

SO HELP ME POD

Three Kent State alumni find personal revival and community in the power of podcasting.

By Michael Blanding

Podcasts are everywhere these days.

According to recent data, more than a million active podcasts are streaming over the internet. Half of all Americans, ages 12 and older, have tuned in to these free audio shows, and a quarter of them listen weekly. Celebrities from Gwyneth Paltrow to Snoop Dogg have their own shows. Among other topics, podcasts dispense political commentary, true-crime narratives, and recipe advice.

When three Kent State graduates each decided to create their own podcast, however, they turned to the same source for content: their own experience.

Whether it's surviving a traumatic childhood, overcoming obstacles to start a business, or just trying to become a better person, these alumni have found a way to make their past difficulties engaging for audiences.

The podcast format is unique among platforms—simple to make with a microphone and a computer, intimate as a conversation in person—yet potentially limitless in its ability to reach listeners.

Each of the three podcasters we highlight used that format to create the podcast they might have wanted to listen to, using it to connect with people tackling similar circumstances. But they haven't done it alone. They've brought in guests and experts who add their life experiences to the conversation, expanding the podcasts' scope and creating a community of support online and off.



HARRY ACOSTA PHOTOGRAPHY

BECOMING BETTER

TREY KAUFFMAN, BA '09, COLUMBUS, OHIO, *THE MOSAIC LIFE*

Following graduation from Kent State, Trey Kauffman spent six years bouncing around a succession of sales and marketing jobs, feeling uninspired.

"I would always get bored at a job," he says. He spent evenings drinking too much and putting off any meaningful change, such as starting his own company or writing a book. "I always made excuses—that was one of the most toxic aspects of my life."

The best moments of his day were those spent commuting in his car, listening to podcasters such as Tim Ferriss and Kevin Rose interview inspirational entrepreneurs. "I realized things weren't going to magically change for me overnight," Kauffman says. "I had to put in the work."

In 2016, he started doing just that, quitting his job to start a web design company, 2237 Designs, meditating, reading up on the ancient philosophy of stoicism and launching a humor podcast of his own.

In fall 2019, he and a friend, Ernie Welsh—whom he'd met at a leadership event—launched a new podcast called *The Mosaic Life*, asking a question that has become an important one for Kauffman: What does it mean to be happy?

"We see people who struggle with being overwhelmed and anxious, especially when it comes to the workplace," Kauffman says. "They need resources to find happiness and contentment, to know they have the capacity [to find that] within themselves."

His friend left after a year, and Kauffman has continued the podcast, bringing on guests from the realms of business, philosophy and psychology to glean insights into how we can all get closer to the lives we wish we had.

In one recent episode, he interviewed Nir Eyal, bestselling author of *Indistractable*, about how to stay focused in the hyper-media landscape. In another, he spoke with Ashley Mead, a former marketing exec with Amazon who now consults on creating "psychologically safe" workspaces. In still another, he spoke with Lauren Laudani, a yoga instructor who started her life over personally and professionally at age 36.

"I'M CONTINUING TO STAY IN CONTACT WITH THESE PEOPLE TO MAKE SURE THEY'RE GROWING—AND I'M GROWING AS WELL."

For his part, Kauffman has developed a personal mantra—"Do better"—and asks himself each day what he can do to improve his own life. A year ago, he quit drinking and challenged himself to read a book a week for a year. "We all have the capacity to do better in our lives so we can help others—and help ourselves," he says.

Kauffman traces his creativity to the influence of his mother, who worked for a local newspaper while he was growing up in Green, Ohio, a small town between

Akron and Canton. Extremely shy while young, he came out of his shell at Kent State as a deejay for the internet-based Black Squirrel Radio, where he started a humor show with some friends; soon he was webmaster and marketing director for the station.

While there, he learned to have naturally flowing conversations with guests, following a practice he continues to this day. "I don't want to over prepare for interviews, because I don't want to be rigid, but I want to be informed enough that I can talk intelligently about whatever subject the guest is bringing."

His relationship with guests doesn't end with the podcast, however. To keep the conversations going, he created the Mosaic Life Co-op, a private Facebook group for his guests to connect with and learn from each other. "It's never a one-off," he says. "I'm continuing to stay in contact with these people to make sure they're growing—and I'm growing as well."

Eventually, he hopes to write a book distilling the wisdom he's collected, reaching others who might also be yearning to make changes in their lives, but not quite knowing how.

"If I can inspire one person to make a change in their life—to scale back on their ego or spend a couple hours a week working on their book or startup, that makes it all worthwhile."

Listen to *The Mosaic Life* at <https://www.onemosaic.life/>



FINDING FAMILY

KERI RICHMOND, BS '17, WASHINGTON, DC, FOSTERSTRONG

You don't have to search too hard to find negative images of foster care, says Keri Richmond. "You look at *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, and the kid who was in foster care is always the one who goes on to become a serial killer running around the city wreaking havoc," says Richmond, who was raised in foster care and an adoptive family herself. She was pleasantly surprised, then, when she saw the 2018 film *Instant Family*, a heartwarming comedy about a foster family starring Mark Wahlberg and Octavia Spencer, loosely based on the life of screenwriter Sean Anders and his wife.

When Richmond met Anders at a screening in Washington, DC, he told her he was starting an organization to change the perception of foster care through the voices of former foster children. Richmond jumped at the chance, joining nine other foster alumni to found FosterStrong in 2019. "Our mission is to tell our raw and authentic stories," says Richmond, now the organization's executive director, "not tokenizing the trauma, but showing the resilience and strength embodied by somebody who goes through the system."

At the heart of the effort is a podcast, showcasing the stories of foster care alumni through group conversations with the core members.

"Our primary audience is to reach former foster children to share experiences," Richmond says. In addition, they hope to impact social workers and other advocates to help them better understand foster

children, as well as potential foster parents to counteract negative perceptions of fostering. "We are elevating how much love you can bring into your home and how your family can grow and learn."

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Born into an abusive family outside Columbus, Ohio, Richmond entered foster care as a newborn and again at 4 years old. At 5, she was adopted into another chaotic home where she was once again abused. "I feel like the state of Ohio failed me," she says. "They washed their hands of me and went on to the next child." She gritted her teeth, living with her adopted mom until high school, when she moved in with her best friend, Alexis Donati, BS '17, whose family helped her attend Kent State.

Richmond thrived on the Kent Campus, joining student government and a sorority, and working with the nonprofit Together We Rise to hold a fundraiser where she told her story publicly for the first time. "I saw the power of storytelling and how my story that felt so broken could also be

used for good and for change to help other children going through the system."

After taking courses on public relations advocacy with communications professor Stephanie Smith, Richmond decided to dedicate her career to advocating for child welfare. She currently works full time in Washington, DC, as a lobbyist for the American Academy of Pediatrics, at the same time managing FosterStrong's daily operations and hosting its podcast along with the other members of the group.

The stories in the podcast upend stereotypes in a wide variety of foster care experiences. Recent episodes, for example, center on the story of Carlo, who forged a deep bond with his grandmother, who took him into her home in a form of foster care called kinship care; and Ria, who at age 11 was forced to advocate for herself and her sister in court so they could be adopted at a young age.

If there is a common theme that unites their stories, it is the presence of at least one person who showed them unconditional love when their birth families could not.

"What stands out is that one individual or a couple of individuals who were consistently showing us love and encouragement. That, at the end of the day, is what fostering is about," Richmond says. "We champion the belief that every child deserves to be loved by somebody, and anyone is capable of being that somebody."

Listen to FosterStrong at <https://urfosterstrong.org/>



CREATING SPACE

OLEG LOUGHEED BA '16, AUSTIN, TEXAS, OVERCOMING ODDS

There were many moments while growing up that Oleg Lougheed looked around at his life and asked, "Why me?" Born in Russia, Lougheed's mother was an alcoholic and his father was in prison. By age 9, he was in an orphanage, and at 12, he was adopted by a family on the other side of the world in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he was unable to speak the language.

"I would immediately go to the place of, 'I can't believe this happened to me,'" Lougheed says. No matter how much he felt sorry for himself, however, it didn't change his situation. "I realized it wasn't a productive mindset because it didn't give me any additional insight to move forward."

Eventually, he started subtly changing his viewpoint to ask, "Why not me?"—wondering what his experiences had to teach him. "It changed my relationship with adversity completely and made me realize I could be of service to others to help them see their own adversities through a different lens."

Last year, he founded the organization Overcoming Odds, creating a venue for himself and others to share their experiences dealing with difficult situations. At its core is a weekly podcast in which Lougheed interviews ordinary people who have struggled to overcome situations including racism, cancer, sexual assault and COVID-19.

"This felt like something people were desperately needing," he says, "a place to

be heard, to be appreciated and to be understood."

Lougheed was studying to become a Russian translator at Kent State when, on the advice of a friend, he walked into the Center for Entrepreneurship and Business Innovation (CEBI), in the College of Business Administration. There he found mentors in business professors Mary Heidler and Craig Zamary.

"They would stay late with me to help me practice and polish my pitch decks and give me feedback," he says. "I began to experience a feeling of being at home."

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After graduation, he attended an entrepreneurship program in Delaware to develop a meal-sharing app for travelers, but after only a few weeks, he realized that he wanted to create something deeper.

He reached back out to Heidler and Zamary, who helped him come up with a business plan to fund his organization through donations and speaking fees, along with the podcast concept to connect people from all walks of life who were struggling.

"Far too often in life, we are told to only listen to experts," he says. "But these 'ordinary' people are also experts in their own lives."

Instead of coming with a list of questions, he goes into each interview with an intention to listen and "share the space," allowing people to tell their stories in their own way. Often, in fact, he starts by asking subjects what question they are seeking an answer to in life.

"The first thing I often hear is, 'I've never been asked such a question before,'" he says. "It also gets people curious about their own lives and routines—after a moment of silence, they begin to realize how rich their life has truly been."

Beyond the podcast, Overcoming Odds also hosts paid events such as "Survive to Thrive: A Parent's Journey," which brings together parents to share their stories along with national experts in the parenting field.

In addition, every Saturday morning, Lougheed's organization hosts a free weekly conversation over Zoom called "Courageous Conversations," in which anyone can show up to discuss topics including the value of suffering and the meaning of life.

"The beauty of it is that every single person gets the opportunity to share their own perspective," Lougheed says. "That is the heart and soul of the work." ⚡

Listen to Overcoming Odds at www.overcomingodds.today