

THE STORY GOES | CHRIS LOPEZ AND ROBYN PARKER | THRU PROJECT

MOLLY: Hey! It's Molly, and I'm with SA2020. And I'm here with Kiran, who is also with SA2020.

KIRAN: Hellooo!

MOLLY: This is The Story Goes, a collaborative podcast between SA2020, the nonprofit who drives progress towards a shared vision for a thriving San Antonio, and KLRN, your public television station. I like to say that. It makes me feel like I'm part of the KLRN Public Television Station family.

KIRAN: It is very convincing. You are very good at that.

MOLLY: Thank you very much, and today, we're going to be talking—we're actually doing something a little bit different today. It's the first time. So, Chris, congratulations for us figuring out how to put four people into the closet with three microphones. Chris and Robyn are going to do a tag team swap out, as we talk to THRU Project.

KIRAN: You get to swap out in the dark.

MOLLY: In the dark. Everybody laughs when we say that, but it's true. We are in a dark closet, and we have three microphones but four people.

KIRAN: There's one flashlight above Molly's head. (CHRIS and MOLLY laugh) It's important to paint the picture for our listeners. [\(0:58\)](#)

MOLLY: Yeah. You have to put it out there. So, thank you for y'all being here. We are going to sort of set it up. The Story Goes is an opportunity for us to tell a more complete story of the people and organizations who are sometimes quietly and sometimes loudly changing the story of San Antonio.

KIRAN: Which is so obvious as we sit here with Chris Lopez and Robyn Parker of the THRU Project. We are so excited to sit down with this nonprofit organization and partner of SA2020. We know in San Antonio that we have work to do when it comes to college access, college completion for our workforce in San Antonio. This organization is specifically serving folks who are young people in our community who are aging out of the foster care system and making a direct impact when it comes to education and economic competitiveness.

MOLLY: Yeah, as well as like, we also know that Bexar County, and you're going to speak more specifically to this, so you can help me in the data points we are going to throw out. Bexar County's foster care system space is—we have a lot of people in our foster care system.



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CHRIS: It's one of the largest throughout the State of Texas. Each year, we have over 200, 2 to 300 youth, who age out of the foster care system. It's also, we have about, I believe the statistic last year was about 1,300 that entered the foster care system as well. So, it is a region, Region 8. It extends from Victoria all the way out to Kerrville. So, it's one of the bigger regions. We do get a lot of foster youth from Bexar County, as well as the surrounding counties. [\(2:46\)](#)

MOLLY: Do you, also, it's amazing, that sort of statistic itself. But also, if we could, like how many people we are working within our region? And also, recently, I don't know if you have a place to play in this space, but HUD announced a 6.8 million dollar grant to combat homelessness in youth. I'm assuming y'all have some play in there as well. [\(3:14\)](#)

CHRIS: Right. So, we do partner, we just got a partnership with San Antonio Housing Authority, where we will be housing young adults over 5 years, 10 each year, so 50 total we are going to house through one of their SAHA properties. In the past, we have tried to help as far as the housing concern with foster youth. 1 in 3 young adults will be homeless after the age of 18 once they leave care. So, we really want to try and alleviate that barrier of housing for these young adults because how many of us were ready at 18 to get into the real world and say, "Hey, I'm here." What happens life hits hard, and it hits you to the ground. So, these young adults, we want to make sure they have a supportive network. We did partner with SAHA again. We have spaces at one of their properties, and we are working on trying to eliminate that barrier. [\(4:13\)](#)

MOLLY: Let's take a step back and talk more specifically about the THRU Project. I realize it's (spelling) THRU. Can you tell us more specifically about how it was founded, the mission, what you do? Like, it's clear that you're necessary in our community, and why is that? [\(4:33\)](#)

CHRIS: The THRU Project was founded back in 2012 by our co-founders Elaine Hardell and Steve O'Donnell. Steve O'Donnell was a former foster youth, and he was one of the owners of Hill Country Fair Bakery, or Hill Country Bakery, so he got with Elaine, who was fostering teenage boys, and they started seeing there was a need. There was gaps in services and a need to eliminate barriers. So, they got together, and they started the THRU Project. When they first started, Elaine had recruited 10 young adults to get mentors because we feel like mentors are a big, key component in helping these young adults get through life. I mean, I know I had a great support network when I was 18 going to college and everything else with my family and friends. I mean, a lot of these young adults don't. So, why not give them a mentor? Someone they can call upon if they need any help. So, Elaine did get started, and since 2012, we have helped over 700 young adults. Currently, we have 160 young adults in our program, and we also help with, not only housing and mentoring, we also assist with transportation needs because that's a big barrier. So, we will provide them with a bus pass, 6-months bus pass, so that way they can get around town—get to jobs, get to work—that sort of thing. We also see the barrier of communication is key. So, we will provide them a cellphone if they qualify. [\(6:12\)](#)



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MOLLY: (CHRIS agreeing throughout) Do you, maybe I'm completely, I didn't realize it, right. People are completely aging out of foster care the system without a home to call their own? And that's happening so frequently that we needed to create a program for that. I'm not saying that it's impossible to imagine. I'm saying, wow, what it might seem like as a system that its broken enough we can't find homes for children who need them.

KIRAN: Yeah. We also know, right, in a conversation we are elevating a lot at SA2020, and we are hearing at large in San Antonio from so many folks, is that one in three are burdened by housing costs in San Antonio. So, it's clear at THRU Project, you are very specifically elevating what that looks like and the specific population of young people who are aging out is a targeted intervention that need to be made. [\(7:04\)](#)

CHRIS: Right, right. So, we are trying to do our part as far as eliminating those barriers that these young adults face once they leave the foster care system. I used to be a case manager for Preparation for Adult Living Program, which is set up for young adults as they leave care to help with their benefits, get them on their feet, education, employment, things like that. So, I did that for about six years before I came on to THRU Project, and working with this population is definitely a great experience, and it is a need. We need more people out there to help these young adults as they leave the foster care system. [\(7:45\)](#)

KIRAN: Chris, we talk a lot on the podcast about changing narratives. I would imagine in your day-to-day work and your own experience, that there is a lot of work happening through THRU Project around just changing, sort of just busting myths about children that grow up through foster care. What are some of the narratives that you find yourself or the conversations you find yourself shifting about this population or about folks in our community that grew up in the system? [\(8:11\)](#)

CHRIS: So, a lot of the myths are that the older youth are very combative. They are difficult to work with. They're not going to listen to you. They're going to do what they want to do. But I mean, that's teenagers in general. I know—

MOLLY: (laughing) You just mentioned me today!

KIRAN: It's just teenage years!

CHRIS: Yeah, right. It's just a very difficult population to work with, and a lot of times these young adults who are needing care just age out of the system. Instead of getting adopted, getting placed in a foster home, placed in placements like St. PJ's, St. Holmes, Roy Maas, instead of being placed with a family and showing that support that you know a family does. [\(9:00\)](#)



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MOLLY: There's something so specific about saying this is my family. There's something to be able to call your home, home. So, I can imagine that myth of, "oh, they're combative, or it's too hard." It's not just describing your average teenager because most of them are combative. It's just different.

CHRIS: Absolutely, absolutely. Just eliminating that barrier and showing that love and support, that's huge to these young adults. They just want to have somebody that cares about them, as I can trust this person. [\(9:34\)](#)

MOLLY: It seems so obvious, too. This idea of I just want somebody I can trust and that cares about me, like it seems like such an obvious space to provide for a young person.

KIRAN: Yeah, it brings up the concept of belonging for me. How do we ensure in San Antonio that everyone calls our community home believes and actually has access to everything they need in order to belong in our community? So, hearing you talk about the housing system as it relates to, or hearing you talk about transportation as it relates to folks who are aging out, how can these large systems and institutions that exist behind them make sure that they belong for everyone. [\(10:15\)](#)

CHRIS: Absolutely, yeah. And I totally agree with that statement right then and there. We just want to make sure that everybody has that sense of belonging in the community.

MOLLY: So, how do you, how do young people find you? Or how do you find them? [\(10:26\)](#)

CHRIS: Well, we go out into the community. We talk to young adults, whether they are at placements or foster homes, let them know about the program. And I'm telling you right now, nine times out of ten these young adults are like sign me up. "You mean to tell me that I'm going to have somebody who is not being paid be a part of my life? To see me once a month? To call in and check on me? Absolutely, sign me up." We go out into the community. We present. We talk to the youth about our program. And again, they're like sign me up. How we get our mentors is the same way. We go out in the community, talk to people. We need more caring adults to be a part of these young adults' lives. [\(11:07\)](#)

MOLLY: You also mentioned some of the larger homes in our community, as well. I would assume you have sort of a referral conversation with them, too?

CHRIS: Correct. So, we do work with Family Tapestries. We work with Seton Home, St. PJS, all these big organizations that house these young adults to make sure that before they leave let's give them somebody that's going to be with them for the rest of their lives, you know. So, you know, right now, our longest match I believe is over four years. So, you know, we just require that the mentors once a month go and see their youth face to face and call them every once and a while, and say, "hey, what's going on?" We had a match recently where the young man



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just texts his mentor every night, “goodnight.” You know, because he cares so much about his mentor and everything his mentor does for him. [\(12:01\)](#)

MOLLY: Yeah. Tell me what as a guy that works at the THRU Project, this is going to be a little bit of a different podcast, we kind of set that up to begin with, we were going to swap you out, tag-teaming here. So, before I swap you out, as the guy who works at the THRU Project, what are the things, the calls to action, that you need to people to hear on this podcast? Like okay, I’m ready to jump in and take an action. [\(12:31\)](#)

CHRIS: We need more mentors. Right now, we have more youth in our program than mentors. So, right now we need more mentors, especially male mentors. That’s the biggest thing. We have a lot of young men out there who need that male role model in their lives. Teach them how to take a girl out on a date, be polite, how to do things that a father figure would teach these young adults.

KIRAN: And Chris, tell us more about what that mentorship looks like. [\(13:01\)](#)

CHRIS: For mentorship, you would go on our website thruproject.org, you can get some more information on that for our mentor project. We would ask that you come to a training, every second Saturday of the month, we have a training. It’s a two- hour training. We talk about the responsibilities and everything else that goes along with the mentorship, then we do a background check with Child Protective Services, and then after we match you up with a young adult that you have common interests with. [\(13:30\)](#)

MOLLY: I’m intrigued also by the fact that you’re telling us you’re having a shortage of male mentors because that’s across the board. Any mentoring organization will tell you it’s male mentors, we are having such a difficult time having them come in and commit to mentoring, and I’m always curious about why that is, and how can we do the thing. How can we get more men to say, “I’m ready.”? They’re the first three letters of the word *mentor*.

KIRAN: I think you’re on to something.

CHRIS: Wow, I never thought of that. [\(14:00\)](#)

MOLLY: I’m just saying. I’m not saying you should trademark it, but I’m saying I know how to spell. Okay, so sign up to be a mentor. That’s your biggest, *do that?*

CHRIS: Correct. For more information, like I said, go on our website thruproject.org. Donations, anything to support, you’re welcome to go on our website.

MOLLY: I’m going to tag-team you out, Chris. You’re still in the room. We could hear you from afar, but we only have one microphone, so we are going to bring Robyn up. Robyn Parker, who



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also now works at THRU Project. And Robyn, you have an interesting story on how you came to work at THRU Project, and I want to hear all of it starting at the beginning 9,000 years ago or whenever. [\(14:53\)](#)

ROBYN: It feels that way sometimes. (MOLLY laughs) Well, so when I was younger, I guess I'll start with my story.

MOLLY: Yes, please. I would love that. [\(15:02\)](#)

ROBYN: When I was younger, my father left. I think before I could walk, and my mother struggled with eviction. So, it was, I was being passed around from family member to family member, and then eventually it was the CPS system actually said, "you're not in a safe place. We are going to take you away." So, funny story, the day before, the day I was taken into care, I was actually getting evicted. Me and my mom were getting evicted from the trailer we were living in. I was put in a group home that night. In a way, I think foster care saved me, and so I moved around from foster family to foster family for a few months.

MOLLY: You were how old at the point which you were put into foster care? [\(15:40\)](#)

ROBYN: When I was placed with the last family I was in, I was 17. Six months later, I turned 18.

MOLLY: Okay, so the first time you went into foster care?

ROBYN: The first cases started when I was 3 years old. So, this was, at 9, I was taken into a group home, and then I was released into the custody of my grandmother. So, it was just different moments, and the final case started when I was 15 or 16. It took them a while, and when I just turned 17, they came and got me, and I was put in a group home. I was at a kinship placement, which basically means you're placed with a family member or somebody who is related to you in some way. From there, I moved to two different foster homes. Then, I finally stayed at my last one. So, six months after I turned 18, and that's about the time Elaine came and introduced herself to me. She was from the THRU Project, and I received a mentor, which was awesome. So, when I turned 18, I had the option: Do I stay in care? Do I stay one more year until I graduate? Because I was a junior. I didn't even have my diploma. Both my parents were incarcerated. I don't, where am I going to go? And then, my mentor was actually the one who talked to me, and told me another year. Just finish out that time, you can do it. And I did. My foster parents agreed that I could stay, as long as I wasn't in any trouble. So, I stayed, got my degree, and then I moved to college. That was probably the hardest year of my life. [\(17:08\)](#)

MOLLY: The transition into college?

ROBYN: Exactly. It's so amazing the little things that normal people learn, that I never got to. The small things, like taxes, how to apply for an apartment, what a credit score was, things like



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that, I don't, I was so scared. I didn't know what to do, and my mentor was so amazing. She kind of stepped in, and was like this is what you do. A lot of times, I was calling Chris or calling THRU Project, like "Hey, I don't know what to do. I don't know where to go." [\(17:37\)](#)

MOLLY: Let's take a step back, so you started in the foster care system itself when you were 3 years old, and you were in and out of that, until you aged out of the system at 18. You said, that Elaine found you, and we heard that Elaine was the founder of, or co-founder of, THRU Project because Elaine has ESP or something and knows where the young people are that need help. How did she find you? [\(18:03\)](#)

ROBYN: So, I was actually in the PALS program. Chris was actually my PALS Case Manager when I was a teen. So, he was the one who kind of told me about the program, and then Elaine was the one that came to my foster home and told me they were giving me a mentor, which was really cool. I mean how often do you have the co-founder who comes to you and says "we just started this program. Do you want a mentor?" It was amazing, and then I got a mentor. It's hard just in the fact that, so when you're in care you have a case manager. You have a lawyer, sometimes you have more than one case manager because I had a PALS case manager and a CPS case manager. Then you have foster parents, but they're paid. So, they're there to do their job, and then they're there to move on. It's hard to talk to your friends because they're the same age as you. They don't understand what you're going through. They don't have the capability to really analyze or process the situation like an adult would. And so, then getting that mentor, and getting someone who could help me process from like a third-party point of view was just amazing. It made things less scary. I didn't feel as alone as I did. [\(19:07\)](#)

KIRAN: I know Chris shared with us earlier, that less than 3% of all foster youth graduate college, so shoutout to you for graduating from UTSA. It's clear that it's because our systems are so broken when it comes to housing and transportation, of course this number is so low. I'm curious as someone who has gone through that system and been able to be paired with a mentor and work with an organization like THRU Project, what then has brought you back into working for THRU Project, so what do you do now? [\(19:41\)](#)

ROBYN: So, I am the program coordinator with THRU Project.

MOLLY: So, you have to work with Chris every day.

ROBYN: Yes, I do. (MOLLY laughs) The transition has been funny. Technically, you were in charge of me, and now we work together. So, it's definitely been an interesting experience. I love it. I love how the organization is still kind of small. I know the co-founders. How often can you say I talked to the CEO, and I know the CEO. I think I want to work for the organization more because I was a part of it. I know exactly what they do and what it means to those youth. They come in, and they're scared, or I don't know what to do. And it's like, hey, we know what to do. We will get you from point A to point B. It's okay we got your back. When you graduate



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from care or you're getting out of care, and you don't have parents or siblings, it's, you don't know what to do. You don't know where to go, how to get a job, how to apply for a job, birth certificates, things like that. It's confusing and scary, and all kind of comes at once. So, being able to have some kind of foundation to come back and say, "Hey, I don't know what I'm doing, can you help me?" Like, it's just absolutely, for me, it was earth shattering. I was like, you know, when you're an adult moving into adulthood, all the things come at once, and you're like "Whaaattt?" [\(20:58\)](#)

MOLLY: Yeah, it's weird that at like 18, you don't magically know how to do these things. You turn 18, and I know *exactly* what I'm supposed to do.

KIRAN: Why doesn't it work like that? (ALL laughing)

MOLLY: So, you graduated from high school and went immediately to UTSA?

ROBYN: When I was finishing my high school diploma, and they were like what are you going to do next? Both my parents were still incarcerated at the time. I have siblings, but we are not in contact with each other. I didn't have any family. So, I was like, I don't know where to go. I don't where to live or what to do. College for me was like that safe place, where I could go to a big university, and they have dorms or apartments next to it. So, it was like from the foster home, I immediately moved into UTSA because the dorms. I have somewhere to stay. At first, I wasn't even thinking about college because I don't know where I'm going to live. And then, it was like maybe I'll go to community college, and then work. Me and my mentor were talking, and I was like, "I don't know what to do. I don't know where I'm going to live. I don't know." And she was like, if you go to a university, an actual college, they have dorm rooms, and you can stay there. You won't have to worry about it. So, then I applied to UTSA, and I got accepted thankfully, and I moved straight into an apartment on campus. I didn't do a dorm just because they do 9-month leases, and I didn't have anywhere to go in that 3-month break. So, I moved into an apartment right next to UTSA, where they had the 12-month leases, and I've been there ever since. You know, when you don't have anywhere to go for holidays, and I don't want to, I gotta stay here. [\(22:37\)](#)

MOLLY: Right. Sure, you're creating your own home and your own space of belonging, which I appreciate a lot. You've graduated from UTSA with a degree in?

ROBYN: Health.

MOLLY: Nice!

KIRAN: What made you choose to study health? Tell us how you chose to study health. [\(22:50\)](#)



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ROBYN: Oh okay. That's a hard question. I've always been interested in health. So, when I was in high school, I took dual credit anatomy and physiology. I took health and wellness. I took physical activity. Something about it really connected with me, the idea of your mind, body and spirit all being connected. So, I wanted to be able to share that with health because my degree is concentrated in community and preventive services. So, I know that when I graduated, I had nothing about what I was supposed to keep healthier. The stress was the biggest thing for me. I didn't know how to handle it. When I was taking my courses, it was teaching me stress management, physical activity, and nutrition, all these different and wonderful subjects. I knew that I always wanted to work with people. I've always wanted to work with people, and youth specifically. And so, getting my health degree meant I got to take classes like psychology and sociology, and health and wellness, and all these aspects, and I was able to include everything that interested me. So, being able to put that back out into the community means the world to me. [\(23:53\)](#)

MOLLY: You graduated from UTSA, and you were focused on health, mind, body soul, which I appreciate a lot. By the way, I'm also a 'Runner, so beep, beep or something. I don't know what you do. You just do the thing. I'm just like, I don't know if we need, there's like a "Way to go, 'Runner!"

ROBYN: I honestly don't know. (MOLLY and ROBYN laugh)

MOLLY: Did you immediately say like, "Okay, I'm going for a job at THRU Project." Or did they say, "You. We need *you*." [\(24:20\)](#)

ROBYN: So, my last semester I was actually interning with the City of San Antonio, but I was also interning with THRU Project. I worked with them for a while, and then I tried a few different jobs more closely related with health, but I was still with THRU. So, I was speaking at events. I was going to speak at interviews, like this, any time they needed me. You know, it was always coming back to THRU, and a few months ago, I was talking with Chris, and he was telling me about the opportunity, and I was like, "No, I need to jump on that. I need to be a part of this organization." You know, the smallness, the greatness, the whole, how much they care about these youth specifically, amazes me. We have youth that come into the office, and everybody knows their name, and to me that's just amazing. It's always felt home-y to me. So, being able to work there, I'm just like, "Yes!" [\(25:10\)](#)

KIRAN: Yeah. It just makes so much sense given your person life story, as well as what you studied at UTSA for undergrad that you would have such a brilliant insight on how to serve young people that are coming out of the system. Not only because you would be able to relate from your own story, but also that you would also be able to see what the gaps in program and services are, that would may be less intuitive for other folks that starts with something as simple as how do you start to look for housing, or how do you start to fill out a particular contract. I'm curious, have you come into sort of looking at the way that services are being



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delivered, or how programs are being delivered and seen some of those gaps given your experience? [\(25:54\)](#)

ROBYN: I think there's definitely some gaps, but I also think that THRU Project is working on bridging those gaps, like partnering with SAHA or partnering with NextLevel. We are finally bringing all these resources for these youth together. I think we are slowly working on building that network, so that we can really see those gaps. There are gaps. It can be hard to see them when your one organization focused on one thing or two things, and others are focused on others, but when you put them together, and you start working with them, it's like "we have this resource, let's send them here. What other resource do we need? What's next?" [\(26:30\)](#)

MOLLY: Yeah, I love the fact that you are, that THRU Project, is even elevating that we can't sit in our silos. We have to be able to look across and meet community need, and then in a particular community, what are those gaps? So, I appreciate it a lot. I'm going to ask you what I asked Chris, (1) because you're newer to the organization, you can speak to what somebody listening might want to do, but you may have a different idea of what is the call to action? Like, what should somebody be compelled to do after listening to your story and hearing about THRU Project, and understanding the need in the community? [\(27:06\)](#)

ROBYN: I think if somebody's listening, and they're like I don't know what to do or how to do it, you know, please go onto our website thruproject.org. Or if you can't mentor right now, there's nothing wrong with that. If you can donate to an organization, whether it's ours or a different organization, clothes or money, whatever gap is there. Or looking at the other organizations that are in our community and figuring what's out there, and saying, "I can do this." Really, I think it's looking at yourself and looking at what you're capable of doing and what you're able to do, and then looking at the resources available, so you can be a part of that organization—volunteering, donating or with us mentoring. [\(27:45\)](#)

KIRAN: I appreciate you saying that so much. We typically, we use the language a lot, thinking about what your sphere of influence or sphere of control is, and even as one person you are capable of affecting change, which is exactly what you described for us.

ROBYN: Exactly. Even if it's having a conversation, you're having a coffee conversation with a friend, and they're talking, and you're just like, "Hey, did you hear about this organization?" Even word of mouth can mean so much to an organization, you wouldn't believe how many people we have saying they heard it from a friend, so they want to hear more about it. [\(28:15\)](#)

MOLLY: Robyn, you're my new favorite. I'm going to say it out loud. Sorry about it, Chris. Robyn's my favorite. I appreciate you for being able to tell your story and feeling solid in how you changed the world in your world. The idea that you changed the stat that only 3% have finished college. And you're like, "3%? Let me blow that right up!" I appreciate you, not only



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sharing your personal story, but telling us, “Hey, get involved.” Don’t just sit there and do the thing. Thank you. It sounds so simple, and I’m just like thank you.

KIRAN: I feel exactly the same way for just sitting here and telling your story is incredibly powerful.

ROBYN: Thank you for having me. I appreciated speaking with you.

MOLLY: Of course. All of the things that we’ve talked about today, every resource that’s been announced or talked about, will be on the website klrn.org/thestorygoes. That’s also where you can go to subscribe to the podcast and hear about more people who are affecting change in our community and making our story even better. Chris and Robyn, thank you so much for sharing your stories today. Chris, you did well in bringing Robyn, she was better than you. I’m sorry. (CHRIS laughing) I think it’s important to acknowledge it when it happens.

CHRIS: (inaudible)

(ALL laugh)

MOLLY: Thank you so much for tuning in for this one, and we will be back again in another couple weeks. [\(29:46\)](#)



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