

AGAINST ALL ODDS: THE INSPIRING JOURNEY OF OVERCOMING FOSTER CARE AND VIOLENCE IN CHICAGO

Versiti Podcast: Season 3 - Episode 3 (Part 1)

Host: Edgar Daggett

Guest: Carmen Santiago-Keenon

INTRO CLIP

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BUMPER

EDGAR: Welcome back to another episode of the standout from the Inside Podcast presented by Versiti I'm your host, Edgar Daggett. We have a super amazing guest with us this evening. If you're watching, super happy to have you guys here. If you're listening, get ready. This is gonna be an amazing episode. We're gonna be talking with someone who came from an interesting past, you know, where she grew up, where she came from, and then what she's doing today, and how maybe, you know, how she grew up, affected what she does today. So this guest is named Carmen Santiago-Keenon and she's here to speak about her past and where she's at now, and we're super excited for all of you, viewers, all of you listeners, to hear an interesting story from her today. Carmen, welcome to the standup from the Inside Podcast.

CARMEN: Aw, thank you. And wow, what an intro. So that's very kind and generous. Thank you. And I feel so grateful to be invited and included with such amazing people that you've had on your podcast. So thank you.

EDGAR: No, thank you for being here. You know, everyone who's viewing listening, watching right now, whether you're in your car at the gym, going at it, this is gonna be an amazing podcast. We're super excited. And I kind of just wanna dive right in go head first and, you know, kind of talk about, you know,

your beginnings and, because I'm super excited for everybody to hear about who you are as a person. Well, how you're doing and what you're doing to stand up from the inside.

[**CARMEN:** Well, thank you. Well, I am born and raised in Chicago. I grew up, you know, west side north Fullerton, Cicero. And from there, and we can go back and kind of break it down. Mm-hmm. but you know, that's where I started. From there I ended up in the foster care system and ended up in the suburbs. And kind of just kept going from there. But, you know, I was born in 1980, so not a spring chicken over here. But my mom, who, you know, I'm her namesake. They're actually five Carmens in my family, so I'm all about breaking generational strongholds, FYI. And so but you know, my mom was a young mom and also had her own struggles. And part of those struggles were different addictions. And so I was born four pounds and addicted to cocaine when I was first born and my mom about a month and really wasn't able to care for me. So my grandparents stood and they kind of stepped in, if you will, and raised me till I was about 13 years old. And at the age of 13, I was then placed in foster care. And that really, I mean, the whole process right, shifted and shaped my life. But that really just gave me a huge understanding of the lack of resources that I came from in the sense of like the school system. And in between that I also have, you know, I'm neurodivergent. I didn't discover until I was 38 years old that I was on the spectrum. But at the age of 17, we found out that I was dyslexic so my brain, yeah, inverts numbers. And so it's curious that I, you know, intentionally taught myself and I'm always working on my brain, you know, and trying to rewire that connectivity there. And so that's kind of also why I wanted to delve into technology to be able to like work on that aspect. Yeah. But through that experience that was also my first experience having to interview. I had to interview to be a foster kid in that home. My parents... So I'm so grateful for, I'm now adopted. I was adopted as an adult. But you know, my parents at the time I was 13, I was the youngest foster kid I had taken in they had a foster home in DuPage County in Wheaton, Illinois. And they were the only family that really wanted to work with teenagers. I mean, teenagers are hard, right? Whether you birth them or not, and who wants to take that on a structural teenagers with, right? So, and coming from brokenness, but also with that, you're only allotted a certain amount of children. And so they have five foster girls, and there was a bed that became open. And so I had, you know, had an, an interview and sat there and my dad asked me, why should we allow you to move in? And I looked them, you know, straight in the eye, which, you know just so confidently and just like, because I know if I'm given the right resources that I can make something of myself. Mm-hmm. I knew that much. And that really is the space and the soil, if you will, of where my business and who I come from and where my roots go deep from that space. Right. That really is how I feel and that's why everything that I, you know, create out in the world or

partner up with or do is always in that alignment, right? If I can give not only myself but others, the resources, the tools, you know, that they need to be able to, you know, advance in life, then that's what I wanna do. Because the more that I learned and I was able to elevate and it was so difficult. Who I am today is vastly different, even from who I was five years ago, you know, a year ago even. Even. And it just shifted my life. And so there I was, this 13-year-old kid shaking in my little shoes, you know scared. Didn't know what was gonna end up happening to me. I was already scared and being displaced. Luckily, I only went through two other foster homes briefly before I landed. With my mom and dad. They ultimately decided, yay, Carmen's great. No. We'll give her a try. We'll try her out. No. Ever since, they've been stuck with me ever since. But it shifted my life and I'd like to say that I was this kid that came and was so appreciative and, and I was, but I was also a huge pain in the butt. And so, I mean, I ran away, I got kicked outta school. You name it, I did it. I tell people all the time, I'm like, you know, my parents didn't have a d t, the security system put in our house to keep burglars out. They had 'em put legit to keep us in the house because whatever you, the window, you know, room, blah, blah, blah. And so, I mean, being the clever teenage girls that we were, we did figure out a way to go around that magnet. But nonetheless, you know, yeah, it was my poor parents. I put them through it the first, yeah. 30 years. No, if you talk to, like, you're still putting us through it. No, yeah. It really just, but it did something twofold, right? Here were people that decided. that they were gonna step up and care for me and love me in spite of all the things that I was told I was broken and bad for, right? Mm-hmm. and abandoned for right. And beat for, and you know, I pushed against it, right? Because when you come from trauma and when you come from abandonment and other attachment wounds you know, that's kind of what you do. That's part of the song and dance. You know, you don't love me. I'm gonna show you why you don't love me. Please don't leave me. Love me, don't leave me. I hate you. You're not my mama. You're my mama. Yeah, yeah, definitely. But they're still here. We're still here. They're my mom and dad, you know, and but growing through that and now being able to, you know, help others through that. I have a girlfriend who works in the foster care system. She's an attorney on behalf of the children. And, you know, she wants me, I'm gonna be mentoring one of the girls that, you know, she's working with. Because I was that kid. I get the pushback, I get the hurt, I get the confusion, I get the why you're fighting and why you're being thrown in juvie. I was thrown in juvie. You know, it's by the grace of God that, you know, if I didn't have my kids when they were given to me and other things, you know, my parents and other systems in my life, who knows where I would've turned up, you know? And even, you know, and even when I placed myself in the wrong place at the wrong time. I mean, again, we'll delve into this here. You know, I'm somebody that survived four bullets to my back in the city of Chicago. You know, I was cocktail waitressing. And at this club called the

Dragon Room at the time, and it was kind of in between a part of the city that was starting to get gentrified. And then it was like in this alley there was this posh club, you know, it was this Asian club. You'd go in these big dragon room doors and it had like all the things you go in and it was amazing. Anyhow. Wrong place at the wrong time. Right. So there was, we come out of the club, everybody's obviously, you know, it's 3:03 in the morning, so you know, we're out, early 2000. So, you know, everyone's having a good time. There was something going on. Shots were fired. A friend of mine was shot in the arm, in the leg. I didn't even realize I was shot. My body went, oh wow. Yeah. My body went into shock. Yeah, this poor little leather, not even leather, it was like pleather, like a \$10 jacket over like this. Sequence tube top, you know, and like, pull leather pants is what saved my life. But I mean there were like four clear bullets and my friend was like, oh my God, Carmen, you got shot? They pack me over, you know, took their shirt off or, you know, put pressure on it. They were calling the ambulance, whoever. And I remember just reaching for my friend's phone, devastated. I was a mom at the time, you know just feeling like I needed to let my, you know, my partner, my son's father know like, oh my God, I was shot. Like this is messed up. I think I'm gonna die. Let no son know how much I love him. Yeah. Have come to Jesus moment. Right. And then I hear, you know the firefighter, the ambulance from EMT, you know, Carmen take, you know, squeeze my hand. They were, they didn't want me to fall asleep because, you know, they were afraid that I'd slip into a coma. Got me into the ambulance, you know, and off to the hospital and you know, it was on the news, Carmen, San Diego or Santiago, right from, you know, Illinois, my poor parents. You see, you know, the ambulance and the whole, the whole bit. [00:13:00]

EDGAR: And yeah, such a scary moment.

CARMEN: Oh my, honestly, by the grace of God again. Right. Let me talk about being covered. I just had no idea. Didn't feel it.

EDGAR: Well, your adrenaline I feel like is rushing, so it's like Oh, blocking everything. You're more worried about the people around you.

CARMEN: Yeah. Oh 100%. And so, and that was my instinct and that's actually the girlfriend that I was with at the time. I had like thrown her into the, into the driver's side and that's how I got shot. So I took four to the back when I woke up, you know, the biggest thing, cuz I didn't know what was happening, you know, was. Obviously I have the gift of Gab. I had the breathing tube and it was very, it hurt, but I couldn't, I was so confused. I didn't know, I didn't remember what had happened. And so I woke up with like 20 doctors around

me, literally in amazement. Like, you know, they were like, you have no idea what you survived. Any bullet that would've killed me, missed any vital organ by half an inch. Oh wow. You know, I had, I did catch a bullet to my spine, so I'm a little bit shorter, but also it caused swelling around my spine. So they didn't know if I was gonna be a paraplegic or not. Okay. Again, you know, by the grace of, and I'm walking fully functional they gave me a steroid to see if that would shrink the swelling. And sure enough it did, and maybe four days later I was walking out of there like a champ and was right back at work. Cause I was a, you know, a waitress and. At the time in Cocktailing, and I had a one-year-old that I needed to support and ain't nobody got time to be cut. So, you got back to work right away. Oh, I did. Yeah. And my boss thought it was, you know, and, and even just, and even now, you know I'm very much of the mindset if I allow myself to, and I have, you know, this is why I have to push and overcome, but if I allow myself to live in that space of victimhood it's just not a good space for me. So I'm just kind of that person that just kinds of just, okay, we need to keep going. Right? Yeah. And so, I mean, even to this day, you know, I had a couple of emergency surgeries in November and I was still working, you know and doing what I needed to do. And it just, if I'm able to do it, I'm gonna do it. But I've a lot better at honoring my body. If I need a rest, then obviously I'm gonna rest. And I don't have, you know, luckily the company that I'm consulting with now and you know, they're very gracious and amazing and they're like, stop working, you know, rest or, so, you know, I have my pockets of, you know being able to heal Absolutely. And given that grace. But anyhow, no, at that time, I mean, when you're serving and your money is cashed, right, you have to figure it out. I mean I, I mean, I guess you have choices, right? You can choose not to, but for me, I didn't think that I had that choice. So to work. It was and then the doctor was like, you can't lift anything over 10 pounds. I'm like, well, I have a one-and-a-half-year-old, and he's like 30 pounds. So no matter what's gonna work, but, you know, I'll do my best. So but yeah, it just, you know, everything that I see. Where my life is now, and even being in the healthcare space and us having these conversations, right? Mm-hmm. I look back at my life and even as I'm saying and speaking out my experiences, it all makes sense as to where I ended up and where I'm still gonna be going. Right? I mean, I am naturally, you know, have a servant's heart. I've, you know, again, because of the ability to be in the foster home that I was in, my parents their mission, their nonprofit was open door for teens. That was, you know how I came to live with them. And there were missionaries through their church. And again, I'd like to say that I was this angel, but as I stated before, I was more of, you know, a hellan, if you will. But there I was at church, grateful that you know, the walls and it burst up in flames when I walked through it. And but and. You know, had the opportunity to go spend a summer and then that turned into two summers on two different mission trips, working with the Navajo on two different nav reservations. Wow. Yeah. And you know, for me,

this is my life. You know, you and I spent some time before this talking and, you know, DEI or DEIB, whatever the buzzwords are now mm-hmm. And maybe I'm gonna get pumble for saying that, but you know, let's be real. Honestly, it's a buzzword, right? Like, that's my life. Nobody had to teach me to want to be diverse, equitable, and inclusive. Like, that's just who I am naturally, you know? So again, looking back at my life and the things that I do, it's all in alignment with who I am, you know, and who God has created and consistently saves me to be. So, yeah, I'm sorry. You can jump in. [00:18:36]

EDGAR: No, no, no. It, it's super interesting. And you were doing D&I before it was DEI that's the thing. Like, before it was known as that popular thing. Before it was being recognized everywhere by either having a chief DEI officer or like a director at that level, you were already doing it. And there's so many people like that, that are been, it's a passion. It's something who they, you know, you're born with, you know, that's something that you want to do. And I wanted to go back because you, not only you've gone through this, but you're also trying to help others because you said you were, you were gonna consult somebody who's been going through this process. Is this the first person you're, do you're helping? Or is this, you know, has this been, you know, something that you've been doing for a while?

CARMEN: So I think you know, just because of being an advocate and I, you know, again, by the grace of God have been given the ability to do public speaking engagements and again, Working in different ministries and things, and with community as well and different non-for-profits. I've had the opportunity to work with the youth and, you know, other, you know, young women, young adults. I'm also public speaker and volunteer for lumity.org. So I do go to underserved communities in high schools and, you know, talk to the kids about the STEM initiative and, you know, talk to 'em about being in the business, you know, development part of it, the relationship building part of it, because guess what? You can have the best solution in the world, but if you don't have somebody like myself or somebody else that is amazing at relationship building and selling a product, it's no bueno. Right? Yeah. So, and letting kids know, Hey, we are building an intentional pipeline to help you get into these spaces. You are included. We see you. I am you. Hey, you know, I get it. You don't wanna be here. You hate school. I was that kid too. Let me tell you what, I got kicked out. And let me tell you what helped turn me around, you know? And when you come from a space of seeing them eye to eye, right? Not I'm better than you. Mm-hmm, you know, I come in like I am who I am. I was you, you know. And to be able to share that, if that helps anybody on their journey to healing or understanding, I'm all about it. Anything that I can do, especially for young women I think. You know, the hardest thing for me that I'm still dismantling at the age of 43 is believing the lies. Right. And then you

throw on that being neurodiverse and being on the spectrum, that's a whole other thing. Yeah. You know we were talking before the pod, you know, before we hopped on the podcast and I mentioned joking, but like, yeah, my life was but it's true, you know, in a lot of ways I was influenced by my environment and my, a willa watched a lot at Telenovela. Mm-hmm. in English and in Spanish. And when you are on the spectrum, a lot of what I'm learning and understanding, which I thought was like some personality disorder, bipolar, and I was misdiagnosed since I was a teenager. And, you know, di misdiagnosed, so for medicated all the things. And nothing against medication, you know caveat there, just my personal experience. But, you know, I came to this place of always from a young age wanting to figure out, okay, my immediate environment is not healthy and quote-unquote normal. Why? And also I'm different and now I'm being told I'm weird. I was overweight growing up, so I was definitely the kid that got made fun of for a very long time. Okay. You know, when I went into the foster care system, it was like mid-eighth grade, so I ended up moving from the city with my grandparents to the suburbs on a suburb called Glendale Heights, which was kind of like another sub-city of Chicago. A little, not necessarily hoodish, but still had that city vibe. That's where a lot of families were migrating west from the city. Right. Ok. So and. only stayed there for like a seventh and a half of eighth grade, so like a year and a half. And then I went right into foster care because, you know, in the city, the school really isn't in your business if you know, but in the suburbs, they're not about that life. Right. Mm-hmm. So anyhow, so I'm here in the suburbs and, you know, I was 160 pounds. My hair's naturally curly, so I'm like coming from the black, you know, I walking tough and angry and just ugh, you know, and so, and so just going through all this angst and, and adversity. And then I left my friends in junior high and nobody knew. I mean, they knew I was running away at this point and going through stuff, so like kids and my friends in the school, you know, was involved and that's how DCF. You know, was involved and Okay. You know, ended up becoming involved. But through that process, I straight up just disappeared. So nobody knew what had happened. And that's when I ended up in the foster home. So about three months, I didn't, three, four months, I didn't see anyone. I didn't graduate with my eighth-grade class. And in that interim, my foster parents, you know, my now mom and dad the Keenons, they were like, yeah, we don't just sit around, you need to go do stuff. Which was new to me. Like my biological family is Puerto Rican. That's, you know, I'm Puerto Rican town, but I was raised by my mom's family, which was Puerto Rican. And you know, they're very cautious with their kids and what you're allowed to do and not, and they just weren't very open to me doing other things outside of the home. Okay. But, you know, my foster parents were like, no, go, go walk to, you know, go walk a couple miles in a town. Go do this, go do that girl library, you know. And so I ended up losing like 15, almost. 20 pounds. Yeah. And so I was like totally different, right? So I went from like this kid that

was being made fun of. And you know, I also wrestled in junior high. You know, you a little bit. [00:25:08]

EDGAR: you were a lot more active. You then

CARMEN: I got a little cute too. So yeah. Some people are like, Hey, who's this? And I'm like, hmm. Remember the fat girl that used to make cry? That's who this is. No. Yeah. But then that started a whole other problem. But, but you know but it's also rooted in that as well, is that I'm able to share with young ladies, Hey, I didn't understand my identity and let me share that with you, you know, and let me share with you why it's important to guard your heart and guard yourself as a young woman, right? Why it's important to walk in integrity and in the knowing of who you are, you know, and that is self-care, you know understanding the value of who you are as a young woman and what you bring to the table and the value in, you know, focusing on learning things that you're interested in, and maybe some of the things that you might not necessarily be interested in, but are important to know about, you know, encouraging our youth. I'm very intentional about building our next workforce, especially in the tech and trade space. They work together. I myself, I'm an automation, you know, right now I'm consulting in the healthcare space, which I love. I work with EHR Systems, ERP systems. And doing a lot of work around health equity and just really great things. But being able to show other people that, especially the youth, hey, I came from this, there's hope and we have a plan. If you choose to follow it, we can help you get to where you'd like to go. [00:27:00]

EDGAR: Now, similar groups, like from people that came out of the foster home or similar groups just like yourself, like in the diverse communities.

CARMEN: Who, honestly, it's been interesting because I've, it started with, you know, speaking with Lumity, which was, you know, going to other schools, kind of where I grew up. Right. Coming from the inner city. Correct. And really just letting them see another Latina that they can identify with and be like, you. Which is so needed, especially in the healthcare space. Mm-hmm, you know, our so much. Yes. You know? Right. We were talking about this before. So much diversity on the back end and on the front end, right? Mm-hmm. So we have to be intentional with that, and that's how we organically build a diverse and equitable and inclusive pipeline. Right? Right. By being intentional and saying, okay, we're lacking and we need X amount of people working in this type of solution. Let's build that pipeline with the high schools. Let's partner up and then let's have corporate America be accountable for that, right? Let's have the big tech giants invest in this. Let's invest in the youth. And also with that, let's invest in upskilling our workers as well, because it goes together. You

know, we're talking about automation. That's a scary topic to so many people. And I'm on the front lines of automation and what we're doing, right? We're coming in, we're automating processes, whether we're talking RPA, process mining, when it comes to, you know, emerging technologies, when we're talking UKG Workday and other implementations that we're doing on the healthcare space. It's all always comes around process efficiency, right? Mm-hmm, but also the conversation of having to manage services, the workers, you know, we can't sell you something if we can't back it up with the people to sustain it. Right, right. So again, being intentional in creating the next workforce. And I see that happening with our school systems and I think it's time. I think it's time that the big dollars with all the investments and DE&I and community, that they really start tapping into this resource that we have available. [00:26:15]

EDGAR: All right everybody, we are gonna take a pause cus this is part one of our conversation with Carmen on the Stand Out From the Inside podcast presented by Versiti. Hope you guys all enjoyed the first part. Come back next time to hear the rest of her story on the next episode. We'll see you all next time.