

Post Christmas Eve interview with Anthony, Shenail and the kids.

Thanks to everyone who helped on this year's BIG give. It was a big house that had LOTS of work to do in it. This year's team included a lot of new people and a healthy dose of chaos. The end product still stands for itself...a beautiful home and a happy family. I will send a second note next week with some specific shoutouts, but here the story we are all waiting for. For those of you who are new this year, this is always a bit of a long story and you will want to make time to read it privately.

Sometimes these stories make you cry.

Part one -Moving the Gauge

I had just pulled out of the storage unit from unloading the truck when the call came in. Geeze that was fast...

It's Shenail's phone, she is sobbing, yelling into the phone, with high pitched child screaming in the background.

She is panting with excitement. "Oh my goodness!!! THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU! You said, you said this would be a miracle but I didn't know what you meant - this is a for REAL miracle. This is not the house I left this morning." Tears. "This is **unbelievable**."

The kids are screaming random sentence fragments in the background. "My bed, the table, the tree, I have a lamp. It has my name on it!"

Laughing, shocked tears are flowing. I can hear her struggling to talk through the raw emotion, her voice is quickening and becoming one long run on sentence of excitement.

"This is a miracle! Legit. Girl do you know this is a miracle? This is crazy amazing, I mean it feels different here. I can't believe this is our house, nothing feels the same, I can't even tell where to look! I just, I just don't know. I haven't even been upstairs. I haven't even GONE upstairs!"

Finally a single breath in. "I just can't believe it is *this* great"

Her voice falls to a hush quiver "I don't know what to do, I really don't, it's so, so, so nice. This is a blessing. This is a real Christmas miracle." She breathes in and hears her own words. BAM!

The deep tears come instantly. The kind of tears that grab you hard and force you to your knees. Sobbing, moaning tears that are not going to get put away quickly.

"My phone's gonna die," she lies "I'll call you back."

-click-

I've been doing this a long time. I know those tears and I usually don't get them at Christmas. One of the things that happens when you achieve the *thing* the heart was afraid to dream -**BAM** the pain of *never having* that becomes very real and the body coughs up all that it's been stuffing. A powerful emotional release. The lesson is that tears of joy release hidden pain quickly and efficiently.

"I'll give her a few minutes," I say to whatever angels might be listening.

Being human is a funny thing. After living in survival mode over a period of years, the deep gut wrenching tears will frequently come when individuals reach the shore of safety or achievement, NOT when it's just plain awful. Many of you reading this have cried those tears. For Shenail today was a double whammy - these are also tears of cellularly feeling loved deeply and loved without judgement.

Every ounce of love that was sent to that family just hit the target.

I pull the truck in to my driveway, put my phone on the charger, and get ready to get into the car to drive over personally to check on those releasing tears.

Part 2 Peace is Powerful

Before I ring the bell I opt to NOT tell Shenail that I am showing up on her door 50 minutes later to double check on her emotional wellbeing. I see all the lights on in the top floor and no overhead lights on in the main floor. The good news I tell myself, is that most people can't cry deeply for more than about 20 minutes. She should be good.

No answer to the bell and no response to the knock. I dial her up.

"Are you home? I'm standing in your hallway."

"I will be right down!"

Joyful and bright I hear her flying down the stairs and the door flies open so fast I thought Peter Pan himself was coming out.

"I can't believe it!" she beams (we are back to the run-on sentence speak).

"This is so nice, this is a blessing, it's so different, you told me this would change me, *but this is a blessing*, Ohhh let me hug you!" she launches right at me with that *get over here* love hug.

Anthony is at the top of the stairs with a smile the size of Texas. Anthony is a quiet guy, but he is more than ready with a divebomb hug.

"Thank you so much, this is so unbelievably awesome!"

Up the stairs and into the living room the scene is quiet, no children screaming, no tears, just very laid back. I get a second look at the space now that it is evening and it REALLY looks nice. I'm a little re-impressed with the work of those elves.

The shift in both of them is physical and they are straight postured and assured.

"Soooo," I lob out coolly "ya think this is going to work out ok?"

Laughter erupts and their heads shake yes furiously. "YES, it is going to work out. Thank you so, so, so, so much. We love it."

Shenail shares first. Her words are slow and clear. She's on her game and has emotionally got this. "It's so calming to be in here. I feel pride. It washed over me. I don't know how to explain it other than I am filled with *pride*. I mean a proud kinda pride. I am proud of my home, I'm proud to have people willing to be good to me, I am proud that my house has all this love in it. It's a *blessing* but I didn't know a blessing would make me feel me so personally and extra deeply this *pride*. THIS, *right here is why people want to go home*. That's a new feeling. I knew I was not proud of my home,

it was not even a home, it was a house and THIS feels like a home. This experience gave me something I was not able to find ever really.”

She laughs at herself “I can be me in here and not fuss about it.”

Anthony is Cheshire-grinning, taking in all her words shaking his head in agreement. He looks like a school boy with a *really good* secret.

"What's this been like for you Anthony?" I ask.

“This is my dream, right now, really. My dream is to have a family and to BE a family. We are sitting in a house that has everything. You don't understand what a blessing it is as a man and as a father to have all your kids happy at the same time, have every need met, and you can just sit here and be thankful. AND hold still. My mind can take a minute and clear itself. I am not thinking about how much I *should* be doing something else, or how we are going to make a bill, or hearing the kids argue because they are bored. My heart feels comfortable.”

He takes in a deep breath and sighs deeply “I am at peace because all of this is peace” gesturing around the room.

“Peace is pretty awesome” he grins.

We all three sit for a minute and think about how powerful that statement is: I am at peace because of all this peace.

His tone is meditative, “You know, I've spent over half my life in prison and when you're in prison you just think about what it could be like to have a different life. This feeling right now is greater than anything I could've let myself wish for. I'm just gonna be with it.”

He exhales slowly “I sit in this spot all the time, and this seat has *never felt like this*. I love how peaceful the twinkle lights feel, it feels like I can rest. I am leaving those up all year. Everyone is happy, there is nothing that needs to be done, we don't need anything from the store, the house is full of food, nothing is broken, and THAT is a really an odd feeling.” (he laughs at himself) “I mean in a good way. I cannot remember a time in my life that things felt this straight. *Nothin' twisted here*. Like I said, I'm just gonna be with it.”

The kids pop out to see who is attached to the voice in the living room and we let out the truth. "THANK YOU!" and their kinetic energy is dancing as they speak.

"Do you want to see what happened to your house today?" Parents and kids come close to look at the pictures on my phone of the people that worked in their house. I love kid's raw reactions.

I show them the group shot and in unison came ONE word from every member of the Evans household, "Daaaaang."

"That's a lot of people" broadcasts the oldest boy.

"Ooohhhwie thasss crazy" says the middle daughter and she snap her head like a dance move and slides away from the screen in disbelief.

"All of them people were in OUR house? That's cray-cray" and she starts spinning with her older sister trying to get her to hold still.

I had an elf video that was only a few seconds long that shows everyone waving and saying "Yay Project Elf!" Good news, 10 times in a row is just the right amount of times to push re-play.

"Now you gotta see my stuff" chime the girls, and the boys flash back to their rooms because they've already spent too much time away from it.

That moment of the kids needing to go back to their bedrooms is THE moment when I know that our team has done not just a fantastic job but a life changing job. When I walk into a house on any given year the children will literally lock themselves into their rooms because somehow this event gives them a sense of being and having their own identity that has never been present before. And in this case, there has never been a moment in these children's *entire* lives that everyone had their own bed or enough space to have their own stuff.

The girls have, in under an hour, already rearranged their closet so that they each have EXACTLY 50%, a marker line added, and they sorted all the gifts and clothes to identify which things were theirs and they have been slid into the correct side of the closet. The television is on and blaring the game show Family Feud, and the middle daughter is bouncing up and

down on her bed waiting to see what the answer will be. "SURVEY SAYS" she shrieks at the TV. DING the answer is revealed.

Things look good here. I move onward.

The boys already switched their sleeping space appointments to who had the highest seniority. The oldest boy decided that he absolutely did not want his little brother sleeping or bouncing over him and the middle boy was sure that he loved the idea of now being crowned with the largest bed. The boys hunted out all the coins from the sandbox and are jingling them in their pockets. Dad makes them put them back in the sandbox. They are giddy with all the details of the room. "It looks like a store in here." says the newly crowned biggest bed middle child who is heading back to the sandbox. This may now be HIS favorite space.

I move the parents towards the living room and edge myself towards my own holiday in waiting. It *is* Christmas Eve. I let them know that they are loved, it was an honor to work with them, and I'd just like give them a few extra details about the gift cards, and what are some of the offerings that they aren't seeing and then I'll be on my way ...

I told them that I had taken a broken microwave out of the house, and they both laugh and smile. "Yes, but we have plenty of money" laughing about their gift cards. "We can go buy a new one. If we need something we can just go buy it!"

Gift cards were placed inside a very special box next to the parent's bed with the cards that we call *letters of hope*. All the people that volunteer on delivery day can write a special note to the family. It's one of the most treasured items that a family receives. They will save and re-read those letters for years and years.

They are both in on the good fortune joke "Ohhh, we read EVERY ONE of those cards. We read them to the whole family and then we kept finding all these gift cards! The gift cards were so generous and amazing and it made our minds think "*wow we can go DO anything with our family as a treat*." That isn't even an idea that we have on ANY day, ever. We are always trying to use our extra money to save up to meet the basics, replace something that is broken, or just try to get something put up in the house like groceries."

I can see my job here tonight is almost done, this is a set of parents that is not just hungry for personal change, they are *voracious*. But they have no idea what happens next, because tomorrow they will wake up in a beautiful home that feels loving and wonderful and they will have to go back to the same job and same life *but they will feel very different and their sense of self has now changed*.

The next step is to apply resources. I go into my helper mode "Here's the schedule that is available for you if you choose it, we have cooking lessons on Tuesdays that will be delivered to your home so that you and the older children can learn how to use the pantry and learn how to cook ahead and freeze meals. We have a cleaning coach coming in three times, and we have an online video series that will give you some new ideas about thinking differently. Oh, and you both need to start adding new friends that are different than you."

Anthony looks at his feet and Shenail sort of drifts into another room because she does not want to be here at this part of the conversation. Apparently, this is Anthony's lesson.

"I know I need to expand my ideas and my relationships" he looks down at his feet and a big sigh comes out. "It's hard to trust, it's *real* hard" his eyes grab and scan the glowing holiday lights around the room. "It's hard to know what to do next, I don't have hookups like that, I just keep trying on my own. I'm a grown man and I just got my first ever job this year, 18 months ago I had a baby with my girlfriend and now I am parenting six kids! I just try to be strong each day, be a good person, not get into trouble or make bad decisions."

I am about to give him the same sentence I have given to CEO's, community leaders, people coming out of poverty, and even felons...I grab his eyes with mine.

"Anthony- you're **NEVER** expected to do this alone." Gesturing with two hands I say, "Look at this house, this beautiful expression took FIFTY people putting in six hours. It took 300 hours of work to make this house look like this, and that's with all the resources being sourced, sorted and delivered." My point drives home with a whisper. "No one does it alone."

I can see relief push his shoulders down and he gives me the nod of understanding. Message delivered.

Shenail has now found the makeup video that the makeup blogger has made specifically for her as her big wish gift and she is now bouncing into the dining room with her phone lit up. It's a 30-minute video and she is back to her run on sentence excited voice.

"Did you see ALL MY make up? Whoa, did you see the wrapping, it is so fancy I took a picture, she wrote me notes in every package, I am saving those, and the - oh my Lord, I have never in my life had such an experience or array, so do you know I have 50 make up brushes, ***I mean I HAVE 50 make up brushes***, who has that? And I have a space to put make up on, with a sliding chair, and its makeup that I have only ever seen in magazines and tutorials" and then out pops the announcement: "I am going to stay up ALL night tonight and do my make up."

Anthony smiles and shoots me the *you know what's up* eyebrows. He knows that she's about to disappear to her room and play with all of her toys, just like the kids. That's the break he was looking for. He is going to sit in the living room and listen to the peace and just BE with it.

As each one of us left that house just hours earlier, peace and pride is the feeling that we all got and gifted. Today was the peace that is only offered when we love freely.

Be with it.