

Stephen Calabrita: From the Mount Sinai Health System in New York City, this is a Road to Resilience, a podcast about facing adversity. I'm your host, Stephen Calabria, Mount Sinai's Director of Podcasting. On this episode, we're joined by guest host Shilpa Taufique, PhD.

Dr. Taufique is the vice chair in the Department of Psychiatry and Chief of Psychology for the Mount Sinai Health System. She also serves as Director of CARES, the Comprehensive Adolescent Rehabilitation and Education Service, a unique and highly effective treatment program for New York City's most vulnerable teens and young adults.

Dr. Taufique interviews Ms. Ronelle Pelissier, the current intake coordinator at CARES.

But not only is Ronelle an employee, she's also a former student and patient of CARES who entered the program as a high schooler having suffered from sexual assault, substance abuse, and depression.

Together, the pair discuss the challenges that Ronelle faced, how she ultimately prevailed, and the strategies for anyone who wants to rise from adversity. We're honored to welcome [00:01:00] Ms. Ronelle Pelissier and Dr. Shilpa Taufique to the show.

Shilpa Taufique: Hi, I am Dr. Shilpa Taufique. I am Director of CARES. CARES is the comprehensive adolescent rehabilitation and education Service, and I am incredibly delighted, and proud and honored and humbled to have with me Ronelle Pelissier, who is our current social work assistant or intake coordinator.

The kind of frontline face of who everybody meets when they try to come to CARES. But what's most exciting for me is that Ronelle is a former student and patient at CARES and she's really showing us this full circle moment of going from student patient to staff.

And it just thrills me to no end. Welcome, Ronelle.

Ronelle Pellissier: Thank you. Hi.

Shilpa Taufique: So Ronelle, I wanna get us started with what brought you to CARES in the first place. Can you tell me a little bit about growing up I think on the Upper West Side, right?

Ronelle Pellissier: Yeah. I [00:02:00] grew up on the Upper West Side. My parents are immigrants. My dad is from Haiti and my mom is from Morocco. I grew up in two parent household. I have two siblings. I'm the youngest.

So, growing up I did grow up a little alone. I started struggling with mental health at about 10 and my parents were just very lost and confused on how to handle me, help me.

Shilpa Taufique: So ten's pretty early?

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes. Yeah.

Shilpa Taufique: So tell me about what life was like before 10.

Ronelle Pellissier: It was awesome. I loved soccer. Oh, I loved sports. I did gymnastics, basketball, tennis, everything. But soccer was my favorite. I wrote a lot. I did a lot of dancing, singing, sometimes. I loved sports most of all.

Shilpa Taufique: And what was life like with your family? What was your relationship like with your parents and with your siblings before 10?

Ronelle Pellissier: It was good. My dad was my coach for every single sport I played, [00:03:00] so he was

Shilpa Taufique: That was good?

Ronelle Pellissier: Yeah, it was really good. Actually, he played football himself. He did a lot of sports, so it was a really connecting thing for us to have where every game day, every practice, he drove me. He took me and he was there.

My mom was also there, so we were, there was a lot of connection and closeness. And my mom used to be a dancer too, so dances she would take me to dance class.

Shilpa Taufique: Wow. Yeah. So from the sound of it, even though as a psychologist, I know there's no such thing as an ideal family you were close to it. Things sounded pretty good and I'm hearing already how many seeds were planted for strengths in you.

And the start of building that resilience through this strong connection with your family. Can you tell me a little bit about what that looked like at age 10?

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes. I had gone through a sexual assault that had originally started all of my mental health issues, and it [00:04:00] was very hard for me to go through and I didn't tell my parents. So that kind of let led to a, what's the word?

Shilpa Taufique: A rupture.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes, between my parents and I where they started to actually notice I was depressed and I was anxious. I started getting bullied in school, and that led to me just separating from everyone becoming more depressed and anxious.

Shilpa Taufique: Ronelle, that's really rough. That's, it's a lot that you dealt with from a really early age. So now tell me what happened after 10. Tell me what school was like after 10.

Ronelle Pellissier: School got very hard and bleak. I feel like I, I don't really, I remember I used to love English. I never liked math. I always loved English and the sciences.

But after everything happened with the sexual assault and stuff, I just tuned out. I don't [00:05:00] remember a lot. I don't remember my teachers. That like grace period. It's just all a blur for me.

Shilpa Taufique: Can you describe what home was like after the assault?

Ronelle Pellissier: It wasn't really home for me. It was. I felt very out of my body. I felt, I remember feeling very dirty every day, so I didn't talk to my parents. I came home, took a shower, and just stayed in my room.

Shilpa Taufique: And how did they understand that? What did they say to you at that time? Because that must have been so strange for them.

Ronelle Pellissier: They didn't, honestly, they didn't understand it. They didn't know what was going on. And I, like I said, I just kept it to myself, so eventually they just assumed, oh, she just has depression. I did tell 'em I was getting bullied, so that kind of covered up the truth a little.

Shilpa Taufique: I see. So everything was explained by the being bullied. Did that give you an out from school too?

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes. My parents said I, some days I did not have to go to school. Which was very [00:06:00] nice, obviously in the moment because I didn't have to go and face all of those kids, and my parents were very comforting.

So when I stayed home those days. My dad would come and lay with me for hours. And my mom would make me food and things like that. So it just felt very nice.

Shilpa Taufique: So even in the context of all this support, I'm hearing a real loneliness that you were experiencing as well. Was that loneliness a new experience for you?

Ronelle Pellissier: I don't think so. I think growing up with immigrant parents, I have this view that I will never go through the things they went through, obviously, like traveling to a different country, starting over.

So it's very hard for me to look at my struggles and feel like they're struggles compared to my dad who came on a boat, my mom, who came to a country not speaking the language and had to [00:07:00] adapt.

So I feel like I put the loneliness on myself in a way where I just put all this pressure, thinking, my parents are just gonna judge me. I'm crying over someone telling me I'm fat. It's nothing compared to what they went through.

So I feel like that's where that loneliness started.

Shilpa Taufique: So there's another piece in there that is an inherent loneliness and being the first generation. That is an experience that your parents did not have here.

And there is no way they'd be able to share that experience with you or model it for you or even provide guidance around it as much as they may be well-intentioned to do so. You're starting off your life here as one on their own.

So do you feel that some of that may have gotten stronger as you went through some of these negative experiences?

Ronelle Pellissier: I think so, yes. Especially because at that age I didn't know my parents' full life. Now that I'm 23, I've learned a [00:08:00] lot more. But at the time I didn't know a lot of things, so I just figured keeping it to myself would.

Be better handling it myself better.

Shilpa Taufique: So this, we're talking about starting at age 10. Now, take me forward a couple of years of this is going on. You're getting into middle school. How's that going?

Ronelle Pellissier: Middle school was the same. It was a little bit better, but I remember that's where boys started coming in. And, I had a rocky relationship with boys, obviously because of the sexual assault and I, that just didn't help things either.

Shilpa Taufique: And then you get to high school?

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes, and then I get to high school. And freshman year was a very rough year for me. I think that was my first attempt my first suicide attempt.

And that's how I ended up at CARES. After the hospitalization, my parents were just very confused and lost. [00:09:00] And my mom worked at Mount Sinai.

Shilpa Taufique: So she heard about CARES.

Ronelle Pellissier: And that's how she was like, we need this. We need this for Nel. We don't know what to do.

Shilpa Taufique: !So your mom was confused and scared. How about you?

Ronelle Pellissier: I was a bunch of things, but I don't think I was scared. I think I was just numb. Honestly, I wasn't confused. I just remember my mom telling me the decisions she was going to make. And I just said, okay. I didn't see any option being better than one than another.

They just all seemed terrible at the time.

Shilpa Taufique: Had you been in any sort of mental health treatment before coming to CARES?

Ronelle Pellissier: I was in therapy for a few times, but I had a bad relationship with therapy because, for some reason, every time I had a therapist, they would leave in three months or two months. So then I just kept feeling like, they're gonna leave me. I don't wanna do this.

Shilpa Taufique: And [00:10:00] if I can ask, what are the different things that you were going to therapy for?

Ronelle Pellissier: PTSD? Depression, anxiety, anger issues. Yeah, I think that was it.

Shilpa Taufique: Any substance use?

Ronelle Pellissier: At the time, no.

Shilpa Taufique: Okay. So then you come to CARES. And you are now faced with all day, every day treatment and school, all in one place.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: Two things that have not been going well for many years. So tell me about your experience starting at CARES.

Ronelle Pellissier: Starting at CARES, I was very reluctant. I was a Kappa student, which is a substance abuse track, and I was, it was drug testing every week. I didn't like it.

I would cry to my mom . I don't know. It was a unique experience to get used to, in the beginning, like you said, you're going to school every day and then on top of school you have to go to therapy and yeah, I was reluctant.

Shilpa Taufique: What made you cry? What would you go [00:11:00] home and cry about to your mom?

Ronelle Pellissier: That I had already felt out of place, but being a CARES student made me feel more out of place, but also less out of place. It was, it's weird, you're going to a program.

When I would tell my friends at high school, and they'd be like, oh, where'd you go? And I would try to explain, oh, I'm in a high school that's for mental health and, but I'm also like not smoking anymore.

And it was just so confusing for them to understand, which made me feel out of place. But then when I was physically in CARES, during the school day, I felt very at home because I'm with kids who are struggling with the same things I'm struggling with.

Shilpa Taufique: So what's notable to me about that is, one of the things we try to do at CARES is bring all parts of a teen's life into one space. And it sounds like that's exactly what the struggle was.

Is, on the one hand, you can be an integrated person, but on the other hand, when you go back out into the real world, it's really hard to stay fragmented.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: And only show parts of yourself to somebody.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes.[00:12:00]

Shilpa Taufique: So what was it like, the day to day for you, and what are the different things that you did at CARES? Maybe talk me through like just a typical day at CARES. So having your sessions. Using milieu. Not wanting to use milieu, but using milieu.

Ronelle Pellissier: Okay.

Shilpa Taufique: Or a group.

Ronelle Pellissier: Okay. So day to day. I used milieu a lot.

Shilpa Taufique: Tell me what is milieu to you?

Ronelle Pellissier: Milieu is where the kids have a safe space to talk for five minutes. Sometimes they get a little longer if they need it. But it's basically just like a break from everything for me. That's how I thought of it at least, when I was too overwhelmed in class, too overwhelmed in my head.

I would go on milieu, take a five, and just either talk. You could do anything you want in a five. You could talk, draw, cry, laugh, and I would just use those five minutes to do whatever I needed.

And it was very therapeutic for me to just be able to come out, sit on a [00:13:00] couch, talk to a therapist, and go back to class. So yeah, I would use milieu a lot during the lunches. I remember I would go to my therapist a lot because I felt safe with her.

It was a unique experience because when you're in a regular high school, you can go to a guidance counselor or whatever, but to go to my actual therapist and say, Hey, this happened this morning, and she knows my whole case, so she's able to actually talk to me and care and give me feedback.

It was nice. The group therapy every day was intense. And I remember sometimes I hated it, but it helped a lot. I learned a lot of skills in DBT. I learned that I was a lot of skills in substance use. Group.

Shilpa Taufique: What did you learn about yourself in group that was maybe different than what you learned in individual therapy?

Ronelle Pellissier: I learned that I used to consider myself not a people's person, for a long time. But when I'm in group settings like that, [00:14:00] it's very easy for me to be happy, which I don't know if that makes sense, but when I'm alone or maybe when I'm in individual therapy, it's very easy for me to get caught up in my own mess, my own problems.

But in group therapy, it's very easy for me to not focus on myself. And listening to others helped me a lot. I will say that. It helped me feel less alone.

Shilpa Taufique: So relating to others. What were classes like for you? What was it like to be in school after so many years of having a hard time being in school?

Ronelle Pellissier: The only thing is, the classes were small, right? Which I liked, but sometimes it made me more anxious.

Just because I felt, and I think this is a me thing where I feel more pressure to be great and be perfect and, but I also think it pushed me to do better with my assignments, with my tests, because now I know this teacher knows me.

He knows who I am. He knows how I learn compared to [00:15:00] 30 kids in a class, and I don't really know if the teacher looks at my essay or if they look at, this long paper I wrote. But I knew that she was look, or my English teacher was looking and she was reading and the feedback she was giving me was caring.

Shilpa Taufique: So you were being seen and heard.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: So how long were you at CARES?

Ronelle Pellissier: For about a year.

Shilpa Taufique: For about a year? And how did you know it was time to leave CARES?

Ronelle Pellissier: I knew it was time to leave CARES when I had been sober for a while now. I had was on medication that, I think it was like one of my first or second times actually trying medication. And it had finally started working.

Things were looking up. I, things were less foggy in my head. Everything just felt a little lighter.

Shilpa Taufique: Can you talk a little bit about how you got sober? Like what is it about the treatment and the experience that [00:16:00] may have contributed to your sobriety?

Ronelle Pellissier: In the beginning I remember I was failing my drug tests, because I wasn't actually being sober. And that just made life more difficult for me, to have to fail the drug test every week that my parents would get notified.

Shilpa Taufique: I think. No. Unless you told them.

Ronelle Pellissier: Oh, I probably did tell them. Yeah. I probably did tell them because my parents definitely did know, or I think they were just on top of it asking me every week, oh, did you pass da? So yeah. So it was just more stressful for me. To have to know that I'm failing something, another thing.

Shilpa Taufique: You were failing, meaning you, you didn't wanna be using? Did you feel you were failing or was the message that others thought you were failing?

Ronelle Pellissier: No, I thought, I was like, I didn't want to be using, I was using to numb myself.

Shilpa Taufique: I see.

Ronelle Pellissier: So I was mad at myself. That I kept failing this test. But like that I also, during the week, I would fail. Like I need to go smoke, and [00:17:00] I would go outside and smoke.

Shilpa Taufique: And so how did you end up using therapy to help intervene with that cycle?

Ronelle Pellissier: I remember I, with my therapist and my psychiatrist, we had made a plan. It was more so to not to stop cold turkey, but just to be less hard on myself about the mistakes that I make and to know that I am trying.

Shilpa Taufique: And that a setback doesn't mean a complete failure so you wove in some self-compassion as you were trying to achieve the goal.

Ronelle Pellissier: And I remember we would keep track of the days where I relapsed. The days I did relapse, I would go over how was I feeling that day, what made me relapse, what triggered me, how can I stop the triggers, all of that.

Shilpa Taufique: So it sounds like you were gaining a lot of insights about yourself. And that allowed you to think differently about using.

Ronelle Pellissier: And I remember being asked, How do I see myself in five years- on [00:18:00] drugs or like still being getting high and I was just kinda, I don't know. It doesn't sound appealing to me. And that's when it was like a wake up call. If it doesn't sound appealing, maybe I should stop.

Shilpa Taufique: Okay. So now you're at a place where you and your therapist and your psychiatrist and the team at CARES feel you're ready to move on. You don't need this level of care anymore. So what was that experience like of knowing, okay, I'm leaving this place and I'm going back out into the real world?

Ronelle Pellissier: It was overwhelming and frightening. I didn't know what would happen when I went back to my old school. At that point, I didn't want to leave CARES. I became so comfortable with the staff and the environment.

Shilpa Taufique: Were you annoyed that we wouldn't keep you?

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes. That's, yeah. And my mom, I remember my mom saying, this is good. This means that you got better. And it's yeah. But I also got comfortable.

Shilpa Taufique: So I do remember that little battle we had for a little while with you.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes. I was like, no. I wanna stay.

Shilpa Taufique: But then you didn't. You did it. You left and your plan was to go back to your old school. Not, [00:19:00] you weren't ready to graduate yet. You had just come to his freshman year.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yeah. I was a sophomore at that point.

Shilpa Taufique: Okay. So you go back to your old school?

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: What happens to treatment now?

Ronelle Pellissier: I was still seeing the psychiatrist and therapist.

Shilpa Taufique: You stayed in what we called After CARES?

Ronelle Pellissier: After CARES. Yeah. For a little bit, I think until I was 18 maybe. It was for a while. I was seeing, I was doing therapy there, still family therapy and CARES was very close to my house, so it was very easy to get there, my parents to get there.

Shilpa Taufique: This is a very specific but nuanced question, it's not often that you can stay with your therapist after you've been in intensive treatment this way and we do it for a reason. Very specific reason.

But I'm curious from your perspective, what was it like to still be working with the people that knew you through your darkest time and now here you were still with them while you're in a new phase of your life back out in your old school [00:20:00] after having gotten better?

Ronelle Pellissier: It was amazing. I had a very special bond with my therapist. She helped me a lot. So to still be able to see her while I'm back in that environment that I swore I could not survive in was awesome. I remember just she was so encouraging.

She was so happy for me and that just helped me act go to class every day, go back to school every day. There was obviously still bullying going on, but the way I handled it was just so much more gracefully.

And I feel like that's because, like you said, I'm able to still work with these people who seen me at my lowest and now have sent me back out into the real world.

Shilpa Taufique: So you felt her and your psychiatrist belief in you.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: You can actually do this.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: You don't need to stay here in order to do well.

Ronelle Pellissier: We still have you. Yeah.

Shilpa Taufique: That's great. After that, you're back in school? You graduate and you move on to [00:21:00] yet another phase of your life.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes. College.

Shilpa Taufique: What was that like?

Ronelle Pellissier: College was interesting. I.

Shilpa Taufique: Oh, so you don't quite know this about me Uhhuh. 'cause you haven't been in any classes with me. But I don't like the word interesting.

Ronelle Pellissier: Oh, you don't?

Shilpa Taufique: No. Because it covers up what you're actually feeling. So I wanna know what, okay. It actually felt like college was.

Ronelle Pellissier: I don't even know. I graduated in 2020. During COVID.

Shilpa Taufique: Ah, okay.

Ronelle Pellissier: I hated my freshman year of college, but I think that was understandable. I, everything was on shutdown down. I couldn't go anywhere. Classes were online. I failed my first year of college. It was actually really bad. And I blame it on COVID.

Shilpa Taufique: So first year of college was rough. Yes. How did you cope?

Ronelle Pellissier: I coped through therapy. I had virtual therapy every week that helped. I was on my medications. I honestly have used a lot [00:22:00] of skills that I had learned throughout the years in therapy and group therapy.

Shilpa Taufique: So I'm hearing you pulled it out from inside of you how to cope with something that kind of the whole world was struggling with at that time.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: But you found those reserves in you and you figured out what you needed to do to be able to make it okay. So how was the rest of college and what did you do in college? What did you study?

Ronelle Pellissier: The rest of college was amazing. Yeah. Once the, everything was lifted and we were allowed to actually do things on campus, it was an amazing experience. I remember almost every single day being grateful for not succeeding with attempting to end my life, because college was just an amazing experience for me.

I started off as animal science major to be a veterinarian. And then I realized chemistry is not for me. So I switched to psychology because I loved the Intro to Psych class I took. And from there, it just [00:23:00] evolved.

I always knew I had a love for mental health, obviously, because I have mental health issues. But after going through all of the courses, I really fell in love with psychology as a whole.

Shilpa Taufique: You graduated with what?

Ronelle Pellissier: My associate's of Arts in social sciences and my Bachelor's of Science in applied Psychology.

Shilpa Taufique: Amazing. And where do you wanna take this now?

Ronelle Pellissier: I want to be a social worker. I think that's the route, that's the plan? Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: Okay. I think I know a social worker that you might want as your mentor. Yes. We'll see. Yes, we'll see about those dual relationships. Alright, so now bring us to 2024 that was graduating from college.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes. Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: And then I heard back from you. So 2024, you graduated from college? I think it's about that time that I heard from you. Yeah. So tell me about that.

Ronelle Pellissier: So December 20, 24, I needed my end of. Degree [00:24:00] internship that we all needed. It's 480 hours, so I was struggling for weeks. It was almost the end of the deadline where I needed to find a place to do my internship.

Shilpa Taufique: And I was talking with my mom. She's like, huh? How about CARES? And I think to herself, and I'm like, oh, I don't know, maybe it might be, and she's Renell, let's just do it. Let's reach out to Shilpa, because obviously my mom worked at Mount Sinai.

Ronelle Pellissier: So she's very familiar with you. So she's let's reach out to Shilpa. Maybe she'll remember you. Maybe she'll be willing to do it. So we sent the email to you and you replied, I remember you were like, oh my God, yes, I remember Ronelle.

This would be such an amazing experience. So that January I started the internship with you and CARES.

Shilpa Taufique: Now I want you to tell me what that was like. So you did an internship at the place where you experienced your lowest lows? And highest highs in some ways. And went through a transformational experience.

And now here you were In the [00:25:00] capacity of let's say a junior staff, as an intern among other teens. What was this like?

Ronelle Pellissier: It was nerve wracking. Because I did not know how I was going to introduce myself if I wanted to share that I was a CARES student. I didn't know if I would get triggered by walking back in there. I hadn't been in there since back in 2015, 2016.

But I walked in there and I just had a feeling of nostalgia and it wasn't sadness, it wasn't, it was oh my God, this is where I healed for a little bit. And then I started meeting the kids and all of that nerve just went away.

I feel like, I forget how nice kids can be sometimes, especially teenagers. And yeah, eventually I started sharing my experiences. And everyone was way more welcoming than

Shilpa Taufique: With the students who started sharing experiences. And you were joining [00:26:00] staff meetings?

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: What was that like?

Ronelle Pellissier: That was crazy. The 9:00 AM staff meetings. I also remember. A lot of things started clicking in my head. I'm like, oh, so that's where you guys were for the first 30 minutes. You were just having a staff meeting and stuff like that?

We have breakfast in classrooms. So, it started clicking and being able to see the behind the scenes work was very, it's, it was really rewarding.

Shilpa Taufique: How so?

Ronelle Pellissier: Because it felt the, as a full circle moment where I went from being the patients who are the patient, sitting on the couch crying and feeling very hopeless to now being a staff member, as you said on the Zoom call.

Just brainstorming how we're gonna make today great. How we're gonna make things successful. Yeah, it was really rewarding.

Shilpa Taufique: So you did this for about five months?

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: From January to May.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yeah.

Shilpa Taufique: And can you share a highlighter or two of working with a student, from the perspective of a staff member?

Ronelle Pellissier: [00:27:00] One big thing I feel like I've learned is to be more forgiving and I've learned that through the kids, which is. It's interesting because

Shilpa Taufique: not interesting.

Ronelle Pellissier: Not, sorry.

Shilpa Taufique: It's, yeah. I'm seeing so much affect on your face. I want you to tell me what are you thinking? What are you feeling?

Ronelle Pellissier: I just, I. Okay, so for example, one one time I accidentally addressed one of the students with the wrong pronouns, Uhhuh, and it was in the beginning. I was new to the whole pronoun thing. Or Yeah. And they were just very understanding about it. I freaked out.

I was like, oh my God, I'm so sorry. I know you don't go by this, but you go by this. And they were like, you're okay. It's okay. It's a learning experience. Like the fact that you're remorseful about it, and you're okay.

And in my head I'm [00:28:00] just wow. I expected it to just to not go this way, just to not, and for me, it just sticks in my head where it's just some people, they don't know everything.

They're gonna make a mistake, but just be more forgiving about, I don't know that's just something that stuck out to me to just be more forgiving about things. Not everyone is that aware.

Shilpa Taufique: So you saw another side of this teen that you maybe weren't expecting.

Ronelle Pellissier: I wasn't expecting it, but it was very eye-opening to just notice that a 14, 15-year-old can still understand that people are human. And it's okay to make a mistake.

Shilpa Taufique: So you really did have the staff experience of seeing the full range of what a young person is and can be.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes, and what they're capable of.

Shilpa Taufique: Yeah. Yeah. That's great. So your internship was over?

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: And then what happened?

Ronelle Pellissier: My internship ended in May. And a few weeks later, I think I got a text from you. Asking if I wanted to guest speak at graduation.

Shilpa Taufique: Yes. [00:29:00] The CARES graduation a big event. Yes. Yeah. A huge event.

Ronelle Pellissier: And of course I said yes. Of course.

Shilpa Taufique: Of course? No, it was really, truly a question for me. I didn't know if it was an "Of course."

Ronelle Pellissier: No, you asked me a lot of questions about opportunities and I'm always down. Always.

Shilpa Taufique: But tell me why it's an of course for you, because you know what it means to speak at graduation. You're really talking about yourself. You're putting yourself out there. And sharing with the other kids and families and staff and guests that we have there a lot about yourself. So what felt like, of course I wanna do that.

Ronelle Pellissier: I just, I love I've grown now that I've I'm working here, I love what I do and I love working with the kids. I love seeing them every day. I

love when I tell them that I'm a care student and they're the shock on their face, and they're like, what? That's crazy. You sat in this exact chair and

Yes, I did. So it's, if I could help. More kids feel like they can go to college and they [00:30:00] can graduate and they can do things, then of course I'm going to do it. Of course.

Shilpa Taufique: So what was it like to actually give the speech?

Ronelle Pellissier: Oh, it was nerve wracking. I've never publicly spoken before, but it was an amazing experience because I was standing there. As you said, there's parents there. It's not just the kids and staff anymore.

It's everyone, and it was just a very full circle moment to be a kid who was walking the stage graduating from CARES to now being the one telling everyone, you got this, you're going to move on to greater things.

Shilpa Taufique: I saw you as providing a level of hope and fostering dreams and possibilities in a way that none of the staff could possibly communicate who were not patients at CARES.

There [00:31:00] was something really quite magical and profound about seeing you stand up there and truly be able to say to these kids, you got this. I know you're gonna do this, because I'm living proof of that. And it was really remarkable. And now I'm gonna get teary.

Ronelle Pellissier: Oh, thank you, Shilpa. Yeah. No. Yeah. I. I feel the exact same way.

Shilpa Taufique: Yeah, it was, you know, the, it really took the staff some time to come down from that experience. And it was really nerve wracking for us too, to really see the, in some ways the contributions that we made to see them come to fruition.

And it was like a bit of a, wow. Oh my God, what we do is actually really important.

Ronelle Pellissier: A hundred percent Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: Look at how much it matters and look at this amazing person standing up there. And I just felt so grateful that we were able to offer you a space to do the growth and support and healing that you deserved to do and that

your parents deserved to have and to get you back into [00:32:00] their lives. Yeah, it was pretty incredible.

Ronelle Pellissier: It was.

Shilpa Taufique: So now you're working for us.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: So tell me about that. Okay, you were junior staff, right?

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: As an intern?

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: Now you are the first person that people contact when they say do you know of any program or what is this program? Or, I found your website. Or, my doctor said, I need to come to you. Wow. What happens when you pick up that call or you receive that email? What happens to you inside?

Ronelle Pellissier: I get this feeling of, okay, it's time to go. I dunno how else to explain it, but when I get that CARES front desk email of external application, I'm like, okay, another family, let's start working.

Let's see if you have everything. If, When we could do an eval, when we can, I'm so eager and it breaks my heart when certain, when they don't pass or we can't accept them I honestly, I go home and I think about it for a very long time.

Shilpa Taufique: Yeah. Yeah. So [00:33:00] way back in the day I don't know if you know this, but I started at CARES as an intern.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: And then there was no such thing as an intake coordinator. There was just, at some point once I got hired, I was doing the job that you're doing and built it into a job.

And I remember like from that point on, I still have this, so whenever the applications float by me, there's always that sense of urgency that you're talking about of I gotta be on, I gotta go.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: Of we must get this kid in here.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: And we face the real world limitations of why someone can't come in and as much as we try to minimize those, there's some that we just have to deal with. And I still, I will go home at night and think about that one. That one out of the 50 50 that we just brought in, right?

But there is something about having experienced CARES and wanting to be able to offer that because to as many people as possible.

Ronelle Pellissier: No, 'cause I know it's going to help. It's going to work. Yeah, so I just try my hardest. If a parent [00:34:00] asks, can you try again? I will try again and I'll try again. Until I can't, because I know everyone could benefit.

Shilpa Taufique: And I love that persistence in you when you push back on us and you push back on the team that's reviewing the applications.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yeah.

Shilpa Taufique: And I love that. And that's, that to me is every time I see that yes, she's the right person for this job.

Ronelle Pellissier: Thank you.

Shilpa Taufique: So as that frontline person, you really are representing the entire program, and you have the capacity to represent not only the staff and the programming, but also the students. How do you feel you're able to do that when a family comes in for an intake?

Ronelle Pellissier: Represent the students?

Shilpa Taufique: Yeah. Yeah. The whole program, really.

Ronelle Pellissier: When students come in or applicants come in for intakes, I always try to show them around a little bit. See we always have things hung up. And posters. So it's always nice to just show them around.

So they get a little more comfortable. I also, I don't [00:35:00] always obviously mention about my history with CARES.

Shilpa Taufique: That's okay. So boundaries are good.

Ronelle Pellissier: But , there has been circumstances where I do, and I just see a shift in the parent's face. Where they're, they just feel a little more comfortable. Or safe with this option, because obviously there's so many different programs.

None like CARES, but there's mental health programs, restart programs. But sometimes I do say "I was a CARES student and it helped me a lot." And I just see the parent just be like, huh, I would've never, I would've never guessed that.

And then they look at their kid. And I'm just like, yes, they will be okay.

Shilpa Taufique: Wow, that's amazing. And a few days ago, what was it, last week, I got an email from a prospective parent who just out of the blue, actually one of those that we couldn't accept because the hospital didn't accept their insurance who wrote just the most beautiful [00:36:00] note about her experience and her child's experience of working with you, to get rejected, and yet she felt compelled to write to me to say what an amazing experience that was, and if only more people could work the way Ronelle worked with us.

And she was just so grateful. And I was floored by that. I have never gotten that sort of an email before.

Ronelle Pellissier: Oh yeah. I was really shocked, but I was so grateful. 'Cause like you said, I had tried so hard and then I realized that we didn't take their the insurance. And so I think I spent like an hour, maybe not that long, but just like gathering resources for her.

I'm just like. I got you like five resources. Hopefully this helps. If not, let me know and I'll find you some more. So yeah, it just, it felt nice 'cause in my mind I'm like very anxious that I'm rejecting someone, especially a parent who's struggling to get their kids some help.

Shilpa Taufique: So now that we're in the new space, I'm hoping we can create more [00:37:00] seats for more kids to come. And in terms of where we're gonna go next I'm hoping you're able to help me with. And building out CARES to be able to serve many more kids in our city.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: And bring in additional, not only supports, but various resources and different programming. And there's a lot for us to do with building out CARES now. And also with uprise, and in your role, you help out with Uprise.

So I'll just share that, Uprise is the offshoot of CARES, CARES being the hub of the intensity of the services that we offer. And uprise is the tailor made components of our program that we then take out into the community.

So we're embedded in schools or in various sorts of community centers, we're about to be in a youth shelter, offering the range of mental health and substance treatments, and also just psychoeducation.

So really it's a question of what do the youth and the families and the staff in these locations [00:38:00] need, and how can we provide it, rather than forcing everybody to come into a typical traditional healthcare model.

And so you field these referrals as well, and you take these applications and I'm hoping that you are with us too, to continue and grow these uprise locations.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes.

Shilpa Taufique: And really spread our way of working throughout the city and beyond.

Ronelle Pellissier: Yes. I hope so.

Shilpa Taufique: Okay. Ronelle, thank you so much for everything you've shared.

Ronelle Pellissier: Thank you.

Shilpa Taufique: I'm eternally grateful to you. I am too, and loved hearing your stories again. Do you have any questions for me?

Ronelle Pellissier: I have one question. As you mentioned, we just moved to a new location. What are your next plans for CARES?

Shilpa Taufique: I'm very excited about this new space. been working on this for many years, in some way, shape, or form, and as of two weeks ago, we just moved into a beautiful new space with an unheard of amount of support and encouragement [00:39:00] from Sinai.

To which I am also like, I'm so grateful to how much they get it. They get what we do, and they get the impact and they're behind us in wanting to grow this program. And make it more accessible to more youth and families. And so that is really the goal.

It's just we're gonna get bigger, we're gonna go out into the community more. We're going to open up more Uprises in more schools, more community centers adding a youth shelter as well, and we really wanna see our approach to working with youth, teens and young adults as a way of working as opposed to a manual or a process or a procedure.

It's not just that there's, I'm hearing it in you and I think you hear it in me and you hear it in everybody. That's a CARES. It's about a way of thinking, a way of feeling, a way of living. And a way of being. And that's really what we wanna be promoting.

And because I think all of those tie back to what you have [00:40:00] beautifully outlined for us in just the course of the development of your resilience over your life. And how that just takes you to places that you'd never imagined you'd go.

Ronelle, what would Ronelle of today say to Ronelle from 2015?

Ronelle Pellissier: I think she would tell her to just breathe. I never really breathe. Just take a second. It'll be okay. Your timeline is not everyone else's timeline. Just breathe. It'll happen when it's supposed to happen.

Shilpa Taufique: Thank you.

Stephen Calabrira: Thanks again to Ms. Ronelle Pelissier and Dr. Shilpa Taufique for their time and expertise. For more information on the CARES program, email CARES front desk@mountsinai.org, or click the link in the podcast description. That's all for this episode of Road to Resilience.

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