

I Swear on My Mother's Grave S3 Bonus: Jesse

[00:00:00] **Jesse:** I am so grateful that I got the time with my mom in these last five years and my life too, right? Like it was hard, but... I'm grateful for it all, and I'm grateful that I have shown up in these spaces and learned how to talk about hard things, because talking about hard things around grief specifically has allowed me to talk about hard things in other aspects of my life.

[00:00:22] And I really believe that grief brings gifts as much as it takes away.

[00:00:44] **Dana:** Hey friend, welcome to I Swear on My Mother's Grave. Happy 2024. For those of you who are new here, I ended this podcast journey after three incredible seasons last year, but I have so much content from brilliant people that you haven't even heard yet that I thought I would make a little bonus episode for January, a little gift from me to you.

[00:01:07] So I hope you're staying warm out there. If you're in the cold weather like I am, I'm in Northern Michigan and we just got 12 inches of snow and I learned how to use a snowblower for the first time. So there you go. Uh, but welcome and I hope that you fall in love with Jesse Moss just as much as I did when I first got on the mic with her in 2023.

[00:01:30] Jesse Moss has figured out a way to turn her loss into leadership.

[00:01:35] That's her quote. Don't steal it. And is now the Rockstar Director of Marketing for Experience Camps. She's in charge of developing strategies and content to create a more grief sensitive culture and advocate for grieving children. She's the voice and creator behind the Experience Camp's TikTok, which if you haven't seen it, it's incredible, and they've garnered over 45 million views.

[00:01:56] Jessie has been featured talking about grief on outlets like Vogue, ABC, and the Huffington Post, and before she worked in the world of grief, Jesse worked as a digital strategist in the Obama administration and was a social media manager at Warner Brothers and an associate producer with E! Entertainment.

[00:02:13] In this episode, we're going to talk about the death of Jesse's brother Jordan, to suicide. When she was just 22 years old, we're going to talk about how her complicated relationship with her mother turned into a mother daughter love affair for the last five years of her mother's life.

[00:02:30] And by love affair, I mean, Jesse's mom asked her to marry her more than once. We're going to talk about Experience Camps and their free summer camp programs and the initiatives that they offer year round and how working there has changed Jesse's life. I believe that talking about grief. Prepares you to talk about all the hard stuff in life.

[00:02:53] And so does Jesse. Oh, and the "phrase gay and grieving" is also a tagline of Jesse's. So, buckle in if that's you too. This is Jesse Moss.

[00:03:16] But I wanted to read back something you wrote in 2022 on the one year anniversary of your mother passing before her 60th birthday. You said, "I'm lost without my mom, point blank, period. But somewhere inside all of that is an explorer, an adventurer lost in the jungle. The leaves are overgrown. I can't see that far ahead of me.

[00:03:37] I have no idea where I am. But I'm slowly hacking away with a machete, trying to make my way. And some days I hear a beautiful call of a bird and it brings a smile to my face. You get a new appreciation for the little things when you've been through hell. But then some days I'm just plain fucking lost in a jungle and I'm pissed and alone and nothing can make me smile.

[00:03:59] And that same bird, well, it's suddenly the most annoying sound I've ever heard. That's grief." I was like, Oh my God, you're extraordinary. So when you hear that now, it's 2023, it's August, you're at camp, Experience Camps and I read that back to you. Tell me what happens in your gut... and where you're at today and your grief, right?

[00:04:27] **Jesse:** Yeah. In my gut, I'm like, wow, whoever wrote that is really smart and really eloquent. And it took me a second to remember that it was me. So that was my initial reaction was, wow, that, that person is wise. So it's, it's a nice reminder to myself that I have come a long way, that I kind of have this connection to grief that is, ever changing, just as, as my words, you know, a year plus ago shared.

[00:04:59] But yeah, I think it's one of those things that it's like grief is what is, you can feel so disconnected and so connected. And that's kind of exactly how I feel about hearing my writing back to me is I feel so disconnected from that person that I was. And at the same time, I feel super connected to those feelings of the person that wrote that, but I'm not that person anymore, which is really interesting.

[00:05:23] And I think really sums up grief super well, as we're all ever changing and moving and becoming different versions of ourselves. Alone, without grief, we're always evolving and becoming different versions of ourselves. But I think grief sort of catapults us on a rapidly changing journey when it comes to knowing ourselves and the things that matter to us and the things that give us joy and the things that scare us and the things that you know, kind of shake us out of our body and, and make us second guess things.

[00:05:53] And, you know, just my disconnection from that writing is my disconnection from the person that I was a year ago. But I hear my, I hear sprinkles of myself in it. I'm like, yeah, that sounds like me. That sounds like something I would have said.

[00:06:06] **Dana:** Yeah. What are some of those in that thing when you were like, yeah, I would have said that or I remember what that bird was, the joyful moments and then the annoying moments, you know, like what?

[00:06:15] **Jesse:** Yeah. The cursing.

[00:06:20] **Dana:** You're like, yup, that's me. That's fucking me.

[00:06:23] **Jesse:** The cursing. That feels spot on. Yeah. I like, I forget sometimes that like some of the people that follow me on social media, I probably shouldn't curse in front of, but you know what, that grief does that to you. I was never really like a cursing person, but yeah, here being like, and it's fucking annoying.

[00:06:40] I'm like, yeah, yeah, yeah. And it's fucking annoying. Grief, grief gives us so many things good and bad. And many of the times I, I, I find myself being like, well, this is really fucking annoying. So I was like, as soon as I heard that, I was like, oh yeah, yeah, yeah. There she is.

[00:06:57] **Dana:** There she is. So who you were a year ago, talk, can you talk about that evolution of you know, from the one year anniversary of her death to now, do you know why you're different? Could you, is there any way to articulate it? I mean, I don't know if I could do that. If somebody was like, Dana, I'd be like, I don't fucking know. I'd probably do that. Right. But I, I wouldn't know if I could totally articulate besides the fact that the podcast helped me get a lot of these feelings out, talk them out, shout them out, laugh them out, cry them out, look at pictures. You know, getting this out of my body has helped me, but I was curious, yeah, what you would say.

[00:07:34] **Jesse:** Yeah, it's a great question. And I totally agree. Like on the first, as soon as I heard you ask the question, I was like, well, I don't know, but I think, I think I do know.

[00:07:44] I think I really do know and it's, it's a few things, and I think the work that I do and I'm sure we'll get into it, but the work that I do at Experience Camps, I think. Sort of is the answer to to your question, which is when you are able to talk about it, as you said, and you are able to be around people who understand.

[00:08:05] And that doesn't mean that they've experienced grief. That just means they're willing to listen people who understand or at least willing to be empathetic, not sympathetic, there's a difference and who are willing to go into the muck with you. And even if that means they're not saying anything and they're just sitting there looking at you like, and you could tell they're thinking, I don't know what the fuck to say to this person.

[00:08:26] This is really sad. I'm just going to sit here. And I think like having community... I always say this, so my brother died in 2012 and I was 22 years old and nobody wanted to talk to me about it. I didn't know what to do. So I just mirrored what everyone else was doing, which was. Not saying a word going on normal with my life.

[00:08:45] That was 2012. I had nothing.

[00:08:46] **Dana:** Family and friends everyone. It was silent the death of your younger brother. No one was speaking. Okay.

[00:08:53] **Jesse:** Exactly So he died by suicide which like adds another layer on to you know people not wanting to talk about it and more whispers than anything, but I didn't have anyone I didn't I was also young, you know, 22 feels old, but it's not old at all.

[00:09:09] I did not have the tools to process any of it. And so when my mom died, one of the first things I said, and my mom died in 2021, two years and change ago. And when my mom first died, I was working on Experience Camps already. I had community around me. And the first thing I said after she died was, I want to get this right.

[00:09:29] I want to get the grief process, right. I'll make a little asterisk there of there's no such thing as getting the grief process right. And I knew this...

[00:09:38] **Dana:** I was like, did you crack the code?

[00:09:39] **Jesse:** Exactly. I knew this. And we talk about that Experience Camps all the time. We say to our kids, cause we work with kids like 8 to 18, we say to them, there's no right way to grieve.

[00:09:48] There's no getting it right. It doesn't... And I knew all these things, but I also knew what I had done with my brother. So somewhere in the middle of me knowing that's not actually real. And knowing that like, there are probably better things I could have done than not talk about it. I set out on a journey of helping myself grieve.

[00:10:07] Obviously, I got through, like, the first, you know, month of logistics and being numb and all that stuff. And then I was like, okay, what are we gonna do? Because I can't wait, like, six years like I did after my brother died to start doing anything with it. So I just sprung into action of resourcing myself, and that's super privileged, and I feel very lucky, and I have an amazing, amazing human being that I work with, a coach that I actually signed up to do a grief residency with.

[00:10:35] This was like a couple of months after my mom died. And they're amazing.

[00:10:39] **Dana:** Yeah. What does that look like?

[00:10:40] **Jesse:** So what that looks like is staying in a tiny house by yourself and this person comes and they work with you. I think it was like four or five days for four or five days straight, one on one and you're doing different things and it's not all like, you know, tell me how that makes you feel.

[00:10:55] It's not that at all. It was like inner child work and like forest bathing. So we were going on hikes, like it was all these different things of just being intentional and just being. So I just, I did the grief residency. I actually ended up making myself my own little grief camp in my house for my partner and I, cause my partner also had a death in her family a couple of years back.

[00:11:18] So we both kind of got the grief thing and made our, made us a little like one day grief camp, including things like, you know, dance party where we like shake out our feelings. And like, I just really wanted to do all the things that I could do to make sure I could get to a place where I could live because my mom was my best friend, but we were only best friends for the last like five years of her life.

[00:11:39] **Dana:** Okay.

[00:11:39] **Jesse:** Because she was a drug addict my whole life. So it was one of those things where like, I had a really rocky relationship with my mom for most of my life until, and it was really challenging and, you know, anyone who's been down the addict process knows these things to be true.

[00:11:58] Like it was really tough. I felt like resentful. I felt like I didn't have a mom who, you know, was like all the other moms who would drive me to soccer practice, all those classic things that like quote unquote normal moms are. So, there was just a moment I had in my life, maybe like around like 2017, 2018, where I was like, she was sober and I was like, I need to give this woman a second chance.

[00:12:22] And it was like, boom, the second that happened, it was like a redo of everything. And I realized, you know, addicts become addicts because something horrible happened in their life usually. And they're, they're using that as a coping mechanism. And I saw, I was old enough to understand how someone becomes an addict.

[00:12:39] And I just kind of flipped the switch and like, we fell in love with each other. And we got, we started over.

[00:12:45] **Dana:** That's amazing. Did you live with her when you were younger, like as she was an addict? Were you in her home?

[00:12:50] **Jesse:** Yes.

[00:12:51] **Dana:** Yes. Primary caregiver still?

[00:12:53] **Jesse:** Yes. Yeah. So I like, I grew up in, in Long Island, in New York with my mom, my dad, and my brother.

[00:12:59] And my parents got divorced when I was in high school, but up until I was in high school, yeah, the four of us lived in the same house the whole time.

[00:13:07] **Dana:** Hmm. Yeah.

[00:13:08] **Jesse:** But yeah, the cruel joke of it all was that like, you know, we became best friends and then she died.

[00:13:14] **Dana:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. My mom, I mean, my mom dealt with opioids and was an alcoholic for most of her life.

[00:13:21] So but a functioning really high functioning, you know, for, for a long time. It's interesting before you told me that about being an addict, I was like, how have you reconciled? Or how did you with the fact that your parents didn't talk about his death? Like before I knew that she was struggling with her own addiction, I was like, that's horrible.

[00:13:46] Why didn't the parents help? And why didn't, you know, you're thinking you should have gotten resources. And so did you ever talk about that? Maybe in these last five years of coming together, did you talk about your, your brother Jordan? And were you able to say like, Hey, I felt I was failed. I was sort of, I was flailing.

[00:14:02] You know, back then. I'm just curious if that was something you guys discussed or talked about or with your dad. I don't know. You tell me.

[00:14:10] **Jesse:** Yeah. That's, that's a really great question. And one I wish I could be like, yeah, I totally did that, but I didn't.

[00:14:16] **Dana:** Like a Hallmark film. We sat around, yeah, we sat around and have coffee and talked...

[00:14:20] Yeah. I don't know. Right. Maybe. Yeah.

[00:14:22] **Jesse:** I was, yeah, I was not raised on feelings. We were not a feelings family. There was never reconciliation of anything. It was just like, these things happen and you move on. And so when I got back with my mom, like, in a really good space. I was just so focused on making sure I could make her happy and smile and like, we talked about my brother and we talked about my brother a lot.

[00:14:45] We talked about my brother a lot, but it was never, I never, I don't think I was mature enough even at 28, 29 to understand how important those conversations are. I know that now. And. It's, it's challenging for me, even in my own relationships to like, come back around after something has happened and it didn't go right.

[00:15:05] Right. Like, that's like a learning process that like all adults have to come to terms with. And if you don't have the ability to like, come back around

to things you might have messed up on and been like, Ooh, that felt. Did that feel weird for you? Because that felt weird for me. Let's talk about it.

[00:15:17] That's something that is learned. Unless you have, like, incredible, incredible, like, parents who are maybe therapists and, like, know how to do these things growing up.

[00:15:25] **Dana:** Well, even then, you're, yeah, you're, like, you even hear, like, you're a great therapist, but you can't talk about it in the home, right? Like, clients love you, but, yeah, you're, like, oh, man, my mom's still complicated. Yeah.

[00:15:35] **Jesse:** The grass is always greener, I guess, Dana. I don't know. I guess. I don't know. But yeah, we, we didn't have those conversations. Nobody, nobody, you know, I think one of those things about grief that sometimes happens, so my brother was an addict too. So the last couple of years of my brother's life were really tumultuous.

[00:15:54] Like, talk about, like, another addict journey on top of my mom's and like, his was totally different because he was a kid and...

[00:16:02] **Dana:** Right. He's like in his teens, right?

[00:16:05] **Jesse:** Yeah. He was 19 when he died and like he dropped out of high school was in and out of rehab, sober homes, you know, was in jail for a little bit.

[00:16:12] Like it was just one of those things. And I think this happens a lot. And I'm curious what your experience was like with your mom, but like when somebody dies, I have noticed people really like, to only say nice things about them once they've died. Like, they're like, don't you remember when they did that amazing thing?

[00:16:29] And I'm like, I remember when I found them passed out, like, face down in a bowl of spaghetti, but like, we're not going to talk about that. So I feel like a lot of the times when you're dealing with grief, you're dealing with good memories. And it has even taken me years to be like, no, it's okay if we talk about the bad memories.

[00:16:46] So I just don't feel like to answer your question in a long winded way. Like, I just wasn't at that spot a couple of years ago to be like, that was

really tough with Jordan. He put us through the wringer. Nobody talked about our feelings. What's up with that?

[00:16:58] **Dana:** What's up with that? And even when you're writing an obituary, which I've learned with even my mom, my grandma, we eliminate, well, especially when suicide's in an obituary, you're like, this is the most beautiful, open family... you're like, yes, like they're being real about it. Anyway. So even my mom, I was like, how do I talk about pain and depression and how beautiful she was and how she was an amazing teacher and she looked like Vanna White. And so this podcast was the only way for me to be like, no, I call. I called my mom a bitch as I cried.

[00:17:29] As I was like, I miss you and love you so much. I can still be like, I hate you. And at times I want, I wished my mom would die. You know, I was like, take her, take her, take her. She's sick and she's in pain. You know, but that is so hard. As I'd had family, friends be like, but remember she was such, she loved you so much and she wanted you so badly.

[00:17:48] I'm like, no, I know. And really broke my heart and was complicated and kind of a martyr and da dah, dah, dah, and know an addict...

[00:17:55] yeah. Two

[00:17:55] **Jesse:** things can be true at once. That's I know.

[00:17:57] **Dana:** Yeah. Could be true at once. And she didn't ask to be addicted to pain pills, you know? She didn't wanna be in pain. I blame the system.

[00:18:05] No. Right. Kind of.

[00:18:07] **Jesse:** Yeah. I mean, same, that, that's exactly what happened to my mom. She went from kind of functioning alcoholic with, with alcohol to she had one car accident and then got prescribed pills. And that was it.

[00:18:20] **Dana:** That was it. So what were those last five years with her? Like for you, like, when you look back, what, what does it feel like?

[00:18:29] And, and maybe before you say that, I will read one more thing about.

[00:18:35] **Jesse:** Is it something I wrote, Dana?

[00:18:37] **Dana:** Yes, yes, yes, love. You get that memoir.

[00:18:41] **Jesse:** I've never heard my words spoken back to me.

[00:18:44] **Dana:** With a professional voiceover artist, okay? Professional actors are putting all the sauce on it for you.

[00:18:49] **Jesse:** I should be paying you.

[00:18:51] **Dana:** Yeah, I'll do your audio book. You wrote, "My mom often asks me to marry her. I know that sounds odd, but it's true. When she first started proposing, mostly at, Jesse, do you think we can just get married? I'd always sigh and say, Mom, come on, stop asking me that. It's really weird. But after a few years of the repetitive question, it hit me.

[00:19:10] And I realized what was truly behind her odd request. To my mom, marriage equaled the ultimate love you could have for someone. And that's why she popped the question to me. Sometimes weekly. My mom was the ultimate lover. And she loved me with every ounce of her being." And then you talk about Annie Lennox and we'll get to her love of Annie Lennox, but what do you hear?

[00:19:31] What do you feel hearing that? And so in terms of like, yeah, those last five years, when did she start proposing to you or did she always propose to you or did it start in the last five years?

[00:19:42] **Jesse:** Yeah. I mean, hearing that, like, I'm not a crier and I just got a little misty eyed cause it really is like the most beautiful thing.

[00:19:51] Like, hearing, hearing it and knowing it to be true. My mom was always a mush, like even through the hard things, like always wanting to like cuddle and, you know, lay with us and, and, and all of that. But really in the last five years, yeah, I think the thing was, is we felt like we had, we only had each other.

[00:20:13] Like we felt like we were a team. We felt like we... we kind of like grew up knowing so much about each other and the rest of the world knew nothing, you know, I knew her innermost secrets. She knew my innermost secrets and like we were a team and my parents are divorced and my dad's remarried and my, my brother obviously had died and we just felt like it was us.

[00:20:38] And my mom also, because she was an addict for so long, she was single, she lived on her own, she also had a lot of health issues, so I felt like her caretaker and obviously, like when I was younger, I was for sure parentified a bit to take care of her in that way. But at this point in my life, in these last five years, I liked it.

[00:21:00] And maybe that's, you know, because some therapists will tell me that's not good, but I liked it. I liked loving on my mom. I liked helping her. I liked, you know, when she was like. Jesse, how do I log on to Netflix? I like doing that for her. Like, I liked giving her the world. And I think the reason for the proposals was because she felt like I was the person that cared for her.

[00:21:22] And to her, marriage and love, even though like that's not between, you know, a parent and a child. That felt equivalent to what I was doing. Like we, I cared for her. I called her every day. We FaceTimed every day. You know, I told her jokes. She told me what she called. Oh, she would call me sometimes and be like, Jessi, turn on Channel 7, my favorite program's on and I would have to be like, Mom, I don't have cable and I don't know what Channel 7 is.

[00:21:51] It's in, it's different in different places. What are you watching?

[00:21:54] **Dana:** I have work, I have things to do. Yeah. Turn on Channel 7.

[00:22:00] **Jesse:** I'm like, I only watch my shows. I don't have time for your Lifetime movies. I'm really sorry.

[00:22:03] **Dana:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. What are some of the favorite jokes? Do you remember some of them? Like that she would tell you or that you would tell her?

[00:22:10] Do you have one memorized?

[00:22:12] **Jesse:** Yeah, so the, so the biggest thing with my mom was her texts. And sometimes my friends will text me and be like, can I please get a Meryl Moss text? So my mom was like a notoriously bad texter, like bad, not like bad, like she wasn't good at texting. She just like, she didn't understand how it worked.

[00:22:31] There was, there was one that like, I really, really love where I asked her like a random question, something like very, very unassuming, like what time is your Uber coming? Or whatever. And she just sent back a bald bitmoji.

And this was like when Bitmoji first came out and my mom was not bald. My mom was not bald.

[00:22:52] My mom had long brown hair. Right. Brown hair. And I just responded, why is your Bitmoji bald? And she just wrote, I don't know, but my Uber will be here at 3:30. Just like stuff like that would always happen. There was another one, which is one of my favorites. And I say this with all of my friends where she messaged me and she goes.

[00:23:12] Do you know what BTW stands for? This, this was like two or three years. I mean, that's crazy. She's dead more than two years. So three plus years ago, she, do you know what BTW stands for? And I said, yeah, it stands for, by the way, it's like shorthand. And she goes. No, it stands for born this way. I saw it on TV this morning as said by a gay person and I'm queer.

[00:23:38] I'm queer. So she was like, I love you by gay daughter. And I was like, I love you too, mom. And then she just responded, GAY ALL DAY in caps. And so now sometimes me and my friends will just shout at each other, gay all day, gay, all day.

[00:23:51] **Dana:** Gay, all day. BTW.

[00:23:55] **Jesse:** I'm like, it definitely doesn't stand for born this way, but...

[00:23:58] **Dana:** yeah. No, no, but she was definitely

[00:24:01] watching channel seven, saw her gay, whoever this gay icon was.

[00:24:05] **Jesse:** Yeah. I don't know.

[00:24:06] **Dana:** That's amazing.

[00:24:08] **Jesse:** Yeah. It was the text that really got me.

[00:24:11] **Dana:** And she, and she loved Annie Lennox. This is a, do you know why that was a favorite musician of hers or is there a certain song? What is she, what does she love about her and her music?

[00:24:23] **Jesse:** Yeah, that's a good question. So my mom grew up in Brooklyn. In the 60s and 70s and my mom like went to studio 64, 54 and she loved dancing and loved club music and when like the big techno music of like

the late 90s, early 2000s, like that song, song like Stan Sandstorm, my mom loved music, like love, love, love music, anything she could dance to like, that was her jam.

[00:24:53] And I think Annie Lennox and Eurythmics and, and all these songs, it's just like, was kind of the epitome of her childhood and like dancing out in the clubs underage, she would always tell me that they would like sneak into these, you know, big, you know, New York City clubs and have like amazing nightlife.

[00:25:10] And yeah, I think she just carried that with her always. She loves love dancing. I have so many videos for dancing.

[00:25:15] **Dana:** Oh, yes. Yes. I guess let's go back to camps. Let's talk about experience camps and, and your work there and what led you to the camps. I mean, obviously your brother is a part of that. I guess, I think I heard you in a panel.

[00:25:31] I think it was a panel you were on or you were at a conference and you, somebody asked a question and you were like, oh no, I'm the one in the room that's like, wait, your ears perk up. Did somebody say death? Did somebody say grief? I'm here for you. Right. And I feel that way too. It's like, I'm like a fucking magnet for like, did someone say dead mom?

[00:25:45] And but you were saying I'm that person, like I'm the weirdo, you come to me, but I also loved that about you that you were like, no, it's a safe space just like those camps are to come. You're a safe space in the world. And then this camp is a safe space for people to come and be as they are, right? So talk a little bit about your journey to the Experience Camps and then what you've yeah, learned from working with, do you call them children?

[00:26:08] Because some of them are in their teens. I was like...

[00:26:10] **Jesse:** yeah, we usually say like kiddos or campers. Yeah. Yeah. 8 to 18. Teens and tweens, if you will. But yeah, I think the most, the biggest feeling that I have found. That comes with grief. For the people I have spoken to in my life is a feeling of isolation, of feeling like you are the only one in the world.

[00:26:37] That has experienced this thing and that makes you other and that makes you different and the people, it's not like you have blonde hair and no one else has blonde hair and people can just kind of move on. It's this thing that

is so innately a part of you and other people just don't understand and not only just don't understand, like don't really want to talk to you about it.

[00:26:59] So that was the experience I had after my brother died and it took me. Until one conversation with a friend six years later to make a change. So I was randomly walking with my friend in New York City and we were talking about jobs that kind of could make your heart sing, jobs that like you wake up in the morning and you're like, let's do this thing.

[00:27:18] And I was like, I don't know if that exists. That's a lie, right? That's just the lie made up capitalism, all those things. And she was a therapist and she was like, I actually really like my job. I like, I get up in the morning and I'm excited. And I was like, whoa, that's crazy. And she asked if I'd ever heard of Experience Camps.

[00:27:34] She said a friend of hers from college volunteered at one of these programs, and I went to camp as a kid for 10 years, and obviously my brother had died, and she's like, you're good at grief, you're good at camp, check them out. So I ended up volunteering in 2018 at our California location, the one I'm actually sitting at right now, for a week as a camp counselor.

[00:27:51] And the first day that I got there is an orientation day for the staff and they do a staff sharing circle just so you can see not only because 80 percent of the people that are volunteering are coming with their own grief story, but you can get a feel for what it's going to feel like with the kids

[00:28:06] **Dana:** And it can be anything. It can be. It can be parental and or sibling.

[00:28:09] **Jesse:** Yeah, it can be anything. Anything.

[00:28:11] **Dana:** Okay.

[00:28:12] **Jesse:** Yes.

[00:28:12] **Dana:** A partner, a lover, whatever.

[00:28:14] **Jesse:** Anything for the volunteers.

[00:28:16] **Dana:** Got it. Got it. Yep.

[00:28:17] **Jesse:** Exactly. For the volunteers it can be anything, but for campers it has to be parent, sibling, primary caregiver.

[00:28:22] **Dana:** Right.

[00:28:23] **Jesse:** So I sit down in this, this circle with like, 8 other human beings and everyone one by one goes around and is like, "Hi, my name is this. This is who died. This is how I'm feeling. This is how they died. This is what I'm dealing with." And I was the last one to go. And I'm sitting there the whole entire time stewing because I have never said out loud anything about my brother in front of a group of strangers.

[00:28:45] **Dana:** Ever?

[00:28:45] **Jesse:** So they go to me and I'm like, Hi, I'm Jesse... ever, ever, ever.

[00:28:49] **Dana:** Wow.

[00:28:50] **Jesse:** I did. Obviously I'd said something to my family. I had said it to like friends, but I never announced. My brother's death to 10 people. I did not know. So I'm like, hi, my name is Jesse. I'm really not good at this. I don't know what I'm doing, but here goes nothing. And like a scene in a movie, like cut to me now, like, you know, having worked here for five years and it's my life and it's my brand and all these things.

[00:29:14] But from that moment of opening my mouth and saying my brother Jordan died by suicide or an overdose, I don't know. It's complicated. Here are my feelings. And watching people like nod or, or, you know, I was having heard someone else's brother who died or someone's dad who died by suicide. It was sort of this moment where I was like, wow, this is, this is who I am.

[00:29:38] Like, this is, this is just as important to me as like, my queer identity, being Jewish, all of these things, it is so a part of me and how can I move through the world with it not being a part of me? That, because other people told me I should, that's the answer, but you know, society told me I should. But I kind of had this light bulb moment where I was like, I got to talk about this more.

[00:30:01] I got to be, this is fun to be around people who understand. And not only were we talking about the people who died in our lives, but like, we were also having fun and sort of having that like yin and yang of grief of being able to move through the joy and the pain of it all sort of sent me on this journey.

[00:30:19] And, you know, on the plane ride home from camp, I wrote my cover letter and submitted and was hired for a job like two months later, and that's been five years.

[00:30:28] **Dana:** Oh my God. Did you... So, working with kids, like, when you're there, do you feel like you have, as the, now you work there, do you have to keep outing yourself, like, not your sexuality, but I mean your story?

[00:30:44] Does it have to always come up as a staff person?

[00:30:47] **Jesse:** Honestly, they both do. Like, gay grieving and get used to it.

[00:30:55] **Dana:** Oh my gosh. That, yeah, we need that on a shirt.

[00:30:59] **Jesse:** Okay, don't steal that, that's my business idea.

[00:31:01] **Dana:** Or that's your memoir title.

[00:31:06] **Jesse:** But yeah, the answer is yes. I want it, I want to. I want to say it in as many rooms as I can. I want to say I have a dead mom and a dead brother and this is what I'm dealing with and this is how they died. I was actually talking to an eight year old yesterday and she was like, my brother died from a seizure.

[00:31:24] And I was like, my mom died from a seizure. And she just ran up to me and gave me a hug. And like, where is that happening in anywhere else but...

[00:31:31] **Dana:** Nowhere.

[00:31:32] **Jesse:** ...grief camp.

[00:31:33] **Dana:** Right. Yeah.

[00:31:34] **Jesse:** Nowhere. And so just like the magic of being here infiltrates the rest of my life. So like I was saying on that panel, like I'm that person if I overhear something in a room or even if I don't overhear something in a room and I'm just like, what's the worst day of your life?

[00:31:47] Or like, anyone die in your life? Let's talk about it. I'm here for you, you know?

[00:31:52] **Dana:** Like, what's one of the most profound, and maybe you probably don't know, because there's probably profound moments happening all the time, but is there something you've witnessed during your time there that, a moment that you could share about somebody who's lost, a parent, you know, experiencing a breakthrough or just a beautiful moment between, because at the retreats, I find moments between parents who have died, people who have lost their parents to death, and then people who have lost their parents to estrangement, or a mother to estrangement, I'm like, what will they have in common?

[00:32:22] What could they possibly help each other with? A lot, right? It's insane. You're like, Oh, wow. Wow. Yeah. The beauty of, of, yeah. So watching a, potentially a parent dealing, a child dealing with a sibling dying and a child dealing with a parent dying, they must totally be able to help each other as well. So I was curious if there was a moment you saw that.

[00:32:45] **Jesse:** Yeah, absolutely. There's like so many that like it, and I mean this wholeheartedly, there's so many. I, the first one that comes to mind is one that I share a lot, which happened a few years ago at our Michigan location. We had a kid who said on like the first or second day of camp that he had not slept through the night since his dad died.

[00:33:06] He like woke up from nightmares every night, his dad had died like eight months prior or something like that... and On like the third or fourth day of camp, someone came up to me and was like, did you hear about this kid? You know, let's call him Bob. Uh, you know, did you hear about what happened with Bob? And I was like, no, what happened?

[00:33:24] He said his bunk last night after hearing that he had not slept through the night since his dad died decided to push all of their beds up against his bed so he would feel supported By their them being there, because usually the beds are, you know, pretty spaced apart, so everyone has their own kind of space and privacy and all that, but the rest of the kids in the bunk push their beds up against his bed and said, we're here for you.

[00:33:51] We're going to sleep right next to you. And if you wake up, we're right here. And he slept through the night.

[00:33:56] **Dana:** Wow.

[00:33:58] **Jesse:** Yeah.

[00:33:58] **Dana:** Holy yeah.

[00:33:59] **Jesse:** And the thing is, is like that bunk was not made up of all kids with dead dads. That bunk was made up of kids with dead dads, moms, you know, primary caregivers, brothers, sisters, siblings, like all of these people.

[00:34:12] I think the beauty of this space of having these kids that have experienced the death of someone in their family, close to them in their life, and I will not say loved one, because not everyone, you know, had that kind of relationship, some people don't really know them, or, you know, were abused by them, different things, so not loved one, but like, close to them in their life, is that, like I was saying, there are not spaces, as it stands, many spaces where for kids where they can come together and like be kids and have fun and know that everybody in the room has experienced something that they've experienced. And it doesn't have to be the same person. It doesn't have to be that they died by the same way or their relationship was different.

[00:34:50] But there is something beautiful and you obviously know this from your work and your retreats is like being around people who get it and you don't even have to say anything, but you get it knowing that they went through that, knowing that they might have experienced bullying in school like you did, or they might have, you know, struggled with, you know, tests for a year after because they couldn't focus like you did and just having all those moments.

[00:35:12] And it's not always a deep grief moment. Sometimes it's a, you know, do you like Billie Eilish? I love Billie Eilish. And then they jam out Billie Eilish for 40 minutes. But there's an awareness of being around people who understand, and no matter who it is that died in your life, or how they died, or, or your relationship to them, like, there is a unique connection there that is just so innate, because, like I said before, like, grief is a part of us.

[00:35:38] Like, it's not something that will ever go away. Even, you know, my brother died 11 years ago. I still feel that grief all the dang time. I feel it everywhere, all the time. And it's not as... you know, it's not as debilitating as it used to be, because, you know, I think time does, it doesn't heal all wounds, but it changes our relationship to them.

[00:35:57] So the ability to move through the world, knowing that this will always be a part of you and that you will have people who understand, like that's, forget about like moments or big like breakthroughs or revelations, like the knowledge of you not being alone is life changing. We had a kid last year, we were interviewing him and we said, What's the biggest surprise... what, what

surprised you the most about grief? And his answer was that there was more than three kids in the world that I had experienced it, And to me that was like the most yeah, that was the most powerful thing I had ever heard because here this child is with a hundred and fifty other kids for a week having fun at camp being a kid again and getting to talk about the person that died in his life and he now knows, he at least at a minimum knows that there's 150 kids, right?

[00:36:49] There's more than three.

[00:36:50] **Dana:** Oh my, yeah, right.

[00:36:50] **Jesse:** But to that knowledge, just to bring it back to that isolation bit that I was talking about, that's the power right there.

[00:36:57] **Dana:** And I think, you know, those camps too, you hear a lot about how grief is the least, like you are talking about it. Let you're having so much fun that sometimes right you forget it's a grief camp and that's right the illusion of...

[00:37:10] **Jesse:** yeah exactly.

[00:37:11] **Dana:** ...times two is like it's not just crying all the time and trauma.

[00:37:15] It's joyful. Yeah so much joy.

[00:37:18] **Jesse:** Yeah a lot of people think that about our programs and a lot of kids before they come think that like we'll talk to kids and They'll be like you know, I dragged my feet all the way from my house to the bus, all the way on the bus to camp because I just imagined that we were going to be sitting in a circle crying for a week straight.

[00:37:34] And then I got here and I realized we only do something clinical for an hour a day and the rest, I'm having the best time of my life. We call this the best week ever. That's our slogan, "best week ever," which is weird for grief camp because you know, it's like the worst club, but the best week.

[00:37:52] **Dana:** Yes. Like this whole call, I've heard children screaming behind you, laughing and screaming because you're at camp.

[00:37:58] So even during this call, it's like...

[00:37:59] **Jesse:** Yeah, yes. If you hear anyone screaming behind me, it's kids having the best time of their lives doing something wacky or like, you know, doing synchronized swimming on the basketball court because they don't feel like playing basketball, but they want to do something creative.

[00:38:14] It's just... yeah, kids are amazing.

[00:38:18] **Dana:** Yeah. So there's clinicians on site, I'm assuming, that's part of.

[00:38:22] **Jesse:** Yes.

[00:38:23] **Dana:** Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. And it's free, right?

[00:38:26] **Jesse:** Yeah, it's totally free. So we have our, we have our camp counselors that work like in the bunk with the kids as your like classic camp counselor position. You know, go to their activities with them. They're eating meals with them. They're going to their grief activities with them. It's just like you're kind of like classic summer camp counselor, as you imagine it. And then we have licensed clinicians who come in and these people are therapists and social workers in their day to day life, and they are there to run the grief activities and as support if things come up because they do outside of those grief activities and the best part about our camp is that they're totally free kids don't pay a cent, no matter who you are. So we get kids from all walks of life, all backgrounds. We even have kids from like eight different countries this year. I think the farthest we had someone come from Japan. Someone came from Spain. Someone came from Iceland. Like people, because, you know, we were, we're a national non profit, but we're definitely becoming a little bit more well known. We have a, we have a really nice TikTok following.

[00:39:24] Like the word about our programs and the power of it and how they're free and, you know, how they're life changing is really kind of spreading in the last year or two. So, so we're getting a lot of kids from all over the world and whether they come to us through our camp programs, or they connect with us online.

[00:39:40] We have programs in Minecraft and Roblox and like I said, we're on TikTok. We're, you know, meeting kids where they are because 6 million kids will experience the death of a parent or sibling by the time they turn 18. And we'll serve 1200 kids in our camp program this summer. So how do we. The 1200 is amazing, but how do we reach those 6 million?

[00:40:00] So we're working really hard, hard to do that.

[00:40:02] **Dana:** Wow, so you're sitting right now in the same place you said that you, or you're at the same camp that you volunteered at how many years ago did you say?

[00:40:13] **Jesse:** Six years ago. So it is my sixth summer. So maybe it's five years ago. 2018. Yes.

[00:40:19] **Dana:** Okay. When you came and you got in that circle and you announced for the first time in a group of strangers about your brother's death and now you're working there, you're doing marketing.

[00:40:28] What would you say to your, to that person that's six years ago? Is there something that you've learned or remember it for the memoir?

[00:40:36] **Jesse:** Yeah. Huh. Gosh, that's such a good question. I'm like, all I'm thinking of is something that's so cliché, but like, it's something around that, like, this is going to change your whole entire life for the better.

[00:40:55] And it seems scary right now because you've never done this before, but in five years you're going to be doing this for other people and using your loss to turn it into leadership. Wow, I should, I should trademark that loss into leadership.

[00:41:11] **Dana:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Gay and grieving. I'm gay and I'm grieving, turning your loss into leadership.

[00:41:17] Yeah, yeah.

[00:41:17] **Jesse:** Wow. I have so many good one liners, Dana, you should really write these down.

[00:41:23] **Dana:** Well, I was gonna, you, you said my grief is me and I am my grief. That's another one, friend. That's another really good one.

[00:41:29] **Jesse:** Wow. Yeah. Wow. Wow. But yeah, knowing that being able to share with myself that I would turn something horrible that happened to me into something really powerful and help others with it, I think would have given me the confidence in that sharing circle to be like, this is important that I do this because I was scared and I didn't know it was important.

[00:41:51] I didn't know the power of talking about grief. I just didn't. I thought, I'm doing this because I'm supposed to, or somebody asked me to do this, and it's just something we all go around and we say, and I'm disconnected from that. But the words are coming out, but I'm disconnected from it. But I think knowing that I was going to kind of turn that into, I mean, for lack of a better word, a career.

[00:42:13] I think would have been really powerful for me. And, and I think like, gosh, telling my 2018 me that my mom was going to die, I think would have wrecked me. So I probably would have not done that.

[00:42:25] **Dana:** Well, right, right, right.

[00:42:28] **Jesse:** I would have maybe spared her that.

[00:42:30] **Dana:** Yeah. What do you think is, I mean, I can say what I think, but like, what do you think is the power in talking about loss?

[00:42:38] **Jesse:** I think it's the, I think it's a few things. I think the first one, I think it's important to move what's inside outside. And I don't think it necessarily has to be talking, but I think for a lot of people, it is talking. It could be writing. It could be dancing. It can be. any sort of movement or, you know, slam poetry or singing or laughing.

[00:42:55] It could be anything, but I think you have to move what's inside outside because if you keep everything inside, it's going to get stuck and it's going to come out in ways you don't want it to come out. You're going to yell at the person you love most in the world. You're going to scream and punch a wall like it can come out.

[00:43:12] in bad ways if we don't move it. I like, speaking of little like one line zingers, I was, I did a talk back of an off Broadway show called Sorry For Your Loss by Michael Cruz Kane a couple of weeks ago, maybe months ago at this point.

[00:43:25] **Dana:** Yeah, yeah. I hear it's amazing. Yes, yes.

[00:43:28] **Jesse:** Yeah. And I had said something like you have to unstuck the muck.

[00:43:32] And, and that's sort of kind of what I'm saying is you have to move the things that are stuck inside of you and you have to move them out. So I

think talking about grief is an outlet of unstucking your muck and, and, and being able to kind of move through it in a way that's powerful and I also think the beauty of talking about grief is sharing it with other people lightens your load because then they can carry it with you.

[00:43:57] So if I'm sitting in a group of eight people and I say, my brother died and he died by suicide and I'm fucking pissed. Then in that moment, I have just. I've taken my grief and I've split it maybe by 10. Maybe that math's not right, but something like that. And I've allowed those 10 people now to hold my story and maybe come up to me later and ask me about it, or maybe put a hand on my shoulder.

[00:44:19] I think sharing your grief lightens your load.

[00:44:24] **Dana:** Mm hmm. I love that. I know you're at work, so I don't want to take too much of your time, but I know you've listened to some episodes. So you might know that this is the moment, my friend, where I ask you to tell me your mom's name. How you're feeling about her today, in this moment, sitting at that camp, what's coming up for you emotionally when you think about her.

[00:44:53] **Jesse:** So my mom's name was Meryl, Meryl Moss. How I'm feeling in this moment, sitting at camp. Honestly, I feel grateful in this moment. Maybe it's because I'm talking to you and I'm talking about my mom because maybe it's because I'm at grief camp and I just know without even saying a word to anybody that these people are my people and maybe it's just because over the last two plus years I have worked so hard to move into a place that my my grief from my mom is not debilitating because it really was fucking debilitating for a really long time I like could not function I had not experienced that with my brother, so it was just not only really scary because that never happened before, but it was scary because it was scary, but I, I kind of, I feel, I feel grateful.

[00:45:44] I feel, you know, we always say about experience camps, and I feel this way about all the friends I've met, is that like, I don't know what I, I don't know a world without you all, but I wish I wasn't in this world. It's like I have experienced the worst things people could experience, but I have gained the biggest gifts.

[00:46:04] I would not be talking to you if my mom didn't die. I would not be at Experience Camps if my brother didn't die. I would not have the friends that I have and the deep conversations that I have with the people in my life, you know, I always, I, I, I laugh a lot because I just, I don't have time for the bullshit anymore.

[00:46:22] I don't have time for the small talk. Like, yeah, it's hot out. Cool. Great. Well, it's hot by you. Great. Cool. But like, what was the worst day of your life? Like, that's what I want to know. Right. So it's like, I, I always, I say a lot of times, like. Would I have just been like a basic bitch if my brother and mom didn't die, like who would I have been?

[00:46:39] Would I have been boring? ? Would I have had no substance? Like what would I have done with my life? Seriously, I have no idea. So like, I'm so grateful that I got the time with my mom in these last five years and my life too, right? Like it was hard. But I'm grateful for it all and I'm grateful that I have shown up in these spaces and learned.

[00:47:00] How to talk about hard things because talking about hard things around grief specifically has allowed me to talk about hard things and other aspects of my life. And I really believe that grief brings gifts as much as it takes away. So yeah, I'm just sitting here. I feel, I feel peaceful. I feel grateful.

[00:47:19] I'm mad as hell because I miss my mom and my brother like crazy. But for the most part, I feel, I feel gratitude, which I don't know, maybe that's a weird answer, but I'm staring at like a really big mountain right now, you know, feel filled with greenery and hearing like sounds of little kids laughing and.

[00:47:37] And that's just beautiful.

[00:48:02] **Dana:** I still can't believe that Jesse reached out to me on Instagram and said that she was loving the podcast and was willing to come on and chat whenever I wanted. She was already on my spreadsheet as somebody I was dreaming of talking to, and then there she was in my DMs. I was thrilled. I love that she was literally at camp in the woods of California during our interview.

[00:48:24] I forgot that, until I listened back to our conversation. I remember hearing the sounds of kids laughing during our call and I wasn't even worried about background noise. But instead I was excited that we might be able to hear the laughter during the episode. It felt like we planned it this way, to hear the best week of these kids lives in real time.

[00:48:45] Talking about hard things, around grief specifically, has allowed me to talk about hard things in other aspects of my life, Jessie said. It's so true, and now for me it feels like a superpower that began three years ago when I started this whole podcast journey. The whole time I was working on this episode, I, I kept thinking about an interview I did in season one, with a 16 year old named Daisy who had lost their mother at the age of eight. I was so nervous to talk to

them, and I didn't know much about their story. Daisy was referred to me by a friend. I also didn't know much about their mom. And I was anxious, not just because I didn't know them, but I was afraid that I would pity Daisy, or feel a sense of guilt that I had been granted more time with my mother than they did, that I had it good, that how in the world will we be able to really connect or relate to one another?

[00:49:37] I mean, Daisy's 16. I'm in my early 40s. But what I learned in that conversation is that just because we're vastly different people with different experiences, different lives, different cultures, different ages, we both lost our mom. Those are the hard facts. I also remember the moment so viscerally when I learned about Daisy's mom's addiction.

[00:50:00] And when Daisy started talking about their mother hiding drinks and lashing out and Daisy feeling like, where did mommy go? Well, I immediately felt seen and understood. At that moment, I was looking at a peer. I was looking at someone who got it, who, who understood. And obviously I'm not a child and losing your mom in childhood is a vastly different experience than losing your mom in your 30s or your 40s or your 60s.

[00:50:26] Having your mom ripped away from you in the early stages of your life is so unfair, but Daisy and I still got to connect on a very special level, and we stayed in touch for a few years. I haven't talked to Daisy in a minute, and I think about them a lot. I actually recently texted them, but I didn't hear back.

[00:50:46] I wonder how their grief is feeling today. Did they go to college? Are they still in Chicago? Is their hair still purple? How is their heart? In our podcast conversation, the 16 year old Daisy said, as a kid, you're supposed to have everything open to you. And death just rips you away from somebody that you thought you were supposed to be with forever.

[00:51:07] Especially when you're a kid and you don't have that understanding. It doesn't make sense. But now it's just like, that's my mom. My mom is dead. And that is sad, and it sucks, and it blows, and I will never be the same again. But here I am, still living. It is sad, and it sucks, and I will never be the same again.

[00:51:31] Speaking of sucks, Experience Camps, where Jesse works as the Director of Marketing, has just launched an incredible new platform called Grief Sucks. It's a digital content platform for preteens and teens that helps them navigate their feelings, and it offers a place of belonging. A lot of the content features celebrities talking about grief.

[00:51:51] There are teen reviews of grief related pop culture content, teens candid stories, and so much more. You can find them on Instagram and TikTok, and all the links are in our show notes. If you know a preteen or a teen that could use this type of support, please share Grief Sucks with them and pass along all the resources and summer camp offerings that Experience Camps has to offer.

[00:52:14] Experience Camps is an award winning national nonprofit that transforms the lives of grieving children 8 to 18 through summer camp programs and innovative year round initiatives. So check them out in our show notes and let's find a camp this summer for someone in your life who might need it. Let's help more Daisies and little Jesses who are part of the worst club experience the best week ever.

[00:52:39] Talk to you soon.

[00:52:41] **Grief Sucks Promo Audio:** Grief sucks. Grief sucks. Grief sucks because it's just hard to talk about things, you know, that you don't really feel comfortable talking about. Grief sucks! Grief sucks because it comes at the most random times. Grief does kind of suck because it can hurt you on the inside. Grief sucks.

[00:53:02] Grief sucks. Grief sucks because nobody wants somebody in their life to pass away. Grief sucks. Grief, it sucks cause like, if you see other people, like your other family members, it sucks watching them suffer in pain. Grief sucks! Grief sucks.

[00:53:33] The third season, which is crazy to say, of I Swear on My Mother's Grave podcast would never be possible without our editor, Amanda Mayo from Cassiopeia Studio. I also want to thank our music composer Adam Ollendorff, our graphic designer and illustrator Meredith Montgomery, our copywriter Rachel Claff, and Tony Howell and Jonathan Freeland for all of their work on our beautiful website.

[00:53:55] And as always, thank you to Heather Bode for her emotional, spiritual, social, physical, for well, for all of the help over all of the years. Thank you. And all of you, thank you for listening, for subscribing, for reaching out, for telling all of your friends. I know that this club, this complicated, messy club, isn't fun to be in.

[00:54:17] But I'm so glad that you're here. I couldn't do this without you. So, thank you for being a part of this community. And if you haven't signed up for

our newsletter, please do so at our website, which is danablack.org. Not just because I want to sell you stuff, but because I want to keep talking to you, and you talking to me.

[00:54:34] So, go check that out. There's personal stories. I'll tell you about the season, and you'll learn about some live retreats that we're curating. One retreat at a time. So, Yeah. Thanks for being here. I hope you'll come back. Will you come back? Don't leave me like my dead mom. You know what I mean? Come back.

[00:54:50] Please. I'll talk to you soon.