Alison (A) : Ok, so if we could start, if you could just say your name and tell us a little bit about yourself, whatever you find interesting.

Helena (H): My name's Helena Reynoso, ummm, I am 33. Born and raised in Denver and I am the day site coordinator at the Regis Safe Outdoor Space.

A: And how long have you worked with Safe Outdoor Spaces?

H: Almost a year

A: Ok, ok, and you said you were born and raised in Denver?

H: Yes

A: Ok, do you still have family around Denver?

H: Yes

A: Ok, and I'll ask you more how you came to work here and what it's like working here in a bit but first I'd be curious just as someone who is working with people experiencing homelessness and kind of knowing this community, How do you define homeless or homelessness?

H: (pause)

A: I think it's a hard question, everyone's answered it differently.

H: I mean I would just, if I'm defining homelessness it would just be like an unhoused individual, either by choice or otherwise, circumstances.

A: So you've been working with SOS for a while and I know you worked at the first sight on 16th and Pearl and now we're at the site at Regis, I'd love it if you just kinda told me first how you found this job.

H: I am, so I was homeless on the streets of Denver for four years and I was also struggling with a drug addiction and when I got clean, my sponsor was actually the site manager at Pearl. And I told her I was super interested in helping other people who are struggling with the stuff that I struggled with and that's how I ended up here.

A: yeah, would you feel comfortable talking about your own experiences with homelessness?

H: Sure. So before I became homeless I owned my own house. I had a great job and then when my addiction hit, I became homeless. I slept in a car for awhile but I knew in order to supply my habit and to be around other people like me, the best place to go was downtown. And I didn't leave until I got arrested and got clean.

A: When you said “people like me,” what do you mean?

H: Just other people who didn't have anywhere to go and were struggling with addiction. I call us street kids but like a lot of people who are struggling with addiction and homelessness, we look out for each other. We, we're like a family, and I knew that I would be safe.

A: Wow, do you have any kind of stories that show that sense of family, or that sense of community or sense of feeling safe, as examples?

H: I mean I've, being down there I've had men try to follow me. I've had men try to assault me and I mean in downtown Denver you see it when you're driving by, there's a homeless person everywhere, you know. And both of the times that had happened to me, somebody else jumped in, grabbed me and helped me get away.

A: Were the people you felt safe around mostly women or were they also men?

H: Also men.

A: Yeah.

H: Most of them were men.

A: Yeah, did you feel like it was easy to kind of find those safe people, like was it a natural coming together, or...

H: Yeah. I mean I think the fact that we all used a substance, probably helped that. You know we were always looking out for each other but when it comes to the women especially like I think a lot of the males on the streets look out for us without us even knowing. You know, in one of those situations this guy came out of nowhere.

A: you think maybe he was sort of had his eye out for you a little bit?

H: just kind of keeping an eye, just making sure that nothing went wrong and thank goodness he was.

A: right, right. Are there any other stories you'd want to share with your own experience with homelessness before we kind of move more into SOS stuff?

H: No.

A: Thinking back to, so you talked to your sponsor who was kind of in a leading role with SOS. Were on the waitlist at all, or no, not on the waitlist for SOS but did it take a while to get the job?

H: No, so they were kinda, they had that minor setback where they were gonna open and then they didn't. And when they decided they were gonna open again, I interviewed with everybody in the very beginning, and I was part of the team when we opened.

A: Can you describe the first day of work at SOS?

H: Interesting. I hadn't been, I only had 60 days clean when I started working for the site. I hadn't been off the streets that long. You know, so when I first came in, I was meeting a lot of new people but there were also individuals who living at this site who I used to camp with or get high with who were residents.

A: Yeah. Can you say a little more about what that was like?

H: You know it was hard at first to remember my role and like set those boundaries with them.

A: totally.

H: It was, at the same time it was very empowering, because I was doing so well, you know. I gained 45 pounds since the last time any of them had seen me. My face wasn't picked at any more, and I had multiple of them within the first week tell me that I inspired them because they never thought I would get clean, so if I can do it, they can too.

A: That's intense. And I mean this certainly you don't need to talk about it if you don't want to, but I'm wondering, that being so close, were you worried about being triggered, working there? Especially in the earlier days?

H: I had processed it a lot with my sponsor, with my family. My family was extremely upset with me when I told them what I was going to be doing for work.

A: oh interesting.

H: Relapse is a huge part of my story and they basically said I was setting myself up for failure and they couldn't believe I was gonna do this. But I had a plan in my head and I knew the first time I was triggered, I would quit.

A: Wow

H: I let my sponsor know that I was, you know, I was talking about it a lot with her and through my step work and with other people in the program and I mean I wanted to give it a try because I am very passionate about helping other people. But I knew that if anything happened to where I was triggered or I felt like I couldn't handle it anymore, I would quit.

A: Wow. It almost sounds like the opposite was happening, where people were like ' you look good, you're inspiring', was doing the opposite.

H: Yeah, it was. I can say the SOS plays a major role in why I stay clean as long as I have.

A: You said you're really passionate about helping other people. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

H: I mean I've always had a huge heart. I blame my mom for that. Sometimes it's my downfall. You know but when I was on the streets and I was struggling with addiction like all I wanted was for somebody to care. All I wanted was for somebody who understands what I'm going through to help me. And I know I can't be the only person who feels that way and if I can I want to be that person that they can trust.

A: And when you say “somebody to care,” what do you mean by that?

H: I feel like a lot of people who work in rehabs or try to attend to people who are struggling with addiction and homelessness have a school background. Not an actual experience. I know it was really hard for me to trust-, it's really hard, it's still, it's hard for me to trust people who don't know what I went through. It's like you don't know what I went through, you don't know anything about it other than what you read in textbooks. Like I don't even want to talk to you. And I shut down in rehab because of that. I mean from talking to people who are still struggling with addiction and people who used to, they felt the same way. It is very hard to connect with somebody who doesn't know exactly what you've been through.

A: Wow. Do you do a lot of that, is that connection work part kind of part of your job here? Whether officially or unofficially?

H: Yeah, I mean we definitely build rapport with them. You know, I don't, one thing I'm really weird about is that I don't go into war stories. Like I'm not gonna talk to them about 'oh you know this one time, I did this drug' you know but more, I more so focus on like how I got clean and what my life is like now. Not so much the problem but what my solution was and how much better my life has become.

A: And do you feel like people trust you quickly?

H: Yes and I think overall, I built really good relationships. And I think that's, you know, it's called the Safe Outdoor Space. I mean yes, It's locked, their stuff is safe but I think the residents feel safe knowing that all of their staff have some kind of lived experience.

A: Wow, that's fascinating. Do you care to say a little bit more about that?

H: I'm not really sure. I mean obviously, I understand why they did it that way but at all SOS sites, everybody who is hired has some kind of lived experience either with homelessness, addiction or both. You know, most of us are either in recovery or have family who are in recovery or...

A: And from your experiences, that's unusual, it sounds like, in supporting agencies?

H: From what I've seen. I mean I only went to rehab once but...

A: I love that question about safety and that's kind of a new definition for safety. I'd love to hear you talk more too about just the community of people living here and with that sense of safety and like how you see that changing and maybe getting stronger then maybe getting weaker sometimes or changing?

H: I mean I can say from the first SOS to this one, the people that live in this community are completely amazing. You know, they are so smart and they have so much potential. And a lot of them don't see that. A lot of them are very hard on themselves and down on themselves and like ' I'm just a homeless junkie, like I'm never gonna amount to anything, so I'm just gonna continue to live this wa.y' And I understand it cause I was once that person you know. I never thought I was gonna get clean. Like I was going to die a heroin addict, that was, you know. So being able to be this person who can sit here and tell them like ' no you're not what you think you are. like you have so much potential. Let's help you love yourself again' is really an honor and a privilege to be able to help people like find themselves. It does change you know. There are a lot of, the age range is pretty wide, nationality, religions, everything. I mean But for the most part, it's a community and they are very respectful to each other. They are very respectful to staff, you know. Normal issues when you have a bunch of people living together but for the most part, it, it's so peaceful, you know. When I was working nights I would come in on my days off and you just see all these people sitting around like drinking coffee, smoking their cigarettes and that's why this whole, the lawsuit and Park Hill and all of that, just completely breaks me.

A: So you mean, people, the neighborhood not wanting them there?

H: yeah, it just because they are such wonderful people

A: Was there any push back like that in this site, near Regis?

H: From what I know, No. I mean, we had a volunteer who had stated like on the next-door app, people were like voicing concerns maybe but actually this neighborhood’s been amazing. There's a development across the street where they all own their homes but they've come together, and they make us lunches and bring us dinner and buy us ice and bring ice cream. Like, this neighborhood's been amazing.

A: Do you have any interaction with Regis at all?

H: So I was actually a student at Regis.

A: No way.

H: Yeah and when I fell into my addiction, I dropped out. So, yes, I mean I do have some affiliation with it. I mean we have connections. Whoever set this up for us, they're super supportive as well.

A: Yeah, yeah. If you're ok with it, I did want to ask one more question about your own experience.

H: Ok.

A: You said that you thought, you never thought you would kind of turn things around. I'd be curious if there was one moment or incident or thought that like helped that switch to happen.

H: Ok, so. What kind of what started my addiction is my mom died unexpectedly in her sleep. And my aunt's best friend did her eulogy. So I had got arrested and I called my aunt and she told me that her best friend had a dream. And in the dream she was standing on a stage and saying ' I can't believe I just did her mom’s and now I'm here to do hers' and that was my wake up call.

A: Wow.

H: Yeah.

A: Is that a story you share with people here or is that kind of an example of the stuff you maybe wouldn't?

H: No, I would share that if it came to it. I don't think I have. I try not to talk about my mom as much as I can cause it's still a very sensitive subject and I'll lose it.

A: Are you still in touch with your aunts and her friend?

H: Yeah. They're both super supportive of my recovery. I'm actually getting ready to pick up a pretty big milestone. So my whole family's kinda super excited and --

A: Congrats

H: Thanks you.

A: Thinking again about SOS. Some people in Denver know this exists, a lot of people don't, or a lot of people just kind of hear about it quickly and turn the page, you know. What do you think is necessary as staff and as a team of staff to keep this place up and running and functioning that most people wouldn't think about? Like what are some of the unknown parts of this job?

H: I would definitely say teamwork. I mean even though we are on opposite sides of the week or opposite shifts, it does take a whole team to run this place. And communication.

A: Do you have an example of where teamwork and/or communication was like really key?

H: I mean in incidences where things have become physical. Knowing that you have a team behind you and have other people there is huge and especially for the emotional stuff too. This job can be draining, emotionally, mentally and physically. You know, we, especially because most of us are in recovery, we're always checking on each other. Hey like I think you might've been triggered like are you ok? Is there anything I can do? We're very, we're a very close-knit group.

A: Yeah. When, the times when you like kind of leave that close-knit group, maybe when you're on your days off and maybe when you're in different communities, do you ever find yourself needing to kind of advocate for the people living here and/or your teammates? Like, you know, if people don't understand or are being judgey or something, and if so how do you express that?

H: I haven't ran into that a whole lot. Most people that I've run into, love this idea.

A: Have you run into people, expressing, maybe complicated or critical sentiments about homelessness?

H: Oh yeah. And you know, a lot of people I know will call them arrogant and I don't think its arrogance, I think it's unfamiliar and that's what I said about Park Hill. When all of this first started, you know, those are million dollar houses. This is unfamiliar to them. Having homeless people in their community is unfamiliar to them. That doesn't make them arrogant. But I wish that they were more open to seeing it, like the bigger picture of it. Not all homeless people are drug addicts, not all drug addicts are homeless and not all homeless or drug addicts are criminals. You know, we have several residents here who have full time jobs and don't use a substance at all but I feel like people who are unfamiliar with this, see a homeless person and automatically see a criminal drug addict. And it's not fair.

A: Right, right. I mean this might sound like a stupid question but, where do you think that comes from?

H: Probably just history. Over the years, you know. I don't know. I mean it's not, it's not a wrong assumption. A lot of people who are homeless do use a substance to cope with the fact that they're homeless. You know, a lot of people who may have gone on the streets, not on drugs, became homeless and then ended up on drugs because they needed a way to deal with that. But it's not everyone and not everyone is a criminal. I mean I know people have been homeless for 20-plus years and never committed a crime or been to jail. You know, it's not fair for everybody to be lumped into one category.

A: Right, yeah, I think the answer “history” is also a good answer to that, like your first instinct, yeah. Kind of shifting to COVID, since COVID has been big thing. I'd love to hear how COVID kind of entered your personal story, if you're comfortable and then also just, cause you, the SOS camp was a response to COVID, so you weren't quite working here yet. It sounds like you were maybe in that big transitional phase, right as COVID came down?

H: Yeah, (pause) For most of it I was still on the streets. But I also got clean through COVID as well. It was hard, you know, there were no in-person meetings. To meet with my sponsor, I had to do it on a zoom video. Zoom meetings, there's no, none of that fellowship. So working here like, that's, that really started to help because I had other people who were in recovery that I could talk to them face to face. So for the first like four months of my recovery, or three months, I was pretty much isolated and that makes it hard. Isolation and recovery do not go well together. But once I started working for the SOS, my spirits were lifted a lot and things really looked up.

A: What about, kinda the, people living on the streets more generally. How do you think COVID was affecting that experience?

H: I feel like most people would say like COVID like was super hard, but I feel like the homeless community, COVID was a blessing. And I say that because they weren't sweeping people during COVID.

A: For a while, right.

H: Yeah, they did start up again but for a nice chunk of time they weren't really sweeping and so people got to stay put for a while which is something we weren't used to.

A: Wow, good point. And then, I mean I'd love to just hear your thoughts on the sweeping in general, like either when they started up again or when they were going on before?

H: It makes me sick. I mean, I can't even count how many times I got a knock on my tent, and they were like throwing my stuff in dumpsters, I just...

A: Just immediately?

H: Oh yeah, no, I mean, I guess now they have started to post one-week warnings or… but back when I was homeless, they didn't do that.

A: So literally be woken up by someone throwing your stuff

H: From a cop knocking on your tent asking you to come out and half your stuff was already in the trash.

A: What would you do right after that?

H: What could I do? Start over

A: So it's like, walk somewhere?

H: When I was homeless, I became very desensitized to materialistic stuff.

A: Wow. Just had to let it go

H: I did not get attached to anything and I did not keep anything that really meant something to me because I knew it wouldn't be long before it was gone someway. Whether thrown in the trash or stolen.

A: right, right. I mean we kind of got there a little bit but the city was doing all sorts, responding in all sorts of ways to COVID, what do you think of their response in general? Or, I mean it’s hard hard to even know what was the city and what was...

H: Yeah, I mean the fact that they weren't sweeping I guess was nice. I don't know, I feel like COVID is what made a lot of this possible thought. I don't know if COVID and I can't speak cause I don't know a whole lot of history about these places but I feel like that one of the huge selling points was that COVID was going on and this was going to be a safe place. So I don't know if the city really would have approved it or if it would have taken longer if COVID wasn't a thing.

A: That created this urgency that was never here before. If you had some kind of either political power or resource power, like in a decision-making way, is there anything you would do differently to support people experiencing homelessness?

H: I mean, yeah (laughter). Is it realistic? Probably not.

A: Would you like to share your vision?

H: I just feel like there's a lot of, you know one of the downsides to this is the wear and tear on the tents. The strong winds, the hard rain, you know, the cold when it snows. Like, being able to set something up like this in like a warehouse or you know an abandoned apartment building?

A: Still have the tents there?

H: So it's unrealistic but if I had some kind of power that would be my thing. To somehow get them in doors even if it still has to be a set up like this. But I feel like there's so many abandoned buildings out there that we, like the homelessness out in Denver is horrible. And I feel like there definitely could be more done.

A: That reminds me, I also wanted to ask you about the temporary nature of these sites? Cause this, am I correct in thinking it's a six month lease?

H: Yes

A: How does that affect kind of your mind set in being here, and maybe the way you are able to support residents here?

H: I really try not to think about like the time, you know. If anything I try to think we have less time, you know, it makes me, gives me more of an urgency to try to get them connected with as many people as I can. Doing housing applications, you know. Yeah, I try not to think about you know, too far into the future, cause it will just stress me out

[both laugh]

A: That's a very good philosophy to follow, I think. And kind of going back again, we're getting near the end, don't worry. I'd love, I'm wondering what just sort of a typical day here is, if there's a typical day?

H: There's not. And honestly that's part of the reason why I love my job so much. I've always been the type of person who gets, I don't like doing the same thing everyday. You know, I worked for a mortgage company for 12 years and might have been different files, but it was the same thing everyday and that's when I started going to school and I changed things. I used to work for the Denver Women's Prison, every day was different and that's one thing I love about. Everyday there's something new, it doesn't get repetitive and boring.

A: Can you think of any details that sort of like show, like for someone who's never been here and has never lived in a place like this, any details that kind of show how it's not boring? Not in a vacation brochure kind of way. [laughs].

H: I mean, there's always laughter, there's always conversation, you know. You can go to any point in the camp and get involved in a conversation or somebody telling a joke or, you know.

A: If you knew, hypothetically, two people were talking about homelessness but they had no lived experience and knew very little about it, what are a few key things you wish they could know before they kept talking?

H: (pause) That people in the homeless community are people too. And they are good people and they deserve the same respect as anybody else. Just because of their living situation does not make them less of a decent human being than those living in million dollar houses. Sometimes, I see more respect and gratitude and just love and acceptance and all the good things, a hundred times more from homeless people than I do a rich person. Homelessness will humble you. And I think people in the homeless community are…

A: And then, thinking about this oral history project and other people also telling their stories, how do you kind of see a project like this or others where people are, cause I know SOS has gotten kind of a bit of like media attention, you can be very frank, do you think its good or bad or?

H: I think it's a good idea. You know, we've had people at this site who have interviewed but I think it's great that you guys are doing staff and residents to kind of get the outlook on both and just, you know. I feel like with anything, people being able to tell their story, even if it can help one person change their perspective, it's worth it to me.

A: For sure. And last question, if you were conducting this interview, what question would you ask that I didn't ask?

H:(giggles) I can't think of one. (pause)

A: Or any other just part of either SOS or homelessness that we just didn't even get near cause I didn't know to ask about it?

H: I honestly can't think of one

A: Did you want to add anything else ?

H: No.

A: Ok. Thank you.