

Season 2 Episode 10: Bonus Episode on Teen Sexual Health
[intro music Sun Through Shade]

HANNAH: This is a special bonus episode on Teen Sexual Health. In this episode, we take another look at sexual health working with young people. We spoke with Tory Sparks, an experienced sexuality educator in Michigan, to learn more about this important public health topic. We hope you enjoy our interview with this amazing youth educator and sexuality education professional.

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00:10:09.630 --> 00:10:18.390

Abby: An easy question, if you could tell the listeners, your name and then some of your experience working in reproductive justice.

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00:10:19.380 --> 00:10:38.040

Tory: Yeah. So hi, my name is Tory Sparks my pronouns are she, her, hers, and they them there's, um, I am a sexual educator and advocate and specifically working with young people and my

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00:10:38.940 --> 00:10:47.640

Tory: specialty and experiences when working with high schoolers. I work for one of the largest providers of sexual health and education in the United States here in the Michigan.

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00:11:03.300 --> 00:11:03.900

Tory: Affiliate

Tory: A majority of my work is in classrooms and I teach right now the basics of contraceptives and condom usage.

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00:12:40.320 --> 00:12:57.930

Tory: As well as sort of an LGBTQ 101 presentation in high school health classrooms, and i do that also through running a peer education program. So I trained high schoolers to teach their peers peer education is a really effective models, as I'm sure you know,

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00:12:59.340 --> 00:13:10.050

Tory: In public health, education, especially with young people who, and especially with sex education are really listen to their peers, more than they are adults.

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00:13:10.500 --> 00:13:29.250

Tory: Young people get a majority of their sex education from their peers, but unfortunately it's not often like accurate information. And so my... a part of my job is to make sure that young people are equipped with the right information and skills to educate their peers.

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00:13:30.870 --> 00:13:39.930

Tory: I also facilitated a couple youth advisory councils, so making sure that when an organization

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00:13:41.520 --> 00:13:47.580

Tory: is putting out work that is directly affecting young people, or about adolescent health

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00:13:48.690 --> 00:13:57.510

Tory: that young people are getting their eyes on it and they're getting their input on it. So I see a lot of my work as providing resources for young people,

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00:13:58.620 --> 00:14:14.400

Tory: teaching them about their bodies so they can make their own decisions, advocating for them in arenas where their voices are not usually heard and yeah make it... making sure that youth voices sort of at the center of

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00:14:16.350 --> 00:14:21.420

Tory: the work that we do. And I think generally, and I can talk about this a little bit more, but

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00:14:22.440 --> 00:14:28.860

Tory: my work is guided by "nothing about us without us." And so making sure that

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00:14:31.140 --> 00:14:32.100

Tory: Sort of the...

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00:14:33.180 --> 00:14:41.160

Tory: Perspective in public health that's creating programs for people without their input isn't happening, and I think especially

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00:14:42.570 --> 00:14:45.480

Tory: amongst all the power dynamics and

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00:14:47.100 --> 00:14:56.910

Tory: various ways that people are marginalized, it's really harmful and public health work is done without the voices of the most impacted groups. And so

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00:14:58.650 --> 00:15:09.420

Tory: when I graduated, so I spent four years studying gender, sexuality and feminist studies at Oberlin College. I also have a degree in anthropology and a minor in French, I

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00:15:10.860 --> 00:15:14.490

Tory: felt like I had spent a lot of time in the Ivory Tower and

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00:15:15.630 --> 00:15:24.240

Tory: Felt like I was like okay you know like sitting in the classroom studying dynamics and studying the way the work is done.

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00:15:25.470 --> 00:15:32.850

Tory: And much of what I'm really grateful for about my education is that it taught me how to think, but it didn't teach me what to think.

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00:15:34.170 --> 00:15:38.760

Tory: And so I was really eager to get on the ground post-graduation and start doing the work.

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00:15:40.890 --> 00:15:44.940

Tory: I wasn't sure what that is going to look like. But I got very lucky.

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00:37:52.860 --> 00:38:04.530

Abby: You mentioned briefly a little bit ago about personal responsibility and individual responsibility. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that in the context of this example as well.

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00:38:05.070 --> 00:38:20.100

Tory: Yeah, so a lot of issues around teen pregnancy and parenting is framed as a personal responsibility issue so

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00:38:21.270 --> 00:38:25.080

Tory: I'll back up a little bit. Individualism as a system that

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00:38:27.000 --> 00:38:37.290

Tory: makes us think about people outside of their circumstances. So it frames people's decisions and the things that they do based on

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00:38:37.800 --> 00:38:47.520

Tory: Their inherent self and making their own decisions when in reality we're making decisions in the context that we're in and

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00:38:48.060 --> 00:39:00.810

Tory: We're going to have to make different decisions based on our situations. Right. And so this is a really big problem. When you look at like the welfare system or even something like Medicaid and Medicare

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00:39:01.890 --> 00:39:15.420

Tory: That's going to say, well, you screwed up. You don't have a job. And so why should my tax dollars up to help you out. Right. Um, when in reality, like the reason that that person needs to be on welfare needs Medicaid

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00:39:17.310 --> 00:39:20.910

Tory: Is is structural and not because they're lazy.

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00:39:22.500 --> 00:39:30.360

Tory: But an individualists framework, which is like super, super everywhere in America.

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00:39:31.440 --> 00:39:43.200

Tory: Wants us to think that it's that person's fault for their decision making and not well okay they didn't have XYZ resources in the beginning. Right. Um, so

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00:39:44.190 --> 00:39:55.440

Tory: A lot of sex education funding actually from federal government is what's called prep funding, which is a Personal Responsibility Education.

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00:39:56.640 --> 00:39:57.060

Tory: Act.

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00:39:59.010 --> 00:40:12.660

Tory: And while we're able to do really good work with that money. And it still is based in framing teen pregnancy as like an issue with making the wrong choices and it's your fault.

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00:40:13.440 --> 00:40:28.620

Tory: When in reality, it's super complex um some teenagers make the decision to become pregnant and want that. And guess what, it's fine, because they're making their own decision and they should be allowed to make their own decision about their body right

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00:40:30.060 --> 00:40:47.190

Tory: Some teenagers are in a situation where they were not taught many teenagers. They were not taught how to prevent pregnancy. They were not taught how pregnancy happens, they were not provided with what they needed to for pregnancy and

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00:40:48.360 --> 00:40:54.330

Tory: As a result of being a, like a human being who is developing and

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00:40:55.380 --> 00:40:58.350

Tory: Might want to be intimate with another human being.

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00:40:59.550 --> 00:41:03.570

Tory: May have been in a situation where pregnancy could occur and

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00:41:05.430 --> 00:41:20.250

Tory: became pregnant right and a personal responsibility lens wants us to be like wow that teenager with being really irresponsible. Shame. Shame, shame, right. And when in reality we can say, all right,

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00:41:21.750 --> 00:41:36.990

Tory: Did you have what you needed to make this decision, no know. Okay, great. The education system and a whole lot of other systems did not give you what you need to be able to make your own decisions and it is

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00:41:38.190 --> 00:41:50.820

Tory: I mean, I like i said i work with teenagers and it's unbelievable unbelievable how many of my students really do not even understand how menstruation occurs and have been menstruating for years.

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00:41:52.170 --> 00:42:03.210

Tory: Or have no idea what the risks what physical and emotional risks. They're taking on when they make the decision to become sexually active.

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00:42:05.100 --> 00:42:08.760

Tory: Because nobody sat down and taught them right so

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00:42:11.610 --> 00:42:21.390

Tory: It's. I mean, I'm getting on sort of a sex ed tangent here. Right. But this is not about like stopping kids from getting...teens from getting pregnant. It's not about stopping teens from having sex.

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00:42:21.720 --> 00:42:27.870

Tory: It's about giving people the amount than enough information and resources to make those informed decisions.

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00:42:30.000 --> 00:42:34.080

Tory: And not framing every decision that happens as as like a

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00:42:35.160 --> 00:42:48.690

Tory: personal failing, but rather as the feeling it. Not even a failing weight, but the circumstances that that person is and then the structures that may not have given them everything they need to make the right decisions for themselves.

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00:43:51.120 --> 00:43:58.860

Tory: So one of the things that I do with my peer, like, with my peer educators when they assist them in teaching

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00:44:00.510 --> 00:44:03.420

Tory: Is that we do a condom demonstration.

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00:44:04.890 --> 00:44:09.510

Tory: Right, and we do a condom demonstration with

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00:44:10.560 --> 00:44:19.680

Tory: fairly realistic models of what a penis looks like because guess what penises don't look like bananas and putting them on a banana is nothing like putting them on a penis. Hey,

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00:44:20.100 --> 00:44:30.960

Tory: And we allow the students to have to actually use expired condoms in the demo so they can like open the package and see what it looks like right they can see what it feels like.

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00:44:32.700 --> 00:44:41.280

Tory: And they're getting all that all of that, like sort of hands on experience is in a safe place. But let's say that

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00:44:41.880 --> 00:44:56.190

Tory: I was only using a reproductive health lens. When I was teaching that lesson. Um, I probably walk in and be like, All right, this is the condom and it kind of is going to prevent STDs. You don't want us TVs, let's learn up with this on the penis.

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00:44:58.590 --> 00:45:05.130

Tory: And then we just do it. And we, you know, right. You pinch the inch and then you roll it down and we're done. Right.

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00:45:06.180 --> 00:45:06.630

Tory: I'm

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00:45:07.920 --> 00:45:09.840

Tory: A more holistic approach.

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00:45:11.220 --> 00:45:25.830

Tory: Is going to consider a variety of things. One of the things that we need to do is make sure that we're creating a safe space for students to be able to do something that's kind of scary and vulnerable and also like highly stigmatized right

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00:45:27.180 --> 00:45:39.390

Tory: And so we need to make sure that we've set out really clear guidelines for what's acceptable and what's not acceptable, and students can opt out. And that's fine they not have to do the condom demonstration.

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00:45:45.450 --> 00:45:53.430

Tory: Well, and in doing so, right, we need to make clear that's never. This happens all the time. It's never acceptable to

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00:45:54.180 --> 00:46:10.230

Tory: Comment on or police whether the other student decides to do the demo or not. Right. When we teach.

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00:46:17.430 --> 00:46:29.040

Tory: So we go step by step. And the first thing that we asked is, what is the first step to the condom and most students are going to say like

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00:47:03.000 --> 00:47:18.660

Tory: The first step that we're gonna we're gonna say, what's the first step to using a condom. Great. And the students are they all raise their hand and they're like, you take it out of the package or like, no, like, oh, when we check the expiration date or like, oh,

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00:47:20.490 --> 00:47:32.160

Tory: The first step to use a condom is consent and they're like, Wait, what, and then we teach them about consent because teaching them about kind of usage without teaching them about consent is not giving them all the tools they need

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00:47:33.510 --> 00:47:34.350

Tory: And

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00:47:35.400 --> 00:47:50.250

Tory: If we're teaching kids how to use condoms and not teaching kids in the same breath, how to make sure that they're communicating with their partner about what's happening, we're not setting them up for success. Um, another thing that happens in that demo is that

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00:47:53.160 --> 00:48:02.910

Tory: A lot of people, a lot of health teachers to kind of demo and they'll be like, hey, so we have the condom on, and now you put the penis in the vagina.

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00:48:04.980 --> 00:48:08.760

Tory: Um, what happens to the

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00:48:10.080 --> 00:48:15.540

Tory: however many kids in the room who are not going to have sex that way.

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00:48:16.800 --> 00:48:23.670

Tory: Because of their preferences and desires and bodies right um

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00:48:24.720 --> 00:48:32.490

Tory: What happens to them. Well, they feel wrong, they feel unnatural, they feel scared, they feel not included, they shut down.

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00:48:33.930 --> 00:48:42.180

Tory: And they say, well, this isn't for me. So I'm not paying attention and then they don't learn how to use a condom, which is super necessary.

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00:48:43.200 --> 00:48:49.320

Tory: For many other things that people do with their bodies sexually right besides putting a penis in vagina.

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00:48:51.210 --> 00:48:51.870

Tory: So,

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00:48:53.760 --> 00:48:55.260

Tory: All of these things.

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00:48:57.180 --> 00:49:03.180

Tory: Are part of a more holistic approach, we are going to talk about, okay, where you get condom.

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00:49:03.690 --> 00:49:17.370

Tory: And the answer that is not just you go to the store and you buy it right because how many students are going to have the resources to go to the store and buy a condom. Right. So we talked about where in their community, they can access free condoms and

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00:49:18.990 --> 00:49:29.190

Tory: There are even some like really incredible sex ed curricula that walk students through the process of what it's like to purchase a condom or what, what, where would you get. What if you needed one right

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00:49:31.980 --> 00:49:39.780

Tory: Going back to reproductive rights, though in the state of Michigan and you cannot hand out condoms at school.

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00:49:41.250 --> 00:49:54.090

Tory: teachers and staff and any adults in the school cannot hand out any condoms. So we do a condom demonstration. We teach them all about condoms: why do you use them, consent.

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00:49:55.350 --> 00:50:03.780

Tory: You know, all the different ways, etc, etc. Right. And then we have to collect them back and then they say, oh, but can I have one and we say, No, that's illegal. I'm sorry.

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00:50:05.070 --> 00:50:10.440

Tory: So like, you're gonna have to go somewhere outside of school to get that right. So,

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00:50:11.610 --> 00:50:20.010

Tory: All of this this poll example gives us, like, all right, the reproductive health piece is the actual, like we need to teach condom usage.

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00:50:20.310 --> 00:50:27.780

Tory: And the reproductive rights piece is that we need to be less like legislatively allowed to teach about condoms in school and allowed to give comes out in school.

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00:50:28.200 --> 00:50:35.370

Tory: But the reproductive justice piece is going to say, okay, but you need to make sure you're doing it in a way that's super inclusive.

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00:50:35.670 --> 00:50:47.130

Tory: Of people being able to make their own decisions within their context that have been created outside of their control how much money they have their sexual orientation and desires.

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00:50:49.110 --> 00:50:58.080

Tory: The classroom dynamic in of itself, were like great cultures everywhere in high school, right, etc, etc. So I guess that's sort of

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00:50:59.010 --> 00:51:08.550

Tory: An example that gives you all three frameworks and why they're all like crucial and but needs to be working together and you can't really have one without the other two.

Tory: If you think about, I teach young people that vasectomies and tubal ligation are a thing.

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01:01:11.070 --> 01:01:19.590

Tory: And sometimes I'll come across young people, or even people in their 20s who are like 'I'd really like to get a tubal, like, get to get my tubes tied or get a tubal ligation.'

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01:01:19.920 --> 01:01:28.470

Tory: Like, unfortunately, you're gonna have a really hard time finding a doctor who's going to operate on you because they're going to convince you, they're going to try to convince you to have children.

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01:01:30.090 --> 01:01:32.640

Tory: That happens to white women, most often

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01:01:34.500 --> 01:01:46.290

Tory: And women of color have been sterilized without their knowledge and a lot of cases as well. Right. But, um, that sexism even is going to play into

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01:01:47.580 --> 01:01:54.120

Tory: Well, okay. But you know, you have this anatomy and, and you're white woman, and you need to reproduce and so I'm not going to do your tubal ligation.

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01:01:54.450 --> 01:02:06.450

Tory: Come back when you're 40 and we'll think about it, right, is going to block somebody from having access to care that they deserve

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01:04:17.700 --> 01:04:31.710

Tory: And there's, I mean I think probably to some listeners, this is all going to be really daunting. I think a lot of people, myself included, the first time you encounter the amount of oppression and you especially you know if you are a person who grew up with privilege.

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01:04:32.790 --> 01:04:42.390

Tory: And you're learning for the first time that a lot of these things are happening and have happened. It's, like, really overwhelming.

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01:04:43.350 --> 01:04:48.990

Tory: Um, and for a lot of people who did not grow up with the amount of privilege. It's like, well, yeah.

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01:04:49.350 --> 01:05:07.560

Tory: You don't need to put it in a textbook for me to know that I've, like, understood that my whole life and my experiences, but we all have spots where we don't necessarily understand other people's experiences because we're only, we're only living in our identities. Right. Um, I think that

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01:05:09.630 --> 01:05:15.990

Tory: That feeling overwhelmed. Sometimes, and just like me talking about white people and guilt.

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01:05:17.220 --> 01:05:23.760

Tory: It's like overwhelming and it stops people from doing work, and I think that

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01:05:24.810 --> 01:05:35.460

Tory: Just beginning to educate yourself is a really good place to start. And there's an just an absolute

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01:05:36.630 --> 01:05:39.240

Tory: Plethora of resources for learning.

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01:05:40.980 --> 01:05:47.850

Tory: And for beginning to break down your biases and for beginning to understand the history of the country that you didn't learn your history class.

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01:05:49.350 --> 01:05:50.280

Tory: And

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01:05:52.500 --> 01:05:58.320

Tory: Like it is unbelievably easy if you have access to the Internet.

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01:05:59.610 --> 01:06:02.640

Tory: To access some of those resources to start to learn

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01:06:04.980 --> 01:06:18.690

Tory: And so I don't ever want. And I realized this is like a thing that happens. I don't want people to shut down because it's overwhelming like oh my god everything. The world is bad this is all a dumpster fire. I give up. There's nothing I can do.

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01:06:21.120 --> 01:06:21.810

Tory: I think

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01:06:23.340 --> 01:06:30.660

Tory: If you are walking down the street and you see somebody who is in the really unfortunate position and have to ask strangers for money.

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01:06:31.560 --> 01:06:38.220

Tory: And you think, instead of the way we've been conditioned to think, which is that's, that person's fault.

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01:06:38.850 --> 01:06:48.870

Tory: Which is that personal responsibility and individualism thing, right, they just need to be pull up by their bootstraps and in a job or rate and

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01:06:49.680 --> 01:07:09.750

Tory: If you are in a position of financial stability, pull out \$5 and give it to that person and look them in the eye and give them a smile and tell them to have a really great day and you're not doing something like revolutionary, you're not changing the whole world. Right.

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01:07:10.830 --> 01:07:15.810

Tory: But you're beginning to break down some of these really toxic ideologies about other people.

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01:07:19.770 --> 01:07:28.620

Tory: Or you know, like let's say you're in a public health program and you're working on an initiative that you don't think is, is that you think is happening about us without us right.

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01:07:34.320 --> 01:07:51.210

Tory: Just suggest, hey, maybe we bring in one person from the affected community on this project to give their input about whether community needs or maybe we want one focus group. So we compensate people for their time.

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01:07:53.190 --> 01:07:59.070

Tory: And get people's input on this right. One thing that makes me really proud.

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01:08:00.750 --> 01:08:03.270

Tory: To work where I work, is that

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01:08:04.350 --> 01:08:23.430

Tory: We always make sure that youth are compensated for their time and if we offer opportunities that youth can access only if they're in a privileged enough position to not have to work in their free time and then we're not reaching everybody people need to be compensated for their work and

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01:08:25.740 --> 01:08:28.110

Tory: Not tokenized either.

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01:08:30.420 --> 01:08:36.000

Tory: These issues are complicated and complex and overwhelming and also

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01:08:37.080 --> 01:08:38.970

Tory: That doesn't mean we should run away from them.

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01:08:42.690 --> 01:08:50.880

Hannah: So going along with that, um, how are what are some different ways that people can be involved in reproductive justice and advancing the work that you do.

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01:08:51.930 --> 01:09:03.870

Tory: I think it's really gonna. So I want to start talking about this by talking about the fact that not every way of being an activist is for everybody. So in college,

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01:09:05.460 --> 01:09:14.430

Tory: I was in a lot of positions where I like was told that the only way to be an activist was to go to a protest and

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01:09:16.950 --> 01:09:22.800

Tory: yell about something which absolutely we need people doing that and I'm not one of them.

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01:09:25.350 --> 01:09:35.460

Tory: So, and like I felt a lot of shame about that for a long time that like that. There are parts of that there are types of activism that don't work for me.

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01:09:36.360 --> 01:09:50.610

Tory: Because they made me really anxious. I mean, you know, like, because I have trauma that makes those spaces not feel good or like whatever it right. I sit to my laptop all day and accomplish important work right.

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01:09:51.990 --> 01:10:05.790

Tory: I am doing the work by going into classrooms. I am not doing the work by going into the Capitol building. Both ways of doing the work are important. Right. And so we always see the loudest work.

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01:10:07.380 --> 01:10:20.910

Tory: And that is important. And there's so much behind the scenes also happening right whether that is like, Hey, I just got my stimulus check and I'm going to donate \$100 of it to

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01:10:22.050 --> 01:10:29.760

Tory: Organizations that are doing work to to help marginalized communities right now and I'm going to find out what those organizations are by

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01:10:31.620 --> 01:10:38.040

Tory: Talking to people who are who are affected by those issues by talking to people who I trust, who are already doing the work. Right.

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01:10:38.430 --> 01:10:48.270

Tory: And I've literally been in situations where people are like, Hey, I have \$100 to donate to an organization that my grandma gave me, where do you think this should best go, here's what I care about.

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01:10:50.100 --> 01:11:00.300

Tory: Or to even say like, Okay, I don't have any money to donate. But I have a couple hours on a Saturday and maybe my local mutual aid group needs somebody to go pick up a palette.

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01:11:01.530 --> 01:11:03.720

Tory: From a grocery store or...one of the coolest things happening right now. And this is not major structural work, this is like on the ground, mutual aid work is that people are beginning to help each other in

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01:11:20.940 --> 01:11:30.660

Tory: Really, really cool ways by being like, like literally like, hey, I need a, you know, have a kid. I can't afford diapers. Right now I need diapers.

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01:11:31.740 --> 01:11:36.720

Tory: And then the rich lady up the street is like, oh my god, I have an extra pack of diapers. Here you go.

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01:11:38.730 --> 01:11:49.680

Tory: Amazing right you did it. Cool. Somebody's like, hey, I need a ride to the immigration office to figure out something for my hearing and then somebody is like, oh,

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01:11:50.100 --> 01:12:02.040

Tory: I actually am headed that way you can come in my car and it does not have to look this is important. Call your senators and writing letters is super important. That's not the only way this work happens

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01:12:03.600 --> 01:12:14.190

Tory: Parents beginning to raise their kids have a sex positive environment that tells them, it's okay to have whatever body they have and that they can learn about it and love it.

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01:12:15.030 --> 01:12:28.470

Tory: That's so important. That's very reproductive justice work right there. Right. Um, let's say you're good at spreadsheets. Okay, there's a ton of organizations out there that needs somebody to do data entry for two hours and

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01:12:30.660 --> 01:12:32.400

Tory: There you go, you've made a start to

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01:12:40.590 --> 01:12:58.110

Tory: To helping out. And so just getting connected and then finding out what what organizations need its really important not to just say, here's what I think you need somebody to give you this right. And so a really good example is that there's a mutual aid group around here.

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01:12:59.160 --> 01:13:13.050

Tory: That is really informally setup and helps people who are housing and food insecure and they have a ton of cans, but no can openers

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01:13:13.680 --> 01:13:28.710

Tory: And so they have all these people who have cans of food and it's great, but none of them have can openers. And so they were like Hey, y'all. If you want to be helpful. Right now, we really don't need beans. We have enough beans. Can you get us a can opener?

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01:13:30.210 --> 01:13:39.930

Tory: And instead of being like, Well, I think you need beams though here, right. It's like, Well, listen, just start by listening to what people need

497

01:13:40.950 --> 01:13:45.390

Tory: And go from there right and and that takes breaking down

498

01:13:46.590 --> 01:13:54.570

Tory: Our own internal biases that because of whatever identities. We have specifically white people think that they know what's best for the people.

499

01:13:56.370 --> 01:14:08.340

Tory: Start by listening. Start by taking an inventory of what you have: is it time, is it money, is it expertise, and then figuring out where you can best serve.

[outro music Night Air]

ABBY: Thank you so much, Tory, for taking the time to speak with us. We hope our listeners have enjoyed this bonus episode on Teen Sexual Health. Thanks for listening.