



# How Passion and Community Engagement Builds Resilience to Trauma

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It turns out that helping people with trauma find their passion and connecting them to the community is an effective way to build up their resilience. This is true regardless of the person's clinical characteristics or if they are developmentally disabled. Take Sara Kahn, for example. When she was two years old her mother locked her inside their apartment and set it on fire. It was a terrifying experience that she replays in some way each and every day. Today, thanks to the program People & Passions, she is writing a book called *Sara Saves* where her stories are put on paper and where she can be the heroine, instead of the victim.

Social worker Sarah Buffie and Mary U. Vicario, LPCC-S Certified Trauma Specialist, developed People & Passions in Ohio to create an opportunity for those like Kahn; people who suffered trauma and have little to no engagement in the community. The issue, says Vicario, is that many people who experienced trauma have a poverty of life experience. They have been bounced from system to system, are in segregated settings, and often don't know their likes and dislikes. She says this is problematic because knowing your preferences is the most basic building block for saying no. So far, in addition to helping people with disabilities, the program has helped those struggling with addiction, children in the juvenile justice system, and human trafficking survivors. The latter two groups in particular often have choice taken away from them (or never were allowed it in the first place). Consequently, the program not only helps trauma survivors find their passion and integrates them into the community, but it also focuses on developing personal preference and agency. Vicario and Buffie define agency as a *power with others* as opposed to *power over others*. This distinction is important, says Vicario, because people with trauma experienced others having power over them. Instead, agency allows the person to identify his/her preferences in a way that combines the power of choice with safe connections to other people. This is one of the most powerful routes to heal and move beyond trauma.

We help people notice their preferences with basic questions such as, 'What's your favorite color?' If they don't know the answer, we explore with more questions such as, 'What color do you like better than another color?' 'What shirt do you want to wear today?' Next, we move on to comfort foods, clothes, belongings, and relationships. 'What kind of friend, parent, or partner do you want to be and what kind do you want to have in your life?'

The results are striking, she says; participants experience an increase in resilience and a decrease in trauma symptoms.

## **Putting Trauma on Paper**

Sara Kahn's life was difficult from the start. She was born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and for the majority of her child and adult life has been segregated from the community. Before People & Passions, Kahn solely spent her days in a program with other people who have developmental disabilities and evenings with her foster mother. She did not interact with the general community in her town. One of the greatest

challenges the program faced with Kahn is that her trauma often played on repeat in her everyday life. It wasn't revealed in the context of her past but instead, in story form. Buffie says Kahn would tell those around her about fictional life-threatening incidents where she would save a person or animal.

She would get into my car and say, 'The other day there were two worms and I moved them off the driveway, so they wouldn't be run over. Now they are in the grass and alive and well.' Or if someone else had a talent or was complimented for something, she had the same talent or a better one and then told others how she used it to save someone. She was often labeled attention seeking.

The frequent storytelling caused friction between Kahn and her caretakers who were exhausted and felt she was constantly lying to them. Together with Buffie, Kahn began putting her stories on paper. Buffie didn't call them stories, she just asked if Kahn wanted to begin journaling. Soon Buffie saw what could easily transform into a children's book. Two years later, Kahn is currently putting the final touches on the book and working alongside two illustrators to create an underwater ocean fantasy where the main character, Sara, is a mermaid who saves those in need.

Much like Kahn, fictional mermaid Sara experienced childhood trauma. In the book, a wood boat explodes, thrusting sharp pieces of wood toward the ocean floor and directly at a mermaid nest. Queen Stella, the oldest and wisest mermaid in the kingdom saves Sara. The young mermaid, grateful to the queen, commits her life to saving mermaids and sea creatures throughout the kingdom. The book integrates Kahn's trauma history, but, instead of being the victim, she is the heroine who saves others. This, says Vicario, helps Kahn get trauma out of her neural networks. Instead of trauma driving her behavior and daily functions, she's turning it into art. As a result, says Buffie, Kahn acts out less, does less storytelling, and contributes in more positive ways with her foster mom and others.

She has more social connections and it has been healing. She's not just in re-enactment mode; her story is now on the outside of her, literally in a book. It has been a tremendous experience. Sara meets with the illustrators once a month. They make pizza and talk about the illustrations.

## **Volunteering in the Community: Learning to Filter and Autonomy**

The journey to this point began two years ago when Buffie and Kahn started working at a food pantry. Buffie suggested volunteering at the pantry because Kahn liked the idea of helping people who are hungry get food. Buffie also knew this would be a great opportunity to connect Kahn to the community and work on her food insecurity. "During her childhood, she didn't get enough food so her brain tells her she's starving when she's not," says Buffie. The objective was to develop a sense of belonging, improve her relationship with food, and allow her brain to experience having enough food to help others have food. Kahn has made remarkable progress and can now be calm in a space

where there is an abundance of food. “This would have been impossible without People & Passions.”

On the ride to the food pantry, Buffie and Kahn would talk about what they were going to do. This allowed Kahn to prepare for the snack table; an array of foods the pantry put out for volunteers. They would talk through what may be on the table and what item Kahn would likely choose. Buffie found that when she suggested they share a snack Kahn was more apt to choose a healthy option. Other times, it was more challenging; Kahn wanted a donut and she didn’t want to share.

It was during these times, or when Kahn didn’t quite feel like volunteering, when storytelling would enter the picture. She would tell Buffie that she couldn’t share her food because she was saving it for someone in her day program or that she had to stop working because her feet hurt. Buffie would reflect back her feelings and say, “You know what, Sara, you can take a break whether your feet hurt or not.” Kahn would respond by saying, “No, no, my feet really do hurt!” Buffie reminded her that as an adult, Kahn can ask for what she wants. Recently, Kahn has begun requesting a break without a qualifier.

Another challenge, says Buffie, was the prayer circle at the food pantry. It’s a time for people to share what they are experiencing. The first time they participated, Kahn shared a laundry list of concerns and tangential stories. “It’s not that I don’t want her to share, but the problem is that people stop taking her seriously when she begins storytelling,” says Buffie. “I want Kahn to be and *be perceived as* a valued team member.” The next time they prepared for prayer circle. Buffie asked Kahn what she might share. Kahn told her a story about her friend’s uncle’s dog who died from cancer. Buffie suggested they do a prayer for the dog in the car and save the prayer circle for a joy or concern Kahn wants to share about her life. By filtering out experiences that weren’t her own and weren’t applicable, Kahn was perceived as a volunteer instead of a storyteller.

## **Benefits to Contributing in the Community**

Today, when Kahn and Buffie arrive at the food pantry, they sign in, get their aprons and name tags, and quickly check out the snack table. Afterward, they do their job, which is primarily made up of organizing and packing food and other donations. Kahn has become an incredibly valued team member to the organization. She helps to organize the upstairs and packs books for children and diapers for infants. Kahn is excellent at counting but doesn’t have strong fine motor skills, so generally, she counts while Buffie writes. It’s important, says Buffie, to highlight her skills. “We want to be helpful to the organization where we are volunteering and use her skill set to do so.”

Volunteering has been shown to have health benefits for the person giving help, both physically and mentally. This includes giving the person a sense of purpose, greater

life satisfaction, autonomy, lowered mortality, and improved self-reported health and functioning levels.<sup>1</sup>

The more Kahn discovers her passions and finds those in the community who share them, the more she feels valued. The result is that Kahn does less storytelling in all aspects of her life and now has real experiences to share with others. She has also decreased acting out and is forging genuine connections and sparking attention in positive ways.

## **Kahn Says**

Writing *Sara Saves* has changed Kahn's outlook in life. She examines not only the characters but the impact the book can have on others, including herself. Kahn says what she likes most about writing the book is how the main character helps sea creatures feel safe and calm when they are in danger. She highlights how the message translates to everyday life, particularly to children who are in the hospital (she volunteered at the local Children's Hospital). "I want people who read it to know that they will be safe because good people are there to help them," says Kahn. "The doctors can help them and they can feel safe with people."

Kahn also shares what writing the book has taught her. "It means that I should also keep myself safe and talk to people about what's going on with me and how they can help me and how we can stay safe together."

*People & Passions programming is located in Cincinnati, Ohio, and will soon launch in Columbus and Toledo. It is part of the trauma treatment Resilience Model. Videos about this model can be seen at [www.findinghopeconsulting.com](http://www.findinghopeconsulting.com). Those interested in learning more about People & Passions can do so by contacting Mary U. Vicario at [findinghopeconsulting@gmail.com](mailto:findinghopeconsulting@gmail.com) or Sarah Buffie at [buffiesh@gmail.com](mailto:buffiesh@gmail.com) ([www.sarahbuffie.com](http://www.sarahbuffie.com)).*

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<sup>1</sup> Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Policy Development. The Health Benefits of Volunteering: A Review of Recent Research, Washington, DC 2007. Accessed on August 28, 2018 at [https://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/07\\_0506\\_hbr.pdf](https://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/07_0506_hbr.pdf).