

Mike: Hi Mom, how are you?

Geanett (the guest): Michael Browne. How are you? I'm well! How are you?

Mike: Haha, I'm doing great. Is this still a good time to talk...?

music

Mike: My name is Mike Browne, pronouns are he/him and what you just heard is... well... my momma! In this episode, episode 8, I sit down with the woman who gave me life! And pick her brain about how she became a childcare provider. Apologies in advance for the sound quality. She was experimenting with a new phone and I was recording in my car for some peace and quiet. I hope you enjoy.

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Alright yall, so everyone knows that childcare is essential. We're some of the most influential people out there. Yet, we are often under paid and overworked. So how can you work full-time, have hobbies, show your friends and family love, self-care, and also fine tune your skills and grow more in-depth? That's where we come in. These napcasts, 25, 30 minute segments are designed to help you learn on the go, hear another perspective, spark debate, agree incessantly, and honestly, remind you that you're not alone. We live in a complex world, so allow us to challenge your perspective. So, are your headphones in? Did you turn the volume up? Alright now. Let's get it.

Mike: Growing up you had a ton of jobs due to a volatile job market, being immigrants, and having that hustle mentality which you certainly passed down to me. But one thing stuck with me for a long time. Almost 18 years to be exact.

So, let's take a trip down memory lane and let's take it back to 1993. I had considerably less hair than I do now. P.diddy was still known as puff daddy or Sean Combs, Blockbuster was where we spent our Saturday nights. And it was also the first year you went into business for yourself and become a family childcare home center. What inspired you to start your own center?

Geanett (the guest): What inspired me the most is that you and your two other siblings were getting older and were getting more independent. I think you were about two. You were in preschool, so, I decided to get a part-time job. A childcare worker would pick you up, since it was a half-day program. After a couple of months, I quickly realized that my paycheck was going straight to childcare and preschool, so I said "hmm, this is not working." So, I voiced my concern to a friend, and she was like, "why don't you open up your own childcare center?" And I jokingly said, "yeah, right!" But after sleeping on it after a few weeks, I decided to look into it. I started the application, did my research, started taking classes, had the house inspected to be certified, and hence, become Tender Hearts Childcare, my baby.

Mike: Was there an experience before that, that made you think "Wow, there's a need for this in my community?"

Geanett (the guest): Yeah, I when I moved from San Francisco, because I loved to move, I was a rolling stone. I saw the need for quality childcare because I stayed at a homeless shelter. And I saw the people who were at the homeless shelter was young mothers with children. The shelter wasn't a safe place for young children. I remember growing up in my country, Antigua, in the West Indies. I was mostly raised by my grandparents, as my parents were constantly away trying to build a better life for us. But I had a happy childhood. I didn't have a ton of cares or worries in the world. I had aunts, cousins, neighbors, in fact the whole village. We have a saying in my country that says, "it takes a village to raise a child" and literally in our country it takes a village to raise a child. Everyone from the elders, pastors, neighbors, nurses etc. were there looking out for you. In our village, since we were so far from everyone and everywhere, we had nurses and a doctor that lives in the village and comes from the village. Teachers that lives in the village and comes from that village. So, everyone had a hand in raising a child, and that's what ingrained in me.

Mike: From my older brother Randy watching my sister and I growing up. From Ms. Jennifer our family friend. To that one random year Aunt Sandy decided to spend an entire year in New York with us. You had a ton of people watch us so you could provide for us. I imagine those people and your children's early years in schools also helped shaped how you wanted your center to look like. What were some of the experiences you took from them that you wanted to implement and some of the not so positive interactions or experiences that you stayed cleared of when you decided to open Tender Hearts?

Geanett (the guest): The most I really wanted to include is how the children were taking care of. Most of the kids that I had come from young parents, who didn't have complete knowledge of how to raise a kid, some because they didn't have any parents influence in their lives growing up. So, they struggled to understand things like the different cries of the children and what it means. So, I tried my best to observe as much as possible and interpret it for the parents. I had babies that started with me from 6 weeks, and just imagine the parents away from the child and only get the chance to be with their child when their child is winding down and getting ready for bed. So, they don't have a ton of quality time to observe the child during the day. So that's why I tried to implement in my settings. A ton of observations.

Mike: You had to dissolve Tender Hearts in 2011 due to the financial crisis of 2009. There are many others out there right now suffering the same faith from Covid-19 and I'm sure some will have to close in the future due to other pandemics, crises, systemic oppression, and policies enacted, some of them will have to close their doors as well. I'm not sure if you know this or not. But I distinctly remember one night hearing you whisper on the phone to someone about having to close down. And I heard you crying. That was the first of two times I ever heard you cry. The second was when the stupid New England Patriots won another Superbowl title and I joined you that night. Haha. But for those who are being forced to make that decision to close, what advice, thoughts, words of affirmation could you share with them?

Geanett (the guest): It's really hard to close a business. It's not easy. After you put all your energy and dream into a business that is near to your heart. But you close for a certain reason. Some are financials which is beyond your close. Some is that you're ready to relax. To retire. To move on. For in part, it was for the latter. I had children from 6 weeks to 12 years old. I said to

myself, my children are graduating from college, are moving on, and the kids I watched are all growing up and being productive young people in society, I decided to close and move onto something different. And another reason was that the rules and regulations were changing rapidly. I was a state-based center. So, a lot of the children that came to me were on government assistance. And the rules they were implementing, I didn't agree with. It was best for me to close my doors and have time for me. To do things for me. To self-care.

Mike: Despite being out the game for quite some time now, you're still loosely connected. Can you speak about the growth you've seen and some of your hopes and wishes for where the childcare industry can go from here?

Geanett (the guest): I think the childcare industry is not focused on what I think should be. And that's supports. They put the child in the center and pay for the child to attend, but the agencies need more help and support for the parents or caregiver. It's not easy to raise a child. And there are times where the child frustrates you so much and you don't know what to do. And you may turn to being abusive to the child. It's not what you intend but with the stress and working and trying to make ends meet. It's very hard. I wish they could have classes, not only parenting classes, but classes to help parents know how to budget. How to buy food that are nutritious for the child. How to budget what they have for the entire month. Or how to buy stuff that will be beneficial. Parents need help especially the younger parents. They need an outlet to be able to sit and talk to people and express how they are feeling inside. I remember early on, they had something called Big Brother. Which is when a parent is at the end of their rope, they could drop the child off to my center for the weekend. And I would keep the child for the whole weekend and the parent would go and get supports – mental and emotional – that they needed. Come Monday, they would come back refreshed and be a better parent. I wish they would bring that back.

Mike: What are some lessons you've learned or wisdom you'd give family childcare homes, for new educators who are just starting out or for other providers in general?

Geanett (the guest): If you're into childcare, make sure that's what you really want to do. Childcare is not easy. Children have thoughts and feelings and sometimes don't know how to project that to you. They might act out and we adults call it disruptive but that's how the child communicates. How they get out what they need to tell the adults.

You really have to be prepared to listen and come down to their level. You have to actually come down to the floor and look at them eye to eye instead of standing as a giant over them. You have to reason with them so they can understand and observe them to understand what is really bothering them. It could be as simple as the child is hot, but you want the child to keep their socks on. The child feet are sweating, it's uncomfortable to the child. You keep putting the socks on and they keep taking it off and that's what makes them start screaming and stuff like that. You have to really be present with the child. It's not all for the money or for you to sit there and watch tv. You have to really be with the child to understand the child.

Mike: Nowadays we have a ton of rules and regulations. Some are great. Especially around disinfecting and some are restrictive, prescriptive and prevents children from soaring and

thriving. Talk to me about your philosophy. I mean clearly it was effective. A ton of your kids still comes by and check in on you. Many of them have went on to have careers in engineering, ballet, and TV personalities.

Geanett (the guest): My philosophy was very simple. You have to learn how negotiate, reason and offer advice. Encourage them. Reassure them. And sometimes even let them act out. Sometimes as adults we just want to scream right? Give children a safe place to get it out. They have feelings and they need to let it out. And 9 out of 10 times, they'll be okay. Cleaning stuff is very essential, but children are going to be children. They put everything in their mouth. And that's how they build the antibodies in their body. That's how they build their immune system by putting a dirty finger in their mouth. The body then learns how to fight off certain germs. If you try to keep a child in a sterile environment, the moment they go out and touch something else, they get sick. Cleaning is very essential and it's okay if they stick their dirty shoes in the mouth. It's not the end of the world. Advise them not to do it but know that it'll be okay.

Mike: So, allow children to be children. Allow them the ability to find their voice, to express themselves.

Reassure them when they need it.

Geanett (the guest): Exactly. Give them a hug. Take them into your arms. Rock them. You'd be surprised! They'll feel assured and safe and really believe in someone that they trust. When other folks see the children with me, they always thought they were mine. By just the way we react with each other. I even had some of them even call me 'mommy.' Some of the parents felt uneasy at the time but after getting to know the parents a bit better and seeing the love I gave they understood. The parents were happy to see that whenever they leave their child with me that they would be taken care of and they didn't have to have any worries. They could think about what they had to do in their lives and jobs peacefully. I always corrected the child and pointed out that this was your mommy, this is your daddy. The child would be with me so much, that they just picked it up. The parents

Mike: So, my brother went into accounting. My sister went into biochemistry. Very predictable careers for them. They were straight A students.

I was the one hiding in the back of the class or... and I can say this now since I don't think you can ground me being 10k miles away, but I was the one trying to forge my report card each quarter. For this question I'm going to ask you to speculate a bit and say why do you think I went into childcare?

Geanett (the guest): Well this is the first time I heard that you were always in trouble. In fact, the teachers growing up were always saying you were attentive etc. But you were the one who was more like me in thinking and being free-spirited. The other two was homebodies and when I was younger, I was never in one place for a very long time. I was always traveling with you. We went on the bus, train, plane etc. You got the free-spirited from me. Always on the go. Always adventurous. So, it didn't really surprise me that you went into the childcare. The childcare children I had, always used to cling to you. Always wanted to be where you were, what you did. It was a good thing. While I'm not surprised you went into childcare, I just never thought you

would be doing things like this (Napcast) and other things you're doing right now. And I'm proud. Like they said, the apple doesn't fall from the tree.

Mike: I hear you getting tired of all these questions, so I'll end this interview with this one final one. would you do it again?

Geanett (the guest): In a heartbeat. I really loved my children and the parents. As a matter of fact, they always come back whenever they are in town. I saw one the other day. They always come back when they are in town and knock on my door and I'm like "who the heck is this?" They call when they are in town and letting me know what's going on with them. I saw a parent the other day and she was like "Andre keeps asking about you" and I have to tell him "leave her alone. She's busy. She has a life." But yup, I would do it again. Zero hesitations.

Mike: Thank you mom, I love you.

Geanett (the guest): love you too.

Mike: We'll be right back...

Commercial: Hilltop Children's Center is a high quality preschool, afterschool program, and professional development institute of early learning and inquiry serving the Seattle community since 1971. Together, we are working with the next generation of inventors, leaders, thinkers, artists, and social activists. For more information on our professional development and community outreach including workshops, presentations, blogs, coaching and consulting, and of course, this napcast, please visit www.hilltopcc.com

Nick: Mike, thanks for taking the time to record that with your mom. As we've been getting to know each other and growing our relationship it was awesome to hear the rawness and vulnerability with your mom. The sound quality didn't sound too bad either! Seeing your world through a different lens, is something that was really interesting, and I felt the vulnerability and I know it'll be received really well. How was it for you?

Mike Ya know, it was fun interviewing my mom. I was recording it in my car, and I live off of a busy street and had to do it in my car and of course it was 90 degrees that day, so I was dying! She was super nervous if you couldn't tell and for me, it was very vulnerable moment. She and my pops are foreign-born. Sharing that bit of yourself, in 2020, in this country? That's not something you typically broadcast. Sharing our battle with escaping homelessness in 93 and then again going through transitional housing a couple of years later, that's draining. Even little things like me knowing and know sharing that English isn't her first language, and thinking about how society reacts to that, made me pause and actually think, do I want to bring that to the light? How is society going to react to that? Is she going to like me saying that?

This interview came with a lot of thoughts. And even know, hearing it back, especially when I think about how English isn't her first language, there were times when she said things and I knew what she meant, but thought, dang, the audience might not. Like, for example, back home in her village in Antigua, everything is called daycare. Preschool is called daycare. 1st grade is

called daycare. Babysitting is called daycare. I was thinking, how are people going to take that here? Especially as we try to professionalize the field. So, it was troubling at first thinking, how am I going to explain the cultural context around that.

We're also super proud people. Our culture is rooted in strength. So, asking her to lean into some of these questions was difficult for her. Especially when she had to talk about closing down her center. It was partly due to the financial crisis of 09 and it was partly because she was tired, and she didn't want to admit that.

Nick: I think that's always tough for parents or the adults of children. She called all the children her babies and that could be hard when you have been so strong for young ones all your life, and then to suddenly put down your guard and lean into this thing of vulnerability.

Mike: Oh, and her saying she didn't know I didn't I was disruptive or sitting in the back of class was a bit of a stretch. Because she would beat me religiously for it each quarter when educators would call home and give updates haha. Anyways, it was great to hear speak on the topic and shed some light that I hope listeners found useful. Leaning into vulnerability and sitting in discomfort is something I'm always challenging others to do but struggle to put that into practice myself. It's not really a strength of mine. So, it was good exercise doing that here and practicing what I preach.

What sucks is that she had some real gems that I had to edit out because it was slightly inaudible. As I mentioned, cars were passing by, I was sitting in the car trying to escape background noises etc. She mentioned things like "children are smarter than we think and are like a sponge soaking up every word or action" which goes right along with how we view children and the image of the child which we spoke about in Episode 5.

Nick: Yeah, something that struck me was your mom's strong sense of the image of the child and how she really called out being present with children. This is something that I always tell other people in the field as well, children really aren't any difference than us. In fact, I think your mom called them mini adults. And they are. They just have less practice. And like she pointed out, they don't have the tools to regulate it as much and I even wrote it down here, sometimes they just need to let it out. In fact, we all need to let it out. Sometimes you just have to scream it out. So, that really hit home when your mom said that and in fact, it made me miss my own mom. Because, I was a pretty 0 to 60 type of kid. My mom always tells this story about how I wanted to go to a toy store when I was maybe 3 or 4 and she said no. I kept begging her, she stuck with it and in the middle of the mall, I flipped out, and she would look at me and "Are you done?" "I still have some shopping to do." But I think what my mom and your mom is getting at is that this person needs to get this out and this is how they know best. They'll learn along the way to better regulate themselves and they just need time. That's what I got from your mom. Being presence and forming these authentic relationships with people.

Mike: Looking back, it was something special. In the moment, it might pass you by but as we look back, especially as us being reflective practioners, I'm like dang, what a childhood and an opportunity to see how do you treat other people despite them being children of the state,

children who suffered different types of abuse, neglect, and seeing how my mom saw them as a person. Those are just invaluable things that I'm going to bring to my child if I were to ever have one.

Nick: What do you remember having kids in your house?

Mike: I think the most beautiful part of having so many kids in our home, you think about how many hardships we had, it forced me to grow up. It forced me to get a job. It forced me to be responsible. Having that many children in our house also reminded me that I can still be a kid. I can still enjoy the little things. It protected my childhood. It was a preservation of childhood. You're a child for such little time in the grand scheme of things. You're a child and we define childhood as birth to 9 years old, for, maybe if you're lucky 10% of your life. And we know from statistics that if you're a person of color, especially a Black male, by time you hit 16, you get treated like an adult. So, having a chance to be around children and enjoy Dragon Ball Z, and being able to get muddy, to play football in the streets, to put a shoe in my mouth... did wonders for my development.

Nick: One of the things she pointed out was that she had a lot of young children in her care. She was almost like a swado parent. I also really loved her village experience and how she tied it back to everything and her real life experience. She lived that out and it was almost like a core value for her. What struck me also is that time is a privilege. For young families and families of color... having time to being able to spend 5 hours a day with their children is a privilege. I'm assuming the families she served were families of color and they didn't have that privilege. And I think it's just part of the systemic oppression we face. We keep families of color so stressed out, always having to work that they miss out on bonding. It almost makes me wonder if that's what children think family dynamics are. You have children, you work so much, and you never get to be with them. Then certain people on the political spectrum wonder about family values. And the answer is easy, we need to invest more in families. And that was something your mom said within the first 5 minutes of the conversation that had me thinking so many different things!

Mike: Until you just said that, I didn't even make a connection about how the village concept and how it influenced her childcare center. There were children in her care at 7am, 11am, 6pm, 8pm. I remember a couple of times her waking me up in the middle of the night at 2am and getting me dressed to go pick up such and such because their parents had a breakdown and my mom came to support them and they stayed with us for a week. That village part rubbed off on me and I start to think about how invested I am in my community out here in Seattle, in ECE, in the Black and Brown Community. I mean, I knew it deep down but to hear it from you and for you to help me realize it even more just how much the village concept is in me is something special.

Nick: It's lived out and its striking. It's wonderful. And thinking about how your mom started her center and how she did it out of necessity because her village, which we can easily just substitute for society or community needed it, is wonderful. There's this Amish saying, I think, that goes "there's no heavy burden if everyone does some lifting."

Mike: So much of our field is siloed. You're Reggio, I'm Montessori. You're headstart, I'm ECEAP. And my hope is that we take some of that village concept and start to integrate it. We start to look out for each other no matter what and stop competing against each other. And we even take that and support those not in the field anymore. Because once you're part of the family. That's it. You're always a part of us. Of ECE.

Nick: I'm curious, what does your mom think about childcare now. And what does your mom think about males in ECE?

Mike: What does she think of childcare now? I'm going to start there because that's the easier of the two questions. She thinks we're on the right track. There's a lot of uproar going on. There's a lot of progressiveness going. We can at least acknowledge that the system wasn't built for all of us. And that we can't continue to do the things we were doing. She's down for the deregulation. We talked about intent vs impact and while the intent is good, the impact is that it's forcing a lot of our centers like hers to close. It's forcing a lot of people now in COVID-19 to close. So, I think she's down for the cause and she's looking for ways to support although she's out of it.

What does she think of men or males in ECE? I think her first question was "Nick has tattoos?" Because you have a sleeve of them. But nah, she thought it was pretty rad that it's not just an isolated or a single gendered field anymore. The one thing she's super interested and proud of is that by having more male involvement it's going to destigmatize the field and it's only going to make more quote unquote, successful families, however you define success. There's going to be more involved male figures, not just fathers, but male figures. And that's going to increase male involvement and strengthen the relationships that our young boys and girls and non-gender conforming children are having in the world.

Nick: It'll really get to the concept that we are all in this together. I appreciate this Mike.

Mike: No doubt. So, what's next?

Nick: I don't know? Maybe we should get my mom on it?

Mike: I love it. Let's do it!

Nick: Haha, alright. We will. Well, I appreciate you Mike. Thank you.

Mike: Thank you Nick.