



Episode #: 15 Title: **Moving from Trauma to Triumph**

Guest: Elizabeth Akua-Nyarko Patterson

Guest Title: Founder / Exec. Director

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Debra: Hello. Welcome to Human Potential at Work, with Debra Ruh. I'm really excited about my guest. I just met my guest a few weeks ago, and she just really impressed me. Oftentimes, I hear from my peers that the younger generation, they're not doing anything. And I think, "Wow, I don't think you're meeting the people that I'm meeting."

And so, Elizabeth is a perfect example of what a very young person is doing to change the world, and she has a very, very interesting story as well. So her name is Elizabeth Patterson, but I'm going to let her -- and she is the founder of The Girls Education Initiative of Ghana.

So welcome to the show, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth: Thank you very much, Debra. It's so nice to be here.

Debra: Yeah, we're very excited to have you here, Elizabeth. Elizabeth, I know that you have a longer name than just Elizabeth Patterson, but to be honest, I was afraid that I might mess up the name. So do you mind telling us your name and also telling us a little bit about your story? Because I was so fascinated when you told me about yourself.

Elizabeth: Okay. So my full name is Elizabeth Akua Nyarko Patterson. Elizabeth, because I'm Catholic and my parents chose St. Elizabeth for me. Akua is every Wednesday-born girl child in Ghana, from the Ashanti region gets the name Akua. And Nyarko is I'm named after my dad's grandmother. And then Patterson is my dad's surname. So that's the explanation for my four names.

So as you said, I'm the founder and the executive director of The Girls Education Initiative of Ghana, or GEIG, and also the president of the Girls Education Initiative of Ghana U.S., Inc., which is the U.S. component of the Ghana organization. The mission is to provide academic and financial support for girls, including Africans with special needs, so they can access higher education and professional opportunities.

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The idea came about, I would say, probably in 2007 when I had gone back to Ghana for the first time, following a near-death car accident in 2003, while I was in high school, as a junior in high school, about to take the SATs and go off to graduate and go off to college the next year.

I was in a coma for about six weeks or so, and so I don't quite remember any of this accident, but I've been told by friends and people who were there with me at the time that we were going on the trip somewhere and we were driving in a van and out of nowhere the van just flipped over, or something distracted the driver and then the van flipped over and everyone besides me got ejected out of the van. I was stuck in the van from the waist down. When the van flipped over, it fell on top of me, my upper body from the waist up, crushing my head. I believe they said that my brain even popped out. And so yeah, that was --

Debra: Yeah, that doesn't sound good, "My brain popped out." Not to make light of this, Elizabeth, it's an interesting story.

Elizabeth: -- to my parents, when they got the phone call. I was in Pennsylvania, and then they get the phone call, being here in New York, "Oh, your daughter, her brain just popped up and we have to rush her to the nearest hospital." So I got rushed to the hospital. Thankfully, they were able to keep me alive. I was in the hospital in the I C U for about six weeks, and then moved to intensive care and then eventually to a rehab facility for the remaining -- for about a year and a half or so. I would say I spent the better half of my junior year in the hospital, recovering at the hospital in Pennsylvania. And then my senior year of high school, I pretty much spent the senior year of high school also in the hospital. But at that time, I was an outpatient, going in every two weeks or so for checkups. Because my brain was injured, the doctors had to remove a portion of my skull which got fractured.

It's always funny when I tell it like this. They told me that they had to keep it in a fridge and then later on cement it back together, so everything would be intact. So I always tell people my skull basically got rebuilt. It was removed for a couple of months and stored in the fridge, and eventually I had the reconstructive surgery where they placed it back, alongside with a metal plate to hold everything together.

And so, out of all of that, I always felt as though, I guess, I could have given up. There have been numerous times when I feel like, "Why am I even here? Why am I doing this? Let me just give up." But throughout all of that, the fact that I really wanted to go back to school, especially for my prom and for graduation, kept me going. Unfortunately, I didn't go back for prom because I was not recovered enough to go back for prom, but then I went back for my graduation in 2004, and that was the first time after a year and a half or so of being away from my school and my classmates and everyone. I went back with a leg brace to my left knee.

The accident left me physically impaired. Impaired, I guess, is the politically correct word that I could use. Brain injury, no one really sees the impact that the accident had on my brain, except for when I'm in the classroom or when you ask me to read something and it takes me a little bit longer to read, because my brain just needs that extra time to comprehend whatever it is that I'm reading. But physically, when people look at me, they see that something must have happened to me.

For the people who knew me pre-accident, it's clear evidence of the drastic change that happened to me. But most people who don't know me before the accident, just a lot of times assume that I was either born this way -- and I'm saying all this because, Debra, we haven't met yet, but I hope that when we meet, you will be able to see that I walk with a limp. I had a stroke on the left side of my body, resulting from the right side of my brain being impacted. And so I still 14 years post-accident, still don't have mobility in my left arm. And so a lot of times my left arm remains very, kind of, stiff. It doesn't hang loosely, and it's the most clear evidence of the fact that I don't have use of that side of my body.

Debra: So that's quite a story, Elizabeth, and that's a story of -- well, I mean, it is interesting why you're here. One thing beyond just the incredibility of that story, is that what you've chosen to do with your life. When I was introduced to you by a good friend of ours, *** (8:37), who is going to be on the show in the future as well, an amazing woman, I was telling her that I was looking for -- I really wanted to tell the stories of young leaders that were making a difference. Of course, I have a special preference of wanting to interview people with disabilities, but I'm not just interviewing people with disabilities. But I love so much about your story, because it's a real transformational story.

And so, how are you different? And I don't mean physical-wise or traumatic brain injury. How are you different today? How is Elizabeth now than who she was before the accident?

Elizabeth: Well, as I just mentioned, how am I different. As I was talking about, physically, my body has changed. There's a noticeable difference in me. But intellectually, a lot has also changed, and that's what I always want people to understand. That I have the remnants of the accident in that way. My vision got impaired as a result, and so now I wear glasses for reading, even though I've been told I should try to wear them all the time. I wear glasses for reading because, I'm sure you know, if your eyes roll back and forth for too long, they will get tired, and mine gets tired a little bit quicker than the average person.

How else am I different? I'm trying to think. Okay, so I think after the accident, I've come to the realization that everything happens for a reason. And so, growing up I wanted to be a journalist or something in that area, that field. But everything changed because had it not been for the accident, I don't think my

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family would have gone to Ghana, which is where we're from originally, but I don't think the entire family would have gone together, back in 2006, with the sole purpose of trying to find some kind of traditional medicine for my stroke, because we had tried everything here in the U.S. and it just seemed like it would work for a little bit and then we would just either plateau or stop making progress. So the family went back in 2006, mainly because of me. That was not planned at all.

Everything else has changed, I would say. The way I live, how I travel. I just got an alert from Delta. I'm going back to Ghana next week, Friday, and the alert was to tell me that when I get there, please make sure that I notify somebody at the desk that I need wheelchair assistance. I need wheelchair assistance not because I can't walk, but because I easily get tired if I walk for too long. I'm sure, as you know, you travel all the time, airports can be very taxing on a person, even if you're able-bodied. It can be very taxing on you. So these accommodations that I now have to, in a way, force myself to come to accept that I'm not really the same person that I was 14 years ago. It's become, kind of, my new reality, if I have to say.

I think when I was emailing you before this, I said I have to live myself in the margins. I always struggle with the person that I used to be and the person I am now, because anyone who knows me well enough knows that I can be stubborn at times. Maybe a lot of times. I do things as though nothing ever happened, like no car accident ever happened. So I used to be a runner back in high school, and sometimes I see myself running. My life now, I think a lot of times I still think that I can run and I want to run. So I live my life in those margins, as though nothing has ever happened, and I want to just go above and beyond and do everything that I was supposed to do 14 years ago, in spite of this accident. I would say more so because of this accident, in a way I want to prove to myself that I am different, but I always say to people I'm not disabled; I'm differently abled. I can still achieve things in spite of what's happened to me.

Debra: Well, and I agree, and one thing that really drew me to you was not because you have a disability, but because you're actually making a huge difference in the world for young girls in Ghana, and you're changing their lives. So you're changing their lives and changing your own life at the same time, and I think the thing I loved about your story, your story of transformation and triumph, is that you're not sitting around saying, "Oh, who I was is this person." You're saying, "How can I improve my life but improve the lives of others?"

So tell us a little bit about what you're doing to make the world a better place, and actually how your accident and the walk that you took, the healing walk that you're still taking, what was the catalyst to really reach out and make sure that other girls have a chance?

Elizabeth: It sounds so grandiose when people put it that way.

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Debra: But these are lives, though, Elizabeth. Elizabeth, these are girls' lives that you're changing.

Elizabeth: Yes.

Debra: It is grandiose.

Elizabeth: Yeah, so we've been working with 12 very deserving girls in Ghana for the last two years. Of those 12, 2 of them are dyslexic, and their teachers, their schools would not have known that these girls learn differently, had it not been for GEIG stepping in and saying, "Oh, maybe this child is struggling in this area because there's something more to it than just she's not trying." And so GEIG's mission is to be very inclusive in the girls that we cater for. Out of the 12 girls, 10 are mainstream students, and then 2 are dyslexic.

And so the lives that we are touching, I believe in the last two years, I have to say with confidence that in the last two and-a-half years, we're about to enter our third year of the program this August, we've been able to keep 12 girls in school full time, with almost no absences, all of them maintaining between an A and B grade point average. And these girls, a lot of times come to me and say to me, because of you and what the team is doing for us, I think now I can see myself going to university.

Last year, we partnered with a university in Ghana called Lancaster University Ghana, to have the girls, for the first time, study and live on a college campus. It really was amazing to watch. And to have them see themselves in that kind of a facility, maybe in about five years or so, I think maybe one of my proudest moments, because one of my students did a presentation where she talked about what she would like to see herself doing and where she wants to see herself in the next couple of years, and she said she would like to be admitted to Lancaster University Ghana as a full-time student, hopefully pursuing a nursing degree.

And so it humbles me. I say grandiose is -- we're doing a lot of good work, I think, but when you're in it, in the line of work and doing it every day, I think a lot of times -- I and maybe the rest of the team needs to take a step back and realize that we're actually touching peoples' lives and it's not just routine and doing it for the data and being accountable to somebody. That these are actual lives that we're touching.

For the two girls who are dyslexic, we've been able to help them get individualized one-on-one tutoring. One of my colleagues went to speak with the heads of school at the two schools, and made the teachers and the heads of school really aware that these girls have clinical medical issues, not because, as I said before, they're either stupid or they're not trying. Because when we first went to the school to kind of gauge the levels that the students were at, one of the teachers

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said to me, "Oh, she's not trying. It's because she's just stupid and she doesn't want to try."

And that was very heartbreaking for me, because as I talk about, my brain injury, a lot of times when I was at N Y U getting my masters, that was, I think, the very first time that I had to accept that I needed extended time for my papers and my exams. And then if it was an exam that I needed to be present, I needed to be separated in a different room so I would not be distracted by everything else that was going on in the classroom.

I sympathize and empathize with these students, and I always tell the schools and the parents and the teachers that had it not been for getting these extra accommodations, I probably would not be here with a master's degree. It's so important that these kids need to have these kinds of supports and assistance, so they too can feel as though they are smart in their own ways. Maybe they don't automatically get subject matter in the way that the average learner would get it, but if you teach it to them in a different way, they will eventually understand. It clicks for them and it's like, oh, that's why that means this, or one plus one is equal to two. You know? So these students are able to get it, if you teach it to them in a different way.

I believe that it's so important and impactful that there's an organization like GEIG in Ghana, advocating for these girls. It's important to advocate for girls especially, because I think we all know that globally, 62 million girls are not able to access quality education, or especially higher education, and in Ghana the data and the trend shows that enrollment at the primary and the secondary levels are almost equal, but as you rise up the secondary and tertiary education levels, the dropout rate for girls begin to increase. I always say to people I'm a person with multiple different facets of my identity. I'm a female -- I think I said this to you the first time we spoke. I'm female, I'm African by birth, I'm American by citizenship, I'm African American in every sense of what that term means. And then as also part of my identity, I'm a disabled woman, or a differently abled woman, whatever you want to say.

And so it's good for girls and young people in general to be able to have role models to identify with and say, okay, so if Ms. Patterson -- that sounds so weird to me to say Ms. Patterson -- if Ms. Patterson has been able to achieve all of these things in spite of everything that has happened to her or happened to her, then what's to stop me from also getting the best of myself.

Debra: I agree, I agree. I was going to ask you, and then you did it, I was going to ask you to talk about -- because if you look at the United States, if you're looking at this from the United States lens, making sure that girls go to school in the United States, in a lot of ways -- hopefully everybody is going to school. But it is a much bigger difference when we're talking about a country like Ghana and other

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developing countries, because girls are not getting an education. But you addressed that in a beautiful way.

I also think it's so powerful that you, despite having a very, very severe, traumatic brain injury and other disabilities as you were recovering from this horrific car accident, you still went on to get your master's degree. And as a person that does not have a master's degree, I'm very impressed with that. I know how hard you had to work to make that happen, so I continue to be more and more impressed with that.

So I know that you are involved in the program called Women Who Inspire Us, and you have a speaker and workshop series. Tell us a little bit about that.

Elizabeth: So GEIG has three core programs: The GEIG Learns the GEIG Leads and then the GEIG Serves. Those three programs. GEIG Learns basically provides the girls with financial aid or scholarship so they could go to school, and then year-round academic tutoring, and then every August we hold a three-week summer school session for them.

The GEIG Leads program, our flagship activity is the Women Who Inspire Us speaker and workshop series. GEIG Leads has paired each of our 12 girls with an individual mentor, so the girls can have someone outside of their families and the organization staff, to have an external resource or an outlet, should they need somebody to go to. And then the workshops basically invite young professional women or women who have a unique story or something to share, with the girls and other members of the community.

We hold these three times each academic year, whereby women such as myself -- I've actually been one of the presenters for one of our workshops. Last March, this past March, we held our first one for this year, called I Am Differently Abled, where myself, Farida Bedwei, who's a software developer in Ghana, and Mary Amoah, who works tirelessly to advocate for kids with language disabilities, and her own daughter has autism, is autistic, we were the three speakers for that program. We held it in partnership with the University of Ghana and their office of Students with Disabilities, and it was a really excellent turnout. I believe it was one of our most impactful programs that we've had as part of the Women Who Inspire Us series. We've got excellent feedback.

As I was mentioning before, it's important for these girls and other people to see people who look like them, and then also who they feel as though they can feel inspired by their stories or anything that they're doing in their lives. Basically, it's to steer the girls and other community participants, towards a more positive trajectory, to tell them that no matter what you face in life, you too can be something or do something with yourself and your life.

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Debra: I agree, and I think you're a perfect example of that, Elizabeth. What are a couple of takeaways that our listeners can learn from you? I think there's so many things we can learn from you, Elizabeth, and I can tell you're a humble woman. I can tell that, but you really have done amazing things, Elizabeth, so I'm really proud to know you. I'm really proud and honored to know you. So tell our listeners a few things that we can take away from your life experience so far, and I know you're going to do even better things as you continue your life's journey.

Elizabeth: Thank you very much. I am humbled, very, very humbled to know you, and that's exactly what I was going to say. I'm always humbled when people try to have me kind of praise myself or say something about myself that's just larger than life. I would say that takeaways from me and my story, I really didn't know what to do but to just keep going. I think the minute I came out of the coma and realized that I was in a coma and I had no other choice but to keep living, that's what I decided I was going to do. Just keep living and just never give up. I have a lot of things or a lot of dreams and a lot of goals that I want to accomplish, in hopefully a very short time, because lately I've been saying that I want to try to have some kind of life balance to myself and actually have a life outside of GEIG. So just work hard and always set your targets high, because there's nothing that, if you really dream for it and work hard towards, you can't achieve.

Debra: I agree.

Elizabeth: That's me in a nutshell.

Debra: Yes, and I know that you're going to continue to be amazing. Now, will you tell our listeners about this inaugural event coming up in December?

Elizabeth: So GEIG U.S., Inc., and a few partners, as you mentioned, *** (26:58) is one of our key partners in a program that we're trying to put towards to commemorate the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, on December 2nd. And so we're trying to put together a forum that hopefully will be an annual forum that we hold to highlight the works and the great impact that people with disabilities or special needs or different abilities are having, and also to serve as an advocacy platform for other people, and make sure that these voices and these persons are being well represented in society, and we move more towards positive inclusive development of all of us.

So we're right now in the planning stages, and we -- with your help, we came up with the theme of labels as empowerments. As we've been talking, clearly I've mentioned a couple of labels or names or identifiers that people of this population of disabled persons get labeled as a lot of times, and on a lot of occasions it's not always positive. There's always a negative connotation to it. And so we want to be able to present persons with disabilities and other people, advocates from the community, who will debunk that stereotype and the myth that labels such as disability, or as I like to say, different ability, can be positive rather than negative.

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Debra: Right, right. And I think you're a perfect example, Elizabeth, of our glorious brains. So decide that somebody cannot add value to the workforce or society because they have a traumatic brain injury, or they're like my daughter, they were born with Down Syndrome, so they use their brain differently, or some of the girls that you're supporting in your program in Ghana, that they're dyslexic, so once again they're using their brains differently. I think you're debunking all of those myths.

I remember when we were having the conversation about labels, and I think it is okay to have an identity. I'm a woman, I'm a mother, I'm a wife, I'm from the south part of the United States. I can attach negative labels. I'm overweight. But what if we use these labels as an empowerment? As you said, you're an African American in every sense of that word. You're an immigrant. You're a woman. You're a leader. You're a CEO. I mean, you're a survivor. You're a person with a disability that has shown that there are so many abilities that people with disabilities can offer. And so I think your work is very powerful, Elizabeth, and I'm going to continue to watch your work.

Will you tell our listeners how they can get in touch with your organization and maybe contribute or volunteer their time? I know donations are very important to the work that you are doing. How do they learn more about your programs?

Elizabeth: So they could always access our website, GirlsEdGH.org. You can find us on that website. And then social media handles on Facebook, Girls Education Initiative of Ghana, or Girls Education Initiative of Ghana U.S., Inc. Twitter, @GirlsEdGH, and GEIG U.S., Inc. And then Instagram, GirlsEdGH. I feel like it's very repetitive. Recently, we set up a crowd funding page with Network for Good, and if it's okay, I will give the address in a little bit.

Debra: Yes, and I'll tell you, Elizabeth, what we're going to do. Every time we do the podcast, we do a transcription, because we believe the podcast should be accessible to everybody. So we always do a transcription. So whenever we post the episode, people can go to my website, and not only can you download the podcast but you can get a transcription of it, and we'll include it in the marketing, those websites in the marketing as well.

Elizabeth: Okay.

Debra: So we want to make sure people can find you. Anyway, well I just really want to thank you for being on today, Elizabeth. I just think you have an amazing story, and I think you're proving that Millennial leaders have a lot to add to the world, and you also prove my point that the only disability is not being able to see human potential. So thank you, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth: Thank you very much, Debra.

