

TRAUMA SHAPED MY PURPOSE

By Keith Sciarillo

As an adoptee, I know my story doesn't start with me. Before me, there were my paternal grandparents. They were Holocaust survivors and what they endured during their time in captivity undoubtedly changed the course of our family. And on my mother's side, there was my grandfather who fought in World War II. We had the opportunity to meet before he passed. I imagine he experienced every trauma that accompanies war, including separation, tragedy, violence and unrest. My biological parents experienced their own traumas, which include drug abuse and mental health issues, which is how they met.

In a way, it's almost safe to say my very existence is the result of the trauma that came before me. Intergenerational trauma plays a part in who I am, and my life. It's also the impetus behind what I'm doing now to make things better for my children and their children.

There are several factors that, as far back as I can remember, caused an uneasiness in my core, both physically



Photo courtesy of Keith Sciarillo

and emotionally. Some might say this is due in part to being born with drugs in my system. Or perhaps due to my forced separation from my family of origin. Maybe it is because I grew up in a single-parent adoptive home after my parents divorced and my adoptive father remained absent for years.

Finally, there's the fact that I didn't learn of my adoption until I was 33

years old. A cousin casually mentioned it. However, when I asked nearly every member of my family, they all denied it. It was only after doing my research I learned my biological father was listed in New York's adoption registry. That verification was all I needed: I am an adoptee.

Because my identity was shrouded in secrecy, it's been hard to navigate

life's natural complexities with no road map to help me understand why I am the way I am.

For so long, I was numb and operated on autopilot. However, learning about biological connections and understanding what my family before me experienced has been a breakthrough, unlocking the secret of certain habits and enabling me to conquer them. It was only when I took control of my own life that I no longer let the past dictate its course.

It took a while to become who I am because for long, I was a victim of my own self-sabotage. In my mind, I was able to easily let go of anything that didn't serve a purpose — it helped me cope (I thought), but it also made room for unhealthy situations. Looking back, it was a way of telling myself I wasn't worthy of good things.

Although I believed in my capabilities and opportunities presented themselves, there was always something in the back of my mind telling me, I'm not cut out for what's been put in my path. Could it have been learned behavior or what passed down from past generations? That is the question I asked myself in order to make the necessary changes that are a result of the life I'm living today, deserving of the same happiness as everyone else.

It's hard to summarize the valleys and mountains I've traversed on my 44-year journey. But there are some lessons I've learned along the way. For example, never giving up and living for the long term keeps me focused and continuing to live in expectation of all things good. As I write these words, I'm reminiscing about all I have overcome and all I have. For example, I'm in a healthy relationship

now following a long-term marriage that ended. The comebacks helped to even the score in the game of life.

An important part of moving forward from intergenerational trauma is to find a purpose and stick with it. My greatest blessing to date is becoming a parent. Everything I've experienced is a reflection of the ways I choose to raise my kids by protecting them from some of the internal struggles I faced during my childhood.

They have always known where they come from; nothing is hidden. Working through my own trauma through advocacy, finding community, writing,

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speaking about my story, attending therapy sessions and getting involved with C.A.S.E. (Center for Adoption Support and Education) on their Emerging Leaders Advisory board have all been a part of my healing journey.

Who's to say meaning hasn't been found in what my ancestors went through — but when telling our story, I'm only able to speak for how I've navigated life. There's a reason why everything has happened until now. It's been up to me to make ways for it to have meaning. I'm a believer that nothing is ever wasted when it comes to what we experience. Details aren't always as important as the outcome. If we make it through to the other side better off than we were, it's all been worth it in the end.

I'm sharing my story because while I've been through a lot, and what came before me had its effects, it's what I've

made of myself that's the main focus of my life now. Dwelling on a past lived by others isn't going to get me anywhere, but understanding it has been monumental in where it's leading me.

Now I'm equipped to make better choices for my own mental health, physical fitness and spiritual well-being. There's no doubt there is a long line of survivors in my bloodline and I'm a product of overcoming adversity. There is a constant sense of urgency to maintain what I've worked so hard to achieve, with much more to come. I'm not only doing this for myself and those who proceed but, in some ways, I'm also doing it for them. The ones

who never had a chance to become all they set out to be because they didn't know that there were options. Where the physical meets the mind is where destiny can be found. That's my motto and, most importantly, knowing the direction can change but it's up to me to continue moving forward. There is absolutely no going back now! •

Keith Sciarillo is a late discovery and transracial adoptee currently working full-time in the accounting field. He was born in New York City in 1979, and adopted by a family in New York. He has 15 siblings between his biological and adoptive families. Sciarillo is a part of the Emerging Leaders Advisory Board at C.A.S.E. (Center for Adoption Support and Education). Connecting with others in the adoption community has been a joy for him. What he considers the greatest purpose in his life is being a father to his two amazing children.