

## Beyond the Dais Podcast: Episode 34 – An Interview with Catania Jones

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**Scott Anderson:** Thank you for tuning in to Beyond the Dais, a podcast about the stories taking place in and around El Paso County, Colorado. I'm your host, Scott Anderson, and today I'm joined by Catania Jones, the Director of Children, Youth and Family Services here at El Paso County's Department of Human Services. How are you doing today?

**Catania Jones:** Hello. I'm well. How are you doing?

**Scott:** Great. I'm doing great. Thank you for having me over here. I really appreciate it. And before we get started, I wanted to quickly add that if listeners are interested in more stories about people doing good in and around El Paso County, or hearing from county leadership about local government priorities and how they operate, you can find additional episodes of this podcast on your podcast platform of choice. But to get started today, I wanted to have you introduce yourself a little bit and give us some background about how you came to be in the role that you're in.

**Catania:** Sure. I first and foremost always knew that I wanted to be in social justice in some variation. Just didn't know early on what that would look like. In the mid-90s I did an internship at Zebulon Pike Youth Services Center and was convinced at that time I would stay in the realm of juvenile justice, likely secure facilities. And one day I had witnessed a scenario with a young person and their grandmother, and you know, this young person was in the facility for a pretty serious crime, and I think to the unknowing person looked, you know, tall and maybe a little bit scary to some folks. And I had walked him over to the room to have a visit with his grandmother. And I just recall looking in there and this tall, young person was just balled-up in his grandmother's lap, just like a baby, just bawling. And I just thought, wow, there's a juxtaposition of, you know, the why someone was in there, but there has to be more to that why. So, then it really spun this curiosity for me around, you know, behavioral science, the why behind the action. So, that interaction, of course, piqued my interest into human behavior and family dynamics, specifically. So, I worked at - fast forward to about 2001 - I was led to a couple of child placement agencies, and I worked at two different child placement agencies for a total of 13 years. Well, in 13 years worked for two different child placement agencies, and they were both a couple of the first contracted agencies with El Paso County when El Paso County had contracted out permanency case work and foster home licensing and oversight. And then thought that I needed a break, so popped

over to the state. That was a little bit hilarious because guess what? At the state, what was I involved in?

**Scott:** All the things that you're working with now?

**Catania:** I did spend several years at the Division of Youth Services as a regional program manager and worked with county child welfare. In partnership with, you know, all things juvenile justice and initiatives. And I also worked at a domestic violence safe house and crisis line support for a long time. I'd say about nine years. So, all of those pieces just kind of led to at some point me just throwing my name in the hat to pop over to El Paso County. At the time there was an opening for Practice Administrator and so I came over for that and fast forward, fast forward, some domino pieces happening and here I am in this position. I think I've been with the County now for I think 4 years.

**Scott:** Very nice. So, you mentioned at the beginning that you were always drawn to social justice. Now, I don't have to tell you that this job can be difficult, right? And so, what was your motivation for really going into this line of work? Why did social justice appeal to you so much?

**Catania:** You know, how I describe it is I describe it visually what's in my head. And I had, if you can have "aha" moments as a kid, I had an "aha" moment as a kid. I don't know, maybe around twelve-ish, and I just remember thinking about the number line. You remember the number line was zeros in the middle, and then there's the negative numbers, and then the positive numbers. And I just remember thinking of that zero as being like a starting point. And how some humans don't even get to start at zero on the number line to even get to positive. And what's that about? I believe that we all should be able to start from zero to have the opportunity to get to positive. And so that might sound a little bit different, but that's the visual that comes to mind. That's the visual that I had as a kid and only I looked at what I was learning in math class and it just popped in my head of just human beings and just we want to be at least even in the middle.

**Scott:** Complex thoughts for a 12-year-old. I think I was thinking about Transformers and things like that at 12. So, it's very impressive.

**Catania:** I still like toys. And yeah, I was a pretty deep thinker as a kid.

**Scott:** Well, I mean, I think it takes deep thinkers to make big change, right? Having that kind of mindset certainly I think helped put you on a path to make change in people's lives. So, thank goodness you did.

**Catania:** And I still liked He-Man. And my Barbies and all the things.

**Scott:** We could go on for probably about 20 minutes about He-Man and the Masters of the Universe if you wanted to, but we'll try and keep it on track here. So how do you stay grounded? I mean, again, this job is difficult. How do you stay grounded and maintain positive mental health when you're dealing with the things that you do on a daily basis?

**Catania:** So, I don't want to oversimplify this and I can't emphasize enough how powerful to me this statement is, and it is, choose happy. It doesn't happen at you. And I don't know if it's all the, you know, the brain science that's come out around that and I was really into that really early on as it was really unfolding as a science really. And when I learned about neuro pathways and how we really can shift how we filter information, how we interpret and respond and react to things happening, I had a moment of, you know, it is an absolute intentional choice to assume positive intent. It is absolutely intentional to choose happy and find something in that moment to be grateful for. Even if you have to do it 25 plus times a day, after a while it does start to shift what is happening inside of your own mind. And, you know, I kind of practice what I preach too, right. So, if I'm telling staff, take time, take a moment, what is your safety plan? Where is your, you know, where is your happy place in your mind? What do you have control over? When we don't have control in our in our environment or it doesn't feel like we have control, finding the one thing that you may have control over and sometimes that just really is your thoughts. And so, taking a deep breath. Staring at a rock, literally. And here we live in Colorado, we have some gorgeous rocks.

**Scott:** There's some nice-looking rocks around here, that's for sure.

**Catania:** And so, I really do mean that staring at a rock is calming. So, it's those simple things. They seem simple. Sometimes it may not seem simple in the moment, when things really feel frenetic. And we absolutely can take a moment and do some deep breaths and get a reality check and figure out what in this moment do I have control over. And that's what's helped keep me in the game.

**Scott:** Yeah. I think there's, as an adult, as I've been an adult, as I've been in a lot of different jobs, I think it's really easy to say to yourself, there's not time. Like, I've got to do this, I've got to do this. There's all these things that have to get done. And one thing that has been really great about coming over to work for El Paso County and, you know, I'm sure plenty of other organizations are built it the same way, but they really do give you that opportunity to take a moment. And you know, plenty of people say, you know, plenty of people say it, not a lot of people do it right? And just in my experience with the organization, they do it. They give you that time to decompress. Have you seen a similar thing?

**Catania:** Yeah. And I would add to, you know, arguably with child protection, well any protective services, you are on the clock to save someone's life. And many times when caseworkers are on the clock or on the way to intervene and when a family's at, you know, a really critical moment that they're experiencing and you still have to drive, right? And so, drive time, that may be the moment that you have to kind of just to ground yourself and get there in preparation before you walk onto the scene and meet law enforcement or walk into the hospital. There are just these moments we just have to be so thoughtful about when can – what do I have – I have control over the time that I walk to my car. There's a lot of calming and positive self-talk that we can do just walking to our car. So, it doesn't have to be these grandiose gestures because we, some of our

jobs, it is constantly go, go, go, go, go. And even when we're at the office or if we're talking with a coworker, the time that we spend commiserating, we can choose to spend some of that time saying “and, dot, dot dot,” finding that strength-based something or that's something to be grateful for just in that little window, right?

**Scott:** Yeah, yeah, no, that's really good advice. And I'm wondering too, what advice would you give your younger self or someone who's considering going into this field? Again, we've mentioned a couple times difficult subject matter you're dealing with on a pretty regular basis. What advice would you give to people who want to do it and wanna take that on and wanna serve in that way?

**Catania:** Lean on your team and give yourself some grace. So, uphold all the responsibility as we should, considering the sensitivity that – of everything that we do in child protection. So, it's not minimize that responsibility or the ownership of that responsibility. That's what really holds us up with integrity, and ensure that you lean on the people around you. We get to make decisions as a team, we get to consult with folks, we get to have group supervision right and one-on-one supervision. And I do say “get” because what that means is we, even though it feels a lot of times like isolating work, or that you're out there by yourself, you're the one going to the home or you're the one making this in-the-moment decision we're never alone. There's always someone that's a phone call away or walking alongside of you, and there are so many more people around us. I really have always honored the multidisciplinary team decision making my entire career. And again, there was an “aha”, I shouldn't say my entire career because there was an “aha” moment of, wait a minute, this decision is not 100% on my shoulders. I don't have to make this decision by myself. I may need to take the lead. I may need to be the distributor of information or whatever that looks like – the center of the spoke. And there are so many other people around me, whether they're coworkers or where they're just, again, honoring the multidisciplinary team, there are so many other players around, a kid and a family, or children and family outside of, you know, the caseworker there. The caseworker is that core. So, that takes a lot of pressure off. Well, it took a lot of pressure off of me when I realized, oh yeah, there are other people that can have input on this and sure, I have to have my input and when I'm really stuck. So I'd say lean on your team, give yourself some grace while honoring and upholding your responsibility. Oh yeah, the other thing is be kind. Don't forget to be kind. There is – emotions are contagious, and there is a parallel process that happens when we're around individuals in crisis and individuals walking alongside of them, getting them through their moment of crisis, right. And so, we have to know that and take pause and allow ourselves to not take on or own those emotions while serving the people in which we serve. I think that's a big part and why I say be kind is it's real. I have found throughout – I've been some form or another in this game for years – and so I found that if we're not intentional around taking pause and remembering just to be kind to one another, we can get kind of caught up and hamsters in the wheel kind of mentality. And I'm right here, right now and I've got to do this and all the things that are on the shoulders, right? It's real easy to just forget simplicity of kindness and how much that –

how far that goes. How far a smile goes and what that does to another human being, right? Just to see the smile. Again, another statement that seems maybe oversimplified. And it's real.

**Scott:** Right, right. You see it happen?

**Catania:** Yeah.

**Scott:** So, I wanted to switch gears a little bit here. Earlier this month, Child Abuse Prevention Month was recognized by the El Paso County Board of County Commissioners with a proclamation. Why is this such a big deal, and what exactly is Child Abuse Prevention Month all about?

**Catania:** Well, first of all, we hope that technically, every day, every week and every month is child abuse prevention, right?

**Scott:** Sure, sure.

**Catania:** And April is specifically chosen to be a month of intentional focus on how we, as a whole community, can support child abuse prevention. It's also a time to acknowledge and say thank you to the partners that support and play a critical part in keeping children safe.

**Scott:** And who are some of those partners?

**Catania:** They're system partners. Public Health, Division of Youth Corrections, of course, The Bench. We can't do anything without The Bench. Community partners, faith-based community partners. We really lean on church communities. We collaborate with a large community of treatment providers also and contract with them. So yeah, they all play a critical part and are greatly appreciated. That's how we're able to strive to meet a family's needs as a whole. We do strive not to do things in such a fragmented way. And I say strive, and I know some people may be smiling or rolling their eyes a little bit, with these big systems and you know so many bifurcated or siloed barriers around that, and it is a constant effort to minimize the impact in the trauma of system engagement on families. Hence why partnership makes a lot of sense as well as, you know, a lot of those partners, whether be it system partner, or community agency, faith organizations, they create sustainability of access and resources for families. So, you know, Public Health has Nurse Family Partnership and WIC and, you know, those are some great programs that, you know, any of us in the community could inquire about and many could access, right? So, it'd be no different for families that hit our door.

**Scott:** And part of that proclamation presentation actually involved a number of people going outside and placing pinwheels outside of that administration building. What's the significance of the pinwheels? What does that represent?

**Catania:** So, the pinwheels specifically are the national symbol of Child Abuse Prevention Month. They symbolize bright and happy childhoods. You know, they're whimsical. It's a pinwheel, right? And so, we're able to visually pay homage and draw

attention to child abuse prevention with those pinwheels. Additionally, the color for April Child Abuse Prevention Month is blue. So, you may see a lot of blue throughout child welfare agencies or DHS agencies throughout the state and throughout the nation.

**Scott:** Very good. And so, we've talked about El Paso County itself as an entity a little bit. What does El Paso County do in this specific field that you work in that you are proud of?

**Catania:** I am really proud of our innovative and engaging ways that we support strong and together families while keeping child safety as priority number one. If there's a gap that we've identified, a gap broadly in our community, that safe and together families need, we're not afraid to figure out how to fill that gap. And so, there's no, "this is because we've always done it this way", right? It's about meeting families today where they are today. And we do that through a number of ways, and I'm going to highlight our participation in problem solving court. So, we have family treatment, drug court. We have, well, baby court. We are starting to scratch the surface and look at what juvenile Wellness Court looks like, or could look like, in our county, and we have really been working to move the needle on fatherhood engagement and really recognizing and honoring and holding a value of what we know to be true. And in our field, we had an opportunity to move the needle of "dad's matter too".

**Scott:** Well, it's so good to hear as a dad myself.

**Catania:** And so how can we engage fathers, whether or not they're in the picture, in the moment that we have made contact with a family? How do we engage them in a more meaningful way, and that includes engaging the father's family in a more meaningful way? Arguably, historically in this field, not necessarily an El Paso County thing, but just in our field of child protection, there's, you know, we have historically erred in the direction of leaning on the mother's side of the family – identifying the mother to communicate back and forth the needs and we needed to do better, right? And again, not necessarily we as El Paso County, we as a nation and in El Paso County, we've taken that and really ran with it. We've been recognized, even recognized via the Pentagon for our Center on Fathering work that we, you know – the Center on Fathering has been around for a couple decades at least. More than a couple decades. And so, we've, you know, that was something that we had good going in El Paso County and so we were able to continue to highlight that and build upon that as we are working on fatherhood engagement.

**Scott:** You kind of naturally brought up an interesting talking point in my head, and that is recognizing that you may be falling a little bit short in a specific spot. Again, not speaking directly to the organization, but being able to identify places where improvement is possible, and then being empowered to find those solutions and implement those solutions. Can you talk about how that's done here?

**Catania:** Absolutely. So, with, I'll use an example of our partnership with TESSA.

**Scott:** Great. Yeah.

**Catania:** We were noticing the component of family violence. I think we've always noticed it, but we're really paying really meaningful – meaningfully paying attention to the data and the trends. And so, as child protection, how can we rally around families and get them safe and together. And so we were able to formally contract with TESSA to hire a TESSA staff that is staff-facing, so that staff person could go, would and does go out with our case workers when there's identified family violence, as well as helping us case consult around some nuances that exist in family violence. That may not be so obvious to the caseworker. The caseworker is hired and they're trained for child protection, specifically. We did the same for our – what we call our Zero to Three Program, which is literally children, babies ages zero to three, which is arguably our most vulnerable population. So, we partner with Peak Vista for two nurse practitioners that also go out alongside caseworkers when there's, you know, a zero to three infant child in the home and they're able to do the medical exam and put their eyes on the child as our caseworker is walking alongside, doing the child protection piece. We also have, and for a while, we've contracted with TRE, which is The Resource Exchange, and we have that staff person that also is co-located with us, and they're there to help us move through all the necessary components when we have an identified child or youth with intellectual or developmental delays, as well as if there's a parent. So, we've also created some specialty teams that are focused on IDD, which is great because that's a population that falls through the cracks and historically in any system. So, the other piece that we have really looked at where there was an opportunity was kinship. So, over the last few years we have really focused on when we need to go out and assess a family for child safety, we ask right away what are where, what are kin supports, who are family, who are kin-like supports? So that way if it necessitates that we need support to come in, or the child to be with supports and not in their home of origin, that it's family, it's an individual or individuals that the parents have identified. So that's something that I'm pretty proud of.

**Scott:** Yeah, no, that's great. So, we've been able to cover quite a bit of ground in the conversation so far. So, before we close, I just wanted to know if there's anything else that you want to add that you think listeners should know about or maybe just reiterate something that you feel strongly about.

**Catania:** I feel strongly that we can – we need to continue to engage families in a way that meets family's needs, so we are being inclusive. We are engaging in a trustworthy manner to uphold safety, permanency and wellbeing for children and youth. I also feel strongly that any vision that we could have, or that I could have, must honor tending to the people that we are – that are doing the work, every layer of the work. So, I honor every day that I come into work in any way that I can to take care of the people that take care of the people. It's hard work, right? And it's critical to take care of the people that take care of the people.

**Scott:** Right. Well, thank you, Catania. I appreciate you taking the time today and for all the work that you do here at El Paso County. So, thank you for having me.

**Catania:** Thank you.

**Scott:** If you're interested in listening to additional episodes of Beyond the Dais, be sure to look for us on Spotify, Podbean, or wherever you get your podcasts. Thanks for listening and we'll see you next time.