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A PODCAST FOR BLENDED FAMILIES

Summer: Hello listeners and welcome to another, Everything Always Podcast. Today, it is me interviewing my super good friend Shana Pennington, who now lives just down the street, which is super awesome because our boys like to play together. So it's so much fun. But Shana and I have had so many really, really good conversations when it comes to blended families, because she's grown up in it. This has been her world and so, the insights that she has are so wise. I was like, "Will you please be on my podcast, so we can talk about these things?" She said, "Yes."

Shana: Yeah.

Summer: Welcome.

Shana: Glad to be here.

Summer: To understand, so our listeners have a background of what it was like for you growing up, what was your family dynamic? Can you give us your ... Tell us your story.

Shana: Yeah. I was a five year old, my brother was seven when my parents divorced. I think what the dynamic for us was kind of different, is that we moved a two hour flight away to where my grandparents were. There was this instant like, "You now live with your dad." There was no custody battle, there was no 50/50 sharing custody every other weekends. We just saw him every year, maybe once or twice a year. That was weird. We had my grandparents and we actually, were pretty young. We don't remember much of what went on. It's all I ever knew and yeah, we had a pretty happy childhood, I think.

Summer: Awesome. So then after that, what happened with your mom? Did she-

Shana: We lived with our grandparents for about a year, and they were very involved in our lives. And then both my parents remarried a few years later, and both had baby boys in the same year. I suddenly had this baby in the house and I was a big proud sister, but there was also this baby, two hour flight away. It was like, "That's cool." And then when I was 19, there was an 18 month old baby, which is my sister, who's now 22. We've been able to just see each other as much as possible.

Summer: So that's a big age gap.

Shana: It's a huge age gap. So there's like, I'm the big sister. I'd love to hear their side of the story of how that went down for them. But what's also interesting is, when my mom met my stepdad, he was only 25. You have a 25 year old taking on two young kids, and I wonder what that was like for him. I'm also sure there was this awkward dance for the two father figures. Like, "What's my role in the different ages?" My grandfather too,

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played a big like father role for us. And it must have been just like, "What is my role? What am I supposed to do at this point? She already has a father and he's two hours away." Yeah, a lot went on.

Summer: You guys have a really close relationship.

Shana: We are. We're super close. He walked me down the aisle at my wedding. It's funny because I know a lot of people that have had, they've been quite older and a new sibling comes in, and they haven't been close. It's just been like, we see each other. I mean, your sister is coming out to celebrate your birthday all the way from South Africa. We've just made up for lost time, all of us. It's just been awesome. When I became an adult, I started to really seek out that, my older brother and I. Because I had an original brother from the original marriage, [inaudible] the original brother.

Summer: The OG.

Shana: Yeah. We just made it what we wanted it to be, as much as we could we would get there. Then these siblings and then we just wanted to really spend the time with. I guess, that was ingrained in us as children, that family is so important. So they are. And then life gets in the way. I met my husband, and I moved to Holland, so whatever routine we did had, totally fell away. And then there was this gap where I didn't see any of my family. We then moved back to South Africa when we had our first baby. My father started to travel to do even more and more, because he was able to be there with work that he had. He was reaching out because he had a grandchild to-

Summer: Right.

Shana: One of the other funny things that happened was, the little brother that I did not grow up with, actually moved to our town at some point. We got super close because we were now neighbors. Now we live in America, and we've really had to work at it, because of even greater distance for all of my family members.

Summer: I've gotten to meet all of them.

Shana: You have. And we've just been like ... I feel like it's always this making out for last time and just having as much fun and enjoying each other's company as much as we can.

Summer: I feel like, even people who have family just that stayed away, you still see and do more things with your family than they do. It seems to be really important.

Shana: [crosstalk 00:05:01]. It's not hard work because we all love each other and we want to

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be in each other's lives, but it's about being intentional and making those things come to life.

Summer: Now, I've seen you with your stepdad and your mom, and then I've seen you with your dad and your stepmom. I've seen you all together and I'm just like, it's such a beautiful thing and I've seen how connected you are to all of them. But, like you said earlier, you had all of this time that you weren't actually living with your dad or seeing him on the regular, like every other weekend or 50, 50 and I feel like a lot of people would, that would cause more strain in a relationship later on as an adult. But you've never let that happen.

Shana: Yeah. It can, if you let it. I'm not always as positive about my situation. There's times where I get super sad about the loss of time, and I feel like, "Well, I miss dad. I was cheated and I never got that." But all I can do now is take whatever I can get, and again, make up for lost time. Life's too short to hold grudges and to live in the past and be like, "This could have been and that could have been." I have to look at the positive things too. Instead of having, like growing up in a family that wasn't split and hop on that, I now go, "But look, I have three extra siblings. I got that time with my grandparents, I have a loving stepfather," and it's only going to continue as my siblings get married and they have children, and that's already started.

Summer: Yeah, this would be even for teenagers or kids to hear. But then also for parents to hear what their children's perception is of all of this. A lot of young kids will have this feeling of either guilt or they feel like this grudge, against maybe the parent that they didn't get to see or they have those feelings that they carry through all the way until like forever.

Shana: You can.

Summer: Some people do. What helped you to say, "I'm not going to do it that way?"

Shana: Yeah. I've even seen siblings resent other siblings and have jealousy. Because they're like, "Well, you got to grow up with my father and I didn't." I've never felt that way. I just love them, and for me it's just more love and just have a bigger family.

Summer: That's a big choice to make.

Shana: I don't know how. I think, I must've just been brought up to realize that, the most fundamental thing is, life is about relationships, and if you can get there alright, you can have a pretty happy life. It's just not worth it. It's not worth to be stuck in the past and bringing up the could haves and the should haves. A lot of what happened to me, shaped me as a person. It's made me a super strong person, that's for sure. A lot of my friends

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call me fearless.

Summer: Definitely.

Shana: What's really helped for me is, people say time heals. I believe time with heals, which means the fact that we have been able to come into each other's lives and it was just pretty naturally, happened the time with each other has totally helped.

Summer: The healing came from being together, instead of like-

Shana: Having more distance.

Summer: Yes.

Shana: A lot of people can push another person way because, "Well, you didn't do that," and have that grudge. But yeah, it's more about being open. Opening your heart to whatever, somebody is willing to give you.

Summer: Obviously you know this, there's so many different dynamics. There's a child who, maybe one parent isn't allowing them to see the other parents. We've talked about this on our podcast before, parental alienation, and then a child can form a grudge with that parent and then, that parent comes back into their life and they're like, "Nope, sorry." Or there is, well, both have moved on and they live in different states so they're not able to see each other.

Summer: There's so many different dynamics and what seems to be the hardest, and you and I have talked to teams in situations like this, that pretty much have decided, "If that person comes back in my life or if I'm going to see them more, no, I'm not talking to them." And you had said something in one of our conversations about, people might not at the core totally change, but they do grow.

Shana: People certainly grow. If you want people to give you the grace to be able to be somebody different and to grow into, then you have to give them the same grace. I don't care what happened before. You're still my mother, you're still my father, you're still my brother. I see siblings that don't talk to each other. I see ... It's just awful. My advice for people is just to take all the animosity aside and just try to achieve the harmony. That's difficult in just a regular family that isn't set up right.

Shana: That never goes away though with divorce. Divorce is forever and that's really what I want to tell people now that are blending families with young children. It's so easy to think about the challenges and the struggles for right now, custody battles and all that.

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But what you really want to do is think about the future and you want to be like, "What kind of relationship do I want to have with my ex's first?" Because one day when your children are older and they have children, you want to be in the same room awith each other.

Summer: You don't want to miss out on all the important things because of-

Shana: Because of something that happened four years ago.

Summer: But that happens.

Shana: That does happen. It happens all time.

Summer: There's still people that are like, "My parents are 65 years old or whatever. They will not be in the same room." It's like, "Come on."

Shana: Our wedding, my husband and I, that was the first time that my two sets of parents were in the same room together. Maybe because of the actual physical distance. But everybody pulled it in and they were like, "This is not an option. This is happening." There was no like, "I'm not going if she's going to be there or I'm not going if he's going to be there." Everybody just sucked it up and was like, "The most important thing is that Fred and Shana were there for their wedding." Yeah, priorities, just not getting stuck in the past.

Summer: Yeah. But people do.

Shana: People still do.

Summer: It so hard not to. I like that about looking at the future and what do you want it to be and really thinking about the child's experience with that.

Shana: I've had moments where I feel like I'm betraying my other parent, by talking greatly about one or spending more time with the other, or being like, "I really like my father's wife. She's really awesome." I feel like I can be betraying my other parent for saying that.

Summer: Why do you think that is?

Shana: I don't know. And I've spoken to other children of divorce and they're like, "I totally feel like that too." You feel like you have to take sides and it's not because somebody made you feel like you had to do that. It's just this thing that you're doing in your own head

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with guilt.

Summer: What do you think parents could do, that are divorced to avoid their children having to feel that way? What kinds of things could they do?

Shana: I think leaving the kids out of most of the animosity and the down talking, and the ... We're children and adults, obviously you can have an adult conversation about, "This is how I felt when I got divorced." You can totally have that conversation, but you have a choice. You get to decide who you want in your life and the other parent does not get to speak that for a year. There has to be this supportive like, whatever you want now with boundaries and you can have a good relationship and a healthy environment.

Summer: Yeah, it does make such a huge difference. Just being able ... When you feel secure and you know that your child feels secure when they will start to talk about the other parent or the funny thing that they did and that's what you want-

Shana: That's what you want and that's the place you want to achieve.

Summer: It's a good feeling and you think it won't be, because I think people will go through, "Please don't tell me about what your dad is doing or what your mom is doing." But if you can get to this place where you're indifferent and you just realize that this is about moving forward and having a good experience for the kids instead of holding onto that animosity, which does absolutely no good. The past is the past, like you said, living in the past like, nothing good comes from that. If you can just move forward and then you start to hear your kids talk about, "We had so much fun here." That should make you feel good. Like "I'm so glad that you're having fun when you're at this other house." [crosstalk] you have a healthy relationship or that those are ... That's just such a good, secure thing that kids take into their future relationships, when they become an adult. It's a maturity thing too.

Shana: Totally, and luckily our family's managed to achieve that, to point where when my mom sees my brother from my father's marriage, she just wants to squeeze him and she just loves him and that's not even her blood.

Summer: Right. But she knows that you ... I will feel that way. I look at Logan and Chloe little siblings, they're so adorable. They're so cute and I love hearing the stories that they tell. Because I'm like, "That's so awesome that you get that." Like you said, it goes on, and I know this too, it also affects you having ... When you have kids and how the family gets together, you know what I mean? Your family's not here, but they have ... Have they ever all been together for a child's celebration or something like that?

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- Shana: Yeah, there's definitely been birthday parties and there's questions from the grandkids, like, "Why do I have three grandparents?" And then it was just like, "Wait, you used to be married to [inaudible] too." Life's a journey. They say life's a journey because, you think this is now, and then in five years time, "Well, this is happening and this is happening." Divorce is forever. But it's not a negative thing. It was a slip, but it's like a tree. [crosstalk]
- Summer: It's only negative if you make it negative.
- Shana: Exactly.
- Summer: You can make it a beautiful thing and think of it now there's more family. It's funny because even with grandparents that stuff can happen, where grandmothers are competing or grandfather ... It's like, "You did that with the other grandmother?" But that can happen in just a regular, when you're still together, but it can especially happening in, "Oh my gosh. There's all these other grandmothers."
- Shana: You could have had even more challenges had we all been in the same town. Sure you're going to interview people that have ... You've been through it too. But we didn't and maybe that was a blessing. There was a distance, and when we are together, it's just all about the positive.
- Summer: Yeah. What was the age, because you have younger siblings, what was the age where you really started to bond and become closer to your younger siblings?
- Shana: I think for me the focus was at first my father. I was a 19 year old going, "I want this person in my life. It's not enough for me that I have my mom, my stepdad, my brother who is my grandfather, he's not dead. I want him in my life." My brother and I flew to Cape Town and we celebrated his 50th birthday, and we actually threw him quite a big party, with the help of his wife. I think that was just a breaking point of like, "We're going to see you every year now. This is going to be a thing." The relationship with the children just came. One must have been 15. I don't even remember. They don't remember us not being around, that we were always in their life, but let me tell you, we have made up for lost time.
- Summer: Yeah. You have.
- Shana: It's been some awesome trips and even with my family that I did grow up with, we've had to make up for lost time because my husband's taken me all over the world. We've been all over the place.

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Summer: I love it. So what are some of the ... If you could give parents advice coming from, looking back to your experiences growing up and even if it's not necessarily anything you've gone through, but just things that you've noticed or other families that you see. Because we have a lot of those. Today it's a prevalent thing. What are some things that you would say or some advice that you would give to divorce parents?

Shana: I think I listened to a couple of your previous ones where it was like, and the parents down talking the spouse.

Summer: That's like our big [crosstalk 00:17:36].

Shana: Not getting along, having the children in the middle of that conflict and that animosity. Confiding in your kids, like your kids aren't your therapist, that podcast you did before. Kids just need to be allowed to be kids and they're already trying to cope with the fact that there is a split. They have enough on their shoulders, they don't need to know every detail of-

Summer: They're not someone to get on your side or to leverage or anything.

Shana: Just let those relationships be. I understand when a parent wants to protect a child from another parent and that's great. That's definitely a time where you go, "No, that's ... Boundaries." But if there's nothing to fear, let that child go and discover that relationship, and if that person's not a good person, they will find out in their time. Let that happened.

Summer: It does. Yeah, exactly.

Shana: If you hold a child to, "You're not doing this." Guess what? That's what the child's going to want to do, and they're going to do it anyway. Just be open to the other side. It's nothing, you can't fight it. To the children, don't let that guilt gets you. You've been put on this earth to love everybody and we have enough capacity to love everybody. Don't feel like, "If I go stay over at my step mom's house, my mom's going to feel betrayed." Not Okay.

Summer: No. It's so awesome that you have the perception that you do, because honestly I look back and I go, "I wonder how I would have dealt with ..." It would've been traumatizing for me. Only because I've known my parents together all these years. It would have been [inaudible] and all I can think of is ... I don't know. I just don't know how it would be. It would seem very hard, just really, really hard to have that positive outlook if you are feeling guilt, or pain, or any of that stuff. It's an inspiration to hear that from you. Because I've just seen kids go through it where they're like ... It pains me to go, "You

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shouldn't have to deal with all this feeling of guilt, or feeling like you're in the middle, or feeling like all this.

Summer: Like you said, it's this huge burden on their shoulders and they're young. If they have any ... There's real, actual things that happened as an adult that's real stress, that you're going to go through. There's relationship problems, all that kind of stuff. Do with that then and if you can avoid them having to feel these things, please, please do.

Shana: As I said before, sometimes it's not even something that someone's putting on to you. It's something that [crosstalk 00:20:14].

Summer: Sometimes you just have yourself. That's the thing. I feel like I would probably feel that, even though I think if my parents had gotten divorced but they would have been ... That's just my assumption. You know them, they probably would have been very mature about it and friendly or whatever. But I might've had some guilt like you said, because this, because that. Even if they didn't put that on me, it's just sometimes you just think that when something goes wrong as a kid. Especially you at a young age, to have that mindset of, "I'm going to turn this into a positive thing," that's a hard thing. I've seen you talk to other kids too about it. Like, "You can do this." Some kids are just like, "No."

Shana: Well this is-

Summer: "You don't understand and you don't this." [crosstalk 00:20:59].

Shana: [crosstalk] in life eventually makes you strong. I'm not saying that I was like this as a 10 year old, I'm 40 this year. It's taken me this long to really get that and to be able to share my story with others. One thing I never did was go to therapy and that's something I think that I would go back and change, and I would advise children to do. I don't know why I didn't, I just wasn't up to talking about my story. I felt like it was shameful at the time. Now I'm like, "It's not shameful and I'm going to share it and I'm going to help other people."

Shana: But hardships make you stronger. What I've really taken from my experience is that, you are responsible for your happiness, nobody else.

Summer: Absolutely.

Shana: I've gone ahead and done that. I've gone, "What do I want from my life?" Well, I want everybody in my family to be a part of my life. I suppose so because, and that must've come from my childhood. My mom must have done a great job, ingraining that into me like, "Family is everything." And that's important. That is the most important thing.

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- Summer: You have a beautiful marriage with your husband. He's an amazing dad. You're an amazing mom. Together, you guys have so much fun together, you're just great, great partners and parents together. Sometimes people say, "Oh, I came from a divorced family, so obviously I'm going to get divorced or this or that." Look at me. My parents are still married. I got divorced the first time. It doesn't mean you know either or. But do you think that your experience growing up, how do you think it has affected you and your marriage and how has it affected you as a parent? Like what things-
- Shana: I mean, positively, it's made me a very intentional person and that's the type of thing that makes relationships work. I'm very intentional with my family, with my husband, my friend-
- Summer: Your friends-
- Shana: You know.
- Summer: I know.
- Shana: My children. It's about intention. It's about what do I want this relationship to look like? Working at the relationship, talking. It's just made me strong and determined. Determined to make it work.
- Summer: Well, I think there's so many good takeaways here. I want to have them all bulleted out in a little cheat sheet. I'll make sure that we do that. At the heart of it, really like what you said, is your happiness is your choice. And that's really, if you focus ... What I'm taking away from this is, if you know that you're responsible for your happiness and you take that on, speaking to all like everything that we talked about with the parents, then that if you do that, that animosity, you don't want to feel that animosity. That when you feel that, that's not happiness. You're letting that steal your joy. Things like, all being in the same room together, being a part of all of those experiences, and just really letting that past go and just focus on the future and the happiness of your future, what it is that you really want, and what kind of relationship do you want to have with these people, and with your family.
- Shana: If you're feeling this animosity, it's because you still have work to do. That work could be sitting down with the person who you feel animosity towards, or that work could be internal.
- Summer: Just with yourself.

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Shana: You cannot come out of a divorce being unscathed. Nobody can.

Summer: Of course not.

Shana: Step by step, you slowly rid yourself of this feeling.

Summer: Yes, absolutely. Thank you so much. This was so fun.