

Emma Beedon

# A Hostage Mind

By: Emma Beedon



Elizabeth Estes

## A Frightful Night

On September 28, 1990, Elizabeth Estes, her twin sister, and thirty-one others were held hostage for over seven hours. They were threatened by an armed twenty-nine-year-old, Mehrdad Dashti, who was later diagnosed with schizophrenia. Inside Henry's Pub in Berkeley, California, the gunman ordered blonde women to sit closer to him, told others to block the windows with their bodies, and sexually assaulted some. Elizabeth was among the blondes who had to sit next to the gunman. She says that the moment that sticks with her most from that night is when, "the hostage taker decided that he had to kill somebody to get the authorities to do what he wanted" (Estes). Due to Mehrdad having paranoid schizophrenia, he thought he could get the authorities to give him \$13 trillion or 3 U.S. states.

This mortifying night that Elizabeth experienced 35 years ago, helped her realize her purpose in life – to help others. She is a longtime children's lawyer and is currently a clinical professor of public policy at the University of the Pacific McGeorge School of Law, where she runs her nonprofit called Breaking Barriers. Born through the mission of supporting youth in California until the age of 25, Breaking Barriers aims to ensure their educational, social, emotional, and behavioral wellbeing. Elizabeth and Breaking Barriers do this work by integrating mental health resources into schools and advocating for more youth mental health resources across California.

Elizabeth continues to battle the impact of her trauma and its lasting effects, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She explained, "I have to work every day to keep myself centered. It's not that I'm living in trauma all the time, but it impacts what I went through and all the things that I expose myself to even now still influence me" (Estes). She gets triggered by

things now. She has frequent death-related thoughts and she struggles to watch videos captured by the media from that dreadful night. While Elizabeth has a unique cause compared to others, she has a reality that many others share, namely dealing with a poor mental state on a daily basis.

## Elizabeth Estes

Being a children's lawyer, Elizabeth works with teens and families who have been abused, children who have been in the juvenile justice system, and people with varying mental health needs. To help others, she puts herself in her patients' shoes and partially experiences some of their trauma with them. Not surprisingly, hearing all these traumatic stories started to affect her. She explains, "I had a post-traumatic stress break out of what we call secondary trauma, the trauma of others, really that I was sort of taking in and trying to solve 20 years after my hostage crisis." Consequently, her mental health started to deteriorate and she was diagnosed with secondary traumatic stress (STS). Elizabeth continues to learn how to live with STS and PTSD, though this also continues to motivate her to support others who are in need of help.

Elizabeth's motivation to help others within her community is also rooted in her childhood. She recalls "I grew up in a home with a dad who came from a challenged complex life...like he did not grow up highly resourced. And he grew up in a challenging environment." Having a dad who taught her the importance of understanding that not everyone has the same resources, helped Elizabeth understand that many people in her community and elsewhere are in need of help. Elizabeth goes on to explain, "I had a mom who was really a philanthropist at her core, and exposed us to philanthropy and giving to those who just

didn't have what we had and the opportunities that we had." Being exposed to a role model who was invested in her community helped shape Elizabeth's values of offering support to others. Her dad taught her that not all people come from the same background, and through her mom, she learned about the importance of philanthropy and helping others.

These values shaped Elizabeth, but her experiences from the hostage crisis, really helped her solidify what she wanted to do with her life. Elizabeth explains "My hostage crisis itself really fundamentally shaped who I am." She tells us, "I spent that entire night thinking as I think any person would do, in those life threatening situations...am I doing what I want to be doing with my life?" One poignant moment from that night that sticks with her is when the hostage taker asked, "Who will volunteer to die?" Elizabeth responds, "I tried so hard to say yes. Like I tried so hard to say yes. I was like, I need to say yes. I have to say yes. I have to say yes. I want to help people. My job is going to be to help people." This moment sticks with Elizabeth most because of how intense it was to experience, but also because it connected her with her future. Elizabeth states, "I ran out that day just being like, I am doing what I am supposed to be doing with my life."




# Breaking Barriers: A Collaboration

Breaking Barriers is the non-profit organization that Elizabeth founded. She states, “I didn’t ever really decide to create Breaking Barriers. I would say Breaking Barriers was born really organically, out of the recognition after 20 years in the children’s system that it was harder for children in California to get the services that they are entitled to, than it should be across agencies that are responsible for providing those services.” Elizabeth saw the limited resources that were available within her community and knew that she wanted to make a difference within her community and elsewhere. Elizabeth and her colleagues wanted to give children access “to the care they need when they need it,” and they all understood that a systemic reform was necessary. There are many youth within the U.S. that struggle mentally and emotionally, but they may not have the access to help due to limited transportation or finances. This is where Breaking Barriers helps. The organization works to integrate more mental health resources into schools “in every county and in every city,” across California. Breaking Barriers is formed by a collective group of leaders – across agencies, communities, youth and families, as well as youth and family advocates – who are united by the vision of a more integrated system for the children of California.

While the mission of Breaking Barriers is clear, the fight isn’t easy. Elizabeth explains, “the most challenging thing about being the founder of Breaking Barriers is that Breaking Barriers is really a collective impact organization, and it is designed to unite agencies and organizations, who serve children in California and communities around the needs of those children. And the hardest thing about being the founder of Breaking Barriers is that the system does not operate that way. It’s not designed to operate that way” (Estes). Elizabeth has learned that it is challenging to make drastic changes within the system that we live in because it operates in silos, isolated departments that work independently. So getting a vast number of people to unite





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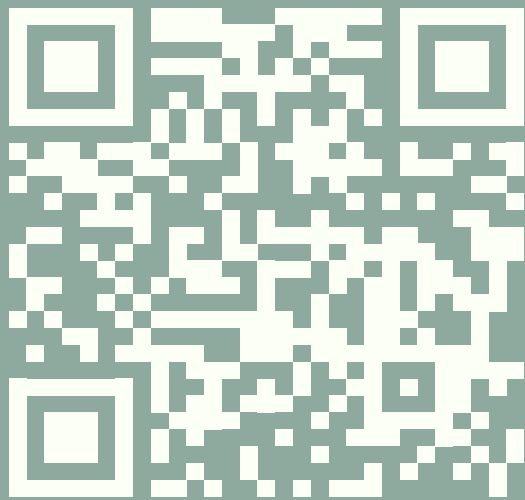
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under a similar cause in order to make change happen is very challenging. As a result, Elizabeth has “learned to identify with people who were leaders in civil rights movement, who tried to abolish slavery or put women back to work.” She has learned to identify with people who have recognized an oppressive system and have tried to change it, and just how “fundamentally hard that is.” Due to what Elizabeth has done and will continue to do, she has also learned to identify with “people who are struggling at various points in their lives and that, you know, no matter what the struggle, I can completely identify with the fact that life can come at you in that are just really, really, really challenging.” Elizabeth able to develop an increased sense of empathy for her peers and past experiences.

As Elizabeth looks back on her experience with Breaking Barriers, she has learned that, “We the people are the solution. Unity is the solution 100%.” Through this process, she has learned that if people were more interdependent with one another, and united in support of each other, “the world would be a really different place.” Through Elizabeth’s work of helping youth get the resources they need, she has also been able to understand that youth are not given, “enough power.” She understands that adults and people in powerful positions don’t give youth enough credit to learn, articulate and identify the way they want the world to work and how they wish for systems to be run in their communities. Elizabeth has taken her values and her past experiences and has used her passion to fuel a movement. Her twin sister Amanda states, “I think it’s good for people to have a purpose and a goal and a mission, and [Breaking Barriers] has been that for her.” Looking back, Elizabeth is beyond grateful for the impact she has been able to make within her community and across California, as she is grateful for everything that she has learned over the past years working with Breaking Barriers. Elizabeth is excited for the future of Breaking Barriers and is hopeful that the non-profit will reach its goals in the near future.

breaking  barriers

# About the Author



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Emma Beedon is a film student at Freestyle Academy and a junior at Los Altos High School. She enjoys exploring nature, while also spending time with family and friends. Outside of school, she loves to run and volunteer in her community. She is a member of Together We Can (TWC) and National Honor Society (NHS).