Stories of overcoming

Two students faced daunting obstacles to get where they are. Now they are on track to graduate from college. How did they do it? Not by themselves.

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Robin Chenoweth: There was a point in Noah Trimble's life when no one would have imagined he'd want to become a teacher.

Noah Trimble: I was viciously bullied. I was a small kid. … I was a late bloomer. And I also have a summer birthday. So, you know how that goes. Either you're older or you're young. And I was young. And I remember just being classically bullied, like trash cans, lockers, you know, that kind of stuff. … I think a lot of other kids were in a similar situation. … Another kid who had been bullied brought a blade to school and I got cut. And it was really confusing to me 'cause I thought this person and I were friends. But I think they were going through a lot of things and then that just came out at me. … You know, I got cut and I just left the class. I come up the stairs from gym bleeding, and my gym teacher had to call an ambulance. … The teacher of the class that I was in when, you know, I got cut, she was like, "Why didn't you tell me?" And I remember not knowing why I didn't say anything.

Robin Chenoweth: Noah is in his final year as a middle childhood education major at Ohio State, and a recipient of the Weiler Family Teacher Preparation Scholarship. But a year after graduating high school, he was living out of his car. What allowed him, and other scholarship recipients in his cohort, to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles to get where they are now? Today we tell the stories of two Weiler Scholars, Noah and Asho. Despite everything that hit them, they didn't give up. Their keys to overcoming are rooted in relationships and reflect the life goal they both found along the way: To become educators. This is the Ohio State University Inspire Podcast. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Inspire is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology.

After being slashed on his arm and stomach with a razor, Noah Trimble didn't want to go back to his middle school. His parents had split up when he was younger, so he moved to Troy, Ohio, to live with his father. For a Black kid moving to a rural school, the change was drastic.

Noah Trimble: Little culture shock, you know, going to the country from the inner city and then...

Robin Chenoweth: What was that like? It was an all-white school?

Noah Trimble: Yeah, yeah, pretty much. There were two other kids of color there when I started. … I went to the office, like day two, because they were playing this, like, two for flinching game and I didn't … I was just so used to getting beat up and bullied. And, so, first kid flinched at me and then punched me, and I punched him back and …

Robin Chenoweth: Uh oh.

Noah Trimble: Go to the principal's office. But that kid and I ended up being friends. We're still friends today. It wasn't an easy shift. But once dad set some pretty strong limitations on what I could do and some pretty high expectations for me … And I hadn't really had that before. “Homework gets done. You're in sports all year.” I played every sport.

Robin Chenoweth: Considering what he'd been through, those were good years for Noah.

Noah Trimble: But with divorce, you know, kids switch around. … My mom was struggling with, you know, alcoholism and things like that. She was very functional. My mom is, you know, 10 years sober. And now she's one of my biggest heroes. I love her very much, but it was hard at that time.

Robin Chenoweth: There was a rough spot.

Noah Trimble: Yeah.

Robin Chenoweth: You ended up coming back to Columbus.

Noah Trimble: Yeah. I have two other sisters. I have an older sister and a younger sister. And it's kind of this unspoken agreement that there would always be a kid at my mother's.

Robin Chenoweth: It was Noah's turn. His sisters went to live with their dad. Noah moved back to Columbus to be with his mom. What played out was the kind of back-and-forth living arrangement that can whiplash kids, especially when the family faces addiction. Noah stayed in Columbus for a year, going to a Catholic high school. Then he went back to Troy. Then he came back to Columbus to finish at a public high school.

Noah Trimble: Every year of high school I was back and forth.

Robin Chenoweth: You're getting sort of tossed. I guess these are all different cultures, right?

Noah Trimble: Yeah.

Robin Chenoweth: The Troy school was nothing like the Catholic school.

Noah Trimble: Nope.

Robin Chenoweth: Which is nothing like Brookhaven, right?

Noah Trimble: Absolutely, yeah. … I got to recreate myself a lot. And some of that was positive, you know, and some of it was not. But, yeah, I didn't really have like a salient identity that I needed to hold on to, which was a positive but also didn't really give me a lot to fall back on for like, my personal life.

Robin Chenoweth: Part of the reason for all the back and forth was that his mom was struggling. The very capable woman who had simultaneously worked multiple jobs, raising three kids and putting herself through college was battling alcohol addiction.

Noah Trimble: When I moved there my senior year, the writing was already on the wall. I was like, I'm not going to do this again. Because we didn't leave on good terms my sophomore year. So I was like, well, let me just make sure I'm prepared.

Robin Chenoweth: Noah bought a beater car.

Noah Trimble: So, when things don't go well, I have somewhere to go. So yeah, I packed up my stuff in my little ’96 Chevy Cavalier. And that's where I lived for my senior year of high school into my freshman year of college.

Robin Chenoweth: He went to high school, but most days checked himself out so he could work. At night, he did his homework and slept in his car — even in winter — moving from parking lot to parking lot to avoid police.

Noah Trimble: So, I was just like, furious all the time. Like ,I was just so mad. And I remember my, my lowest day. I love this day of my life. But…

Robin Chenoweth: You love it?

Noah Trimble: I love this day ... it's so bad. But it was like, you know how Oprah talks about her aha moments or whatever?

Robin Chenoweth: Oh, yeah.

Noah Trimble: Yeah, the aha moment. I'm like, out of money. My car's parked in Carriage Place, like over at Carriage Place Park. And it's cold. It's like February or something. And I'm running my car to have heat on so that I can sleep. Well, the police show up and they say "Hey, you're not allowed to, to sleep here." So, I use the little bit of gas I have left in my car to go over to this carwash right across the street. And I park and I get the heat going, and then I run out of gas. So, I have a gas can. I'm like, alright, let me go scrounge up some change. So, I'm over near the Walmart, like looking for change, trying to get enough for a couple bucks to, like, put in my gas tank so I can heat up my car for the night. … There's almost always a bunch of change over by like the movie theater.

Robin Chenoweth: Then the sky just opens up. It starts to rain. Hard.

Noah Trimble: And I am having a fit. I'm so mad. And I'm like throwing rocks at the side of the building. And I'm screaming at, you know, God and the clouds and anybody that would hear it. I'm just so mad at my mom. I'm just furious. … I'm sitting on the ground. It's pouring rain. And I'm like, your mom's not here, dude. She hasn't been here for a long time. Like, you're mad at somebody who's probably asleep right now, who's not thinking about you. Like, you're just, all that you're doing right now is on you. And it like clicked for me, I was like, oh.

Robin Chenoweth: So, wait a minute. You decided you were just hurting yourself by being angry?

Noah Trimble: Yeah, I was just making my time right now way worse, because of somebody who wasn't…I wasn't engaging with at all and hadn't been for over a year.

Robin Chenoweth: Wow. It was a pretty grown-up thing to do. Because honestly, you're standing in the rain. You have no money. You need to start your car so you can have heat so you're not freezing. I mean, those are all things that you, an 18-year-old, would expect to be sort of given to them but you were having to provide them for yourself. But you, you turned it around.

Noah Trimble: I think the big point for me then was that like, something can be justified but not useful.

Robin Chenoweth: Sure.

Noah Trimble: My anger was absolutely justified. But it was stalling so much of my life. I wasn't providing a lot of things for myself, because I expected, I was still mad that the people who should have, hadn't. … At that point, it felt like, yeah, things really clicked. Like, I'm smart, and I'm capable, but I'm not doing anything. And then once it clicked, that I just need to do things, then my life really took off.

Robin Chenoweth: Did you catch what he said? "I am smart, and I am capable." As it turns out, Noah was not quite as alone in those years as it may seem. The Catholic high school teachers didn't have preset notions about his race, he said, and held him to high academic standards. He

discovered that he, quote, “wasn’t dumb,” he says. And there was Mr. Metz, his chemistry teacher in Troy.

Noah Trimble: He was just really kind and just understood that things might be a little harder for me.

Robin Chenoweth: What was his secret? What did he do that made you sort of come alive inside and start to believe in yourself?

Noah Trimble: I was very quiet, which is not my typical self, but in school settings, I was just silent and especially around authority. So, they ask a question, the shortest answer I can give.

Robin Chenoweth: Noah had this thing. In the city schools, the expectation was if you are Black, you shouldn’t be academically gifted.

Noah Trimble: That's not a cool thing to do. And, you very much get criticized for trying hard.

Robin Chenoweth: In the white community, he couldn’t “show up” as smart, or ask questions, particularly around certain subjects, because people refused to see him as intelligent.

Noah Trimble: Or if you, contradict something somebody else says, they're going to strongly oppose you because you're the stupid Black kid. So, it's hard to want to speak up in either environment.

Robin Chenoweth: Mr. Metz didn’t go for Noah’s short answers.

Noah Trimble: He really kept prodding. Yeah, showed me that he was interested and he wasn't going to give up until he got to know me, which was very cool. And from a teacher, that was pretty unique for me, especially in my high school. I felt like, it's easier to get lost in the bustle, and everybody's doing their own thing. But yeah, he like, forcibly got to know me.

Robin Chenoweth: He kept pushing.

Noah Trimble: Yeah, he just kept pressing, got excited about the things that I would say and would reference them. And also, he did this cool thing. So, if I told him about something like I was in martial arts for a long time, and I really liked like to draw, like he would bring that up to the rest of the class at times. Like, he would kind of became like a gateway for other people to get to know me. And that was pretty cool.

Robin Chenoweth: Mr. Metz got that Noah needed more than help with chemistry. Noah started showing up to the teacher’s classroom during study his hall and his lunch. He began to feel capable. And it stuck. Even two years later, when he was scraping together tuition for Columbus State Community College, or gas money to get to class, and when he was sitting in a puddle of rain outside the closed movie theater, he remembered. He was smart and he was capable.

There’s moral beauty. A kid desperately needs a pathway to something better, and someone, a teacher, gently, reassuringly provides it. And in the process, Noah makes a huge step toward overcoming.

Researchers in the last few years have emphasized resilience theory, which considers why some youth grow up to be healthy adults in spite of exposure to extreme adversity. Studies indicate you can build protective factors, particularly among children, to offset risks that hinder personal development. Indeed, pandemic studies showed that — even for adults — getting more sleep, spending more time outdoors and praying more helped people cope with adversity. But notably, having strong family support, a circle of deep friendships, close ties to a teacher or a partner or a faith community — those social supports underscore the fundamental interdependence of people and its impact on overcoming. Charles Metz, like so many teachers have been and continue to be, stepped into Noah Trimble’s void, anchoring him as his mentor. But then, he did even more.

Don Pope-Davis: I've been shifting my thinking away from talking about mentors.

Robin Chenoweth: Don Pope-Davis is dean of Ohio State’s College of Education and Human Ecology and a psychologist.

Don Pope-Davis: I think the word we should be using more is stewardship.

Robin Chenoweth: Stewardship?

Don Pope-Davis: Yes. … Stewardship means, in my view, that I have an interest, a personal interest, in your success. It's not just giving you advice from time to time, but it's talking about the other variables in your life that allows for a much inclusive conversation. Because once you have those, you begin to see that if you want to pursue a degree or education or a trade in a particular area, there are other pieces that have to come into play. … And, so, stewardship requires a really deep dive into the experience and life of the person that you've decided you want to help and assist. And that's what we need to do more of and move away from this traditional model of mentoring, which in some ways, is kind of a 40,000-feet level of the encounter. … I think I'm sitting here because there were people along the way that helped me and saw things in me that I didn't see in myself.

Robin Chenoweth: Just going back to that idea of resilience theory. … It doesn't factor in how certain people face obstacles and trauma over and over again, which wears them down and can hold them back. … Is resilience theory something that we can use to help everybody and what are its limits?

Don Pope-Davis: You know, there's this idiom that we learn more when we're unsuccessful than when we are successful. … The piece I think is important is dependent in part on how I think of myself in that moment. What is happening in my life that allows me to do that? And if my concerns are about my livelihood, about my rent, about feeling secure, about transportation, all

of those things become primary considerations, before I can move in the direction of what clinicians sometimes called self-actualizing — thinking about my future and achieving. ...Maslow has this Hierarchy of Needs theory that talks about some of these things that I think factor into the notion of resilience and transformation. And so if you don't feel secure in your environment, if you don't know where the next meal is coming from, and you're talking about pursuing an education or a job, it makes it more difficult to do that. So, there are certain fundamental things that have to happen along the way. And one of the variables, is who are the people that are supporting me along that way? Having someone or a group of people that can say, I'm going to help you, I'm going to be here with you along the way and so to that extent I'm going to provide the environment for you to be successful.

Robin Chenoweth: Community is huge. Isn't it? It really is. Actually, in that list that I was reading, I think more than half of them had to do with the people around you.

Don Pope-Davis: Yeah. I worry about people who say I made it on my own. I don't want to necessarily call them delusional, but I know of no one who has made it on their own. … The trick or the opportunity is to make sure you choose the right community because there are different communities that have different objectives. And you have to decide which one of those you want to be a part of, because that will have a tremendous effect on what happens in your future.

Robin Chenoweth: More about how Noah chose his community and turned things around in a bit. First, meet Asho Gedi, a teaching and learning student who is in the same Weiler cohort as Noah.

Asho Gedi: I come from Somalia. And it is a war-torn country. It has been since the '90s. And right at the time the Civil War started was around the time that I was born. So, my family were going from city to city, trying to run away from war. And then it became to a point where you can't run away from it. It's literally everywhere. I don't have vivid memories of it. But I do have like little flashes that I do remember. So, looking back at it, now as an adult, it was a war torn country, like literally living right in the middle of war.

Robin Chenoweth: You told me before that it didn't seem abnormal to you because that's all you knew.

Asho Gedi: No, it didn't. Because hearing gunshots or helicopters with rounds shooting down, it just seemed regular. Like we're crossing the street from one house to another and it's just military trucks coming down the road or airplanes. It didn't seem unnormal until you come to a different place. … I left around three years old. We left Somalia and we went into a refugee camp. … The camps, you're held there until they find a placement for you in another country. … Refugee camps were dark, dirty. Lot of animals. You would hear stories of people disappearing in the middle of the night, either get eaten by animals or getting kidnapped. … There's no security watching us or anything like that. So, it's scary. You're in a small, little tent. You're in there with three, four or five different families.

Robin Chenoweth: Asho vividly remembers double decker buses, like the ones in London, coming to pick up people approved for temporary refugee placement. One day, it was her family's turn.

Asho Gedi: Then we got processed out of the camps, into an apartment in Kenya.

Robin Chenoweth: Two years later, Asho and her family were in the United States, first in New York, then quickly moved to Atlanta. Asho couldn't believe her eyes.

Asho Gedi: It's like sirens and cars moving ridiculously and these big, huge skyscrapers. … I'm like, humans made this? Like, what is this?

Robin Chenoweth: A volunteer named Patricia, from a church-run group that aided refugees, showed her mom how to take the bus, signed her up for English classes, helped her get a driver's license. Her parents, both teachers in Somalia, got jobs. Asho was enrolled in kindergarten.

Asho Gedi: It was scary. … I wasn't fluent in English. I knew my name. I knew my dad's name, I could give you my address, I could give you the bus number that I took. But other than that, I can't have a full conversation with you.

Robin Chenoweth: But she went to an English as a second language class and watched a lot of American TV.

Asho Gedi: I remember I used to, I used to say hallelujah all the time. I didn't even know what it was. Like, hallelujah!

Robin Chenoweth: (Laughs.) You must have been watching religious TV.

Asho Gedi: I had no idea and dad was like, "You know, they say hallelujah, it's like when they're in church. It's like, praise God." I was like, "Oh, okay. Hallelujah!"

Robin Chenoweth: Life was good, until 9/11. Asho was in the sixth grade when teachers brought a television into the class, so students could watch the news. Then, everyone was sent home.

Asho Gedi: My dad came home and he was like, he got harassed while he was at work. And after September 11 on, it got worse for us in our community, it got worse for my parents at their jobs. … It was just like Islamophobia type of stuff, just saying, "Ah, you guys were the ones that did this," and I guess just associating the event of 9/11 with the whole religion.

Robin Chenoweth: Her mom lost her job. Asho's family decided to move to Columbus, which has a larger Somali population. And the community was supportive. Asho lived like most

American teenagers. She made good grades. But still, from time to time at school, she felt like an outsider. Once, an art teacher had her suspended.

Asho Gedi: He thought I said a cuss word in my language.

Robin Chenoweth: Asho was suspended for 10 days for saying "I don't want to" in Somali. It was the first time she had been disciplined at school. She stopped speaking the language, even at home. A few teachers made her feel less than competent. A social studies teacher shut her down when she said a narrative in their book didn't match her life experience. One English teacher riddled her assignments with editing marks.

Asho Gedi: But I've also had great experiences with teachers.

Robin Chenoweth: One of them was with Kim Dykstra, an English language arts teacher at Brookhaven High School, who earned her master's degree at Ohio State. She now teaches at Downtown High School in Columbus City Schools.

Asho Gedi: She's the first one who introduced me to Maya Angelou. She introduced me to a lot of Black readers. I've never had a teacher that taught us a book from a Black author other than her. … She used to give us these weekly journals. … She didn't cross out anything that we wrote, because that was our feelings. She then made (her) own passage, and she did nothing but like, uplift us or motivate us or support us.

Robin Chenoweth: Did it start to turn something around in your mind?

Asho Gedi: Yeah, yeah. Definitely. I was like, I'm good at this. The positive feedback that she was giving me, I was like, maybe the other teacher was wrong. Maybe I am a good writer. … I started writing freely, without any hesitation, without holding back, without putting myself down. And it just got better and better. She loved it. … She also saw our potential. She saw our strengths, our weaknesses. And even our weaknesses, she turned them and she made us feel like they were strengths. Instead of saying, "Oh, no, English is your second language…," "But no, that's great. English is your second language; you would know a whole different language."

Robin Chenoweth: A lot has happened since those journal exchanges. Asho's family moved back to Kenya. Asho and her older sister stayed in Columbus to work and go to college. She started her own family, worked as a healthcare aide and took classes off and on. But things like car insurance and childcare got in the way. She became pregnant with her second child during the pandemic and told her mom she was quitting college.

Asho Gedi: I was like, oh. I was like, Mommy, I'm just, I'm gonna stop. I can't have morning sickness and go to school and get this one ready for school. … She was like, "You're not stopping. You're not stopping again. You're going to finish and I'm going be here for you every step of the way." The reason I've made it this far — was my support system.

Robin Chenoweth: Her mom came back to the United States to help care for Asho's kids. Asho is now 33 years old. She enrolled at Ohio State last year, and because of the Weiler Scholarship, is on track to graduate in 2025. She wants to pursue a master's degree in educational administration, influencing policy for kids also trying to overcome. If you're wondering about how things worked out for Noah Trimble, several years ago, a young woman found him sitting on a park bench. He had just dropped out of college; couldn't afford books; didn't have WiFi. Nothing was going his way. The young woman asked, what he was doing?

Noah Trimble: I was like, Oh, I'm just, you know, I'm waiting for a ride. And then I go somewhere else. And I go to sleep there. Well, she finds me again. And it's like, "Hey, I'm going to call a friend. They're going let you stay with them for the night."

Robin Chenoweth: She took him to the house of missionaries. They weren't home, but Noah slept in the basement and left before the couple returned. A year later, he's still living out of his car, and some friends invite him to a barbecue.

Noah Trimble: Ok, well, they drive me to the same house.

Robin Chenoweth: It's the place you spent the night.

Noah Trimble: It's the place I spent the night.

Robin Chenoweth: Oh, wow.

Noah Trimble: I meet the guy. His name is Mike Lampson. He's extraordinary. … Became like, my spiritual mentor. Again, that father figure, that mentor, that male strong figure in my life to say, "Dude, just, you just got to do these things." He gave me a place to live. So, I lived in their house. That's where I started, like, getting my job, fixing any financial holes that I was in. Just got me back on my feet. And yeah, we've always been close since then.

Robin Chenoweth: Sure, Noah Trimble is resilient. But also, the community came together for him. Like Asho, Noah is a non-traditional student. He's 31, is married to a teacher, has a baby son. His Weiler Scholarship makes it possible for him to go to school without working long hours. And so he's set to graduate next spring. He will become a teacher of STEM education. A steward of hopes and dreams. Just like Mr. Metz.

The College of Education and Human Ecology is extremely grateful to Bob Weiler and his family, for establishing the Weiler Family Teacher Preparation Scholarship so that Noah, Asho and their cohort of 10 teacher education students can realize their dream of becoming like the teachers who inspired them.

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