

[00:00:01.640] - Melissa Corkum

This episode of The Adoption Connection Podcast is sponsored by the Enneagram and Adoption Collective. We invite you to join this intimate group of adoptive moms as we use the Enneagram to gain powerful insight, build stronger connections, and have greater compassion for ourselves and the people we love.

[00:00:20.510] - Lisa Qualls

This group is for you if you're an adoptive mom, if you're curious about the enneagram and new to it or if you already love the Enneagram, if you want to explore your adoption journey in a deep and meaningful way, if you want to have better understanding of how God made you and why you do what you do, and lastly, if you crave community and connection with other adoptive moms.

[00:00:43.100] - Melissa Corkum

So we are super, super excited about this new group. We do have a Facebook group that has started already and we'll be meeting a couple times a month on Zoom with some themed conversation. We just could not be more thrilled to be digging so deep into what our adoption journey has for us as people and as moms, and I think especially because of maybe covid and the lack of in-person connection when we've started some of these conversations already and the deep, deep connection is like feeding my soul. I love it.

[00:01:21.020] - Lisa Qualls

Me too. I'm so thrilled about this group, and right now you can be a founding member. We are just getting rolling. If you like to be in on the ground floor of things, and if you want to pay a special founding member monthly fee, we invite you to jump right in with us.

[00:01:36.920] - Melissa Corkum

This is the last week to join us as a founding member, and we have a special flash sale for you all. You can join us at just \$10/month by grabbing an annual pass for one hundred twenty dollars. We only have a limited number of these spots, so go ahead and grab one now. If you lock in at this rate, that will be your rate forever. This will make a fabulous Mother's Day gift if you're not sure what to tell your people to get you or if you just want to get it for yourself. You can find out more at the adoptionconnection.com/collective. We can't wait to see you inside.

[00:02:16.610] - Lisa Qualls

Welcome to The Adoption and Connection Podcast, where we share resources by and for adoptive and foster moms. I'm Lisa Qualls.

[00:02:24.530] - Melissa Corkum

And this is Melissa Corkum. Don't worry, we get it, and we're here for you.

[00:02:29.930] - Melissa Corkum

Hi, friends. Welcome to episode 130 of The Adoption Connection Podcast. We have another phenomenal story for you this week, and like Lisa mentioned last week, we love to bring you different voices and perspectives from the adoption triad, and probably one of the most underrepresented sides of the triad is the birth mom voice. And of course, Lisa is a birth mom, and she was able to sit down this week and chat with Ashley Mitchell, who is also a birth mom and has another remarkable story to tell and is just such a strong woman.

[00:03:10.380] - Lisa Qualls

She really is we had such a great conversation and it was a unique opportunity for me to connect with another birth mother, which just does not happen all that often. So Ashley Mitchell is the owner of Big Tough Girl and the founder and executive director of Lifetime Healing Foundation. She set out to seek increased care, understanding and resources for birth mothers. So for over a decade, Ashley has been one of the most consistent and sought after birth mother voices really in the nation. She is well known for her candor, her vulnerability, and her transparency in adoption, and her story has touched the hearts of countless members of the adoption community and beyond. And I will caution you that if you are listening with young children around, we do tackle some very mature subjects, and so you

might want to use some wisdom in whether you want to listen with some earbuds or wait and listen later, but I hope you enjoy this interview with Ashley.

[00:04:12.020] - Lisa Qualls

Well, hello, Ashley. Welcome to The Adoption Connection Podcast.

[00:04:15.380] - Ashley Mitchell

Hi, Lisa, how are you?

[00:04:17.240] - Lisa Qualls

I'm really good and I'm really happy to see you and get to talk with you this morning. We see each other on social media.

[00:04:25.610] - Ashley Mitchell

Isn't that how everyone connects these days?

[00:04:27.860] - Lisa Qualls

Yes, it does seem to be, and we get to know each other in such a different sort of way. But anyhow, I'm so glad you're here. Could you introduce yourself to our listeners?

[00:04:39.110] - Ashley Mitchell

Yes. I am so grateful to be here and chat with your audience. My name is Ashley Mitchell, born and raised in Utah, I live outside of Salt Lake City, my husband and I just celebrated 12 years of marriage, which is awesome, and we have two children that we parent. Our daughter is 11 and our son is 9. And I am a birth mother as well. I placed my son Derek for adoption. He will actually be 15 in April. So we've been at that for a really long time and we're just, you know, we're in the grind of parent hood, but we're also in the grind of new seasons of open adoption and transitioning into what this looks like, because my husband and kids are very much a part of it and just processing what that looks like, so other than that, we're in the middle of the remodel that will never end and it just makes me crazy.

[00:05:34.060] - Lisa Qualls

Yes, that can be really, really stressful. OK, so all together, your kids are, your very first son is 15.

[00:05:41.260] - Ashley Mitchell

He'll be 15.

[00:05:42.460] - Lisa Qualls

Ok.

[00:05:42.460] - Ashley Mitchell

And then 11 and 9. Yup, all three of them.

[00:05:46.540] - Lisa Qualls

All right. So being a birth mother has been a huge part of your life as it has been of mine. It shaped my life probably more than any single other thing. Would you say that being a birth mother has influenced and shaped your life significantly?

[00:06:07.630] - Ashley Mitchell

Yes. I don't think I knew the magnitude of what that was going to look like at the time of placement, but 15 years later, I'm really understanding what we mean when we say, "adoption is for life."
laughter It impacts every aspect of my life, of my parenting, of my relationships, when I was trying to date, from everything. It shows up in ways that are amazing and these tender mercies and in ways that just have me crying in the car at the grocery store for no reason. And I never, I never thought that one single event could define me so deeply as becoming a birth mother of my son.

[00:06:55.110] - Lisa Qualls

Do you want to share anything about how you came to that decision to place him?

[00:07:01.740] - Ashley Mitchell

Yes, so I was actually a little bit older, I was twenty six by the time I gave birth. So for me, there was a lot of very honest conversation with myself. I had a job, I had health care, you know, on paper, I had all of these checklist things to single parent. But there was some very deep rooted things for me that were really important that I wanted. And as many, many women do, you know, facing an unplanned pregnancy is terrifying, and we have to weigh a lot of options in those fear based decisions from whether we're going to carry the baby to term, to whether we're going to parent, and I ran, I ran the gantlet with all of those and ended up with making an adoption plan. I kept my pregnancy a secret up until the very end, and so I had my very first doctor's appointment, picked family, met them, and gave birth, like, within a month.

[00:08:01.470] - Lisa Qualls

Wow.

[00:08:01.470] - Ashley Mitchell

So it was a lot. There were things about that that were a great blessing. I think there was a lot less heartache and trauma for my family that knew, my, my just my immediate family. They didn't have to carry that pregnancy for a very long time. I'm grateful that we didn't have that hanging over our head for nine whole months. But there is such a great burden in carrying pregnancy in secret and the shame that just piles on in your head through that secrecy. You know, I live in Utah, so I was pregnant during the winter and we have a lot of snow, and so it was all the layers and it was easy to hide, but it was, it was so emotional. And so, but after weighing all the options when adoption came to the table, it was just, we didn't look back. We made that choice, and within a month, we moved through the steps and did all the stuff and never looked back.

[00:09:00.640] - Lisa Qualls

When you say we, was your partner, his birth father, involved in the decisions?

[00:09:06.640] - Ashley Mitchell

So, his birth father was not. We had talked about an abortion early on. I was too far along here in the state, and so he actually, when I met with the agency, he had relinquished his rights in that last month before birth, and so he was not a part of any of that at that time. So I had told my parents and my siblings. I have three siblings, and that was all that knew, the birth father and then my little immediate family, and they knew within that. The birth father knew very early on, but none of my family knew until that last month. So I had my caseworker and my parents that processed that last month with me, and that was about it. That was about it.

[00:09:48.310] - Lisa Qualls

Wow, so you really kept your circle very small.

[00:09:51.810] - Ashley Mitchell

Yes. There was so many things that I did because I was, the fear of accepting reality was so much because it wasn't just, "oh, my gosh, I have to give birth, and I've never been a parent before," but it was the disappointment, and telling other people, and the embarrassment, and the shame, and what about my job and that checklist, that was a long list of things that really kept me from wanting to embrace this. And, you know, there wasn't baby showers and celebration and I was becoming a mother for the first time, but it was not, it wasn't anything about it that was a happy, joyful time. It was scary and so fear based and one of the loneliest seasons of my life.

[00:10:37.870] - Lisa Qualls

I can imagine. Well, I know, actually. I don't even have to imagine. Did you know at the time of placement when you were making your plan, did you all know how open your adoption was going to be?

[00:10:51.850] - Ashley Mitchell

No, not even a little bit. You know, I pored over profile books and I picked a family that looked

amazing on paper and I got to meet them once, which, you know, you say these things out loud and it's just so crazy to think that that's how we start these relationships by literally picking strangers out of a book to raise our children. They were wonderful, they were wonderful, and they had adopted before, and so they had talked a little bit about their open adoption relationship in their profile book. And so that was, that was a draw to me. However, 15 years ago, we didn't, I didn't, we didn't know what it, we didn't know what open adoption was. So it was, you can have contact and letters and things like that, but I didn't understand the responsibility that I would have or the role that I would play so many years later. And so, the arrangement that we made at the hospital, you know, I look back now and if someone would have told me we would have what we have now, I would think you were crazy. And we went through many years of silence and no contact, so it's evolved greatly from those first initial conversations to what it's actually looked like to evolve into this relationship.

[00:12:12.680] - Lisa Qualls

So in the beginning, did contact go through your agency or did you have direct contact from the very beginning?

[00:12:20.360] - Ashley Mitchell

So like many adoptions, the agency was kind of the middleman, and correspondence went to the agency. So they wanted to protect the adoptive parents privacy and their residence address and things like that. So she would write a letter, mail it to the agency, the agency would call me, if I was up to it, I would come and pick it up from them, and then I could rewrite and it would go like that through the middleman. And that was part of a contract requirement for the first year of our adoption relationship, but we hit about the six month mark and I kind of cut that relationship off. And so she kept sending her correspondence to the agency to honor her year contract, but I stopped going and receiving those letters.

[00:13:12.460] - Lisa Qualls

So now, looking back all these years, do you know why you made that decision?

[00:13:18.950] - Ashley Mitchell

Yeah. I think it started, it started with being very logical about it, right. I tried to be very smart about it, and it was, you know, they were sending me pictures and things started to stir within those first six months that, that I didn't understand and no one was talking to me about, about this ambiguous loss of being a mother, but now I'm childless concept and I didn't understand that, and no one around me was addressing it or understood it themselves. And they were starting to send these pictures and these newborn babies, they change so quickly that I started to get six month old pictures and I didn't know him. When I thought about him and connected with him, I was in the hospital with him when he was a newborn and pouring over him and praying over him and crying over him in the hospital, and as he started to grow and adjust into his environment that was not my own, he felt like a stranger to me, and that was so devastating to me. And I just said, he's yours. He's yours. I gave you this child, I gave you this family. Go and be a family. And back then, I really did believe, you know, I had no contact with anybody that had had any experience with adoption that I knew about. Probably they did, they just never talked about it, and so I really believe that if you take him and he never asks about me, then you did a good job and I picked the right people. And we had missed the education around my responsibility so many years later, and so I started to disconnect very much from, I just couldn't, I couldn't go there, I couldn't feel him, I couldn't miss him, and I didn't understand what I was missing and why I was missing it, and so I pushed farther and farther away and that went on for many, many years. Lots of self-destructive behavior through those years of trying not to feel everything that, I that I needed to feel.

[00:15:26.010] - Lisa Qualls

Yeah, yeah. And do you feel like there was a point at which you realized I'm never going to actually get over this? I mean, that's a painful and very real place to be.

[00:15:42.900] - Ashley Mitchell

Yeah, you know, I think one of the biggest lies for me is always "time will heal everything," and I just, that's not what that looks like, you know, I miss, I'm, I miss my son every day. I miss him every day.

And he, there's always just this thought in the back of my head, this reminder all the time. I'm a mother. I miss my son. But I think we learn to expand around and coexist with our grief and loss and respect and honor it and give it a voice when it needs it and all of these things, but I was about four and a half, five years post relinquishment and had a complete breakdown. I think a lot of birth moms will hit a point at some, like an "aha" moment of like, oh, I am not OK. You know, and that looks different for everybody. Mine, unfortunately, because I don't do anything halfway was very devastating. You know, suicide attempts and so many self-destructive behavior and the reality of facing that loss, it was so heartbreaking, but it was the most necessary step for us to be where we are now because for the first time I had answers. I had an understanding of what was happening. I had a name for it. I could sit with it, and I was not numbing it or pushing it away or trying to cover it up, and, you know, bringing those wounds to the surface after so many years of trying to bury it was so painful, so painful and so sad and lonely, and, but it was, it was a turning point because when that light turned on, it changed everything. It changed everything. But it was at that point, I was actually locked in a mental health facility, actually, and it was in that moment when I walked out going, now I know what we're working with and now I can talk about this and now I can put the pieces and now I can get the right tools, the right doctors, the right meds, whatever I need to. And it really changed the course of what's happened since. And I knew then that this was not going anywhere and it doesn't matter what paperwork I sign at the hospital, this is still a huge part of who I am, and if we don't, it just is always going to be something that we're processing and growing and becoming and evolving through.

[00:18:18.620] - Lisa Qualls

So you said now we knew what we were dealing with. What would you say that, that was? I mean, obviously, the actual separation from your child, what would you say you were dealing with?

[00:18:33.920] - Ashley Mitchell

You know, there was so much grief and trauma that was so unresolved, I never dealt with he was my first born, and then in the state of Utah, you can relinquish parental rights as early as twenty four hours. So I became a mother for the first time and then relinquished my rights and was a birth mom before I was even discharged from the hospital. So I had all of relinquishment, all of child birth, then all of unresolved grief and trauma, and then PTSD and triggers and things that have been going on for years, going to baby showers, and being around family, and never talking about things, and having my family acknowledge grandchildren, but not my son that I placed all of these triggers constantly around me that were never acknowledged. So it wasn't just I gave birth and I separated from my son. It was everything that, that encompasses as a mother. And that was so deep rooted on top of dealing with recovering from so much self-destructive behavior and things like that.

[00:19:39.460] - Lisa Qualls

At what point did your husband, your now husband, enter your life?

[00:19:44.950] - Ashley Mitchell

So he entered, actually, right at about that break down. He was there, so he met me at I just said, man, you don't get to go anywhere because if you knew me then, then we're going to be good.

[00:19:59.740] - Lisa Qualls

Yeah, it's not going to get any worse than where we started, right?

[00:20:03.160] - Ashley Mitchell

I think, God willing, it doesn't ever get worse than when we started. But he, he knew from the beginning it was, you know, I had dated before and it's so awkward, you know, this is a huge question we get from birth moms all the time. Like, when do you tell the people you're dating about this child that you have and some people are way more open about it, and some people are like, you know, the people at the grocery store or first date, like, don't need to know about it, you know, and that's just such a personal preference. But I was so raw when he met me that it was a little bit unavoidable for me to not talk about it, and so he knew right out of the gate. So he's been a part of it even before him and I had children. He's known about it and been around it and watched that recovery into redemption a little bit, so he knew from the very beginning from those, like, right at that break down, like about

that five year mark.

[00:20:56.690] - Lisa Qualls

Yeah, that's, that's our situation as well. My son was two when I met Russ, so, like, I was still kind of still acutely grieving in so many ways, and he's walked with me, and it's not been easy for him. It just hasn't. And I mean, years and years and years, so he stepped into that grief and I'm just super thankful he's the person he is, that he could, that he had the strength to bear it with me.

[00:21:26.300] - Ashley Mitchell

Yeah, yeah. He's watched that evolve and change so much, and, you know, there's things about, you know, he was married and divorced and had children with his first wife. I think there was some things not that co-parenting is what we're working with, with open adoption, but I think there was an understanding in separation of children and recovering trust and respect in the parents that have caused harm and things like that, that he could understand enough to be able to sit with me. So it wasn't all such a foreign concept. He still doesn't know to this day who his biological father is, so he has had a little bit of experience on that side, and his first wife, when he met her, was already pregnant, and so he adopted her at a very young age, so there was enough understanding for him that he didn't come to the table going, "Whoa, this is a lot." But it's a lot for even someone that has had that kind of experience because you can love somebody and want to sit with somebody and support them all you want, but until you've really walked that you just can't understand the complexities of it. And as we started to navigate into now open adoption with our children that we parent, there's been a lot of stuff that's come up that, hey, where do we protect our children that we care of that are in our own home versus giving Derek what he needs and you what you need, and so it's been it's complicated, it's complicated.

[00:23:03.040] - Lisa Qualls

So when you started to get healthier and you were ready, how did you know you were ready to re-initiate contact, and then how did you do it? And how did they handle it?

[00:23:14.110] - Ashley Mitchell

You know, when my husband and I, when we had our daughter, when she was born, it broke everything wide open into a million pieces for me. And I get so emotional talking about it because all I knew a pregnancy was fear and shame. I mean, I was afraid to call my parents and my husband and I were married and we were having a baby, and I didn't know, I didn't know how to do that. All I knew was that, all I knew how to do is give birth. I didn't know how to be a mom. I didn't know how to embrace that emotionally. I didn't know how to connect and attach. I was so disconnected from my, our daughter. It took a long time. In fact, we were about two weeks from giving birth and my husband was like shaking my shoulders, like, we have to get a car seat, we have to put this crib together. This baby is coming home. We have to get ready. And I didn't know how to do that, I didn't know how to do that, and I was crazy at the hospital. The nurses came in, I was like, you take her and I will cut you, like, don't let her out of my sight. I made my husband follow the nurses around, like, I was like last time you took a baby, he never came back, so, you know, and I just, I didn't understand parenting after placement. I had no idea I was going to feel that way. I was like, oh, this is going to fill this hole and every, no. Absolutely not, this is not about replacement. This is, this was on such a different level. There were things as I started to connect and get in the grind of parenthood that I really started to just deeply appreciate what they were willing to step in and do when I wasn't. And it was a really big deal, it's a really big deal, I know adoptive parents get a bad rap for wanting to adopt. It's a really big deal to step in and take on all that encompasses parenting. And I started to have such a respect for them and what they were willing to do when I wasn't, and as our daughter, you know, started to get a little older, I just said, I need to see them, I need to talk to them, I need to say things to them. And I had an old email because we hadn't had contact. I had moved out of state, you know, my husband and I met in Nashville, we, my daughter, our daughter was born at Vanderbilt, we had moved and my number had changed a million times and my address had changed a billion times, and, but I had an old email in a box of old paperwork and I just sent an email that said something really stupid, like, I don't know if you remember me, but you're my son and I would really like to meet you, and we have a daughter. And it really was because it was, it had been so long, and what do you say? It was so awkward. And I had rejected them, and said no so many times that I really didn't expect anything, but I just felt like I

needed to reach out and then whatever happens, happens. I tried really hard to release expectation of response and it was like twenty four hours and his mom, Lana, messaged back and she just said, we've been waiting for you, we've been waiting for you, and yes, yes, we've been waiting for you and whenever you're ready. And that really started this amazing, complicated journey of rebuilding trust and developing our relationship, and we've been doing, we've been in that ever since.

[00:26:58.300] - Lisa Qualls

An how old was your son when you re-initiated contact?

[00:27:02.140] - Ashley Mitchell

So I think the first time I saw him in person again was when he was six.

[00:27:08.800] - Lisa Qualls

What was that like and did he know who you were? I mean, as much as a six year old can understand.

[00:27:14.590] - Ashley Mitchell

I, I give full credit to his parents. The reason that we have the kind of relationship that we were able to build was because of the way they loved me when I was gone, when I couldn't be present. They kept him connected to his adoption, they kept him connected to me, they kept him connected to his birth story and so that when I was back, it was wasn't so foreign of a concept for me to be there. They had pictures and a few things like that, but they, they had worked so hard to keep me so present in the way they told stories and if they wrote a letter, they would always read it to him or have him draw a picture or always work so hard to keep me connected. So I knew that we were able to at least have a solid foundation because of the way they loved me in my absence. And having a one sided relationship like that was, is not easy and they worried about me all the time. They were mad at me, they wanted me to know him because he's amazing and I just, I couldn't be present, and, but they did an amazing job. And so when I saw him again, there's so much guilt, I think, there was so much guilt, but it was just such a relief that everything that I had been through to try and avoid or neglect or ignore was staring at me and it wasn't his fault. And it wasn't that he was the problem that I had to get rid of it. I was able to separate so much of my circumstance and the pregnancy and all of the mess in him. And when I saw him, it was like, oh, I need to give back to what was taken from you, and so it was really cool. It was really cool. And then from there, you know, I talk about our relationship, and my son is going to be 15 and he comes over and has sleepovers with my family and stuff, and you hear adoptive parents all the time, like, you know, I'm like, I give him back, like it's kidnaping if I don't return him, if I don't send him home. But that's a very hard concept to understand, to be so open and have them come and say there's so much fear and insecurity wrapped up in that. But it didn't start like that. Trust me, there were many years of needing to rebuild trust between his parents and I, that they knew that I was safe. They knew I was going to show up to visits, that I was going to answer the phone, that I cared about reading the updates and the letters and they tested me a lot. I'm so grateful for it. And they weren't, it wasn't in a way that was disrespectful, but they said, yes, we understand why this matters, but we're also the parents of this child that we need to protect and so we we rebuild trust for many years before him and I were ever alone together.

[00:30:13.640] - Lisa Qualls

That is really wise on their part and, but how gracious and open hearted they must be.

[00:30:21.020] - Ashley Mitchell

Oh, yeah.

[00:30:21.860] - Lisa Qualls

You know, to be willing because the thing is, they were willing to deal with the fear, they were willing to walk through their own fear of what might this mean and for the sake of their son and for your sake, you know. How does your son, does he talk much about adoption stuff with you or is it more like, whelp, this is just my life?

[00:30:43.030] - Ashley Mitchell

You know, it's really interesting because we're coming into a new season, so I remember when he

turned, I think it was nine and I was in a Barnes and Noble in Arizona and our relationship, we've been rebuilding and reconnecting that trust, and our, I thought we had an open adoption relationship and it was, but it was his mom and I dictating this entire relationship and I was walking through a Barnes and Noble and I got a text message, I was visiting my sister and it said, "Hey, this is Derek, I miss you." And I went, "Does your mom know you're texting?" Like, right then in that Barnes and Noble, I went, Oh, now we have an open adoption relationship because now he has an opinion. He went to his mom today and said, I miss Ashley. Can I text her and tell her? And it changed, oh, my gosh it changed everything, it changed everything because then it was Derek wants this, Derek wants to visit, can we do this? Because Derek's asking if he can do this. When he turned ten, he wanted a sleepover and it took a full year for me to be OK with having this. I mean, it was, it changed everything. And it was like all we had been doing was laying a foundation for him to have trust and having whatever open adoption relationship he wanted and now it starts., And that transition has changed a little bit. He definitely wants more access. He's a lot, he internalizes a lot like I do, but he's starting to have a lot more questions. The social media thing is really difficult. I actually really hate it.

[00:32:24.740] - Lisa Qualls
That he can follow you.

[00:32:26.320] - Ashley Mitchell
Yeah, it's one of those

[00:32:27.820] - Lisa Qualls
I get it.

[00:32:28.300]

It's one of those things, you know, and it's hard too because I want to build that trust and have that individual relationship with him, but he's still 15 and I'm not his parent, so I still have to respect the rules and boundaries that he has in his household that his parents have about social media that's just their parenting choice, not an adoption thing. And finding this balance of how do I honor and respect them and allow them to still trust me with their rules, but also be able to give him what he needs is a 15 year old boy and like build this. So it's very complicated and we're going to screw it up, I'm sure, a million times so, but there's been plenty of times where I've called his mom and just been like, hey, did you know Derek is on Instagram? He just followed me, and she's going, no, we don't do that in her house with any of our kids right now. Can you please do this, this and handle it this way? And I said, you're his parent, yes, of course. But still being able to go to him and say, I'm not, it's hard to know because I think what he, I'm not speaking for him, but I believe that what he's searching for he's not going to get from me through social media because I have a platform that's more general education. I think it would be really hard for him to separate his personal experience with the education that we put on social media. So I'm trying to develop that relationship that says anything that you want to know about you and I, come to me, let's do this personally. Anything that you're curious about, about open adoption or adoption as a teen or being adopted? I have a whole box of books that I'm getting ready to send him right now to say these are, these are suggestions that came from adoptees, they might interest you. If you have questions about us, let me know. Let's just not do social media right now. And I don't know, I don't know. Maybe that's very naive to think that a 15 year old isn't going to do that anyway, but it's scary. It's complicated.

[00:34:27.600] - Lisa Qualls

It is complicated. I mean, I definitely think about that a lot when I'm posting and writing, you know, because I have well, my adopted children are all teens and young adult, you know, so, yeah. And that's, it makes me pause. At what point did you say, I'm not the only one out there feeling this way, I want to help other birth moms. How did you even begin connecting. That's my first question. How did you begin connecting with other birth moms? And then we'll go a little deeper.

[00:35:06.480] - Ashley Mitchell

You know, grief lies to you and really makes you believe that your pain and suffering is so unique that no one will ever be able to understand you and no one will ever get it. I can't even tell you how many times I hear from moms that are like, my story is so different, so it's been so hard, and I'm like, honey, I

just heard that last week, you know what I mean? And not that it doesn't matter and it's not important and it's not their individual experience, but it's not as unique as we like, that grief likes to make us think it is. It keeps us isolated. And I literally believe that I was the only woman that has ever done this in the history of the world. So when I came out of that hospital, you know, at that, at that early stages and in that five year mark, it was a really big thing for me to start writing and processing because I knew how damaging it was to keep it in here. I already knew what that looked like if I ignored it and pretend it didn't happen, so we didn't want to do that again. And so I, I process I need to get it out or I'll just sit and spin on it forever. Right after that, that whole incident, I started one of those free like blogspot blogs.

[00:36:17.590] - Lisa Qualls
I had one of those.

[00:36:18.600] - Ashley Mitchell
Yeah, and I just started writing. I started writing and processing everything. I started as a writer and I, it was not for anybody but myself, but I needed a place that I could go and sit down and just bleed it out every day. People, I just randomly, somehow I get a random little message or something that they're like, oh my gosh, me too. Still in secret rooms and private messages of oh my gosh, you're saying everything that I could never say because so-and-so doesn't know or so-and-so doesn't know. And, you know, this was still, you know, 13 years ago, people were writing on blogs and social media is starting to come onto the scene. Everyone was on MySpace then and then Facebook opened and this, I'm sitting here going, man, I was there at the beginning when some of that stuff happened. And just slowly, little by little, women just started to pour into my, into my email and my messages. And it wasn't, there wasn't a call to action, I wasn't doing any kind of support, I was just writing my heart, and I was very vulnerable and very raw and honest. I'm known for it still now to be very vulnerable. The women were pouring in, going you're the first birth I've ever heard talk about. When I started doing some research, when I started saying in those seasons, I can't be the only one. What I was finding is we talk a lot about the ones in tens. We had groups that were so, in so much pain and so hurt and wanted to just destroy adoption from the bottom up. And then we have the tens that were just in there, delirious, little happy world of how amazing adoption and I lived in the five and six. I was breathing pain and hope at the same time. And I thought, that's where we need the community. That's what we're missing because a lot of people aren't leading with this, but a lot of people are saying this doesn't match what I'm feeling on the inside and so we smacked it in the middle and said, you can be both and this is how we're going to process and make room for all of it. And so it was a new, kind of a new thought for a lot of the birth moms that really were like finally connecting dots to say wow, like, I can be both. And so that's kind of where it started. I started writing and people started reading and it was a new, is a new concept to be really, to process the grief, but also to have hope and healing at the same time.

[00:39:03.040] - Lisa Qualls
Do you often hear from birth mothers from the 60s, 50s, like the women, have you read The Girls Who Went Away? I'm sure you have.

[00:39:10.890] - Ashley Mitchell
Yes, oh yeah. It's one of my top recommendations.

[00:39:17.680] - Lisa Qualls
You know, I didn't read it for a long time because I just didn't think I could. I thought it would just break me, and it, it did. It was very hard.

[00:39:26.320] - Ashley Mitchell
It took me it took me about a year to get through it, yeah.

[00:39:29.230] - Lisa Qualls
Yeah.

[00:39:30.070] - Ashley Mitchell

You know, one of the most important things about that book, I think, is when we're looking at adoption is we talk about the propaganda to share about adoption. And back in your time, it was when they were going to the adoptive parents, they were saying these children are unwanted. And so it was easy for adoptive parents to say, well, of course, we'll take them, they're unwanted. And now we're in a space where we're saying we love these children so much, we want to give them to you. And so adoptive parents are saying, of course, we'll take them because you want to give them to us. And I was like, how far have we really come, or have we just changed the message of what adoption is? But how much in the root of it is really changed? And I've learned so much from that book, and I, and I reference it all the time, but it's so important to understand that lifelong grief and how we've transitioned, but have we really changed? And we have women that come to our support groups 30, 40 years. They just say, where were you, where were you, I would have loved to have this and I'm like, you can still have it. They're like, it's too late now, like, 40 years, 50 years, I'm not going to come to a support group. But I also have women that come out of the quote unquote adoption closet going, this is the first time I've ever met a birth mom in forty five years. I was speaking at an event in Vegas and it was just a women's event, so it was just sharing my story and doing the big tub girl stuff. It wasn't adoption specific, but it always comes up because it's a part of who I am. And I had an elderly woman, she was probably seventy five, eighty, walked up to me, my husband was by me, people had been taking my picture and, you know, was talking with me, and she kind of pulled me to the side and she was with someone that was kind of like her caretaker, and she just kind of leaned in real quiet and whispered and she said, I just wanted you to know that my story is your story, and I didn't want to pass without someone knowing.

[00:41:30.850] - Lisa Qualls
Wow.

[00:41:30.850] - Ashley Mitchell
And I about hit the floor at that conference center and I just said, and she turned to walk and I said, please don't go, like, let me talk to you. And that was such a profound vision, like, perspective of those kinds of books that I have read and learned about and the secrecy and the shame and the heartbreak and the burden of that journey to carry. And it changed, it changed so much for me.

[00:42:06.940] - Lisa Qualls
So tell me about the work you do now.

[00:42:08.980] - Ashley Mitchell
We did Facebook groups for a long time, when Facebook groups first started, we started running online groups. We were one of the very first private groups that was for birth moms, and it was me and a few of my birth mother friends that were doing the admin work. We did a pretty good job considering, but we learned that just because you can start a group doesn't mean that you should and that we had no business managing that kind of trauma. We were not licensed professionals, social media never sleeps, we were reliving our own trauma and triggers through everyone's posts all the time while trying to help them and support them, I spent many, we did that for about five years, I spent many nights on suicide hotlines on conference calls with the women on social media, we probably caused more damage than than we thought we were doing good with running online support groups because we didn't have the right people in place to help process. And it never stops, and it was three thousand women, twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, dumping trauma, vomiting trauma on social media.

[00:43:19.330] - Lisa Qualls
Ok, let's just pause. Let's just pause there a minute. Three thousand birth moms in all that trauma and grief.

[00:43:27.460] - Ashley Mitchell
Yep.

[00:43:28.090] - Lisa Qualls
Who probably had never, very few of them, had ever been able to share this. So I can only imagine the

weight you were carrying, but it speaks also to the incredible need.

[00:43:39.940] - Ashley Mitchell
Oh, yeah.

[00:43:40.510] - Lisa Qualls
So did you shut this down?

[00:43:44.020] - Ashley Mitchell

Yes, so there have been a few women that had committed suicide and a few things over those years from accidental overdose and suicide during those times. The last time that that happened, I haven't received a few messages that I was asleep when I got because it was like 3 a.m. and woke up and we had found out that the woman had taken her life and I just said this enough, like, I can't. And that guilt shut me down for about a year, completely shut groups down, walked away. I was so angry in that year because where in the hell were the professionals? Where were the licensed professionals? Where were case workers and the social workers and the agencies that walked with us in the rebuilds? And there was so much of, they had our baby and that was it and that was it. And I just said, this is not OK. And that gave us enough fuel to sit down and write a curriculum and a training and material that we could go to the agencies and say, look, I know you have a lot on your plate. I know the social workers are overworked, but you can't claim ethical practice if you can't give us what we need long term, and so we'll do all of the work and give you the programs. Just show up and run them, and so we wrote the nation's first curriculum for post placement care. And in 2017, the National Council for Adoption had me come and speak as one of the first birth moms to speak on a platform on post placement care. And we've been fighting that battle ever since to help educate prospective adoptive parents and the importance of choosing agencies that are going to honor and advocate for the women in ways that they are paying for the checks that they're writing, needing them to step into that space, and making sure that every woman that chooses adoption, obviously, we support family preservation, but there are going to be women that choose the place and if they choose, they will have grief and trauma. It is unavoidable, and if they choose adoption, do you have the proper support in place to help her long term? And so that's what we've been, we've been fighting this since we rolled this out. But having those online groups, we learned so much in those five years, we lost so much and we need we need mental health support to manage that kind of stuff, and I that's why we support in person.

[00:46:36.610] - Lisa Qualls

So you do, you have created a curriculum for agencies. Do you find that agencies are open to it or do you find a lot that are not?

[00:46:48.660] - Ashley Mitchell

It's, it's a tough fight for sure, you know, you have agencies that have been serving for 135 years in foster care and, you know, orphan care and things like that. Domestic infant adoption in its own right is so, such a new concept. Open adoption is still such a new concept. And because numbers are down, there's a lot of, we've been doing this for 30 years. It's working great. We still have very, we still have board members that are thinking very much in an older generation. And so we're seeing a lot of new executive directors, a lot of young women coming in, a lot of executive directors that are coming in from like domestic violence groups that worked with state care for a long time, that never did adoption going, oh, well, I can see where the gaps are. It's not it's not complicated to understand why this is needed, but when you've been in such heavy tradition, such heavy Christian culture, tradition funding that's been coming from so many places for so many decades, it's hard to change. They don't even have line items for a budget for post placement care like this. And so they're getting there, but it's going to take some time. It's going to take some time to undo decades of thinking about what we believe about birth mother trauma and community support and doing the work to me in person. It's a lot, it's a lot. And it's a lot to help the women like to draw them out of isolation. We've been in isolation for so long, and so part of the work isn't just convincing the agency, it's convincing the moms to come out of isolation and sit with women and be safe and feel like they can trust that space and that's a lot, especially when it's through the agencies that they felt did them wrong. So we're working, we're working against a lot of really tough stuff.

[00:48:46.210] - Lisa Qualls

But clearly it is making a real difference for a lot of people.

[00:48:51.790] - Ashley Mitchell

This changed my life, being in person with birth moms.

[00:48:54.940] - Lisa Qualls

Yeah, mine too. Mine, too, when I finally found some, that made all the difference. If you wanted to say, I'd say the majority of our listeners are probably adoptive parents. Is there one thing you would really love to say to them as we wrap up?

[00:49:14.850] - Ashley Mitchell

I know that we can be tough to love and tough to understand, and the trauma is a lot and your guilt and insecurities are a lot as adoptive parents, but I think at the heart of it, I really do think the child's heart is that if you love the children, then that love has to carry to their biological families and where they came from. And love just isn't enough. We don't get to just romanticize and skim over and use that cliché anymore because we know too much. And no matter how much you love that child and no matter what you do for that child, you can't love away biology. And I matter. I matter. I matter to my son a lot. Here's what you need to know. Him needing me and loving me and wanting me does not diminish his mom's role, and he can tackle me through my front door when he comes to visit me, and tackle her on the front lawn when it's time to go home, and that can be OK for both of us and everything for him. And we can't do that if we can't do our homework. And if there's something that's keeping you from being able to and I'm not saying, there's always, if there's, if there's real reasons why you're restricted in this, I get it and I support you in whatever you decide to do as the parents as those that were chosen to parent these children, but if there's things that you need to work on that are keeping you from allowing us to both have a role, I just encourage you to do that work, because I'll tell you what, there is nothing more amazing than watching my son sit in a space to know that he doesn't have to choose between the two of us and that he can have a need and love both of us without fear of consequence. And that is how we give him back his voice and his rights and his power in a space that he didn't have a choice in the beginning.

[00:51:24.430] - Lisa Qualls

Well, that is really strong and really good word. Thank you so much.

[00:51:29.320] - Ashley Mitchell

Thank you.

[00:51:30.250] - Lisa Qualls

We will have information about where people can find you and all kinds of links for all of your work in the show notes, but why don't you just tell people right now in case they just want to check out your website without even having to click anywhere?

[00:51:46.540] - Ashley Mitchell

Yup, I'm on Instagram at @bigtoughgirl or you can come to bigtoughgirl.com and get to all the things. All the things you can find me from there.

[00:51:56.210] - Lisa Qualls

All right, all right. Well, thank you so much, Ashley. I appreciate you spending this time with me, and I look forward to getting together with you in person.

[00:52:07.240] - Ashley Mitchell

Me too, me too.

[00:52:12.450] - Melissa Corkum

Wow, I really appreciate Ashley. Hers is not an easy story to tell, and she was super vulnerable, which I really appreciate and I really appreciated her perspective on open adoption. We talk so much about

why open adoption is important, especially to adoptees, and I appreciated, one, how hard open adoption has been for her, but also, like, what a blessing it's been. And I also appreciated her compassion for all sides of the triad, even as a birth mom and knowing, you know, appreciating that there's sometimes a lot of fear and anxiety about these open relationships, and she didn't say it was easy, but also said it was important. And so I just I appreciate her a lot.

[00:53:12.270] - Lisa Qualls

Me, too. And I love that she recognizes and speaks to the responsibility she has as a birth mom to be in relationship with her son in the openness that they have in place. So it's yeah, she's really doing remarkable work, and I, of course, really love the support that she's providing for other birth mothers who really need it, and there just has not been much available. So you can learn more about Ashley by following her on Instagram. She has two accounts at @bigtoughgirl and at @lifetimehealingfoundation. You can also find her website at lifetimehealingfoundation.org and we will have all this information in the show notes so that you don't have to remember all this. You can find the show notes at theadoptionconnection.com/30. Before you go, we'd love to connect with you on social media. You can find us on Facebook or Instagram as @theadoptionconnection.

[00:54:10.710] - Melissa Corkum

Thanks so much for listening, we love having you. If you enjoyed this episode, please leave a quick review over on iTunes. It will help us reach more moms who may be feeling alone.

[00:54:20.910] - Lisa Qualls

And remember, until next week, you're a good mom, doing good work, and we're here for you.

[00:54:28.080] - Melissa Corkum

The music for the podcast is called New Day and was created by Lee Rosevere.