**A narrative on a decade of work: An interview with Renee Yokum**

*Introduction:*

*You are listening to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center Just Rural! Podcast series that highlights innovative programs and success stories from rural communities across the United States.*

*[Music: Cattails]*

**Ali:**

There are some programs that have had long-standing relationships with Child Advocacy Centers. In talking with Renee Yokum, the Sexual Assault Services Coordinator at Women Aid in Crisis in Randolph County West Virginia, I learned about the history of a collaborative effort with the local CAC that has spanned nearly a decade. Renee walked me through the story of this work, turning the pages to show the birth of an idea, the day-to-day practice, and the strong role of leading characters involved in making this effort a reality.

**Renee:**

We started, I went to a training in a neighboring county that highlighted a Child Advocacy Center from North Carolina I believe and was so impressed with the process and the successful outcome with that child and what a friendly environment it was.

**Ali:**

Around the same time that Renee was introduced to the idea, many other members of the community were also learning about the Child Advocacy Center model. Among them was a community member who now serves as the director of the Child Advocacy Center, Sharon Bedford, and the director of Women Aid in Crisis, Marci Drake. The more they learned, the more committed this group became to developing this type of service within Randolph County. Renee went on to describe the process.

**Renee:**

We brought people in to do trainings in the community and to find out where we were and that’s how we all, it was just something within each of us that was a passion.

It was like a say it was a very, very long process, I mean years, years, years, 8 years, 9 years before it has come to this point. Each of us attended different trainings. There was Victor Veith from the National Child Protection Training Center. We had another CAC in the southern part of the state that we borrowed stuff from for our protocols and stuff like that. Sharon Bedford got grants from different places—the Benifem grant was an initial startup. We looked at the National Children’s Alliance accreditation and that’s were a lot of it has come to be what we needed it to look like. She knew that that’s what we had to do, meet those criteria on that and all that is mapped out in their information that they give you when you apply for the accreditation. They sent us, a team of 6 I believe, to Huntsville, Alabama to do a team training, and that was great.

The two biggest components of this coming together were Sharon Bedford and Marci Drake not being afraid of funding issues and caring enough about what’s best for the children that come through this process. Those are the two key people that made this happen, because they cared about the kids. I know that a lot of the agencies say we don’t want--it’s got to be positions, not personalities that make up these teams, but these are people that are passionate about this. That have seen a model that works and wanted it for our area.

**Ali:**

Renee had the unique perspective of serving as the primary sexual assault advocate to provide services within the CAC setting. She described the day-to-day operations of the CAC, the experience of working with families through the investigation process, and the team approach to improving overall outcomes.

**Renee:**

Through the advocacy piece, it’s just a great collaboration. We have an advocate from the prosecutors’ office that is through the criminal process and the crime victim’s comp fund. I go over for the interviews and sit with the family, offer them services, find out what their needs are and just be in there when they go in to talk to the team about if there was something that was disclosed and then I’m there with the children to make it a fun experience. It’s just not a traumatizing experience for them when they come out of there and that’s just one of the big goals. So then we all get together, the advocates get together once a month and go down through and do a case review and make sure that everything for that family, we make follow up calls and make sure that there is not a need—counseling, medical, whatever—if they need transportation, one of us says yeah, I can do that. We try to make sure that nobody falls through the cracks. So a lot of times at this it’s a very traumatic time for the family and they don’t know what to do. They don’t know the process through the criminal, through the civil legal, if there’s a protection order needed, they don’t know all that stuff so they have advocates that help them through that process.

**Ali:**

Renee also described the importance of having a working multidisciplinary team in place to help provide all of the different kinds of services offered at the CAC. While this part of the process seemed challenging, it worked out in the end and led to future collaborative efforts.

**Renee:**

The MDIT was something for a long time that was not working. We had prosecutors in place that didn’t believe in it, and we had ones that weren’t real involved with it. Now we do, and that piece has come together. We have SANE nurses now that are trained. We have a doctor, a pediatrician in our area that attended SANE trainings and now she does a lot of the exams. We also are working now with our hospital on getting a SANE program back in our area, and that’s the sexual assault nurse examiners.

**Ali:**

Besides some of the issues with collaboration between agencies, Renee discussed the financial challenges and barriers that exist when it comes to doing this important work.

**Renee:**

The lack of funding--that was another thing. It is tooth and nail. This, it amazes me that this is an issue that affects, that the sexual abuse let alone the physical abuse to children and 1 in 4 females and 1 in 6 males and that this is an issue within our communities nationwide and there is so little funding for this. It just blows my mind that that is such a huge issue within all these agencies that work together. It’s money. And I think that’s why a lot of people don’t work together because they’re afraid it’s gonna take away from what they’re doing.

**Ali:**

Overcoming these common challenges has allowed Renee’s organization and the CAC to create a smoother, more trauma-informed investigative process. She talked about how this has helped them to gauge their success.

**Renee:**

There’s more eyes on everything and different experts that play a part in this that offer their expertise. I feel like it makes a better process for families and children that go through this.

One of the issues for how do you gauge your successes, and they have counties, from all surrounding counties that call them and say, can you do an interview because they’ve seen and they realize that it’s a very good process that happens there.

We know that our community is gaining knowledge; every year they have more people that participate in the fundraisers. More of the professionals in these departments are learning more about the CAC and how it can help them do their job, like law enforcement, and child protective services. When you see that you’ve got people that will help you obtain your goal within that investigation, I think that they see the benefit of that.

**Ali:**

As they continue to work together Renee noted that they found a marked need within the community to understand sexual abuse. In addition to providing a better response, these two organizations have found other ways to collaborate, particularly around providing community prevention education with limited staff and resources.

**Renee:**

We’ve got a long way to go with the education definitely because we don’t have through their agency and our agency, we don’t have a lot of staff to do community education. You’ve got tons of schools throughout our county and service agencies and just the general public to educate on especially child sexual abuse, because it’s one of those that it happens often, but most people don’t think that it’s going on. We share curriculum that we have with them. Our prevention educator does some of the higher classes, they are concentrating, the CAC concentrates more on the elementary in our county. It’s a lot of people with a big heart for this and just have a passion and believe in it.

**Ali:**

Even through the challenges, these two organizations found ways to understand differences and work together toward a common goal. Renee emphasized the significance of collaboration because in small communities with limited resources, it’s impossible for one person to do it all.

**Renee:**

We all recognize that no one agency can do everything, that no one person can cover this when it’s just something that you have to realize that the best practice is to have more people that can help you do your job. And is one of the, the communication, keeping that open and learning that there’s a way to communicate. Everything is not perfect. When you bring so many different people together, everybody has a different idea and there’s a way that you sit down and you talk out that and you don’t get offended when someone might tactfully be criticizing and asking you to look at what you’re doing, and being open to that, to looking within the team and looking at yourself.

**Ali:**

Renee went on to discuss how the CAC director was able to build a meaningful program because of the resources available and the participation from different organizations in the community. This work requires ongoing effort to understand and value each member of the team.

**Renee:**

The one other thing that we talked about it being really important is she said she can’t afford to hire the people that are already working within the community for other agencies that build their team. The mental health services, she doesn’t have to pay for that, the community, the women’s aid in crisis, my services, Women’s aid in crisis grants pay for my services, but she doesn’t have to and that’s what she utilized was other agencies. We’re just so thankful for the relationships that are a part of this and the changes that have occurred. We know that these relationships are so fragile, because we have seen through the years that one little thing can just blow it apart and then you’re back to square one, so handling these relationships, nurturing them, putting time into them, making each entity feel important and that way it is a team, a supportive team, that works well together. But valuing each member and making each member feel like they are important.

*Outro:*

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*[music: Cattails]*