Episode 1- All of This in Our Little Town? An Interview with Shey Thorn

Details: Welcome back to Real Issues, Real Talk: For Students, By Students! We know it has been a minute, but we are so excited to be back this week with a special episode. This week join students from the University of South Alabama as we sit down and discuss the resources provided by AIDS Alabama South with Co-Executive Director, Shey Thorn. For more information regarding all of the services offered by AIDS Alabama South, please feel free to follow this link: <u>https://www.aidsalabamasouth.org/</u>

Transcript

00:00:04 Connor Thrutell

Hey, everyone. Welcome back to real issues real talk for students by students. My name is Connor Thrutell. And wow, it has been a minute since we've talked to you guys. I have to say it feels a little weird being back in the studio, but I am extremely excited for the semester and for the upcoming season of the podcast that we have.

00:00:23 Connor Thrutell

In the end, I think you guys will really, really enjoy it.

00:00:27 Connor Thrutell

Today I'm joined by a very special guest. I'm joined by the one and only Shey Thorn from AIDS Alabama South and he is here to tell us all about what his organization does and how they interact with the University of South Alabama. So without further ado, Shay, would you like to go ahead and introduce yourself?

00:00:47 Shey Thorn

Absolutely. Thank you so much, Connor, and thank you for having me. I'm very excited to be here. My name is Shey Thorn. I'm Co, executive director of AIDS Alabama South and Clinical Executive director of our Sexual health clinic, shell.

00:00:58 Shey Thorn

Health I was born and raised here in mobile, right on the outside in Grand Bay, and I was able to travel the world a little bit and get a a little bit of a worldly essence before I came back home and taught high school here in mobile and kind of saw the need for sexual health services, especially regarding HIV.

00:01:18 Shey Thorn

And that's what led me to this work. Aside from my personal experiences.

00:01:23 Connor Thrutell

That is awesome and I just want to say thank you so much again for taking the time out of your busy schedule to be here chatting with us today. It truly means a lot to me and to our listeners as well.

00:01:33 Shey Thorn

Absolutely. Thank you so much. It means a.

00:01:35 Shey Thorn

Lot to me too.

00:01:37 Connor Thrutell

Well, thank you. So I guess first and foremost, what is the mission statement of AIDS, Alabama, South?

00:01:42 Shey Thorn

Yeah, so 8. Alabama S is dedicated to eliminating new HIV infections and improving the health and well-being of people living with HIV through inclusive and empowering support services and HIV prevention.

00:01:56

Education.

00:01:57

OK.

00:01:58 Connor Thrutell

Now, can you dive a little bit more into the educational programs that you guys have to fulfill that mission statement?

00:02:04 Shey Thorn

Absolutely. So we have many different departments and services that we offer to our Community for free and one of those is our prevention education department. So I have a prevention education outreach coordinator who focuses on our substance use and recovery population and just the general population of mobile and the remaining 12,000.

00:02:24 Shey Thorn

545.

00:02:25 Shey Thorn

Square miles that we cover.

00:02:26 Shey Thorn

And I have a rural and minority outreach coordinator who focuses more on the rural and minority populations. We also have the ending, the HIV epidemic team, and they work primarily within our clinic but offer in service, education and HIV and prevention education to up and coming providers as well as they operate.

00:02:46 Shey Thorn

A remote site clinic in the community utilizing our medical RV.

00:02:51 Shey Thorn

So essentially what that means is we are able to get into the Community and anyone that will allow us to come, we provide free HIV, 101 education and testing and we can always go deeper if they want us to and go on to HIV 102 that kind of gets into antiretroviral therapy and the treatments for HIV as well as.

00:03:12 Shey Thorn

More broader scale, comprehensive sexual health education.

00:03:16 Shey Thorn

Within that we have Project 1824 and Project 1824. I apologize, project 1324. So 1324 is a project that is focused primarily on the aged populations of 13 to 24 years old, which the CDC designates as youth.

00:03:36 Shey Thorn

And we have a few different programs for those populations. The first would be TARP teen advocates for risk prevention, and that's where our teens, who are aged 13 to 18 within any public school or school in general in the state of.

00:03:51 Shey Thorn

Emma can join and they receive a one hour educational session twice a month regarding sexual health and other essential learning services that they need honestly as they enter adulthood, and there are incentives that are involved, so usually they get like a DoorDash gift card or an Amazon gift card or something like that.

00:04:12 Shey Thorn

Then we have Project 1824 that is focused on African American and black females or those that were assigned female at birth, or identify as women currently. And that project is essentially just an HIV education and prep that pill that prevents HIV education workshop.

00:04:32 Shey Thorn

And these women get together and they learn together. They have fun and they learn from each other and each other stories.

00:04:39 Shey Thorn

And lastly, we have Project 1324 which is the the over the the broader scale allencompassing ages regardless of sexual identification or orientation, any of those other demographic identifiers, anyone between the ages of 13 to 24.

00:05:01 Shey Thorn

Can be a part of this project be on our Advisory Board where we can learn from them and their their services, the services that they've received regarding Prep and the other services that we provide here at AIDS Alabama South.

00:05:17 Connor Thrutell

That's incredible. Now, not to get off track a little bit, but you mentioned these educational programs, which are extremely vast and I'm sure touch a lot.

00:05:26 Connor Thrutell

Of.

00:05:26 Connor Thrutell

Students and you know people in that age range. Do you have a number for how many youth you serve per year?

00:05:32 Shey Thorn

Yeah, absolutely. So TARP teen advocates for risk prevention is actually a state are are first and only statewide program and we are able to. I apologize if you can hear that phone ringing. We are able to reach about 200 youth across the state of Alabama and.

00:05:52 Shey Thorn

And in general, for all of our youth programs, we are able to reach and educate a little over 2000 youth throughout the state of Alabama, but primarily here in mobile. And that includes getting into the public school systems and doing youth outreach through youth programs such as Desi Career Center or Dumas.

00:06:12 Shey Thorn

Leslie, where we come in and we talk to the youth from kindergarten to all the way to 18 and.

00:06:19 Shey Thorn

Yeah, it's pretty exciting. It's really incredible. We are able to kind of create our curriculum in a way that allows the youth to learn more than just about HIV and HIV is so stigmatized and really difficult to talk about sometimes in communities. So that allows us to open up the conversation and talk about other things with these youth as well.

00:06:39 Connor Thrutell

That is absolutely incredible and honestly, something I never had in school, so I'm glad that you guys are out there pushing this to students in Alabama. That's absolutely amazing.

00:06:50 Shey Thorn

Thank you. I agree.

00:06:51 Connor Thrutell

Yeah. Now, so we talked a lot about youth programs, but I assume that your organization also has a lot of programs for people who have been living with HIV or who have contracted HIV later in the month. Could you dive into those a little bit?

00:07:03 Shey Thorn

Absolutely. Yeah. So we offer a vast array of services to individuals who are living with or affected.

00:07:10 Shey Thorn

By HIV and.

00:07:13 Shey Thorn

I think it's important to know the communities that we serve so we serve mobile, Escambia, Baldwin, Butler, Clark, Choctaw, Kaneka, Wilcox, Marengo, Monroe, Covington, and Washington. And we're one of the very few aid service organizations.

00:07:28 Connor Thrutell

All across the board, I guess, right?

00:07:30

Yeah.

00:07:31 Shey Thorn

Literally all of southwest Alabama, pretty much right under Montgomery and below we're one of the very few that that covers such a vast, vast array of geographical area I would say. But we offer case management.

00:07:47 Shey Thorn

Uses and it's designed to enhance independence and increase sustainability for individuals. Allows them to learn to identify their needs and to overcome obstacles. We offer food and hygiene support programs so that our clients can maintain a healthy weight and.

00:08:07 Shey Thorn

Ensure that the foods that they are taking in are nutritious and work well with their system and with the therapies. The treatments that they're on, we offer housing assistance programs and that can include emergency utility assistance, emergency rental assistance.

00:08:24 Shey Thorn

We sometimes have the ability to pay for the first month first and last month deposit for someone moving into a new house or a new apartment, and we offer transportation services both for medically necessary appointments and for just general needs. So if someone needs to go to their doctor.

00:08:44 Shey Thorn

Absolutely. We can drive them there and bring them back to their house or if someone needs to go to the grocery store for food, that they may not have received from our food bank, but they need a spice or something.

00:08:57 Shey Thorn

And then we also offer dental treatment assistance. So dental treatment is extremely important for individuals living with HIV because antiretroviral therapies can affect dental health over a longer period of time. So very often we pay for the full cost of whatever dental treatment our clients need.

00:09:16 Connor Thrutell

Mm-hmm.

00:09:16 Shey Thorn

We also offer linkage to care, which is where we assist clients in.

00:09:22 Shey Thorn

And learning about their labs and and what the different aspects of their labs mean, learning about stigma, privacy, confidentiality and being linked into care for other resources and services through other organizations or clinics in our community. And we offer support groups for clients who are living with HIV.

00:09:42 Shey Thorn

To get together and speak with one another and learn from each others experiences. And lastly, we offer mental health service.

00:09:50 Shey Thorn

And we have a program called breaking barriers for that, which is where our clients can come together and we have a male group and a female group currently, and we'll be expanding that soon. And they are guided by a, a licensed mental health counselor through conversation. And then if they would like after that.

00:10:09 Shey Thorn

Monthly meeting. They can have individual appointments with that licensed mental health counselor.

00:10:14 Connor Thrutell

Wow, all of that done through your one organization.

00:10:18 Shey Thorn

Yes. Yeah, we have grown tremendously in the past, just two years. Honestly, all of those services that I just listed are kind of where we started alongside just general HIV and hepatitis C testing and then things just exploded and each one of those services.

00:10:35 Shey Thorn

Then began to get a little program that went with it and then a larger program and the community need is there. The Community interest is there and as long as that is happening then we can continue to grow, to provide for our.

00:10:46

Community.

00:10:47 Connor Thrutell

Yeah. Now one thing, I think that's extremely interesting about your organization is that you guys also fully operate a clinic as well, right?

00:10:54 Shey Thorn

Yes, that is correct. We have shell health. So amidst the COVID pandemic in 2020, we've been in talks for just a little under five years to with with the dream of starting a sexual health clinic and for us to initiate a sexual health clinic. Our the easiest way to kind of get in.

00:11:15 Shey Thorn

Is to start a prep clinic. And so as I mentioned earlier, Prep, which stands for pre exposure prophylaxis is the pill that prevents HIV.

00:11:24 Shey Thorn

And and in 2020, of course, COVID NIT and it affected absolutely everything that was going on within our lives and our services.

00:11:35 Shey Thorn

And we had to alter our services in extremely, extremely, almost detrimental ways to the capability of providing services to the Community. So much so that we weren't allowed to bring people in. And so we would have to meet them outside. And obviously people that may not be very open or comfortable with their status or living with HIV.

00:11:58 Shey Thorn

They.

00:11:59 Shey Thorn

Didn't like that so much. And so we had to think of ways that we could bring them in and get them in, in house and get them to see their physicians and providers that they weren't able to see outside of the other clinics that they were going to. And so we had this idea to start the prep clinic and it started off as one Tuesday.

00:12:20 Shey Thorn

Every week for four hours and we were only offering Prep, HIV testing and hepatitis C testing and within and that was for about three or four months. Within that time, the interest within the Community just kind of like as I mentioned earlier.

00:12:36 Shey Thorn

Loaded and we had just a little over 150 patients within that time, which is massive for us just getting started and all of those.

00:12:47 Shey Thorn

Every service that they were receiving for prep the blood work, the the visit with the provider, the follow up visits, the medication transportation services, all of that was free.

00:13:00 Shey Thorn

Well, during that time, as I recognize the need that was, you know, being presented to me for our community, I started writing grants because I was like this. We've got to do more. We have to be able to provide more for our Community. And I was able to secure the first grant for just a little over \$1.2 million. And that was spread over four years.

00:13:21 Shey Thorn

So that allowed us a sustainability plan for a four year time period where I knew that we could grow the clinic to a certain.

00:13:30 Shey Thorn

Within a certain respect, that would provide the Community with what they need, so we were able to hire a full time physician, full time nurse practitioner, A clinical certified clinical medical assistant, our coordinators for the clinic and we're soon to be hiring case management staff and nurse and potentially another.

00:13:50 Shey Thorn

Nurse practitioner and now we are open 40 hours a week, every single day. We have a couple of days where we're open later in the evening and we offer everything. So we offer now HIV testing and treatment, hepatitis C testing and treatment.

00:14:05 Shey Thorn

Prep Pep STI and STD testing and treatment and gender, gender affirming care, and I feel like I'm missing something, but essentially we're comprehensive sexual health clinic, and if you come for just one service, then you can come for general care as.

00:14:21 Shey Thorn

Well.

00:14:22 Connor Thrutell

OK, I got you now I think you might have already mentioned this, but all those services mentioned at your clinic which are vast and incredible, how much does that cost to patient?

00:14:33 Shey Thorn

So it cost absolutely nothing. I kind of I had a few mentors along the way with other clinics across the state and I.

00:14:42 Shey Thorn

Learned.

00:14:44 Shey Thorn

Ideas and and various ways of programs that they were able to implement their clinics so that their patients didn't have to pay anything and that was very important to me because.

00:14:53 Shey Thorn

Healthcare is extremely expensive.

00:14:56 Shey Thorn

And whenever you're living with HIV and you, you get that diagnosis. The first thing that's going through your mind, aside from, you know, the the, the myths and and the false ideas that our community has instilled in us is also like, how am I going to afford this? Because it is extremely expensive. The average antiretroviral therapy.

00:15:16 Shey Thorn

Medication. Just one pill, once a day, can cost a patient \$2000 a month if they don't.

00:15:21 Shey Thorn

Have.

00:15:22 Shey Thorn

Insurance. And then you add in.

00:15:25 Shey Thorn

The lab work which for.

00:15:28 Shey Thorn

The general lab work for an HIV patient every three to six months is about 500 to \$700.00 and then the clinical visit. Sometimes you'll have to pay for seeing the doctor. So if you don't have insurance, that would be like \$150.00 and I was just like, this is absolutely too much. I've been in that position before.

00:15:47 Shey Thorn

I I had to worry about how I was going to.

00:15:50 Shey Thorn

Pay for these things.

00:15:52 Shey Thorn

And eliminating stress for people that are living with HIV is vital to them living healthy with HIV. And so that was kind of the guiding point for that. So we have what is called A340B program and that allows us to fill our prescriptions through a pharmacy. And we as the clinic and as the prescriber receive a very small kickback.

00:16:13 Shey Thorn

The revenue that revenue gets filtered through a restricted grant source that's overseen by our corporate office and it allows us to cover all of the clinical related costs so that that patient can continue to receive their services through us.

00:16:27 Shey Thorn

Rick.

00:16:28 Connor Thrutell

That is absolutely mind blowing and incredible, and the fact that that exists in my little town of mobile is honestly just blows me away.

00:16:39 Shey Thorn

Yes, I know. I just want to like touch on that super quick because I grew up whenever I grew up. I was as a young gay person in mobile.

00:16:48 Shey Thorn

Which back then, we didn't talk about very often, but it was super important. I didn't learn and that in our education system about sexual health, it was all scare based tactics kind of to prevent us from from exposing ourselves and contracting something.

00:17:08 Shey Thorn

But luckily I had a parent that was extremely knowledgeable and and knew everything and accepting and that was able to talk to me about these things and she was like, you know, you have got to get tested every three months once you become sexual.

00:17:20 Shey Thorn

Active and so I would have to go to the health department, which was I was living in Grand Bay. It was all the way downtown, and it wasn't the most comfortable place for me. And and, you know, our place may not be the most comfortable place for some people. And that's just what we experience in the world where we live in. But it's it's true to say that we.

00:17:40 Shey Thorn

Or the first comprehensive sexual free sexual health clinic in mobile. And that's simply because, just like you said, it's crazy to think that mobile has that now. But we never had it, and we had these other little.

00:17:52 Shey Thorn

Clinics and federally.

00:17:53 Shey Thorn

Federally qualified health centers and our health.

00:17:56 Shey Thorn

Apartment. But they do so many other services that I feel as though sometimes sexual health kind of gets put on the back burner and it's just like, oh, you're here for STI testing. OK, we'll get you in and out. No, there are conversations that need to be had with these people. We can get to know these individuals and learn that maybe they need other resources or they have a friend that's living with HIV and doesn't know where to go.

00:18:18 Shey Thorn

Or they would be a really good candidate for prep. Or maybe they want to volunteer and help us out. So yeah, I agree that us being in mobile and having what we have now is kind of insane.

00:18:29 Connor Thrutell

Yeah, absolutely. And I mean, you know, congratulations for being the first free comprehensive sexual health clinic in our little small town, giving back to the community in you know ways that we desperately need. So thank you so much for that.

00:18:44 Shey Thorn

Thank you.

00:18:45 Connor Thrutell

So in addition to your clinic, you also touched on the fact that you guys operate a mobile RV as well that provides sexual health services to the community. Could you go into detail about?

00:18:56 Shey Thorn

That yeah, absolutely. So our medical RV is new. The idea surrounding it is not new for us and the implementation is not new.

00:19:04 Shey Thorn

We start.

00:19:04 Shey Thorn

Hit it off with a small Mercedes sprinter that was renovated on the inside to have two testing rooms and a small space for phlebotomy for blood work. But when I say small it is so small we had individuals that had difficulty getting in.

00:19:23 Shey Thorn

In and out.

00:19:25 Shey Thorn

There were we had many issues with it and.

00:19:29

We.

00:19:29

We.

00:19:30 Shey Thorn

Started talks about the medical RV last year and started some research and the biggest thing about needing a medical RV was that we needed a bathroom. Whenever we went out into the more rural communities and say we were just in a grocery store parking lot and.

00:19:47 Shey Thorn

We were doing STI testing well. We need a urine sample for that and we it's very difficult to send someone into the grocery store to go to the bathroom and come out with a cup of urine. It's a little bit embarrassing. Nobody wants to.

00:19:59 Shey Thorn

Do that.

00:20:00

Right.

00:20:01 Shey Thorn

So we decided, you know, it's really time to start looking into how are we going to.

00:20:06 Shey Thorn

To get this medical RV and and how are we going to implement it and put it put it into use, putting it into use was super easy. You know, essentially we just take it out and we park it somewhere and and people come, they're interested in the wording on the side of the medical RV or just the services or our table. So anyway suffice to say we purchased.

00:20:27 Shey Thorn

A 36 foot medical RV that has two exam rooms, a phlebotomy station, a bathroom, it is ADA meets ADA requirements. It has a wheelchair lift on it.

00:20:42 Shey Thorn

And it has a security system inside of it, which makes people feel very comfortable.

00:20:48 Shey Thorn

And we are actually going into a very wonderful, wonderful partnership with the University of South Alabama nursing program in which we'll be partnering with them so that they're arins can run their clinical rotations and community clinical experience through our medical RV. So we're still.

00:21:08 Shey Thorn

You know, working out the details, but essentially what that means is that the students from South will be able to.

00:21:13 Shey Thorn

To go out with us in the community and learn what it means to provide public health and community health on a free, community based organization or clinical organization aspect or side.

00:21:26 Connor Thrutell

That's incredible, and I'm glad that you brought up S because to my understanding, aids Alabama S actually partners with the university in a variety of different ways, right?

00:21:35 Shey Thorn

Yes, we used to not. That was kind of one of the biggest.

00:21:39 Shey Thorn

Things I wanted to do is.

00:21:41 Shey Thorn

Whenever we I moved into this position, rebuilding those bridges and collaborative opportunities within our community was extremely important. And so that means that we need to work with other organizations and businesses, agencies, schools, universities, every single day. And I reached out to South and at that point in time, whenever I reached out a couple of years ago.

00:21:57

Hmm.

00:22:03 Shey Thorn

They were about to have the week of welcome and they asked us to come set up a table and just do HIV testing, which at that time was about all we could do and that kind of grew our partnership with them. So now every year we come for a week of welcome and we also come about.

00:22:20 Shey Thorn

Every two to three months to provide HIV, STI and prep and testing and services. We're also, as I mentioned, now partnered with the School of Nursing for their clinical rotations, where we've been partnered with the Nurse Practitioner program for their clinical rotations. And we received a beautiful award.

00:22:41 Shey Thorn

For our commitment to their that program just a few months ago.

00:22:46 Shey Thorn

And we're also partnered with the School of Psychiatry with Doctor Candice Owen, and I'm currently conducting a research study with her regarding the sexual assault nurse examiners, services and. And those that experience are victims or survivors.

00:23:05 Shey Thorn

Of sexual assault.

00:23:06 Shey Thorn

And how pet post exposure prophylaxis, which can be taken after you are exposed to HIV and can eliminate any possible transmission, how PEP is vital to someone that may may fit into that category. And so we continue to explore opportunities for us to partner with South and provide the students of South and the greater community.

00:23:27 Shey Thorn

Same build with all of these necessary services.

00:23:31 Connor Thrutell

That.

00:23:32 Connor Thrutell

Is incredible and as a student of the university myself, I just want to say thank you for partnering with our university and I hope that partnership continues and has expanded as the years go on. You guys are actually gonna be on campus today with your mobile RV, right?

00:23:47 Shey Thorn

Yeah, we'll be out there. We'll be at the Student Health Center today for a week of welcome. And we'll, as I mentioned, I don't want to say them all again.

00:23:54 Shey Thorn

We'll be providing all of the services that we talked about today. It's very comfortable, very chill. Our medical director, Doctor Thomasina Anderson Sharp will be out there. She's an incredible person.

00:24:06 Shey Thorn

And if anyone has any questions, all of our staff are very well educated. And if you just wanna swing by and pick up a free T-shirt or some goodies, maybe some condoms or to get testing or prep, we will be there.

00:24:20 Connor Thrutell

That is awesome. I will be sure to let all my friends on campus know and we will blast it on our social media pages. So hopefully you guys can get a little bit more traction than you already do, but I'm sure you guys are gonna be swamped no matter what, because you're just offering such amazing things to students. Unfortunately, we are at the end of the episode, so we will.

00:24:40 Connor Thrutell

You wrapping things up here shortly, but I wanna give you one last opportunity.

00:24:44 Connor Thrutell

Take this as your final message. If anyone is listening to this podcast and fell asleep halfway through or just waking up, what is the one thing you want them to take?

00:24:52 Connor Thrutell

Away from this episode.

00:24:53 Shey Thorn

ABC.

00:24:54 Shey Thorn

Absolutely. It's easy to fall asleep when I talk because I tend.

00:24:56 Shey Thorn

To over talk.

00:24:58 Shey Thorn

Yeah. The one thing I would like for people to take away, well, I will say that for a week of welcome, we'll be at South today from 1:00 to 4:00 at the.

00:25:07 Shey Thorn

Health Center. So just just know that. And then the one take away is that we are here for you I think so often HIV is very heavily stigmatized and there are different factors for that and that can be a completely different podcast that we can talk about regarding the Deep South and the lack of education regarding.

00:25:27 Shey Thorn

Maybe.

00:25:28 Shey Thorn

I think that.

00:25:29 Shey Thorn

Whenever people sometimes think of us and we started off as the AIDS service organization providing services to people living with HIV or providing HIV testing, that they fail to realize that we've grown and that we offer so much more and that we do so much more for our Community. So I think just visit our website, check us out.

00:25:49 Shey Thorn

Www.aids.amsouth.org or www.shellshelhealth.org and you can read all about our services. Call me personally 205-918-8224 and I will talk to you about everything we talked about today and I will help.

00:26:04 Shey Thorn

Yeah.

00:26:05 Connor Thrutell

That sounds absolutely incredible, and we'll be sure to link your website in the episodes bio so people can go and check you out and reach out to you if they have any questions just once. Again, thank you so much for coming on the episode and taking the time out of your day to be here with us aids Alabama S we'll have their mobile RV at the Student Health Center from 1:00 to 4:00.

00:26:25 Connor Thrutell

Today. So if you guys are on campus, be sure to go check it out. This has been real issues, real talk for students by students. We hope to catch you guys in the next one. In the meantime, be sure to listen to all of our old episodes available on every single major podcast and streaming platform.

00:26:39 Connor Thrutell

You'll have a great day. Bye.