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[00:00:11] Colby D'Onofrio: Welcome to *Stocking the Pantry: A CalFresh Healthy Living Podcast* from Leah's Pantry, where we share fresh thoughts and fruitful conversations. On this show, we discuss any and all things community nutrition, food equity, and nutrition security. This is a space for thought leaders to share success stories and strategies for equity-centered and resilience-building initiatives. We hope to foster collaboration and community, as well as leverage strengths among listeners, guests, and hosts as we share ideas and dreams of building a more equitable future where everyone has access to healthful nourishing food.

Hello, everyone, and welcome to the show. Today we are really excited to talk about a new Leah's Pantry program and how the team drew on lived experience during its development.

[00:01:06] Tee Atwell: I would love to touch on the words lived experience. This is a bit of a buzzword. I want to provide some context and we're really excited about sharing the conversations we had with some wonderful individuals that have a direct connection between their personal life experiences and the development of the new curriculum based on the knowledge and wisdom gained through their personal lived experience. Think about a curriculum based on real-life stories and lessons learned partnered with additional research and facts. That is what the Fostering Nourished Families is all about.

[00:01:43] Colby: Fostering Nourished Families is the program we will be discussing today and it is a novel training resource for foster and kinship parents, which are referred to as resource parents in California and we'll touch on that a little bit later, but this training incorporates lived experience of foster youth and their caregivers and it includes evidence-based trauma-informed strategies for feeding and nourishing foster children.

[00:02:10] Tee: The Fostering Nourished Families is designed to be implemented through foster and kinship care education programs offered at community colleges, but can also be offered in other settings where support is provided to foster and kinship caregivers. That's why it's so awesome.

[00:02:27] Colby: Our curriculum development team thinks this resource will be used in several ways in CalFresh Healthy Living. The classes cover SNAP-Ed messages for physical and socioemotional well-being and developmentally appropriate child-feeding best practices for resource families.

[00:02:44] Tee: We're not going to go through this resource specifically today. What we want to really dive into are the different aspects of development and bringing in two

people who leverage their lived experience to ground fostering nurse families in the everyday realities of foster youth and their caregivers.

[00:03:03] Colby: Throughout the episode, you'll hear us talking about resource parents and resource families. In case you aren't familiar with this term, it's a newer term that refers to someone who is trained and certified to be both a foster parent and an adoptive parent. Instead of having someone be just one or the other, resource parents can fulfill both roles should the need or desire arise. Here in California, resource parent and resource family became the official nomenclature in 2013.

[00:03:33] Tee: It was real exciting to learn more about what a resource parent was, as well as the goal. It was really to focus on the change to be more holistic and to really account for the varying needs of youth, as well as to ensure permanent, stable solutions for them to be more readily available and prioritized. The change to resource families and resource parents was also designed to prioritize family homes over group homes and institutionalized living situations. CDSS has noted that these changes work to build the capacity of the continuum of foster care placement options to better meet the needs of vulnerable children in home-based family care. This increased capacity is essential to successfully moving children out of congregate care.

[00:04:22] Colby: Tee got to talk to Wendy Willard, the former product and marketing manager at Leah's Pantry. Wendy has been opening her home to foster children for over a decade across several states. Her experience being trained as a resource parent led her to suggest that Leah's Pantry might want to address the experience of foster youth through a program educating caregivers.

[00:04:45] Tee: Well, look, we've been doing a lot of talking, but I'm very excited to allow you to hear what Wendy has to tell you about her experience as a resource parent.

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[00:05:05] Tee: When you're on the ground with Leah's Pantry, like developing the trauma-informed models of nourishment that guide your work today, why do you believe these models could really help foster parents and caregivers navigate feeding their youth in care?

[00:05:24] Wendy Willard: Yes, and that goes back to this idea that food for so many of these kids is something they can control. When most of their life feels out of control, we all know this even if we haven't been a part of foster care, when things feel out of control, you want to do something that you can control, and very quickly I learned that food was something that these kids feel like they can control. Especially a teenager, "No one's going to put food into my mouth. I'm going to choose what I put into my mouth and what I don't put into my mouth." They will often go to the mat on a food-related issue,

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not because it's really about the food, but because they just feel out of control and they want to have control.

Going back to that sense of understanding, can I give this to them? How can I help them have control and have, to use your word, autonomy over what I put into my mouth while still helping them to grow in understanding of what is good to put into my mouth and what is not good to put into my mouth and how that impacts how I feel about myself and the world around me. Don't get me wrong, parenting is exhausting, right?

[00:06:46] Tee: Oh, yes, full-time job.

[00:06:48] Wendy: Right. We have so many things to deal with on a regular basis, and for someone who hasn't grown up from a place of trauma and challenges, food just feels like it should be an easy thing. I think for foster parents, it's especially important, but for all parents to try to not see it as that thing that we just wield our power through, but rather a way that kids can express themselves through.

[00:07:16] Tee: It makes total sense, and it really lends to being a guiding force, not an authoritative or telling you what to do, but just guiding.

[00:07:26] Wendy: Yes, and I think just the last thing I'll add on that is being able to surrender that as something that you don't have to change overnight, to your point of this fruit doesn't ripen overnight. It's this idea that all these things have been baked into them for a pretty long time so if they spend the whole day eating white or brown foods today, it's not the end of the world. I'll get a few colors into them, maybe one today, one tomorrow. I think it doesn't take as much patience when you're willing to surrender the control of that and say, "Yes, it's a marathon. It's something that's going to happen over the long haul." I think what's really hard about foster care is I often am not around to see the end of the marathon.

[00:08:21] Tee: Right. Wow. Yes.

[00:08:23] Wendy: I'm there just for a leg of it, and that's challenging, but also just forces me to trust that what I'm doing is going to have long-term benefit, even if I don't see the short-term benefit necessarily. One of the first things that became very obvious was that even just their habits around the dinner table were very different than ours. We had both grown up in homes where you sat together at dinner and you ate together, and they were in a very large family. I think nine kids in the family and had been living in a lot of different places, sometimes unhoused, and they had really struggled to have food.

They had this habit of as soon as the food was put down, it was the grab-and-go mode, and it definitely wasn't sitting and sharing and so we were very surprised by that. "Wait. Whoa, you need to sit with us." "Well, why do I have to sit with you? I'm going to go watch TV." "Well, no, we sit and eat together." "Why? That's boring. That doesn't sound

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interesting to me. What are we going to talk about?" Then when we actually did sit down, just the table, what a lot of us might call, table manners, when you teach your kids sometimes when they're little like, "Okay, when you have these types of meals, pass the food." Pass the food around or is it reaching over and grabbing food off of someone else's plate. All kinds of different things.

These girls really enjoyed football and they spoke the language of football. My husband said, "Hey, you know how in football there are penalties and certain penalties have a consequence of larger yardage. You have to move further backwards away from your goal. He said, "All right, you do this and that's a 5-yard penalty, but you do this, and that's a 50-yard penalty. They understood really clearly that that was a ridiculous penalty that was so far back that something you didn't want to do. That became this joke that then, they lived with us for about eight months and there would be so many other things that would happen and they'd say, "Oh, that's a 50-yard penalty."

[00:10:52] Tee: [laughs] I love that.

[00:10:54] Wendy: He always would approach it with that humor standpoint and trying to find a way that we could connect with their interests. Football was something they were interested in and we could diffuse it a little bit and not turn it into this big battle. That was really important to us. The other thing that was important was trying to meet them where they were. Both of these girls were looking at wanting to be independent in the future and cooking for themselves, shopping for themselves. Those were all things that we knew they needed to be able to do at some point.

We played a game. You might have seen. There's lots of TV shows, recipe shows, or cooking shows like \$10 meals. There were six of us in the house at that time and so we said, "Okay, I'm going to give you \$10 and you're going to need to shop and figure out how we're going to eat. You're going to make a dinner for us that cost \$10 for the six of us. Their initial reaction to that was to go buy food off the dollar menu at McDonald's.

[00:12:04] Tee: Oh, yes. Okay.

[00:12:06] Wendy: That was their- to basically spend \$10 on the dollar menu because that was their experience.

[00:12:12] Tee: Right, right.

[00:12:13] Wendy: That led to a conversation about, "Okay, let's get \$10 worth of food from McDonald's, and then let's compare that to what we can get from a grocery store."

It took lots of tries, obviously, but that started us down this path where every kid in our house takes a turn making a meal once a week or as often as we can get them to.

We've had kids make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for dinner. After they go to bed, my husband gets something else to eat-

[laughter]

[00:12:46] Wendy: -if he's still hungry. We had one young woman that just cooked meat for dinner. She forgot about all the other stuff but just she was so focused on the meat. We've had a lot of different things but that's not the point. It's not whether or not I like the food that they make but it's can you learn to shop on a budget and prepare a meal that's nutritious, that is enjoyable for the family to eat for the most part.

I'd love to just talk about the other side of this where I get to impact these kids but the impact they have on me, I think, is almost as if not more important. I think I love talking about the power of proximity. We've had so many different cultures represented in our house. Presently, we have a young Latina woman living in our home and she had never lived in a home that didn't cook Mexican food every day for every meal. She did ask pretty quickly, "Hey, could we have some more Mexican food?" I tried my hand at making some and I think she appreciated that I tried, but we very quickly determined that that's not a strong suit of mine.

[00:14:11] Tee: [laughs] Okay.

[00:14:12] Wendy: Now it's just taking her, there's a Latino grocery store near our house, and going with her to the grocery store and letting her pick out items and asking her to pick out even recipes. She has a family member that she texts and gets recipes when it's her turn to cook and so then we go and get those ingredients. Just learning what I've been able to learn from her when her family member gave us some of that food when she went to visit them and they brought it home and I got to taste what that really should taste like, the thing I tried to make. Just seeing how she lights up when she gets to eat food that she has grown up with, why wouldn't I want to give her that? I think it's definitely a two-way street.

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[00:15:12] Tee: I love that she gets her foster kids really involved in the kitchen asking them each to provide a meal for the family on a regular basis. I'm sure this gave her great insight into the information about these kids and their relationship to food.

[00:15:28] Colby: Yes, absolutely. The kid who just made PB&Js for everyone--
[laughs]

[00:15:33] Tee: Yes. Love it.

[00:15:35] Colby: That totally cracked me up but that kid probably ate a lot of PB&Js in whatever home they were in previously and that's probably the only thing that they know how to make. That makes sense that that's what he decided to cook for everyone. Then there was the young Latina woman who really enjoyed and craved Mexican food because of her upbringing and her culture.

[00:15:56] Tee: Yes, and loved Wendy's humility about her own Mexican cooking. [laughs]

[00:16:02] Colby: Yes. She knew her limits. [laughs]

[00:16:05] Tee: Wasn't discouraged and didn't give up on trying and being creative. She actually found an alternative route that probably really helped that youth get comfortable in the kitchen and also connect with her heritage. Wendy's lack of Mexican cuisine knowledge might have been a win-win in the end for everyone.

[00:16:25] Colby: [laughs] Probably not a win-win in the beginning but- [laughs]

[00:16:28] Tee: Right.

[00:16:30] Colby: -it sounds like it all worked out okay in the end. I also really appreciate how reflective Wendy was with these stories. You can tell that she's really thought about in the aftermath of the situation and that is so important when drawing upon lived experience to inform programs and services.

[00:16:47] Tee: Absolutely. She was already primed with knowledge of a trauma-informed approach from her time at Leah's Pantry. She had a step up in understanding the complex and unique relationship we all have with food and was then able to support the kids in her home in fostering and understanding their own relationships with food.

[00:17:08] Colby: It's full circle that Leah's Pantry was able to give Wendy a TI perspective which she used to provide quality care and nourishment to the kids in her house, and then was able to come back to Leah's Pantry and encourage us to create this program using lived experience.

[00:17:26] Tee: Definitely. It's like a symbiotic relationship and that symbiosis was something that came up in our conversation actually with Vanessa as well.

[00:17:36] Colby: Yes. Vanessa Davis has over 15 years of experience in social services combined with lived experience as a former foster youth, a former licensed foster parent, and someone that has struggled immensely to overcome childhood trauma and abuse. Vanessa entered care at the age of three having upwards of 16 placements before aging out of the system at 18 years old. She said she felt completely

unprepared for adulthood. She experienced homelessness and hopelessness, but through perseverance, faith, and hard work, she slowly began to build a life for herself.

[00:18:14] Tee: I love that. She really is someone who really considers herself a healer in more of a less traditional sense. Meaning she aims to cultivate healing in whatever environment she is in not just medicinally. Vanessa has a deep understanding of what it takes to create effective programs and services for communities. She knows that if proper measures aren't taken, organizations that aim to help and heal can actually cause more harm.

[00:18:45] Colby: Our team member, Camille, sat down with Vanessa to talk about incorporating lived experience into organizations, programs, and services. Vanessa has had several collaborations, in fact, with Leah's Pantry, including helping to pilot our around the table curriculum with transitional-aged foster youth in her role at Just in Time for Foster Youth, which is an organization that builds a community of support for foster youth to become capable, confident, and connected. When Leah's Pantry received funding for Fostering Nourished Families, Vanessa joined the development team to ground the work in her lived experience and the experiences of other youth in her network.

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[00:19:35] Camille: Why is incorporating lived experience into program development so important and how is this approach trauma-informed?

[00:19:42] Vanessa Davis: There's levels to this. Sometimes a person may go through an experience and they haven't necessarily reflected on it or continue to gain new meaning from it. They haven't become more aware of themselves because of it but then there are many like myself that have had these profound pivotal experiences especially around food. Like I said, growing up in foster care I struggled with an eating disorder myself and I have cultivated not only the personal awareness but also the professional awareness and how these issues around food are also related to social conditions and our environment, historical conditions.

I understand the barriers that different communities have around navigating their food environment. This type of lived experience, I feel like, is incredibly valuable because often the challenges people have related to food in my experience and my expertise aren't necessarily rooted in educational gaps. It's not rooted in them not understanding the value of nutrition or what nutrition is. It's really rooted in navigational gaps.

Food is such a personal relationship and a lot of times the struggle that we deal with is there's so much shame sometimes around how people are feeding themselves, how they're feeding their families. People feel that. They understand like, "Dang, I shouldn't be eating fast food every day," but they don't know how to change it. People have

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access to almost anything they desire to know in the palm of their hand in terms of education. What they may not have access to is how to take this external knowledge or piece of information and make it real invaluable to them. How can they use this external information to craft a higher vision for their lives, why should what we are sharing matter to them, how can they facilitate movement in their lives to get from point A to point B, all of this, I feel like, is like navigational support.

People are looking to be guided, they're looking to be inspired, and many desire to do this within their communities. This is why I believe incorporating the right type of lived experience and it's all valuable. [chuckles] It's just so valuable because of this on-the-ground navigational support that can be provided that goes beyond simply the development of curriculum. It really gives a personal voice to our work. A person that gives of themselves, of their pain, of their story, of their journey, and contributes to an organization should be compensated for it. The same effort and energy that organizations take in crafting job descriptions to fill this space within their organization is the same energy that needs to be crafted in cultivating lived experience within the organization.

The organization should itself understand the gap that they don't have within their organization and how lived experience can help fill those gaps. What is it that we don't know? What is it that we're trying to know and what type of experience do we need? This might be a little bit radical but I think it's important, especially for those that work within food systems, is that for an organization to receive funding, to be able to develop and deliver programs and services to marginalized communities and not have lived experience at the table can perpetuate a cycle of harm and the nonprofit industrial complex.

It's imperative [chuckles] that organizations partner with their communities in a deep way that they create with communities, that they bring communities to the table to ask, what is it that we should be looking for, how should we be approaching our work, and that they bring communities back to the table consistently to ask have we done a good job, what should we be doing better.

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[00:23:52] Colby: I really appreciate her perspective of putting some responsibility on organizations to support the people whose experience that they are asking for.

[00:24:01] Tee: Oh, yes. It's like a service someone is giving you and, like she said, they need to be compensated for that service. Emotional labor is work.

[00:24:12] Colby: [laughs] Heck, yes, it is. If organizations want that good quality right "type of lived experience" that she talked about, I don't think it's fair to put all the onus on the individual to do that reflection and do that understanding of how their experience

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fits into the larger systems at play. If someone has already done that work on their own, that is great and mad kudos to them, but if not, and organizations are looking for that kind of lived experience, organizations should ask themselves how they can offer support and services to the person providing that story and that perspective.

[00:24:48] Tee: Exactly. It's a collaborative relationship.

[00:24:52] Colby: Yes, it is. Bringing it back to that symbiosis, baby. [laughs]

[00:24:56] Tee: Yes. It really is a win-win because the organization has a better understanding of how to support the community they're working in when they have community experience driving their programs or services.

[00:25:08] Colby: Yes, and if their goal really is to make true effective change, which, I think, that is really the goal of most organizations at least, then bringing in community voices who have that understanding and have that perspective and that experience is really quite critical.

[00:25:23] Tee: Like Vanessa said, continuing to bring the community back to the table, it takes a little work but a little extra work goes a long way when it comes to building relationships and enacting positive change. Positive relationships are the foundation of a trauma-informed approach.

[00:25:42] Colby: This makes me think of actually the six pillars of trauma-informed care, specifically those peer support, collaboration and mutuality and empowerment, voice, and choice. Collaboration, it's obvious, you're bringing people in, you're collaborating with them but the mutuality aspect is perhaps a little less obvious. Incorporating lived experience is going to level power dynamics and it makes the community members sharing their story a mutual part of the collaborative process. They're part of the decision-making and when we bring in a community member to speak about what the community needs, they're supporting their peers. That's some peer-to-peer support right there.

[00:26:22] Tee: Mic drop, say that again. Okay, great point. The empowerment, voice, and choice is so key as well. People who share their lived experience need to know that this is a choice and their voice will be lifted up if they choose to share it. Hopefully, they feel empowered and/or empower others through the creation of appropriate informed and supportive programs and services.

[00:26:46] Colby: Incorporating lived experience and community voices hits pretty much every trauma-informed pillar because it is, at its core, a trauma-informed strategy.

[00:26:57] Tee: Oh, for sure, and it makes the process more fun for direction and deeper understanding. I think everyone on the team is better because of it, not to mention the program or services is much better too.

[00:27:10] Colby: Oh, yes, way better. It builds those positive relationships in the organization and within the community. No one's ever going to be upset about that [chuckles] at least in a trauma-informed approach. That's what we're going for.

[00:27:23] Tee: Yes. We could talk about this all day but to be mindful of time, that about wraps up today's episode but before we go, we just had to ask Wendy and Vanessa what they stock in their pantries.

[00:27:41] Wendy: I often joke when my colleagues ask me, "What are you eating?" if I'm eating lunch on a Zoom call or something like that, I say, "I do eat a little like a toddler." I enjoy fruit and cheese for lunch. I always have apples. I was talking to my 23-year-old the other day and she said, "We've always had apples. My whole life I always remember you having apples." I said, "Yes, it's because it's so versatile." It's apples and peanut butter or apples and cheese. Those are go-to meals for me I love that type of a thing. Having things that I can easily swap for other things like yogurt and granola, another thing where I can swap stuff out. I think that's my biggest thing is finding a couple of key ingredients for me that work across a lot of different menu items.

[00:28:41] Vanessa: Literally, in my pantry, I always have to have rice. Me and my son love eating rice. As far as figuratively, one thing that is always in my personal pantry is I'm very great about personal space, as a creative, needing space to think and be with myself and creatively explore my inner world. It's really what helps fuel and drive the energy that I have for my work. Having that personal space and alone time is very important to me.

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[00:29:30] Colby: Fostering Nourished families has been on California's approved curriculum list since December 2022 as a pilot but it will be moving onto the evidence-based category on June 15th, 2023. The Leah's Pantry team is creating a webinar training for this resource so keep your eyes peeled for that program update in the Leah's Pantry newsletter or the CalFresh Healthy Living Statewide Training newsletter. You can register for this webinar using the link in the show notes or by visiting cflstatewidetraining.org/curriculum.

[00:30:05] Tee: If you or someone you know is interested in becoming a foster parent, visit cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/foster-care. There are so many children and young adults in need of supportive living situations so if you're able to foster a child, we thank you.



[00:30:27] Colby: We'd also like to give a huge thank you to Wendy Willard and Vanessa Davis for sharing their stories and perspectives with us. It was such a pleasure to talk with them and learn from these amazing leaders.

[00:30:40] Tee: Thank you so much for tuning in and hanging with us today. We hope Wendy and Vanessa inspired you to think of ways to bring lived experiences into your organization and program development. Till we meet again.

[00:30:51] Colby: Catch you next time.

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[00:30:55] Colby: Thank you so much for hanging with us. I want to ask you this question, do you know of any thought leaders or someone doing great work in your community? Well, we would love to interview them and we'd love to hear from you. Find us online at leahspantry.org or on Instagram handle [@leahspantryorg](https://www.instagram.com/leahspantryorg), or email us stockingthepantry@leahspantry.org. This podcast is a product of Leah's Pantry, made possible by the funding from the United States Department of Agriculture and their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP, an equal opportunity provider and employer. Visit calfreshhealthyliving.org for healthy living tips.

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