S10E7- The Place I Finally Fit

Can I ask you something personal?

When did you first feel like you belonged somewhere? Not tolerated, not managed, not just allowed to be in the room—but actually belonging. Like the space would feel different if you weren't in it. Like you were expected, you were wanted, and you were part of something.

For some of you, that feeling might have shown up early—a family dinner table, a school team, a childhood bedroom that felt like the whole world.

But for a lot of us—and probably more than we talk about—that feeling took a long time to arrive. And when it didn't come where it was expected, it came from a person.

One adult who decided, without being asked, without it being in their job description, without any guarantee of it working, that this kid—maybe this adult—was worth showing up for.

So today, we're going to talk about those people: youth workers, support workers, the ones who sit in community centres, church halls, temporary offices with bad lighting, and somehow… somehow they change everything.

So welcome back. I am Ashley Costello, and this is The Resilient Kid Podcast —with The Place I Finally Fit .

If you remember, a few weeks ago we kicked this off with Ruby O'Brien, and she talked about a youth worker called Jack who really encouraged her. And as we know, if you've listened to the podcast, Ruby went on to be Youth MP of Knowsley, and she is one of our speaker lineups in the Manifest Teen Tent. We are really excited she's coming on board. She's just flying—absolutely flying.

And it was her story that made me really think about who do I know? What kind of stories do I know about youth workers?

Because I did a lot of work in that sector. I was a residential social worker. We had a lot of youth workers that we worked with. And I started to think about some of those stories, because they do have a huge impact.

So I'm going to tell you a story about a girl called Keza. Now, I am using that name because I don't want her to be identified, and I have changed a few of the details so they're not identifiable. But the gist of the story—the message of the story—is still the same.

Keza is 13.

She's quiet in the way that often gets mistaken for "she's fine… everything's okay." Teachers describe her as "no trouble." Her reports say "a pleasure to have in class, works independently."

And what they mean—though nobody says it—is that Keza has learned to be invisible. She has perfected the art of taking up as little space as possible.

At home, things are complicated. Her mum loves her fiercely, in the way exhausted people love—which is real, but sometimes hard to feel.

There have been different stepdads, different houses, different schools. Keza has been to four schools in five years. Every time she starts to feel the edges of something—a friendship, a routine, a sense of "this is my place"—the floor shifts, and she starts again.

She's not a child anyone is particularly worried about. And that's the thing.

She's not acting out. She's not in trouble. She's just not quite anywhere—floating from one friendship group to the next, present in body but absent in any way that might matter.

She doesn't belong to any particular group at school. She's not sporty, not one of the loud ones, not even one of the quiet ones who have found each other.

She eats lunch in the library.

She has a talent. She draws constantly—intricate, detailed worlds in the margins of her notebooks. And she's never shown anyone, because showing someone means risking, and risking things has never gone well.

So one Thursday afternoon, because her mum signed a form she didn't really read, Keza ends up at a youth centre.

She doesn't want to be there.

The youth centre is loud. It smells of instant coffee and trainers. There are beanbags in primary colours. Murals on the wall that somebody painted badly but with obvious love. And there's a table tennis table missing the net.

And then there's Marcus.

Marcus is the equivalent of Ruby's Jack.

Marcus has been a youth worker for 11 years. He's 34, drives a car with a broken heater. He submits his petrol expenses and they mostly get ignored. He has a caseload that's too big and a budget that's too small, and a manager who means well but doesn't always understand what the work on the ground actually looks like.

You've probably met a Marcus. You have seen a Marcus.

And in those 11 years, he has developed a superpower:

He can see the ones who have learned to make themselves small.

Keza—he spots her within four minutes. She's sitting on the edge of the room, still got her coat on—the international symbol of "I'm not staying"—and she's drawing in a notebook, half hiding it.

Marcus doesn't make a big deal. He doesn't pull up a chair and announce himself. He just walks past, glances, and says:

"Is that city real, or did you make it up?"

She looks up, startled.

"Made up."

"How long have you been building it?"

She blinks—because he's actually interested.

"Two years."

"Right," he says, and then he goes off to deal with something across the room.

He doesn't push. He doesn't make it a thing. But he's asked. He's noticed. He's treated her drawing like it was architecture, like it was real—like she was a person who has been quietly building something for two years, and that's worth acknowledging.

Keza comes back the following Thursday.

She doesn't take her coat off—but she's back.

Now I want to pause there for a moment—because why does this matter?

There is a lot of research into this, and I want to talk about what Marcus just did and why it works.

There is a concept in developmental psychology called belonging uncertainty . It was studied extensively by Gregory Walton at Stanford University.

What he found was this:

For young people who have experienced instability, rejection, or repeated uprooting—moving from one home to another, one school to another—there is a persistent internal question that runs like background noise:

Do I belong here? Is this temporary? Will this be taken away?

And the crucial part is this:

When this question is running, it takes up cognitive and emotional space. It adds to what we call cognitive load.

It makes it harder to connect, harder to engage, harder even to learn—because that part of the brain is always on high alert, always scanning for signs that this is going to end.

Walton's research also showed that even very small interventions—a single conversation that communicates "you are seen, you have a place here"—can reduce belonging uncertainty and improve engagement, wellbeing, and academic outcomes significantly.

The intervention wasn't a programme or a curriculum.

It was a moment of genuine human acknowledgement.

And we know, don't we, that what all of us need is to be seen, to be heard—and that one step further—to belong.

There is also the work of Dr. Brené Brown.

She makes an important distinction: fitting in is not the same as belonging.

Fitting in is assessing a situation and becoming who you need to be to be accepted.

Belonging is the opposite.

Belonging is being accepted as you are.

And the tragedy is that so many of our kids—getting younger and younger—spend enormous energy trying to fit in, which actually moves them further away from genuine connection.

Keza never tried to fit in.

She went straight to invisible.

Same destination—different route.

And what Marcus did—without a programme, without a manual, without a framework—was signal something different:

I'm not asking you to perform. I'm asking about the thing you care about. I see you already.

Now let's bring one more piece of research.

A landmark study by Save the Children UK and the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships found that the single most protective factor against long-term mental health difficulties for children experiencing instability is:

One stable, non-family adult relationship.

Not therapy. Not interventions. One adult—consistent, present, paying attention.

Youth workers are that adult for thousands of children every year.

And we don't have enough of them.

We don't have enough youth centres.

A lot of the work we do is about adding that trusted adult in—giving them a safe space to be seen, to be heard, to process what's going on.

A safe pair of hands that holds space and makes sure they're okay.

So here are five ways to create belonging:

One: Enter through their interest, not their story. Two: Don't reward disclosure—reward presence. Three: Be boringly consistent. Four: Let them contribute. Five: Name the belonging out loud.

Now let's get back to the story.

By November, Keza had stopped wearing her coat inside. That sounds small—it isn't.

She becomes a fixture at the Thursday sessions.

She still doesn't say much, but she's present in a different way now. She laughs sometimes. She leaves her notebook open.

One Thursday, Marcus pins up a piece of paper:

"Youth centre mural project. We want to redesign the back wall. Got any ideas?"

He doesn't look at Keza when he puts it up.

He doesn't need to.

Two days later, she texts the centre number.

It's a sketch—her city.

Three weeks later, she's standing in front of that wall, pencil in hand.

Other young people paint around her design. They ask her questions.

For the first time in a long time, Keza is not on the edge of the room.

She is in the centre of it.

She is the reason people are gathered.

And her vision is what everyone is building together.

On the last session, someone says:

"You made this place look like somewhere worth being."

She doesn't cry until she gets outside.

But she cries.

Marcus will later say the mural wasn't his idea.

He just created the conditions.

That's what the best youth workers do.

Keza goes on to study graphic design.

She volunteers at the youth centre.

She never forgets the Thursday Marcus asked about her city.

There are around 700,000 young people in the UK who are NEET.

And underneath so many of those stories is not a lack of ability—but a lack of someone who saw them.

Youth work is underfunded.

And yet, for every £1 invested, there is a £4 return.

But more than that—it's a human argument.

Because for a girl sitting in a coat she won't take off, one question can change everything.

Is that city real, or did you make it up?

It was both, Marcus. It was both.

To the youth workers, support workers, social workers—you work in a system that measures the wrong things.

But I see you.

What you do is not supplementary—it is essential.

You don't always see the ending.

Marcus didn't know.

He just showed up.

And that's everything.

If you are tired—I know you are—the ones you are showing up for, they know.

Even when they don't say it.

And that stays.

That makes a difference.

That's it— The Place I Finally Fit.

Thank you so much for listening.

Until next time—look after each other.

And look out for the ones wearing their coats indoors.