

Episode 1 - Meet Your Hosts

Jack:

So I am Jack and I am a wife and I met my husband in 2007, and pretty much the first day I met him, I knew that he was my person. And we have been married for 12 years. He is my best friend, my partner in crime, and he makes all of my crazy ridiculous dreams come true, pretty much every day. He is probably the nicest person I have ever met.

I am also a business owner. I have a small company that serves local businesses and I've been working in my field for about 25 years now. I love what I do and I'm really good at it... so there's that.

Right now I am a mom of eight kids because I am a foster mom, and that number is constantly changing and it will be changing again next week. So, I developed a heart for kids who needed homes in my early 20s. When I met my husband, I told him that I really didn't have any intention of having any biological kids until I could adopt one, so he agreed, and after a year of marriage we started an international adoption process. It took us a couple years but it ended us with spending a couple of months living in Africa and adopting one of the most incredible humans, I've ever met.

It wasn't without heartbreak though because when we called the adoption agency we just told them that we wanted to adopt from where there was the most need, and the country that they told us to adopt from closed their adoption process pretty shortly after we started it. Then, before we ended up with the adoption track that we ended on, we had a couple of requests for us to adopt kids who were domestic private adoptions and those ended in heartbreak. But in the end it all worked out because we adopted our son.

So as life turned out ,God must have known that my body wasn't made to carry my own biological children. Because when we wanted to give our son a sibling, it didn't work out biologically. So we were just as happy to change course and consider other ways to give my son some live in friends.

I remember he always used to go to his friend's house who had siblings, and he would come home in tears saying, "when I leave, they still have someone to play with but I go home by myself." Yeah, so it's sad, but it's so opposite from his life right now. He is the leader of this little child mob.

So in 2016 we became foster parents, and it was one of the best decisions we've ever made. You know initially our intention was, well we just wanted to have kids in our house, and we wanted to adopt again but it just seemed like a good route to give our son some people to play with.

And so at this point we've had somewhere between 50 or 60 kids in our home and we adopted three of our foster placements. We've been blessed to reunify families. We've seen kids from our home find their forever families. We have been blessed we've had our hearts broken. We've fought really hard for the kids in our care. Right now, in addition to our four adopted kids we have four foster placements, and we love the heck out of all eight of them.

In 2018 I kind of started being more of a foster care advocate because I joined forces with a group of people who were starting a nonprofit that we were all led by a guardian ad litem that wanted to do a little more for kids in care than she was able to as a gal, and I have been honored to serve on this board. I've seen so many kids be impacted by what this organization does that it is, it's really just a privilege to be part of it. So that's kind of where I'm at in the child welfare side of things.

Cat:

Can I just say that I just flashed back to the first day you were a foster parent, we all met at Culvers, and then we didn't realize that the little boy you had couldn't eat solid foods I ran to get to a bottle. And then when I got to where I was going, my car wouldn't start right. But we didn't know what to do so we just stood in front of the Wawa with the jumper cables in our hands like waiting for someone to help us. All while Mr Jack was at Culvers with a crying baby who was literally crying, he would not even eat french fries.

Jack:

Our oldest son, my sister always used to say, that I didn't earn my parenting stripes with him because he was such a perfect child. So, you know, while we had already experienced spending some time raising a child who had been, you know, through a trauma. We had never been through anything quite like that.

Cat:

So, you've definitely earned your parenting stripes.

Jack:

So tell me a little bit, my friend Cat, about your interest and your history.

Cat:

Well, I've always known that I wanted to work with children, I think since I was like a toddler I was dragging baby dolls around the house

Jack:

Just like your daughter

Cat:

Just like my daughter.

But I began my career working as an elementary school teacher, which I quickly realized was not for me. I taught elementary school for one year and I did that while I was in grad school, and I learned really quickly that large groups of children are really loud and smelly, and they want all of your attention and that was, you know, a lot for a 22 year old so I did not renew my contract the second year.

And that next summer I did an internship for the Children's Defense Fund in Washington DC and I worked in the press department, and there we worked on issues dealing with child welfare, and which are all issues we're talking about now. Like, how does the money we spend impact children... How do the political issues that we vote on impact children? How does Medicaid impact children, you know how the issues that our politicians are voting on right now how does that impact the children that are in care the kids that are going to be removed, the kids that we call them referrals on all these things. And so, children's health insurance, things like that. So that was really impactful for me because it was like hands and feet on the ground, seeing what people are voting on in real time. And so that was a really interesting experience.

But after I was done with that, I finished grad school, and my first job after teaching was I worked as a caseworker for Child Protective Services in Texas.

Jack:

Oh, so you were like a case manager, I didn't know that.

Cat:

Yeah I was. It was really different in Texas than it is in Florida because everybody works for the same agency there, so like there's no different agency for CPI and case management and right. So like third floor was like CPI investigations and the first floor was, case management, that's where I was. And like the fifth floor was adoptions, like we're all together.

Yeah, so it's still tough for me to figure out what everybody's doing here even though I've been here for over a decade. You know, like even remembering all the agencies names.

Jack:

Yeah, you know, because then, each particular function might have multiple agencies
elation

Cat:

Absolutely, absolutely. So, yeah, I remember when I was in Texas when Florida privatized, and we were talking about is that going to be a good thing or not, which I didn't really care. But now I do care because I'm here.

So that experience, and as a case manager was absolutely life changing, because I was on the ground with parents with children. And most of these parents were significantly older than me, because I was 23/24. People were terminating their own parental rights relinquishing them to me, you know, signing away their parental rights, you know, it was just me and them. You know, so really hard stuff for a really young person. And doing final visits with families after they'd lost their rights.

Jack:

I mean listen, I'm significantly older than 23/24, and every time I see a parent sign surrenders, or even just attend a TPR hearing, like I am wrecked. Yeah, so I can't imagine at that age, like being like, such a part of that.

Cat:

It was tough. I remember once, working with a family for a couple years and then the mom tested positive for cocaine, and she relinquished her rights and I remember crying in that court hearing and one of the attorneys was like what's wrong. I was like if you don't understand you're, you know, It was really tough stuff and so, but I think I definitely think that job changed the trajectory of my career.

Jack:

Okay, so this point you've worked with, As far as child welfare you've worked in, like, lobbying laws, right, or, or doing press for.

Cat:

Yeah, so in the press department, I mean we all did lobbying, no matter what department you were in, but I was in the press department so we generated all the news for that day, everything that had anything to do with children or child welfare, and then we put together like this press packet for our CEO every day so if somebody called her for a quote, she could go through the press packet and know what they were talking about. So we did that by like 9am Every day.

Jack:

Okay, so you started working on laws affecting child welfare, and then you were on the ground as a case manager and child welfare what next.

Cat:

Okay, so then the second hand trauma got pretty old. And so I was offered a job as that was, like, I couldn't pass on it, it was the executive director of an adoption agency for infants, and it was brand new. So I was that, like the first executive director. The truth is, I was the only qualified person they could find. I wasn't special.

But, so I was there until I had my oldest son, and that was a really fun experience. There was just as much secondary trauma there too.

Jack:

I was gonna say like, what job, have you ever had that didn't involve secondary trauma?

Cat:

It's true, it's true, but it was, you know like there I definitely learned that there is nobody on this Earth that doesn't have something like some kind of trauma. I remember writing home studies on surgeons, people who were just like more wealthy than I could ever imagine. And then, you know, asking them the hard questions, and then having answers that were heartbreaking. I mean, everybody has something.

Jack:

Yeah, you know, a lot of times, people like look at somebody in certain positions or certain financial situations and just assume their life is perfect, it's not, you know, behind the doors there could be all kinds of problems,

Cat:

Right, there's nobody that I've interviewed that doesn't have some kind of heartbreak.

Jack:

Mo Money Mo Problems

Cat:

It's true. I mean, I have lots of memories that would break your heart, you know.

And so, so, I had my first son I stayed home for a few years, and then we moved to Florida. Then I started working, doing comprehensive behavioral health assessments (CBHAs). If you're in Florida, and you're in the child welfare system you might be familiar with. And I did this for a while.

Jack:

And so just to clarify, as a foster parent, when a child comes to my home. One of the first people I see and often before I even meet a case manager is somebody who calls me on the phone and they're like, my name is so and so, my name is Cat and I have to write a CBHA for your kid. And the first time you get a call, you're like, I don't know what a CBHA is but like, Sure, come on over. You know, these days they call you a lot because of COVID.

But, and basically what is a quick overview of the CBHA?

Cat:

So a CBHA is a pretty lengthy report and it's court ordered and the state of Florida requires it. It kind of goes over everything the child could possibly need, like education, social, emotional, physical, so it's like a full evaluation on the child like talking about their health, their anything there might be an issue with so the the court knows as much as they can possibly know.

And my goal when I'm writing one is to really humanize the child and really humanize the parents. There's, you know everything possible in there, and then, you know, the outcome would be that we write good recommendations for these kids.

And so, the judge will court order the recommendations, generally unless they're bonkers. So, you know like a speech referral for the child if their speech delayed because in the CBHA we do evaluations, you know, you know ot evaluation, like, that this could do a gastro if they have obvious reflux.

Jack:

I always think it's great when a CBHA writer comes in, spend some time with the kid, and then I, as a foster parent get a copy of it, because I feel like it's a really great roadmap to make sure that I'm not missing out on something that they need and so even outside of all the legal stuff.

Cat:

While Florida does a lot of things that are really difficult I think it's something that they do right. Because, I mean, I think it saved some kids lives. Like I've had, I remember, I had one kid who when I interviewed the parents they talked about the child's tumor on the brain, and I was able to go back to the foster parents and say, This is an emergency, they need a doctor's appointment with the neurologist, and nobody had heard about the tumor.

Jack:

And this was something we've talked about before about how a lot of times when kids come to placement it's an emergency type situation. I've had kids who have come to my home, where at the time of placement the parent had Oded and they didn't know if they

were going to make it or arrested or in a state of like confusion. And so the parent is not able to convey information that you might need in that moment. A lot of times they're angry and they won't give them information about the kid because they're trying to prevent them from taking them, when in actuality a lot of times it just ends up in like confusion and misinformation so yeah.

Cat:

It's interesting that that happened, it happens like once a year it seems like, and I haven't written a CBHA in a few months but I stopped in like October, but that was 11 years. Yeah, I've written a lot so like once a year I will hear something from a grandparent or a parent about, you know, we, there's something that runs in our family that is a heart condition because I asked about everything. Right, what runs in your family, you know what does everybody died from and your family.

Jack:

I think sometimes the parents and the relatives are maybe more inclined to speak with a CBHA writer, because you're not like you're not the "bad guy". You're just doing an eval for the kid.

Cat:

It's very rare that they won't talk to me, they're almost always happy to talk to someone else, other than people who took their kid there. They're usually pretty kind every, every now and then I've got someone that's like, you're talking too loud. Why did you even call me if you don't want to talk to me right now and I'm saying well I just need to make an appointment with you it's gonna take about an hour or an hour and a half, you know.

But it usually goes pretty well if they answer the phone. And, and that's the whole purpose of the CBHA, to keep the kids healthy and safe, and you really can't do that without the cooperation of the parents. And I feel like when I see it in action, like the brain tumor. Yeah and that kind of thing. That's when I think, like, you know, that's when it's like a job well done,

Jack:

Yeah. like me doing this job that I did just possibly save this kid's life you know that's like such an extreme version of like what we all aim for. So that's really cool.

Cat:

Yeah, and you know I've had other ones too, they're like you know the parents are Muslim. It's really important for them the CBHA that this child should not be around alcohol because their cultural beliefs are really important and we need to honor that and not disregard them just because they made a choice that caused their child to be removed. And so those things are important too, so

Jack:

So, most of your career was writing CBHAs

Cat:

Right yeah I would say that was the bulk of it because it was about 11 years and I'll probably go back to it I just had like some double vision for a while.

And so about, I guess five or six years into writing CBHAs I added seeing kids for therapy to that. So I saw teenage girls for therapy for a while. And now I mostly see little kids. And so, I have a full caseload of just little guys right now. I mean, that's kind of fun, fun, I love all of them. Yeah, they're a lot of fun.

Jack:

So, so now you're doing therapy for kids in fostercare.

Cat:

Yeah, they're all in care.

So every now and then I get to be a part of a reunification. When the judge will order that the therapist, assist in the reunification so the mom will come to therapy or the dad will come to therapy and I get to be a part of that whole process and that's really nice. That's really cool. Yeah, it's good to see the whole thing come together.

Jack: Yeah, I mean, sometimes even as a foster parent you don't always get to like be as involved with a reunification.

I have two very different quazi reunifications next week, one where a child is going to a relative, which isn't a reunification but it's him going back to family and leaving my home and then I have another reunification where it's these three girls going back to their mom. And while the three girls going back to their mom, I feel like I'll probably be a pretty big part of it.

In fact I was going to invite you, why don't we do it here on the podcast.

Cat:

Okay, all right.

Jack:

This Sunday night when she brings the girls back from their weekend, I'm going to get a cake that says congratulations on it, and I'm going to surprise her when she walks in the door, and my sister's coming with her kids and I just want to jump out and yell surprise and congratulations and all that stuff because she's worked so hard to get to this point and I'm just so proud of her and I just really want her to feel good about it. And I think what's going to happen at reunification is I'm dropping the kids off at school and I think she really wants to pick the kids up from school, which is so cool for them because like, they're basically going to go home from their last day of school and, but it's sad for me because like I won't be there. So I think pretty sure everyone's gonna cry, happy tears though. So yeah, so even as a foster parent sometimes we don't get to really be part of the reunification like this other kid is going to a relative, basically someone's going to come pick him up from my house and then he's just going to be gone. But I'm sure that that will be really great for his family.

Cat:

It is a bit that's one of those bizarre ones where like, we've all known him all this time and they'll just be gone.

Jack:

I know. And then, was my last infant that was with me... actually just today, like an hour or two before you got here, I got a couple of videos and pictures of her from. She's living with a relative nowadays, they, they send me pictures and videos of her getting older and like she's so big, it's unbelievable.

Cat:

Oh, everybody adores this baby. Everybody, my three kids and I were there when they they dropped her off, we were all here at two in the morning, my boys were in this like storage room looking for baby supplies. Yeah, with Jack's son. I think we I think we were up changing her diapers feeding her, all of us at two in the morning.

We are waiting like this. I was hours, thank you guys I call it like 10 or 11 and we just

Jack:

Yeah, I mean it'll take a while sometimes I mean it depends because sometimes the kids like sitting in a car waiting to go somewhere, and they're there, like in less than an hour but most of the time when they call you, like the kid still has to go to the doctor and go here and go there and they got to pick something up and sometimes they even feed the kid before they come.

So a lot of the times, you know, it'll take six hours.

Cat:

And I think that CPI had like three babies in her car that was rough. It was rough for her. Oh yeah so sorry. Super sideline.

Jack:

So you worked with laws for child welfare ,you worked as a case manager, you were doing CBHAs and now you're doing therapy. Anything you want to share about your family?

Cat:

I have three kids.

Jack:

They're amazing.

Cat:

There's a lot of fun. They love Jack's kids.

Jack:

Your daughter just always kills me and I remember when she was a little baby and she's like that same little creature like this bubbly cartoon child

Cat:

She's the same. She's like slowly morphing into like Phoebe from friends.

And I think the reason that we met was because of your son and my second son's baseball experiences thank God for that.

Jack:

Yeah, I mean and what are the chances that I mean that was like the only year your kids play baseball right

Cat:

Yeah, they were. And my son flopped Tball so bad.

Jack:

Every Tball player fails, did you see my four year old on the baseball field? The videos. He had to be carried from base to base. Yes. And many times during each game, he'd come running off the field and like sit on the ground next to me or go running up the hills we hide this like, listen every kid's first Tball year is a flop, but that's okay but I'm really glad that the one year, they played, they got to be on my kids team because, what would my life be like without you? Like who would I go to target with?

Cat:

I don't know but I'd be so mad. I'd be so mad, and I wouldn't know why.

Jack:

That's wild. Alright, so, thanks for joining us and we're so glad to have you.

Cat:

We are so glad to have you and, you know, we'll see on the next podcast. Thank you so much for joining us.