

**ARISE PODCAST #088**

**Empowering Minority Mothers of Children with Autism**

**Host: Tania Anderson, CEO ARISE**

**Chayna Short, Founder of Women Overcoming Obstacles Together (WOOT)**

**Tania Anderson 0:14**

Welcome to the ARISE Podcast. I'm Tania Anderson, CEO at ARISE. And with us today is Chayna Short, who is the founder of Women Overcoming Obstacles Together, otherwise known as WOOT. Welcome Chayna.

**Chayna Short 0:28**

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for having me.

**Tania Anderson 0:30**

Now. I'm really excited about our conversation today, because you and I have a lot in common as moms of kids with disabilities, but you are a firebrand. You have started this group called WOOT. Tell me what WOOT is about.

**Chayna Short 0:45**

WOOT is about empowering women that have children on autism spectrum, focusing on minority women as well as caregivers in the Syracuse community.

**Tania Anderson 0:53**

And how long ago did you found WOOT?

**Chayna Short 0:56**

2021

**Tania Anderson 0:57**

2021 so relatively short time,

**Chayna Short**

Yes.

**Tania Anderson**

And why did you think there was a need for your group?

**Chayna Short 1:05**

I felt like it was a need for my group because of Payton, my son, he's on the autism spectrum, he has Asperger's, and I wanted to be an encouragement for someone else that has a child or parallel stories that they have, like Payton and I, so I wanted to allow them to see the journey and use us as a stepping stone to get to another place in their life that they can be successful as well.

**Tania Anderson 1:27**

Right. And do you think, I think you, you are tailoring your work to a very specific community, so it's, it's children with autism,

**Chayna Short**

Yes.

**Tania Anderson**

But also the minority community.

**Chayna Short**

Yes,

**Tania Anderson 1:42**

Why did you think that was necessary? What did you see in terms of a need?

**Chayna Short 1:46**

What I seen was, when I was going through my journey with Payton, when he was in elementary and even in preschool, that I didn't have a lot of support, or folks that look like me going through my journey, so I felt like I could be a talking piece for the individuals that look like me, to let them know that just because your child is diagnosed with a disorder or an ability, there's other resources out there for you to be successful. So, I also wanted them to know that it's okay. And I also feel like in the black community, it's taboo to label our children. So, when Payton was younger, I used to tell individuals that he has Asperger's, and folks to be like, "oh, oh, I'm sorry. Oh", and I'm like, why are you sorry? This is a superpower. We're going to figure out how he can make the best of his superpower. So, I want to really, like, banish the whole taboo of saying I don't want to label my child.

I don't want these services, but I want to empower mothers and caregivers to say, okay, my child has a disability or an ability to do great things. Let me see how I can get those resources in our lives so we can be successful in the future.

**Tania Anderson 2:53**

Wow, that's that's really powerful. And so I guess we should know that you are African American?

**Chayna Short 3:01**

I am.

**Tania Anderson**

Because people can't see...

**Chayna Short**

Right, right, right? I am.

**Tania Anderson 3:06**

But, I mean, I am not African American. However, I can very much relate to the notion that family members the community they don't want to necessarily share or disclose that their child is different or has a disability, and especially when that disability is invisible. So, I'm interested in your perspective, because I think that is something that is true in our society, generally, but I'm interested in your perspective with the black community that you think it's more true.

**Chayna Short 3:45**

My take on it is, I feel like it's more true because we don't see the ability I'm gonna give you an example of Payton when you see him, he's 13 now. He stands at six two. He wears a size 15 shoe, right? So his engagement is mechanical, right? Because I instilled in him like hey, when you greet someone, you shake their hand, you say hello. But as time goes on, he might start talking about numbers and RVing, and that's not what we spoke about. But I want the people that I live in in the community, because I grew up on the south side of Syracuse. My mother was raised in the 19th ward, the 15th Ward. But we come from this city, and if you don't have an element that you can see, then it's like, oh, he's just, he's just a boy here. Girl out of it, right? But as a child, Payton wasn't in a Cuddle Bug. He didn't engage with me as a mom, he did a lot of parallel playing. And a lot of folks will say, Oh, he a girl. Out of it, he's a boy, but he didn't talk much. He wasn't very verbal, but he was very trivial. So if I asked him a question, he would answer that question, and that was it. And a lot of folks that, oh, that's just a selective conversation, right? But as times went out, I'm like, I know that it's a name out there for my kid, but I just don't know what it was happening, right? I know that he's

very smart intellectually, but the social aspect of his life is very different. And then once we did an internal assessment with his pediatrician, she said, I think he may have characteristics of being autistic. I was like, oh, okay, all right, oh, even though I have a background in education and working with individuals that are high risk in the Syracuse City School District, I just didn't think it could be my son, right? So, I always had this, this notion of, I'm going to equip him with everything that he can be. Because an average person will look at Payton just think that he's just an average kid, but he has great abilities to do great things. So, I want the community that I live in to not shy away of help, right or encouragement or services that are out there. It just may not feel good in the beginning, but sooner or later, we'll be adjusted to the things that we need to be successful in life, if that makes sense.

### **Tania Anderson 6:03**

No it makes a lot of sense. So what I'm hearing is that there's a greater reluctance in the African American community to disclose or acknowledge that there might be a disability in a child. But also, perhaps, you know, maybe families or African American just don't even think to ask the question about, is there something going on here?

### **Chayna Short 6:31**

Or they, don't even, they're not even equipped to know what to ask for. So, when you get, when your child is diagnosed with a disability, that's the ability to do great things, then it's like, now, what? Okay. Now, you told me that my kid is on the spectrum. Now what? So, I feel like a lot of folks that I come in contact with, I feel like they just needed me to be a sounding board to tell them like, Girl, it's okay, now, what do you want to do? Girl, it's okay. Let's go to the school and figure out what services are in place. I feel like when folks get that, they don't know what the next steps are to make them, make their child successful, or help their child to be great, because they don't see the greatness, because they feel like it's just a devastating diagnosis that they have. So, I want to be that, that hand in, that that sounding board for a mom or a caregiver to let them know that I've been here. I cried many nights because I just didn't know what was going on. But then I said, okay, so let me just start talking. Let me start talking to people. Let me see what am I eligible for? What Payton is eligible for so he can be successful in life. I was never ashamed of Payton clicking or twirling or using his headphones during WWE matches. I just made sure that he was exposed to everything that the average kid would be exposed to.

### **Tania Anderson 7:55**

Yeah, no. I mean you, you are doing a great job from my perspective as a mom, and you know, a lot of what you're saying really resonates with me as a mom, and I think with many of the other caregivers and parents I've connected with, because that first, you don't know what questions to ask that first diagnosis can be a punch in the gut. And so, you're going through a really just trying to

readjust your whole view of what your role is as a parent, because now you're not just a parent. You are this superstar advocate fighting to make sure that your child gets everything that they need.

**Chayna Short**

And deserve!

**Tania Anderson**

And deserve. Absolutely. And I can imagine that just because, I mean, the disability community is marginalized, the black community is marginalized, that that that journey of advocacy and learning is more difficult for what you are navigating and how you're guiding the caregivers that you're connecting with.

**Chayna Short 9:04**

Right. I have to say that it's been a journey. It's been a journey, but it's also been a learning experience. I was just talking to Payton today, and I said, we are, you are the why in so many people's lives, right? You are the why, and it's not a heavy burden. I just want you to continue to be the leader and be passionate about the things that you do in your life. He's 13, but he really understands what I mean. You are the why, that I'm doing this. You are the why, because I know that my journey in this life is not going to be in vain, because I can touch someone's life along the way. And I really, really, really, really, really, truly believe that, that I have to be the voice and let mothers know that it is okay, right? We can go through this journey together. I just spoke to a mom a couple of weeks ago, and she said, I just want my kid to be like, Payton. I said, No, girl, you don't want your child to be like my son. You're black, I'm black, and we have two different shades of black, right? So, autism is like a shade or a plethora of different colors. It's like a mosaic of colors, right? So, I want your child to be who he's going to be, right? And whatever he's going to be, if he's going to be non verbal, then it's okay. We have many, many tools out there for your child to be successful. I just want you to know that if someone in the city that looks like you that son is yes at CBA, but your son can be successful in any school that you choose for him to be successful in. And that's all she needed to hear. For her to go on and say, Okay, I got this right, and I'm always a phone call away. That's what WOOT is all about. I just want to touch someone along the way to let them know that just to be encouraged, just have faith and be an advocate for your child.

**Tania Anderson 10:52**

So, you are really with WOOT. You have a special community that you're building and a connection and assurance, and you are, I'm sure, sure you are a guiding light for many of the folks.

**Chayna Short 11:06**

I hope so. Yes,

**Tania Anderson 11:08**

I know you are.

**Chayna Short**

Thank you.

**Tania Anderson**

Tell me about some of the specific sorts of activities that you do through WOOT to help support other families.

**Chayna Short 11:16**

Cool. So, next Saturday, August 3, we're having Ties, Tenders and Fries. It will be at the Community Foundation from 1 to 3 o'clock, and I'm inviting all young boys to come to learn or master how to tie a tie. I will give hygiene bags out to those individuals, and we'll have brunch and a little bit of music to go along with it, but Payton will facilitate that. That came about because we were riding, going to school, and he said, Do you know that my friends don't know how to tie a tie? I'm like, Payton some kids just don't know how to and from that thought, I'm like, how about I just make a program or event where we can just bring a fellowship of young boys together where we can learn how to tie ties. So, Payton would be the facilitator, he picked a couple of older men to help him show some of the guys that part will be participating in the event how to tie ties. And I'll give them ties.

**Tania Anderson 12:10**

So, the vehicle is the tie, but really you're also creating a community,

**Chayna Short 12:16**

An inclusive community.

**Tania Anderson 12:20**

Inclusive community, a safe space where these young men and their families can just connect.

**Chayna Short 12:26**

Connect.

**Tania Anderson**

Absolutely.

**Chayna Short**

That's the whole purpose of WOOT is us fellowshiping and connecting and being okay to be yourself in whatever environment that I set forth.

**Tania Anderson 12:36**

Absolutely I love it.

**Chayna Short**

And thank you.

**Tania Anderson**

And you've done some other creative things in the past to help people connect. What are some of the other events?

**Chayna Short 12:43**

Another thing that I did at Salt City Market in February was a meet and greet, and I had all of the community partners come together at Salt city, and we just had a plethora of food, and folks could just come in, out off the streets and just see what all these communities were. I chose the community partners is because those individuals in in our life and our journey helped Payton along the way, or myself. So, I was really particular of who I invited in. But Payton said, Mom, I think next year you should do like an adult event instead of a kid event. I was like, oh, okay, so maybe in 2025 we'll do something where it's a combination of adults and kids. We also partner with peace Incorporated. We did a paint party in October where we invited the community to come out and paint pumpkins and gave out bags. It was a safe environment, and it was pretty cool. We had over 40 individuals or kids come out and paint, paint pumpkins on Martin Luther King Boulevard. In April to give back to the mothers and the caregivers. We had a self-care event and we made body scrubs at Coco's candles on South Salina Street. Had over like 25 people participate in that. So that was pretty cool. I have an event coming up in October. It's Autism and Appetizers. I don't know the location yet, but it'll be another opportunity for us for just the fellowship with each other and just vibe off of each other and figure out what our next steps will be for next year.

**Tania Anderson 14:13**

Wow, that event. Sounds super fun?

**Chayna Short 14:16**

Yeah, I want you to come to one. Okay?

**Tania Anderson 14:19**

Well, I want to come. You don't gotta tie a tie, but I will go and maybe refine my technique.

**Chayna Short 14:24**

Okay, awesome sauce.

**Tania Anderson 14:26**

But so, you get, like, you like, 25 to 40 people. How many people do you think are connected to? WOOT?

**Chayna Short 14:34**

Oh gosh, in my happy days, I hope that I probably would have touched at least 50 to 60 people so far, and the things that we've done this year.

**Tania Anderson**

Wow. And it's just you?

**Chayna Short**

It's just me, and I have a team of other individuals in my ad hoc committee that helps me out with promoting and sending out flyers and connecting with other partners to help us out to get the message out. Yeah...

**Tania Anderson 14:57**

But it sounds like your son is the assistant director.

**Chanya Short**

Because he is.

**Tania Anderson**

He gives you a lot of orders...

**Chayna Short 15:02**



Yeah, he giving me a lot of orders, and he's also giving me a great ideas to bring to light of things that that's happening for WOOT, yeah.

**Tania Anderson 15:11**

So, you've you started in 21

Chayna Short

2021 Yeah.

**Tania Anderson**

And what's your vision for, for WOOT, say, in the next five years?

**Chayna Short 15:20**

Oh, man, if I had a magic wand, I would want to be able to be at various tables to promote WOOT in a way where we can partner, have coordination of resources come together and make this thing big. I want to touch so many lives and let them know that it's okay to not know the next steps of things. I want to be able in the next five years to say that when a mom can call me or caregiver can say, You know what, Chayna doing, doing this or doing that and participating. I felt like I wasn't crazy. I felt that I was being heard, and you empowered me or inspired me to do great things with my family.

**Tania Anderson 16:09**

That's wonderful. You know, it very much aligns with ARISE, because we're as an independent living center, we're all about giving power to people with disabilities and peer support. Which is exactly what you're doing, and your work is really inspirational and so important, because, as I said, people with disabilities are marginalized in our world. They're pushed to the side. And you are addressing that issue, but you're also addressing the issue within your community, which I'm so glad that you are being this leader and empowering other people in the black community to speak up and be advocates, and then we should and this all of us connecting. Because each of us, you know, we're both moms of kids with disabilities, but my journey with my daughter has a lot of similarities to yours with with Payton, but a lot of differences, but we have this underlying foundation and connection, and that's really the power of bringing our communities together and fighting for inclusion, and just the beauty of our kids and all of them.

**Chayna Short 17:18**

Right, right, right?

**Tania Anderson 17:21**

I just, I'm just, thank you so much.

**Chayna Short 17:24**

You're very welcome. Thank you.

**Tania Anderson 17:27**

So, what is your web address?

**Chayna Short 17:29**

Okay, so it's [www.w2ot.com](http://www.w2ot.com)

**Tania Anderson 17:35**

We're also linked on the ARISE website [ARISEinc.org](http://ARISEinc.org), so I encourage people to connect with ARISE and Chayna and learn to Tie a Tie and have a lot of fun and just really value the power of our kids.

**Chayna Short**

Great. Right. Thank you for having me today.

**Tania Anderson**

It was a real pleasure. Thank you.

**Chayna Short**

Thank you.

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