

Eric Bond (Introduction prior to beginning the interview)

Coming up next is a serious conversation with Risa Shaw. She's a Takoma Park resident and the author of a book, *Not Child's Play: An Anthology on Brother-Sister Incest*. So just a little heads up in case this is an issue that is difficult for you. If you are not able to listen to this but want to get in touch with Risa, reach out to me at Talk@Takoma.com and I'll put you in touch with Risa. But it's a conversation that is well worth having, and sometimes those conversations we don't want to have are the ones that we most need to have.

Eric Bond

I'm talking with Risa Shaw. She's a Takoma Park resident. She has re-published a book called *Not Child's Play* and I'll pass it over to Risa too tell us a little bit about that book and then we'll talk about the experiences she had leading up to publishing the book and then her drive to republish. Risa.

Risa Shaw

Thank you, Eric. I really appreciate you having me and inviting me to be on the radio show with you. *Not Child's Play* - the full title is *Not Child's Play: An Anthology on Brother-Sister Incest*. Hard topic and a very important topic. And I first published, first self-published, the book in 2000. It took me 13 years to put the anthology together and to get it out there. I was both an unknown at that point and the environment of the time was very different than it is now. And only one publisher who I talked to was actually willing to consider it. The environment is so different now that I wanted to republish because one, I had run out of the 3000 copies that I first published and two, I wanted to have it back out in the public because people were asking for it all the time. So I took a couple of years, and the new edition, the 2nd edition has a new preface that I wrote, a new introduction, and a new afterword, which I also wrote. The rest of the book is the original contents of the 35 women who all did first person accounts. It's poetry, prose, and visual art, color and black and white art, and it was really important for me to have the art be a part of this because so many survivors don't have words to put to their experience.

Eric Bond

Now the topic of incest is one that people tend to just immediately cringe from and avoid conversations about, whether within families or among people who are fairly socially aware in other situations. It's just a topic that people seem to be quite reluctant to talk about.

Risa Shaw

That's been my experience as well, Eric. The fact of the matter is sibling incest is happening whether we want to talk about it or not. And all kinds of incest happens in the home but sibling incest is probably the least reported because it's one sibling, usually a brother, who is abusing a sister. And I'll say here, that one, there's no good terms to use. Sibling incest, brother-sister incest, sexual assault. So I don't want people to get stuck on the terms that are used. It's usually an older brother abusing, sexually abusing a younger sister. But I also

want to say that boys are also being victimized and abused. And so even though I center the experience and the book centers, the experience of women who are abused as girls, and all of this is in the context of patriarchy and misogyny, as we well know, that does not mean that boys are not being abused. Boys are also being abused. And anything that I say, anything with the book and this project is not meant to minimize the abuse that also happens to boys.

Like I said, it's happening whether we talk about it or not. And part of putting the book out again and the creating the 2nd edition is to really work on prevention as well as healing. And so what I'm doing is more than just the book. What I'm doing, with some other people, is a whole project about prevention and about healing for not only those who were victimized, but also for the whole family. Because as you were intimating this is a family disease, if you will. It damages the entire family. It happens within the family. It's very damaging, obviously, to the person who's victimized. It's an ongoing trauma that it you just never really get over it. You can heal a lot from it, but it takes a ton of work to do that healing also. The awareness that we can create by doing something like this program will lead to the possibility for prevention and will lead to the possibility for healing. You know, I'm always thinking first of the survivors because I'm a survivor, which I don't think I even said in the beginning. But I'm a survivor of brother-sister incest. And so I'm always thinking first of the survivors. And also of saving even one, but many many children from having to go through what's really been devastating for me and for other survivors.

And there's also part of this project is not just about survivors, but also about the brothers who are also living with trauma that created the environment for them to even think about sexually abusing their sister in the first place, or their sisters. And there's also the parents and the other family members who are also damaged by this. And so, part of what we need to do is not only acknowledge that this happens, but everybody involved needs to acknowledge, be accountable for their part in it, and that includes bystanders, and then participate in the conversation so that the shame that everyone has can really start to be destroyed and shed so that we can get outside of ourselves in a way to make this stop.

Eric Bond

Mm-hmm. I realized, of course, as you were speaking that I used the term victim before and you're using the word survivor which you know I should know better because victims are presented as if they don't have agency and resilience. So, I appreciate that.

Risa Shaw

Yeah. And at the same time, language doesn't do us very much good, because I was a victim. I was victimized. I am a survivor. Lots of survivors aren't really comfortable with the term survivor. You know, we've played around with a lot of different things. So, I was victimized. There was no question about it, and I was a victim at one point. I don't live in that victimhood and haven't for many, many years. But I appreciate what you're saying.

Eric Bond

As you mentioned you're a survivor and you know and you have a lot of experience talking about this and obviously writing about this and helping to heal women who have been through this. But can you walk me through in the way that you best would do so your experience in coming to write the book.

Risa Shaw

Sure. So, I'm 64 years old. And I didn't, I couldn't tell anybody even about it for a good seven or eight years after the abuse stopped. And, in finally being able to choke out those words to tell somebody, I started to really want to hear from the other women who were also survivors of the same abuse. Even though I didn't know anyone at that point. I knew I wasn't alone. So this is back in the late 70s, early 80s. I'm going to every bookstore I can, getting every book that I can find, or getting them from the library, so that I can read. And there were books at that time about father-daughter incest. There were a couple of books that were sort of general trauma books that talked about incest. But nothing talked about brother-sister incest. And I think it may have been mentioned in one or two places, but it wasn't there, and the voices weren't there. So that really is what brought me to want to have an anthology of the other women's voices because I wanted to hear them. And I also wanted to tell my story. So there was a big part of it that was about not being silenced anymore, not being willing to stay silent anymore. And I think part of it is just my temperament. I felt like I was going to explode if I didn't talk about it and so that was the impetus for starting this book.

Eric Bond

Mm-hmm. And tell me about your professional experience and how that intersects with this project, with this study, with this recording of narratives.

Risa Shaw

So at the time, I had no professional experience with this at all. Since, in the last 25 years, I... I'm an activist and I did my doctoral work, including the narratives of survivors of sibling incest. And so I looked at what it meant to women, both deaf women and non-deaf women, to tell somebody in their family about the incest. They're called disclosure stories. And I took a look at what that meant to them and what was in those stories. It was a linguistics study, a sociolinguistics study. And part of what came out of that study and that I can also co...that that I also had in my own experience is that telling family members often led to a re-traumatization because of the family members' responses. Again, we're talking about parents who now have to deal with knowing that one of their kids abused at least one of their other kids, and that this is a secret that's been kept for all of these years, and it likely came out of some sort of environment that was in the home in the first place. I don't ascribe it to intentional, any intention on the parents' part. But I do think that there was a lot of unintentional not paying attention. So they have to deal with that. The parents now have to deal with that. If there are older siblings in the family, oftentimes they feel like they

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should have done something, which nothing could be farther from the truth. The other kids didn't do anything to make this happen.

Eric Bond

How did you go about gathering these stories? What was your experience with gathering these stories?

Risa Shaw

So we're talking about 1987, 1986, 1987, when I started this. So we're not talking about social media, we're not talking really about the Internet at all either. And so it was all done by word of mouth. It was done by friends posting flyers in bookstores and cafes around the country, and also in Canada. And, I opened a post office box in Takoma Park and people started sending me their stories. Then we went through them. I had a friend who was a writer and an editor who helped with that. And I had friends of all sorts participate in the first book and also the second one in different ways.

Eric Bond

Mm-hmm. And I have to imagine that this kind of goes to what you were saying before and I think many of us have experiences, if not with this topic, with other situations, other experiences where telling your story gives it a sense of power and ownership. And also, even just the reality check "what I went through, other people have gone through. I'm not isolated."

Risa Shaw

Yes. Yeah, the chorus of voices in the book touch on everything about the harm, about the families, about speaking out, about not being able to speak out, about anger, about healing. They touch I think in every corner of things that the survivors have experienced. And it's very validating to read the stories if you're a survivor. It shows that you're not alone, which is part of what I grew up with, and lots of people have grown up with. And I even talked to people who are in their 50s and 60s now who have never talked to anybody else who's a survivor. So the pieces in the book are very validating. They also are very illustrative of what it's like to have experienced this sort of sexual abuse.

Eric Bond

Mm-hmm. In a minute, I want to talk about some of the other activities that you've engaged in around the book. But first, just for listeners who did not either personally experience this or do not believe that they personally witnessed anything like this Is there a value in those folks reading the book? What is the value of these studies to or these narratives to people who don't feel directly connected?

Risa Shaw

I think that there's a value for everyone. One, it's not unlikely that somebody, at least in your neighborhood, if not your circle of friends is a survivor, even if they've never talked

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about it. Two, if you are with children, or you care about children, it's something that we all need to know about so that we can actually watch out for it. Watch for signs of behavior changes. Talk to people about the fact that this actually happens. Because again, just saying, "oh, I'm not going to talk about it because I'm so uncomfortable" isn't going to help stop it or help someone else heal. The secretive nature of it is so destructive and it allows it to continue even if it doesn't continue with those same people, it allows it to continue in other families because we're just too afraid to talk about it. Or because we say, "boys will be boys" or "oh, it was something that happened between you and your brother." That's just not what happened. The harm came from the brother. It's not because "boys will be boys." It's because harm was okay and boundaries were not set.

Eric Bond

Right. So, given that it's so secretive, do you have any sense of numbers or how prevalent this is?

Risa Shaw

I think it's extraordinarily prevalent and I do not have numbers. That's not my focus or my line of work, but I don't think that the numbers would be there even if we went looking for them, because people don't report it. And there's no place to report to.

Eric Bond

So then tell me about the second life of the book. Before we even get to the re-publishing, tell me about the activities that you've developed around these narratives.

Risa Shaw

Okay. So now there's the internet and those things called websites. We have a website and the website is continually getting updated. If I can give the website. People can go to notchildsplaybook.com. And again it's more than just the book, but we couldn't get notchildsplay dot com so notchildsplaybook.com. And there are resources on the website. The website talks about the whole project or initiative or movement, whatever you want to call it, about prevention and healing. We're putting up things on the website about art because I do a lot of art and a lot of it, I'm not an artist per se, but a lot of the stuff I've been doing has to do with being a survivor. And one of the things that we did do in the original book was, or before the original book, was we made incest survivor action figures. And these got made, and they're all in the book, they're also on the cover. We made six of them. And when I say "we", it was various groups of women, mostly survivors, but some who were not survivors participated in it. And we took old Barbie dolls and Ken dolls we took them and moved their parts around. We cut off all of the feet so that all of the feet were flat and could have big boots on them. We made them out of popsicle sticks and clay, found objects, and they're all in the book. You can read about them. You can see them in there. We made them because I was joking with a friend of mine about, "oh we need incest survivor action figures." And the next day, she dropped off a box of found objects and old Barbie dolls. And we went from there. And that's just one example of how community and

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art are really powerful and really beautiful. People just come up with these ideas and then do them. And you know, I want Barbie to see that we need an Incest Survivor Action Barbie. We've made them already, but we'll let Mattel make another one or whoever makes them.

And people, you know, going back to the getting the contributions for the book, originally I got way, way more contributions than I could use in the book, or that I did use in the book. And since publishing, people still send me pieces. When there was an Associated Press article back in, I think 2003, 2002. And when that went out, people contacted me with all kinds of things. And lots of people said if you ever do another book, here's a piece. People just came out of the woodwork. So when you talk about do we have numbers, how pervasive is it? Just me being one person who some people hear about and the amount of contact and stories that I've gotten is part of what shows how pervasive it is.

I was talking about the art a little bit. I want to just encourage people to do anything that brings them joy and healing and figuring out how to shed the shame. If I can give one other example I'm taking, I call them "old people art classes" because it's called Creative Aging for people who are 55 and over. And I take all these art classes. We were doing something a couple of weeks ago and I ended up with a green, it looked like a rectangle box on my paper. We were using paints and pastels and different things. It was about a hedge, you know, like topiary hedges. And I looked at it after I was done with it and it looked like a coffin. It was the shape of a coffin. It was the right proportions, and I just wrote next to it "and a funeral for shame". So this stuff comes up in my daily life. And I'm going to make some piece out of that. I don't know what, but we need a funeral for shame because the shame wasn't ours to begin with. And it is part of what has kept us quiet. Part of what has made some people die by suicide. It's part of what keeps people feeling unworthy and self-loathing and all of that. And so that shame is a really insistent, destructive part of what comes out of this abuse.

Eric Bond

So we have families listening, or parents listening. And you talk about prevention. Can you provide any thoughts on prevention? Because obviously preventing is better than having to face the healing process.

Risa Shaw

Absolutely. That's a great question. Thank you. What I would say to families is, watch for warning signs for one thing. So any changes in behavior. It could be withdrawal. It could be angry outbursts. It could be recklessness, rebelliousness, distance between siblings. Over achieving... all kinds of things. And it might be between the siblings. And it might be in other ways showing up. So that's one thing is pay attention and figure out, if you go "something's not right." Don't stop. Don't stop figuring out. Figure it out. Get help figuring it out. You don't have to figure it out on your own. But don't let it just, "hmm, that's just what's happening." The other thing I would say is that again, talking about consent and boundaries and teaching explicitly teaching consent. I know it's a big buzzword, if you will now, but it can't

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be overstated that both consent and boundaries are really, really important. And so do we actually empower our kids to say no to us? To say no to their siblings? To say no to other people? If you can't say no to your parents and authority figures, you're not going to have much of a chance of saying no to somebody who decides they're going to abuse you. So, that's a huge thing. I'll talk about Kindness Day a little bit if you want, but I'll also say...

Eric Bond

I saw that I saw that one of your blurbs comes from Roxanne...

Risa Shaw

Yeah, yeah.

Eric Bond

...who has been leading Kindness Day. So yeah, go ahead.

Risa Shaw

Yeah, I'll just say a couple of other things about if you find out that sibling abuse is happening in your family. What I would say is first validate the kid who tells you that something's going on. Validate them. Listen to them. Believe them. Do not do or say anything that questions what they're telling you. Tell them how sorry you are that it's happening. Tell them that you're going create safety and protection and get that started. One of the big things about this is the person who's been victimized almost always feels like they did something to bring it on. And there is absolutely nothing farther from the truth, nothing farther from the truth. I didn't bring it on, but I can tell you that I have lived with that feeling for well over 50 years and it still shows up sometimes.

Eric Bond

And in worst case scenarios I have to, well I know that there are sometimes family dynamics or religious or other dynamics that reinforce that idea.

Risa Shaw

Yeah, yup. The other thing I would say is don't let the siblings be alone. It's all going to take a whole lot of work. And in some cases it might mean that the sibling who's harming needs to be in a different location or home for some time. Don't keep the abuse a secret - that will just let it fester. So be honest in the family about what's happening and get everybody help. So get the get the victim help. Get the person who's harming help. Get yourselves as parents and adults help. Choose carefully because you need trauma-informed therapists, and there's plenty of them out there. But again, choose very carefully and get everybody h help so that you can start to not only acknowledge what's going on, but people can start to be accountable for their actions and people can start to deal with what's happened.

Eric Bond

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Well. I have to imagine there's some listeners who this is bringing up emotions for them and. Are you comfortable with any of our listeners getting in touch with you and if so, how would they do that?

Risa Shaw

People can contact me through the website. There's a contact on the website, it's the e-mail is also contact@notchildsplaybook.com. And if and if people do get in contact with me from having listened to your show, Eric, it would be great to know that that's where they heard about this.

Eric Bond

And can you, I mean are you able to provide one or two examples of...successes. I don't know if that's the right word, but individuals who have gotten to a better place by confronting the abuse.

Risa Shaw

Yes, I can, and I wonder if I could read a part from my *Afterward* right now, because I think...

Eric Bond

That that would be ideal.

Risa Shaw

Great. "The world in which the second edition arrives is all stirred up in ways that it was not when the original edition was published. It is full of shouts, protests, protests, movements, books, plays, court cases, family exposures, naming the abuse, and the harm. People are rocking the boat, getting loud or refusing to back down. This invites all of us to confront the systemic misogyny, racism, classism, all of the oppressions and attempts at controlling us. I cannot help but wonder what it would have been like to have heard this kind of truth telling and courageous protest when I was 12 and being abused, or 24 when I told my family what their son and brother had done to me, or during my early years of therapy. I'm sure it would have changed my life. It would have given voice to inconceivable pain. It would have broken through the isolation of seemingly private experience. It would have illuminated rage and fury and modeled agency, self-worth, and assertion. This is the work of *Not Child's Play*."

So I read that in answer to your question because I think that there are lots of examples of survivors finding ways to speak their truths, to talk to their families or not, to find community with other survivors. To find ways of dealing with the trauma that lives in their body and get to a place where they are on a road to healing. And I don't think that road ever ends. That's been my experience, that it doesn't end. And we're not looking for an end, but we're looking for... I have to say actually if I can prevent this from other kids getting abused,

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sexually abused by their by their siblings, that would do a huge amount for me and my healing.

Eric Bond

Mm-hmm. Yeah. You keep circling back to those kinds of traumas. Well, is there anything I haven't asked that you want to make sure our listeners hear?

Risa Shaw

I may have said this already, but I'll say it maybe in a different way. In talking about the fact of sibling incest, and the fact that it's an issue that's been buried in secrecy, by breaking that silence, we take power away from... let me say it this way. Because it's been buried in secrecy, the secrecy gives it a power and allows it to continue, and so breaking silence is key. So belief survivors, especially if they're children still, because you're going to make a huge difference in their life if you do. And don't always put the breaking of silence onto survivors. This is one reason why the more our community, even just here in Takoma Park, the more we talk about it, the more we can protect the kids in this community and the more healing we can have among survivors and families in this community.

Eric Bond

Mm-hmm. And once again, for listeners who want to find the book or learn more about it, or should they go?

Risa Shaw

They should go to notchildsplaybook.com and you can order the book. You can order stickers. We have stickers that say "you are brave," "tell your story," "courage," "fearless," "you are not alone." Those are up on the website as well. Can I say a couple other things, Eric?

One, I want to thank you, Eric, for having me for inviting me. It's really important, as I said for us to have this conversation in our community here in Takoma Park. And so I'm delighted to be invited to do this here in my home city. I hope that it will help start the conversation in Takoma Park and that we'll be able to have other events in Takoma Park as well. Can I talk a little bit about Kindness Day?

Eric Bond

Oh yeah, I forgot about that. Go right ahead.

Risa Shaw

Yeah. So, yes, Roxanne Yamashita with Small Things Matter does Kindness Day. I volunteer with Small Things Matter. She asked me if I would like to have a table for *Not Child's Play* this year. And so we did, I did a table. We did a spinner game with... It was all about consent and boundaries and being brave and finding your trusted adults. We did a spinner game and the kids all got to, and the adults, got to decide if they wanted to spin or not. They

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could answer a question if they wanted to or not. And they could have a sticker - the “you are brave,” “tell your story, “courage,” “you are not alone,” stickers were all there. What was really great is that the 2 1/2 hours went by so fast that I didn't even get to go to the other tables because I didn't have any time to get up. I gave... each person could have one sticker and I gave out 91 stickers. I also had handouts for the adults, the parents and caregivers, and I think that about 35 people took those handouts. The book was there as well. And some people bought the book too.

I'll say one other thing because we've talked about families so much and how hard it is in the families. I just want to say also that there's really a lot of hope for families. If this has happened in your family, it happened. Now we get to deal with it. And there's a lot of hope. There's a lot of opportunity for healing, and it requires a lot of hard stuff. There's no question about that. But working through those hard pieces, bring us to really powerful and important and beautiful and meaningful places.

Eric Bond

Thank you. Risa Shaw and the book again, it's *Not Child's Play: An Anthology on Brother-Sister Incest*. And the website one more time?

Risa Shaw

The website again is notchildsplaybook.com. And Eric, I'm very grateful to you. Thank you for starting this conversation in Takoma Park and getting it going.

Eric Bond

I'm so glad we had this conversation. So thank you for reaching out to me and making sure that we had it.

Risa Shaw

Thank you. I look forward to more of it with you.