — for what you might need. If you are a homeless individual, and you're seeking emergency shelter, there are no emergency shelters in rural Wellington, there is only emergency shelter in Guelph. And at that we're at a weightless capacity. So it's not necessarily something that if I decided, 'I definitely want to get out of this bad situation or this place is just I can't sleep on that couch for one more night,' like our person in the story, there's not even a bed available for you, even if you could figure out a way of navigating yourself from getting from point A to point B. So sometimes when my team supports people rurally, we see them transition to an urban centre, whether that be Guelph or something larger, because they are fleeing something, maybe they're fleeing homelessness, and they're looking for a shelter bed, or they're fleeing domestic violence, and they're looking for a safe shelter space, they might be going into treatment centre, because there are no local treatment centres. But if you try to access shelter space, it's not considered your community, so you're denied shelter space there. So, these geographic boundaries can wreak havoc sometimes with what people feel is a hopeful solution.

[musical interlude]

In terms of what's needed in a rural community, first and foremost, in my opinion, is equity. In terms of food banks, and the way that those supports could be shifted to reduce stigma, we can make it more equitable, by giving people the dignity of being able to go and choose what they would like for themselves. And in our smaller communities, we don't necessarily have the ability to have our own pantry where people can come and pick and choose the food. We don't have the infrastructure to kind of keep that going like you do in an urban centre. But in our small communities where you have one grocery store, having the ability to go up and down the aisles and pick what you want, would be fantastic. Incentivize or celebrate those rural employers who provide a living wage. In Wellington County, that's \$18.10 an hour. I'd like to see all employers have their logos plastered everywhere for those employers that are doing this because we can encourage people to spread that concept. I'd like to see municipalities look at how they could change their bylaws to allow for more rental

accommodation in existing housing stock. When I think about seniors struggling to manage their property tax in their house living alone, I think about the opportunities that exist for them to have somebody move in with them. I'd like to see more support for rent geared to income and affordable housing builds, but incorporate social housing *into* the community in a way that brings people together and doesn't separate people. Make an effort to solicit and listen to the needs of all the constituents, give those individuals a voice to talk to municipal leaders about what living in poverty is like in their community, and then take what they've shared and put that into their municipal plan to address. If you asked people that live in poverty what they need, they can tell you quite clearly what they need. They need supports with dignity and respect. And they need to be heard and understood. When they have that and the foundation of a place to live and enough food, those basic needs covered, they can move forward — and they do move forward. The question is, do we have enough of that in place right now to make that happen.

[musical outro]

Conclusion

Narrator: Thanks for listening to *Storied Lives*. If you haven't done so already, please complete the follow up survey by clicking on the link in the show notes. To create the story that begins this episode, we invited people living with poverty to share their stories with us. During a series of focus groups, participants revealed their unique experiences and how these are impacted by multiple overlapping and compounding oppressions. Using their testimonies, we composed four composite stories, including the one you just heard. These are fictional stories based on real experiences. Every scenario in these stories happened or was informed by themes that emerged in the focus groups. This four-part Podcast Series is a collaboration of the Guelph and Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination and the University of Guelph's Live Work Well Research Centre and Community Engaged Scholarship Institute

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Please see the show notes for a list of all the people involved in the creation of these podcasts.

This podcast was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and received ethics approval from the University of Guelph research ethics board.

We deeply appreciate the guests who spoke with us and the people experiencing poverty who shared their stories.