

#4 – Elio & EJ

Empathy Museum presents *A Mile in My Shoes*.

Elio: You're listening to *Our Justice*, a series of true stories and conversations, co-produced by three young people with experience of the Scottish Justice System.

Elio: Would you just like to, like, introduce yourself?

EJ: Hi, my name is EJ. I go by they/ them. I live in Edinburgh. I'm a law student. I'm 21 and I Elio's older sibling.

Elio: So what's it like being a law student?

EJ: I think it's interesting, especially how I've come onto it. We experienced sort of like a bad side of the justice system, in terms of, like, it was our dad who went in. So kind of going from that into studying law where you kind of have to be slightly more open-minded, I need to make sure my own opinions don't really leak out too much. But I also think it gives me an incredible background on what a lot of people feel about the justice system and law itself. Um, but I'm really enjoying it.

It's my third year of study in law and it has been difficult at times, but yeah, it's been good. It's been good.

Elio: So, yeah, our dad went to prison when we were both quite young. I think that brought us a lot closer...?

EJ: Totally agree. I feel like it could have gone one of two ways. It really could have broken us apart as a family or it could have brought us together and thankfully it's the latter. And especially like us and our other siblings – I think that's a bond that's never gonna break now.

Elio: Oh yeah. Definitely.

EJ: Like that's a support network that's never gonna go away, despite where everyone moves off to. Like I moved out now, but I feel like I'm still very much involved in your life.

Elio: Yeah. You're definitely involved. You were very protective of me until I turned 18. I don't know if that's just because you were the older sibling when mum and dad weren't around as much?

EJ: I think so. I was 16 when dad went in, I was the oldest and I had to take on quite a lot of responsibilities. I had to work, had to pay for things, I had to help mum out. Like, me and mum were like a team almost, and I kind of almost felt like a parent to you guys, which is a really difficult adjustment from being, like, a sibling to a parent and then back to a sibling again. So it's something that I've been working on. [both laugh] I saw you guys go through so much hurt that it's not something I ever wanna see again. It's not something I can control, but it's something that I wanna make sure you guys are aware that I'm here for it.

Elio: That's very nice. So, you're non-binary, I'm non-binary but like, I wanna kinda know like what your experience discovering your gender identity, because obviously I came out first...

EJ: Do you know? It's funny because I look back at like Snapchats from like years ago from when I was like 15/16, and I was, like, clearly going through some sort of gender crisis. And then obviously you came out and it was a sort of case of like, okay, I've gotta put my full support into this. Cause I wanna say I was one of the first people you told. I could be wrong.

Elio: No, you were actually.

EJ: Um, so I was like, okay. I gotta like put my full energy into this. I kind pushed all my feelings away. Not in a bad way, just in a... Okay, I gotta be here for my little sibling. I started coming out to people in like 2018. And I think I told you that I was non-binary, but then it was just sort of like bad experiences with other people's reaction to it made me go back into the closet about it. But then it was sort of like especially beginning of this year /

end of last year, I was like, do you know what? I don't care anymore. This is what I am. Take it or leave it. I don't care. [laughs]

Elio: So, as you were talking about like you know law, like, I know you've done a lot of work around that, and like Families Outside about your, our experiences. I wanna know more about that since I don't actually know what you've been doing. Like you keep saying, you're doing all this stuff and I'm like hmm.

EJ: Yeah, well, you left me, you left me all by myself. [laughs] So obviously we did our first conference together in 2018. Um, and I think from then I just sort of grew a really good relationship with Families Outside. So Families Outside as an organisation, they, I mean the clue's kinda in the name, they help the families that are on the outside. When their member of family's in prison, they offer like a range of different sort of support. So they've got their help line. They've also recently started a young persons' group called Time Matters, and they got like in-person help as well. Yeah. They offer like a range of different support and you can basically access that from any point, which is really, really cool.

They supported me in a very different way, like they supported you guys and then gave me these opportunities to talk about how I feel. Um, I had to stop actually for a wee bit. Last sort of October time, you know, two years after dad came out, I finally had my massive breaking point of like, oh, I can't talk about this anymore. I can't do this. And I was just like lying in bed. I didn't go to work. And it was just cause I suddenly couldn't process these things that happened what, five years ago, coming up six years since dad went in. But we're getting back into it, which is good.

So recently I was working with a theatre company. They're called All Things Considered and they basically take verbatim content and make them into plays. So this particular one was about your experience with parental imprisonment. So I got interviewed, it must been like the beginning of last year, and they took a bunch of stories and made them into a play. It was really, really, really interesting. So I did that and I was asked to, like, be part of the discussion panel afterwards. I'm just slowly getting back into it. So I'm still working with the likes of like InCCIP, which is the International Coalition for Children With Incarcerated Parents. They do like bi-yearly conferences, I'm part of the young person panel for that as well.

I also took a wee step aside from just doing stuff on, like, children's rights and parental imprisonment. And I'm working with Waverley Care right now as well, who are, like, a sexual health charity.

And I've been working with Families Outside again, cuz it's their 30th year anniversary. I'm gonna be part of the video and I'm gonna be on the panel to, like, introduce that as well. I think for me, the support they gave me in the sense of giving me a platform to speak was what I needed to get me through, which I really, really appreciate. I mean, I'm still in contact with them what three years later?

Elio: Like I stopped working with them as soon as dad came home. So is there like a specific reason as to why you stay on there and keep doing that work?

EJ: If I can like help in any way, one person, I know I've made my difference. I know that makes me feel better. That's just my way of almost handling the trauma that I've gone through is just making people aware that it does get better and like sounds silly, but maybe seeing me chat about it just makes them feel a bit better. I know it did for me when I saw people talk about things.

Elio: Yeah, definitely. See, I chose to go for acting, which is, you know...

EJ: That's an important thing to note: we process things in different ways and that's cool. And I think the way you display it is so interesting, like through your music or your artwork.

Elio: There was a lot of other things that happened around that time. Like, I've got a lot of like my own memories of stuff that was good and bad during that time period. I'm just wondering, like, have you got any of your own memories, like your own stories about,

like, how you were feeling around that time?

EJ: *I feel like I was just going for your typical, like teenage angst at the time. Like, unfortunately I didn't stop falling in love, breaking up, falling out with friends. You've got all the typical stuff going on as well. And then I think on top of it, you're trying to, like, fit in seeing your dad. You're trying to, for me, it was make sure you guys were okay. Like there was sometimes where I couldn't go out because I had to be there for you guys if mum was working or she was doing anything. Which was sometimes really difficult for people to understand, like, I had people fall out with me over this because I was never there as a friend for them or something. And I was like, oh my God, I'm just going through so much right now that it's hard to handle.*

Elio: *I think I only ever remember you working or being at home looking after us.*

EJ: *I was in college. Most of the time while I was there I had a fulltime job, and I was at home helping you guys. And then of course, we had a few deaths in the family as well. And our family dynamic really, really changed. A lot of people don't speak to us anymore. They start speaking to us based on this circumstance. I still, I still struggle with it. I still struggle that they're not in our life anymore. And I've got friends that aren't in my life anymore because of that situation.*

Elio: *Yeah, I don't think I lost any friends when dad went away. I just eventually lost them cause anything we'd fall out they'd bring that up. I don't know if you've had that experience as well, like...*

EJ: *No, thankfully it's never been used against me like that, but I understand that it has for you and that is horrific. You have done nothing wrong. But I do remember feeling really unsafe, like going back to where we used to live and stuff. Purely because I have had stuff shouted at me in the streets, but that was really early days.*

Elio: *There was a lot of good things about having that situation with dad, random little things. Like you wouldn't appreciate it unless you were in that situation, you were like, you didn't see him once a week, so you would tell him all these really stupid things.*

EJ: *Oh yeah – all the really dumb things we'd done that week, or even all the exciting things we'd done that week. I got in to study law while he was still in there. So the day that I got to tell him I passed my exam or like my exam results were good enough that I was gonna do law, like that was such a wild day. But you also kinda feel a little bit guilty because you're like, oh, you can't celebrate this, like, with us.*

Elio: *Yeah.*

EJ: *I remember when I passed my social science course in 2016, I got a cake and a well done. And I was just kinda like, this is lovely and I love you guys, but I wish dad was here.*

Elio: *He was just never there. Like parents evening, parents evening! Like he was never there for that. I had to tell him all my stuff myself.*

EJ: *Yeah. I feel like it's, you know, all these things that were missed. Like birthdays and Christmas – I feel like Christmas got increasingly difficult every single year.*

Elio: *Definitely. And even the first year he was back, I felt was so hard.*

EJ: *Yeah. Yeah. For sure.*

Elio: *We weren't even sure if he'd be able to stay with us.*

EJ: *And then obviously lockdown happened and then suddenly he was home with us for hours and hours and hours and I was like, it's lovely to have you back, but this is a very strange adjustment. I still sometimes text mom being like, 'Tell dad...' And she's like, you can tell dad yourself.*

Elio: *Text him yourself! Yeah.*

EJ: *And I'm like, oh yeah, I forget that I can pick up the phone and call dad. Like, cause obviously I couldn't do that. And I think that really sucked not being able to, like, phone him whenever you wanted to. I was almost lucky in the sense that I was older by that time – I was 18 – so I could go in for visits by myself, which was good, but also meant I could take you guys into the family visits.*

Elio: Yeah, we got the children visits, which I think was quite lucky, like, you didn't get that option.

EJ: Oh, that was a whole other kettle of fish. I think the first year or so, they were telling me that I couldn't do them because I was 16 and I was too old. But actually you look on their website, HMP website, it says it's up to 18-year-olds. And we had to tell the prison that. So I think that was our first, like, jump of like social justice. It was just things like I would get so jealous of the fact you guys could, like, hug dad for longer, you know –

Elio: – and sit next to him. And yeah, we got to do a lot more of that stuff.

EJ: And that was a prison wide issue, like that wasn't just us. Like, it was obviously happening to so many other families.

Elio: If people are listening who have no experience of the justice system or having a family member in prison, are there things you'd want them to know?

EJ: I think it's just keeping an open mind. I've told people, oh, my dad's in prison or my dad was in prison and I've had a range of different responses. Some that haven't been so great. So I think the biggest one is the immediate: [gasp] 'what did he do?'

Elio: I still get that. It's a very uncomfortable situation to be put in.

EJ: If like a family member was ill and you said they were ill, I don't think they would be prying being like, oh, what's exactly wrong with them? I think it's a similar situation here, which is why, whenever I talk about the situation, I try and keep it away from himself in like the situation, and more like our experience because, you know, that's what I know. And just listen, if they wanna talk to you about it, listen, be there for them. If they don't wanna talk about something, don't push them to talk about it. Also, actually, just to bear mind that it doesn't define them as a person. People can sometimes just pin you as 'oh yeah their dad is in prison', whereas actually we're so much more than that.

Elio: We've done a lot talking. Have you got any questions for me?

EJ: What's the kinda things that you took away from that happening to us? Like how does it affect you now that it's been a few years later?

Elio: I'm definitely more closed off. I'm not very open about what goes on in our family, but I'm definitely a lot more mature. I felt like I had to grow up and understand a lot of things very quickly.

EJ: Yeah.

Elio: I'm like a mum friend. I think I had to develop a really open mind about so many situations and that definitely just did lead to me being a mum friend, cuz everyone's like, they've got such an open mind about everything now and I'm the one they come talk to. So that's, I mean, that's a good thing, I guess.

EJ: I was gonna say, I think that's a great thing. It's not something that a lot people have. I definitely feel the same way. And I feel like people could tell me anything and I'm not ever gonna judge.

Elio: Exactly. I'm that great, that great friend. [laughs] I hope.

Thank you for listening to Our Justice. This is a Boldface production in partnership with Community Justice Scotland, and Empathy Museum.