

Catching YOUR Memories

THE PODCAST

WITH DIANE ATWOOD

A conversation with Christina Huff, published July 14, 2022

Diane Atwood: Hey everyone, this is Diane Atwood, and you are listening to the *Catching Your Memories* podcast. Everybody has an inspiring story, a memory, an experience to share if only someone would ask. That's where I come in. In this episode, Christina Huff shares a story that will break your heart and likely make you feel very angry. It did me when I first heard it. But Christina's story is also full of hope. Only 24 years old, she has been able to turn a nightmarish childhood into something good – she has learned about herself and about love. Especially that abuse, any kind of abuse is not love.

Christina wants to become a social worker and help children and adults who have been through trauma and are struggling. She currently co-facilitates a support group for NAMI-Maine. NAMI is the National Alliance on Mental Illness. She is also working toward speaking publicly about her own childhood trauma. I am grateful that she felt comfortable enough to share with us.

Welcome to the *Catching Your Memories* podcast. I'm so delighted, Christina, that you've decided to be on the show and to share your story.

Christina: Thank you for allowing me a platform in which to share.

Diane: I'm curious, though. You had a difficult childhood and you're still young, so young, and yet you've come a long way, and you've come to that point where you want to share your story with other people. Why?

Christina: Because I found when I was younger, the things that were the most impactful were the real stories, the unedited, the things that felt more real, I guess, rather than some fairy tale where the knight saves the princess, the things that were real. And when people really overcame them, I felt like I could overcome what I went through, as well.

Diane: That's interesting because I was reading somebody else's story this morning, a person who had a very difficult childhood and would dissociate, I think is the term, and I think continues to do that. That is not how you've dealt with the things that happen to you. You kind of deal with them head-on?

Christina: It is, in a way, at the time, because of the intensity of the events, I did have a tendency to dissociate. But as I've gotten older and have had more ability to work through things, I found I have dissociated about the events less and less and kind of embraced them. I think embracing it is the conscious choice. It's one made on a continuing basis.

Diane: How old are you now?

Christina: 24.

Diane: How old were you when you left home?

Christina: I was about 20. I did move back in a couple of years ago once my dad left the situation.

Diane: Let's go back. I know because we had a conversation beforehand that you would rather talk more about what you've learned from your experiences, but you do feel that sharing an account of what happened to you as a child is also important to give your story context. Does that make sense?

Christina: Yeah, it does. I think it's important when hearing difficult events and for myself, when recalling them, to place an emphasis on the good things that you can make out of the situation. It gives the event meaning, and it gives me a reason for having gone through it. And that may not be for everyone, but at least for myself, I find it important

Diane: If you're comfortable with it, let's talk a little bit about your childhood. You grew up in Virginia and then moved to Maine later on? What was your childhood like?

Christina: Down in Virginia, it was both transient and tumultuous, I think would be the right term. Because of financial difficulties, we had a tendency to move around fairly often. I think I went to five different elementary schools before I hit fourth grade. Inside the household, it was a bit more difficult. My father made it rough growing up. It was primarily his influence.

Diane: Were you the only daughter in the family?

Christina: I was. I have two younger siblings and an older half-brother who grew up away from us.

Diane: At home, you said, was equally or more difficult than having to move around and put down roots in many different places and try to make new friends. But home should be a haven, but it wasn't a haven for you.

Christina: It really wasn't at times. When I was little, I remember there was a period of time where we lived in a motel. I must have been eight or nine when we first got there. I used to think of it as an adventure because adventures were somewhat of an escape from the reality of the situation. But the situation itself in my household wasn't the best. My father was physically, emotionally, and at times sexually abusive. And due to financial difficulties, there was unintentional neglect of different needs as well. My mom, she tried her absolute best, worked seven days a week. And at least for the purposes of this story, I'd like to denote that she really did try, and I hold no ill bearing towards her whatsoever. But in those situations, it started when I was little. My father was always pretty explosive with his anger when he got angry. Looking back, I'm wondering if there weren't some neurological difficulties that he had, because the night before my first birthday, he had three strokes back to back within, like, a 72-hour period. So, I'm wondering if part of it could have been that, his inconsistency but...

Diane: Was he ever diagnosed with any kind of a mental illness?

Christina: No, he wasn't, but he never got tested. We couldn't afford a lot of ... I first got insurance when I was in high school when we moved up to Maine, which actually really helped our financial situation quite a bit.

Diane: But by then you are almost out of the house, weren't you?

Christina: Exactly. Yeah.

Diane: When you were living in Virginia and growing up, you said your mother worked seven days a week. Did your father work outside the house?

Christina: No, he has never had a job the entire time that I've been alive, at least. Well, from the time that I was two years old on, I

should say. At first, he was just taking care of my younger brothers. and then he announced to our family, once the youngest was old enough to go to school, that he was retiring from whatever work he had been doing. He used to be a keyboardist down in Florida and in more southern states, and he would tour around.

Diane: So he was a musician?

Christina: Yes, he was.

Diane: But he didn't work, as long as you can remember, it sounds like he was the primary caregiver for you kids? And your mom, if she worked seven days a week, she maybe wasn't around a lot?

Christina: She wasn't. And when she was around, my dad was very mean to her. He would get mad at her for not doing wifely duties, as he would kind of portray, for not cooking, or he would call her lazy for not cleaning, even though she worked seven days a week.

Diane: He was verbally and emotionally abusive to her. Was he physically abusive to her in front of you?

Christina: When I was very little, he was. And I'm not sure what changed in my situation, but I think I was too young to remember. But I remember being three or four and her having to stand in front of us. But he never got physically abusive with her for as long as I can't remember.

Diane: You said that he sexually abused you.

Christina: Yeah.

Diane: Did she know that?

Christina: She didn't. He used to threaten us to not tell her. I think he knew, and I think we knew as well that something would happen if she was told. But I think I was afraid that the situation would get

worse. The sexual abuse happened on and off from the ages of two to nine.

Diane: For all of you?

Christina: For myself and the younger brother, closer in age, the youngest brother did not have to go through it, and that was through my own efforts.

Diane: What do you mean?

Christina: My father wasn't overly abusive to him when he was first born. He didn't like the crying, but I was the primary caregiver for him, for the youngest. When I came home. As he got older, he was only about a year old by the time that I stood up to my father.

Diane: You had never dared to stand up to him before?

Christina: I was nine. In that power dynamic, it is incredibly difficult.

Diane: I am amazed that at nine years old, you found the courage to do it.

Christina: So the abuse was on and off. He seemed to stop himself for a while, but it was like an addiction for him. He always kept coming back to it. Every time. After the abuse would finish and he fell asleep, he woke back up and he would apologize and he would cry, and beg my forgiveness. But I had to say that I forgave him before he would let things return to normal.

Diane: This is after the sexual abuse?

Christina: Yes.

Diane: I'll be blunt. Did he actually rape you?

Christina: He did.

Diane: And he would fall asleep, and then he'd wake up and he'd beg forgiveness and insist that you apologize before you go away.

Christina: Insist that I tell him he's forgiven. But during the event, it was like he wasn't himself. He wasn't the man that I grew up with. He was someone else. And through my reading, I found out that that's actually fairly common for sexual abusers. But in those instances, he was domineering. He was physically abusive during the sexual events. And it's very difficult to verbally describe and have the words to explain the kind of emotions that go on during these events, the kind of escapism that myself and many other children have to come up with.

Diane: To be able to remove yourself from that situation in those moments.

Christina: Yes.

Diane: Where did you find that courage at nine years old to tell him, don't do this anymore or else?

Christina: Well, it started when I was younger, when I was about, well, eight or nine. He would give us lectures in the car all the time on our way to pick up our mom from work, which was about a 45 minutes drive to and from because we only had one car at the time. I disagreed with him on something, or I stood up to him on something and he said that we are done, we're over. Complete abandonment. And then he started focusing on my brother. He started focusing his advances on my younger brother. And he would continually say when it was just he, I, and my brother, that my brother was better. But my younger brother, who was the sweetest kid, who had autism, who, I can't tell you the emotions that went on. I never felt anything bad towards my younger brother because I think even at the time, I realized it was all my father. And in that

situation at the time, I wanted my dad back and I wanted him to focus on me. Whether that's good or bad, I don't know. And to be able to say it is remarkable for my self-growth, I know. But I remember hearing my brother, I remember hearing what he went through. I remember sitting outside the door and wondering how to move, how to get up. I sat there stricken because when it happened to me, it didn't matter. In my head, it didn't matter. It was just something I had to face, something I had to fight through and I could survive it. Even though there were times where it was painful enough that I didn't believe I could. And I didn't know. I was nine. I don't know about I didn't know about anatomy and if the pain was going to be fatal or not. But what got me to stand up was hearing my younger brother, hearing him crying, hearing him in pain. It took a few times. I was stricken in place. I felt like I needed to move. I didn't know how I was going to move, but I needed to do something. And I was a kid, you know. I remember hearing stories about people being the hero or I wanted to be like that. But I think the other part of me, the part that was being abused at the time, wanted to be his primary target. Whether it was to save my brother or for the attention myself, I don't know. When you're nine, you know, but. So, I stood up to him. There was one time when my dad started to lead my brother and I stopped him. I pulled him away and it was like, it felt in that moment like time stood still. I locked eyes with him and I took him into the bedroom. I had to learn different things at the time to protect my younger brother, learn different ways to keep his attention even at nine.

Diane: Wow. I, I just. Such a complicated situation.

Christina: It is. And that's the unfortunate reality for so many people, girls and boys.

Diane: You had another younger brother as well, right?

Christina: Yeah.

Diane: Did he turn his attention on the baby, too?

Christina: He never did. As far as I'm aware, he never did.

Diane: Were you afraid he would?

Christina: I was. And as the abuse continued on with myself, I started realizing I can't do this forever. I don't know what's going to happen to me. And if something happens to me, I don't know what's going to happen to either of my brothers. I think that's what helps me make the choice to stand up to him. Because before, I already made part of the choice by pulling him in. But I think in doing so, I started that I don't know what to call it — neural pathway series of decisions. But I set the precedent, and I realized if I could do that, maybe I could stop it. So, I stood up to him one day.

Diane: What did you say to him?

Christina: I just remember us fighting. I remember saying, if you don't stop, I'll tell mom. And if you ever hurt my younger brother, I'll tell her. And he was afraid of that. Looking back as an adult, he was far more afraid of that than I realized at the time. Because for him, that meant the loss of his safety net, the loss of his entire support system, and the loss of his place in life and our family. And for an abuser, that place of dominance is important. For sexual abusers, it's difficult. I've read quite a few books on sexual abuse, and all of them state that sexual abusers have a complex thought process. It was actually the next day after that he said that we weren't allowed to go outside and play anymore, that it wasn't safe for us to go outside. I think he used that as a method of control.

Diane: Yeah, it sounds like it. That he, as you said, he needed to be dominant in some way. And I am just blown away by the fact that at

nine years old, you were able to almost think this through, come to some conclusions, and found the words to stand up to him and to recognize that they meant something.

Christina: I think part of it was that he apologized. If he hadn't apologized, if he hadn't told me this behavior is not okay in his own terminology, I don't know if I would have realized it wasn't. I would have thought it was a way of life. I remember when I was five years old thinking that this is just how life was.

Diane: What else did you know?

Christina: Well, part of him actually did tell me it was abuse. When I was little, he would say, if there aren't any bruises, it's not abuse. And for a long time, even though he would yell, even though he would get physically abusive. He would throw me to the floor and hit me occasionally or pin me up against the front door by my throat. There were never any bruises, but once the sexual abuse started it's strange how some memories stand out. They shouldn't be as vivid, but they are. The sight of the bruises when I was younger, on my legs, and that made me realize, even when I was little, that, oh, this is abuse, because he said it was, and I was scared. I was petrified. And then, like an addiction, it seemed like he pulled away. Looking back as an adult, I think my mom had, my mom had no idea. But I think maybe something changed between them for a little while, and that's why he stopped.

Diane: You said that after you stood up to him, and again, we have to remember that you're nine years old, the very next day, he announces to you kids that you're not allowed to go outside and play except for going to school, that was your life, having to be at home?

Christina: Yeah, and I would go to school. I would come back, and I could play with the toys inside. He would occasionally take us to the library, and when we lived at the motel, he would take us down to the boardwalk for a little bit. I think this is where the complexity comes in for him. He would take us on walks down the boardwalk of where we used to live because we lived right by the beach. He would do that quite often.

Diane: It was a nice thing, so he wasn't totally bad?

Christina: in my head back then, yeah. And in my head growing up, until I started going through therapy and I realized that people can have that complexity, that abuse and love can coexist. And it took me a long time to realize that loving situations don't have any abuse, not even a little bit. Which is a little sad thinking about it, but for a lot of people, that's a fact of life. And that's another thing that I want to impart to whomever listens, that love and abuse cannot coexist in a healthy relationship, and that people are out there that don't do that, that don't hurt you, even if it seems like there aren't. Because for me, it seemed like it seemed for a very, very long time, until well after I moved to Maine, that any relationship, familial or love that I would get into, I could deal with a certain amount of abuse. And that was normal, and that was normalized for me.

Diane: How old were you when you started therapy?

Christina: About 21.

Diane: And what did you learn about yourself?

Christina: I learned that what I had gone through was significant. A part of me had to normalize it because you have to live with it every single day. You have to live with the weight of every bit of it every single day, even on good days. So, I had to normalize it and

dissociate a bit from it. And I think that as I went through therapy, I started realizing how bad the situations actually were. And I was able to re-examine those in the light of what would I do as an adult in that situation. And I learned, my therapist has been amazing, and I learned a lot about what it means to have and be in healthy relationships, familial or romantic.

Diane: Are you able to live in the moment now?

Christina: Not fully, but I'm pretty close.

Diane: That's remarkable. Since you've been doing therapy, and I assume you're still doing therapy.

Christina: I am.

Diane: You've decided to share your story in a couple of different ways. You're a member of NAMI, and are you part of a speaker's group?

Christina: I'm not part of a speakers group, although that's something I've been looking for. As soon as the class comes up, I really would like to take it. I co-facilitate a group through NAMI, and they've been really great. I co-facilitate a group through NAMI Portland. And I've learned a lot because I work with an experienced host of the group. So I get to refine my skill set fairly often, and I get feedback after every meeting as to what I could have done, what I could have done better, and more information on group dynamics, which has been enormously beneficial to not only my personal skill set, but to my professional one as well.

Diane: You know, speaking in public, never mind having a powerful story like yours, is really challenging. So I commend you for aspiring to become a public speaker, but to be willing to share your

story by facilitating the group. Is it like a support group in which people can share their stories?

Christina: It is. It's a place where people can come to get what they need in that moment, in that day. Remember how I stated that you carry the weight of what you went through every day. Well, you also have day-to-day weights as well, and those weights add up. So, to have a place where you can come even just once a week and talk it out, talk out issues, get feedback, and a place where you can feel safe enough to just be who you need to be, not who you have to be daily, but who you need to be, I find is enormously powerful. And I feel honored to hear the stories shared in those groups, to bear witness to what our group members have to go through and what our group members have overcome. For me, it's my honor to hear them because I know how difficult it is to share your story.

Diane: When you speak about the burden of the memories, does hearing other people's stories kind of lift that burden for you?

Christina: In a way, yeah. Knowing it just continues to tell me that what I went through, I wasn't odd, I wasn't weird, this wasn't my fault. Hearing it in a different context and hearing other stories helps me realize who I was at the time, that it wasn't my fault. It helps enormously, I find, and I hope that maybe by sharing my story, I can do that for someone else.

Diane: What do you aspire to be in terms of a career?

Christina: I'd like to work in social work.

Diane: Are you going to school now?

Christina: I am. I'm completing a human services program at Central Maine Community College. And I hope to transfer after this

winter semester to a four-year university. They actually have very good pathways.

Diane: I think you have so much going for you that you will make it. You have your own pathways.

Christina: Thank you so much.

Diane: If we were going to end now, what are some of the things you would like people to take away from your story?

Christina: That even when things seem hopeless, there is something better. And you are strong for making a conscious decision to wake up every day to continue on. I don't think it's said often enough how hard it is for some people just to simply get out of bed. How that is an achievement for someone who has seen so much, for someone with depression, for someone with anxiety, for someone living with a family they can't be themselves around or they're being abused by. Just the act of living is strength and that everyone should feel some compassion for themselves, especially in between COVID and the economy. It's not easy, I think. And I want people to know that their stories, if this is impactful, then realize that your story is impactful as well. Everyone has a story.

Diane: We've heard your story. I would like you to describe who you are. What is your essence?

Christina: That's a question I've been trying to figure out for a very long time. I'd love to say I'm a healer or a fighter, but I'm not. When I was a kid, I wanted to be an adventurer. I wanted to find new experiences. I think I identify with that the most. I want to heal people. I want to help people. But most of all, I want to see what there is out there. I am so intensely curious of everything. I love it. I'm a person who wants to explore the world because deep down, I love it. I love to travel. I love to meet new people, hear stories,

because there's beauty in everything. And I count myself lucky to be able to see it.

Diane: I don't know if I would call it luck as much as I would call it perseverance. And a deep-down belief in yourself. In a way, you didn't allow your experience as a child define who you are now, or you're trying your best not to let those experiences define you. Did you ever make any kind of peace with your father since you've been through therapy? Or confront your mother and just say, look, I want you to understand this is what happened to me and to my brothers.

Christina: I've spoken with my mom, and she's been naturally angry, upset. My father is out of the house, which helps a lot. But with my father, I know and I've known that he will never truly apologize because I don't think he sees truly what he does is wrong. I don't think he has the capacity, but I think knowing that, knowing that internally he doesn't have that capacity. And I realized a long time ago that I could be angry forever. I could be angry at everything and every adult who wasn't there. But it doesn't solve anything, and it only serves to hurt me. Anger has a place, and anger is a positive emotion, and I want to emphasize that. Anger is the part of you that loves you, that tells you how you should be treated. But I think this kind of anger I needed to let go of, and I'm grateful I had the ability to.

Diane: I think you're going to make a darn good social worker.

Christina: Thank you.

Diane: Do you want to work with children? Do you want to work with adults? Both.

Christina: I like children, but I think I'd like to work with both. I'd like to focus surprisingly, I know, but I'd like to focus on trauma, at least trauma-informed, but trauma-centered therapy. I think it's

either therapy or working within a larger organizational level to try to create interventions for those who've been through trauma because it's very difficult to understand the daily struggles that people with trauma have to go through. And trauma underlines every aspect of our society, top to bottom. Historically, it is the backbone of the world. And I think knowing that and knowing the impact of intergenerational trauma, that focusing on that would be beneficial either in a personal one-to-one scale or on a larger organizational level. I'm not quite sure what job I'll have, but I'd like to bring that perspective to it.

Diane: You're an amazing woman.

Christina: Thank you.

Diane: I'll give you the final word. Anything else you'd like to say? A question that I should have asked you that I didn't think to ask you?

Christina: I'd like to speak to those kids who are scared. And I'd also like to say to not compare traumas, not on your end, but in general, I find a lot of people say that what they went through wasn't that bad. That's the single most common piece that I hear from people, and that prevents so many people from getting the support that they need. I think regardless of what you've gone through, you need to take yourself seriously and allow yourself to get that help that you need. Allow yourself to reach out to others. And it's okay if you can't.

Diane: But try.

Christina: Exactly. Each little step I've found has been difficult, and it's a daily struggle. A little step every day equates to a much larger goal over time, but everyone tries to focus on the big goal, but you need to focus on the smaller steps that you can take, and congratulate yourself for doing that. And as I said, even for just

waking up. For someone with depression, just getting out of bed, brushing your teeth is a monumental task. And it's okay to be, to reward yourself for those. And I think what I'd like to say is be gentle to yourself, regardless of who you are, regardless of what you've gone through, be gentle to yourself,, and know that it's okay to find help.

Diane: Christina, thank you so much for sharing. Not only your story but those wise words.

Christina: Thank you for giving me a place to, and thank you for listening.

Diane: That brings us to the end of this episode of the Catching Your Memories podcast. Many thanks to Christina Huff for sharing her story with us.

If you would like to learn more about NAMI Maine and the services they offer, visit their website namimaine.org, that's n-a-m-i-Maine.

If you would like to read a transcript of this episode or leave a comment, go to CatchingYourMemories.com/podcast.

Be sure to come back in two weeks for another episode of Catching Your Memories. And if you have stories or memories you would rather not share in a podcast but would like to preserve for your family, I also record personal interviews. You can learn more about that at CatchingYourMemories.com send me an email – diane@dianeatwood.com. This podcast was created, produced, recorded, and edited by me, Diane Atwood. Catching Your Memories, the interview of a lifetime.