**Angela:** [00:00:00] the need is really great my focus is, helping everyone really understand that adoptees really benefit from having conversations with each other. And that it's not therapy, it's not exactly friendship, and we could be talking about the same things that our adoptive parents might want to talk to us about, but there's something really healing.

and helpful in doing it with someone else who just gets it

**Amy:** Thank you for joining us for Fostering Conversations. I'm your host Amy Smith.

**Liz:** And I'm Liz Rivera. I'm the co host.

**Amy:** Today we have Angela [00:01:00] Tucker who is joining us and we are so excited to hear from her. She runs the Adoptee Mentorship Program and she is going to tell us all about it and all about her story. So would you introduce yourself Angela?

**Angela:** . Hello. Thank you so much for having me. . My name is Angela Tucker. I am an adoptee. I was adopted from foster care as a young toddler and was born in Tennessee. Adopted all the way across the country to the state of Washington where I grew up with my large family. My parents adopted seven kids, all from foster care, one internationally and had one biological child.

So a really large family. Multiracial, I'm black, my parents are white, and our family is all mixed. And I grew up in a closed adoption. I didn't know my birth parents at all until about 13 years ago. When I was 25 years old, I found my birth mother and birth father. And [00:02:00] that led to Two sides of more family who I have been able to be in relationship with now.

And that's really lovely. And through all of that time, I've been doing a lot of adoption education work, mainly focused on amplifying adoptee stories through all different types of media. And we can talk a lot more about that, but my latest initiative is the Adoptee Mentoring Society, which is a nonprofit that I founded three years ago and I'm the executive director now and I'm a mentor to so many adoptees.

We have over 400 adoptees that we have been mentoring, and they are all across the world, but primarily in the United States.

**Amy:** That is amazing. I didn't realize it was across the world. That's really, really neat.

**Angela:** Yes, the need is really great my focus is, helping everyone really understand that adoptees really benefit from having conversations with each other. And that it's [00:03:00] not therapy, it's not exactly friendship, and it could, we could be talking about the same things that our adoptive parents might want to talk to us about, but there's something really healing.

and helpful in doing it with someone else who just gets it.

**Amy:** Yeah. I think that's with all things we go through in life, right? When someone has had the same experience, they get it. So I love that you've created this platform for adoptees to come together and to share that experience good and bad. I imagine

**Angela:** Yeah. I try not to put a lot of judgment around things that have happened to us in our lives, whether in foster care or through our adoption, but the focus is more on processing and understanding how that has made us who we are. Today, earlier today, I mentored somebody who just found out their birth father is a famous abuser.

so the world really knows this man as a terrible person, but in my [00:04:00] work, I know as adoptees, like we, we are who we come from, and so it's not helpful for this individual to only think through societal standards of this guy is terrible, awful, the worst ever. But instead we think about the ways that this guy who is, really famous may have really unique skills in like business.

And he's obviously really a creative and trying to think of other traits about these people to help us see ourselves in them too.

**Amy:** Yeah, I love that. I would love to throw it back to your story of as a child before you got to know your biological family, like, what was that like growing up not knowing who those people were? I mean, I'm not an adoptee, but I have adopted children. And I wonder, you know, what do they think? Are they looking around for those people?

Like, what is that experience like as an adoptee, not knowing who your biological family [00:05:00] is?

**Angela:** Pretty frustrating, I think inwardly it is. isolating and certainly for me growing up in a small town of Bellingham, Washington, which is at the time, maybe about 80, 000 people, predominantly white folks. So anytime I did see a black person, I was like, is that my cousin? Is that my brother? And then I certainly didn't want to have like a boyfriend relationship with someone who I could be related to, even though I was born across

the country.

**Amy:** interesting. I would have never thought of that.

**Angela:** Oh, yeah. Always thinking about that and simultaneously wanting to be close to them, even if we're not related, because we are one of the only people of color. But in my book, I write about the ghost kingdom, which is a place that I hung out in a lot. The ghost kingdom is this term For adoptees who fantasize about who their birth parents are.

And it's not a bad thing. It's like as [00:06:00] normal as someone who maybe had three colleges to choose from and they went to college a, but sometimes they wonder like, if I went to college B, where would I be living? What would I be doing? Who would I have married? Like those kinds of things for adoptees, it's the same.

So for me, it's like, is my birth mother at the time, it was Halle Berry. For a while. And then Brandy, because Cinderella came out in the nineties and I watched that. She's a black woman is my birth dad, Magic Johnson at the time, because he was a basketball player, has a huge smile. I play basketball, have a big smile.

And so those like wonderings, the fantasies, the ghost kingdom was constant for me growing up. And that's really not to say that I didn't have my needs met. I did. I have really great foster parents and adoptive parents, but still just desperately wanted to see [00:07:00] someone that looked like me. I would get jealous of hearing like my friends say like, you look just like your dad or them getting to say like, My mom has the same wavy hair that I do.

That kind of, those kinds of comments, whenever I hear them, even though they were innocuous and small, always stayed with me the whole day. And I thought, when will I get to have that?

**Amy:** Yeah. And what kind of closure or like, which I think you're in a documentary called closure

 And it looks amazing, but , what type of closure did that bring

**Angela:** pretty huge and shameless plug. If you go to my website, AngelaTucker. com. You can find my movie there

but yeah, the first time I saw my biological dad who had no clue he had a daughter. So through a series of events, I found him and he was Totally unexpected. And so it was even more exciting because we were both like, are you the right person? [00:08:00] And we were just looking into a mirror. We look exactly alike.

**Amy:** Wow.

**Angela:** This is really wild. And there's more things than just looks. So we have. similar mannerisms, but then there's unique things that we wouldn't think are genetic. Like I love words and spelling and I always have and done like spelling bees. And then I have this weird antic of interrupting people when they say a big word.

And I've done this for a long time. And interrupting was like absolutely not okay in my family growing up. But I had to, if someone said, Said something interesting, a nice word. And when I met my birth dad and I introduced him to my husband, Brian, I said, this is Brian. He spelled it. He said, Oh, Brian, B R Y A N.

And my whole family just was like, we thought this was an annoying thing she did, but this is like in her.

**Liz:** Wow.

**Amy:** That's so neat. And like, what a [00:09:00] cool thing to find out like you would have never known.

**Angela:** Yeah.

**Liz:** And this thing about you that, is, is cool and quirky that it's, you share it with somebody. So you don't have to experience that as just something you do is something that other people do too. And people who are related to you.

**Angela:** Yeah. And not just that, but I don't have to experience it as like a negative, like,

**Liz:** Mm hmm. Mm

**Angela:** on interrupting. But instead of this is. It connects me to others, to my birth family, which is so neat.

**Amy:** I love that. That's really neat. Yeah, I would have never thought that. And I, I have young adopted children and I know their birth families minus one of the birth dads we have not been able to reach. But I can, I can see the same thing. The mannerisms thing sometimes will be like, Oh my gosh, that's just like mama, you know?

And it is, I think that's so beautiful. And I hope that my daughters get to see that about themselves someday, not just me noticing it, but them experiencing that, you know, to see their connection to their birth parents. That's, that's really cool. I love that.[00:10:00]

**Angela:** Yeah.

**Liz:** And one thing that is coming out, I think, in your story too, is you are navigating so many identities your birth family, Bellingham, Washington, being black. And then when you're finding , and reuniting with , your birth family, I mean, all of that. And I'm guessing that's , maybe a piece of the mentoring is that you're helping people navigate, negotiate all these different people that they are in themselves.

**Angela:** Yeah. There's a lot of the versus nurture conversations, whether the mentees know that's what they're talking about or not that happen in mentoring, as well as the racial identity aspect of, feeling different than their genetic identity. Feeling white, but. Knowing that they are not so it's a lot of education about where culture comes in, and that you may have been raised in a predominantly white culture.

And so we take those on, [00:11:00] we become. our surroundings, our environment doesn't mean that we aren't those other people too. And then also in the race conversations, a lot of conversation around stereotypes, what makes somebody a certain race and so talking about the history comes into play.

Instead of just assigning certain traits to certain races, which is not true, so helping adoptees, especially those who are transracial growing up in racial isolation, not make overgeneralizations and feel like they aren't a part of that's not accurate.

**Amy:** Yeah, I would think that's really, beneficial to kids that are experiencing that and that's happening everywhere that kids are growing up in those environments. So what got you on this journey of creating this mentorship program?

**Angela:** When we were screening Closure all around the country, my husband and I and my [00:12:00] adoptive parents would come as well to all these different cities. We would go and do a Q& A on the stage after the film screened. And after I answered all the questions, I routinely would notice this like party of the Red Seas where adoptees who were in the crowd would flock up to me and say, And want to talk to me about different things.

And their adoptive parents would race over to my adoptive parents. And then when we swapped stories later that night. My parents and I would realize like the parents of such and such kids said to them, my kid never thinks about adoption. They're fully well adjusted. They're great. That same kid was saying to me, I'm so glad you're here.

You stated all the things that I've thought about for a long time. And having that replay over and over and over and over again, helped me realize this, group of adoptees, specifically those who are pretty stable, have loving [00:13:00] adoptive or foster parents not feeling like they have any space to critique what has happened to them.

This is where the title of my book, You Should Be Grateful comes because it's the sense of if you got great parents and a great upbringing, then there's nothing to complain about, especially if we know your birth parents couldn't have taken care of you and they needed a space. And so that was the impetus because I had found myself virtually mentoring over 300 adoptees through that year of screening the film. So doing that, I realized like, I think there is something here that's distinctly different than trying to heal from an overt abuse, which we might seek a therapist for, a psychologist for. It's not that. It's this place of don't feel like I have a space of belonging, of true belonging. so I wanted to try to create that.

**Amy:** For adoptive parents that are listening, what would you say to them , because you [00:14:00] talk about these adoptive parents, Oh, my kid's fine, they're fine, and that kid was not fine. As adoptive parents, how can we be aware, or what would be signs that we might see that, hey, our adoptee could really benefit from something like this?

**Angela:** I think every single adoptee could benefit from knowing other adoptees and having a space. And I think it's just it's naive to think that we would feel comfortable telling you things about our adoption that we fear could hurt you. We don't want to be abandoned again. And so if we tell you like, I wish I could see my birth mom or I wish I could live with her, that means that we have to risk seeing your face drop, seeing you cry.

When in reality, we're just trying to say, I wish I knew more about my life story or, but for so many of us, we fear maybe rightfully or wrongfully that it would just be too much for adoptive parents to handle.

**Amy:** Yeah.

**Angela:** I think we [00:15:00] can outsource that. I think adoptive parents can outsource some of those conversations to other adoptees, just like you would, perhaps if you're, not a piano player and you want your kid to learn how to play piano, you're going to take them to a piano teacher and you're not going to feel hurt or lesser than for having to do that.

I kind of don't think there's any difference.

**Amy:** No, I think that's a really good comparison. . We are not the expert and there are experts and there are places of belonging. Not that they don't belong in our families, but there's places where they can find that additional belonging and, feel like someone else gets it, you

**Liz:** Yeah.

**Angela:** It's also sometimes like a surprisingly, fun, uplifting sessions. Like we're laughing a lot. So the things that with other people could bring out a frown or tears with adoptees, we're laughing. Like, Yeah, someone mistook my mom for my friend's mom the other day, and all, all of us, whether it's a group [00:16:00] session or one on one's like, Oh my gosh, I've had that before, whereas with other people, it could be like, Oh, no, that's terrible.

I'm so sorry that happened to you. Accurate response as well. But sometimes it's, we need a little comedic relief with each other. And so that's perfectly okay, too.

**Liz:** yeah, I love that. And I was thinking too that what you're talking about it that it's this kind of rarefied space almost where even if it's never spoken, just knowing you're in this space where people understand that just that the power of that presence of that other person

**Angela:** Oh, it's, it's undeniable. And yes, it's hard to articulate. I've been trying to figure out how to articulate that piece because for some sessions, we're not even talking very much about adoption, there's that sense of camaraderie only because we know we share this same identity and experience.

**Amy:** What age do you guys start the mentoring program?

**Angela:** 12 and up and that is mainly because it's virtual.

**Liz:** So how do [00:17:00] you and I hate to even ask this question, but a parent, is their 12 year old wants to do this. How do you help the parent know this is okay. This is a person who's safe for my kid to interact with on their own. I don't have to be in the room monitoring it.

**Amy:** Great question. I think

**Angela:** That education is, that is a tough one. We have a lot of verbiage like that online, but I think that's a bigger educational piece of allowing us adoptees to be together with our own opinions, feelings, and thoughts without parents feeling the need to coach it. Sometimes parents start on a session with their young kid, if they're 12 or 13, and then they Leave when they feel it's okay.

But bigger piece I think is the fear that the parents have of us mentors. Do we have an agenda? Do we believe one certain thing to be true? Like every adoptee should know their birth parents or something big. And we [00:18:00] don't, that's not the focus. Focus is to be really neutral, but Sometimes I think adoptive parents have that fear. For me, I have so much of my work out in the public that people feel comfortable because I know. What I'm about, but when I'm trying to bring on new mentors, that is a hurdle establishing that trust.

**Liz:** How do you bring on new mentors? Like, they have

what you're looking for

**Angela:** We use the adoptee consciousness model, which is this new research done by a group of adoptees, actually J. Ron Kim, Susan Bronco Alvarado of a couple other folks. And essentially it talks about these different touchstones that adoptees go through. And in our assessment, we know that the most effective mentors are those adoptees who are in what's called the expansiveness phase.

And this phase is one where [00:19:00] adoptees are able to see the both and. Adoptees are able to see both that perhaps an adoption was needed in their case, and they wish it was. They didn't have to be adopted. They're really comfortable in that ambiguity and that's distinctly different from some of the other touchstones like status quo is the early one, which is essentially like adoption is the best thing ever.

And you believe the rosy fairy tale story and you don't. Push back the dissonance touchstone is where you're having a hard time integrating everything into your own story. So adoptees and dissonance might think. The opposite. Adoption is the worst thing ever. It should never happen. I'm oversimplifying this, but we use this model and we ask those adults who have gone through some of the mentoring with me or another mentor, they can apply to be [00:20:00] mentors, but they have to be able to explain why they are in that position. So then that really helps us know they are not going to get harmed themselves in mentoring others.

This came to fruition the first year I tried to do this, and I was, instead of using this touchstone model of the adoptee consciousness, I was just going more by age, and so older adoptees I thought would be able to mentor young adoptees, but this model doesn't go by age. It's by the processing. And so I would have an adult, maybe 50, 60 year old adoptee mentoring a 14 year old.

And because of the differences in how adoption and foster care is that those generations, the older one would be triggered by The younger adoptee who was like, I'm going to see my birth dad at the baseball game this week. I don't want to see them. I wish they weren't there or something like that.

And the older adoptee is like, Oh, I wish I had that opportunity. I would [00:21:00] have never, so I'm like, okay.

That's not going to work.

**Amy:** , and how would you know? So that's amazing that you've been able to work out those kinks and figure that out. That's really

**Liz:** Yeah. And also just shows what a huge thing this is, an undertaking there's so much going on.

I mean, just, do you do some kind of like debriefing for the mentors, like where you guys come together and talk about how , the mentoring is going

**Angela:** Yeah, the program we're really getting our bearings. I'm, so grateful to some generous donors who've allowed me to hire folks to help iron this out because i'm really a vision person and So I have a great team who has implemented different things like hiring a psychologist dr.

who is a Adoptee and a psychologist, but she offers monthly consults for the mentors to be able to talk about things like countertransference or different things that have happened. I meet with the mentors monthly and they also go through a, A [00:22:00] rigorous kind of training program where I work with Dr.

Bonnie Goodwin, who is a professor out of the University of Oklahoma, who has done a lot of research on this population and understands interpersonal dynamics and how to teach active listening and self containment and all of that. So yeah, the program has some pillars. Support embedded in,

but we're located all over the country.

 It's mainly virtual. I'm grateful for a donation that came in from the Dave Thomas Foundation that will allow us to bring the mentors all to Seattle in March so I can

**Liz:** Oh, wow.

**Angela:** them in person, which would be really great.

**Liz:** You just got, someone like me just would like to lurk in just to be there just to hear and to learn, but not,

**Angela:** we do that too. We have something called the fireside chat, which is me holding a panel of three to four adoptees. We do this quarterly. And so it's open to the public and I think it's a great resource for. parents, [00:23:00] for prospective parents. And it's also part of the mentoring in the sense that one of the most important things to me is ethical story sharing and ethical storytelling.

And so I'm working on that with mentors and then they get to a point to where they might want to share in the public space. So they are sharing their stories through moderated conversation that I do. But it, it's like being a fly on the wall with. why adoptee to adoptee conversations are so important, and then also modeling how to safely share stories, which is a big deal for foster alum and adoptees.

Um, I love teaching. That's probably one of my favorite parts. of mentorship is equipping adoptees to know how to share their story, if they want to share their story, when, and to know it's okay not to.

**Amy:** Yeah. I love that this time has flown by, but I am hoping that you could share like [00:24:00] some success stories with us. What have been some experiences with your mentees? You know what you shared one about that individual finding their birth father recently. But what are some other experiences that you've had with your mentees that you could share?

**Angela:** I always loved the group mentoring, especially with the age group of 12 to 16 year olds who, get to know adoptees from across the country. And I feel like there's something special that happens when adoptees know that they're not going to see this person like in school tomorrow or at a football game.

And so there's this trust that gets built quickly. I've loved hearing from parents that there's some adoptees who've gotten together. They've flown across the country. Meeting each other and oftentimes it's based around, yes, we have this shared identity, but we learn that we also love gaming.

And so there's a [00:25:00] connection. And I, know way too many older adoptees in their fifties, sixties, seventies, who are also being mentored who are saying, I'd never known another adoptee until I was 60 years old. And so knowing that that's changing gives me a lot of joy.

**Amy:** Yeah.

**Liz:** Yeah. And that's one thing about our more connected world is you can access to tribe that you couldn't have, if you were maybe 70 years old when you were young. Yeah.

**Angela:** Especially if you're 70 or same race adoptee, maybe you're white, your adoptive parents are white. So there's not even that conspicuous nature of knowing

your family. So yeah. How do you find other people?

**Liz:** Yeah, who had that? And I was thinking too, when you were, you were Try deciding on what you wanted to share as far as success. And I was thinking about like what you were saying earlier when, some of these, these kids are not necessarily really struggling, but they just, they still have a need.

And that, and [00:26:00] meeting that need may not, it may not actually look that spectacular. It may not be like something you put on a billboard, but just that, that kind of quiet sense of being known and seen is powerful, even if it's not, fireworks

**Angela:** It's so huge. It's why we have October 30th as Adoptee Remembrance Day, which is essentially all the suicides of adoptees, and that is really common from folks who just are lacking that, that space of belonging, of being known, of being seen, of being able to say it really sucks that I had to be adopted.

And not have other people say like, wait, what do you mean? You hate your parents? Like, no, it's not what we're saying. So just having the ability to articulate some of those things without that repercussion it is lifesaving.

**Liz:** Mm

**Amy:** I still can't get over the fact of you saying, yeah, you know, these older people that have never met an adoptee. I'm just still in my brain [00:27:00] reeling about, can you imagine never knowing somebody else with your same life experience? And then all of a sudden you meet one or two or ten and you're like, That just would like be so validating.

I feel like, and I just, I'm truly like having a really hard time grasping what that would feel like, because I bet it's incredible, like heart wrenching for those 50 or 60 years. But then, wow, like it's so amazing

**Angela:** Yes. Yes. Yes. And I think that's one of the difficulties of my work right now is helping people understand that we don't just mentor kids.

Especially older folks who grew up in a time period where this was really not normalized.

**Amy:** right.

I was just talking to a friend today. I was like, did you know that when I adopted my daughters, they just give me a new birth certificate. It doesn't say she's adopted or anything. Don't worry. I have their original birth certificates, so they'll have both. But how many people exist in the world that have no idea, you know, it's just like, oh my gosh.

**Liz:** [00:28:00] Yeah. And that erasure of their origin is just, it's stunning that we officially erase,

**Amy:** literally I go in and like show some court documents and they're like, that person's gone. It's kind of terrifying actually to me, but. Yeah, that's a topic for another day, of course,

but I just love what you're doing and creating this space and giving kids and adults a place to find belonging and to be.

That is incredible. So thank you. for

all

**Liz:** Yeah,

**Amy:** that you're doing and thank you for taking time to chat with us. We really do appreciate it so much.

**Angela:** Yeah, thank you for having me on. It does feel short.

**Amy:** Yes, but are there any last things that you would like to share, whether they're resources for people listening or any other stories, anything else that comes to mind that we, we didn't get to touch on in that brief amount of time?

**Angela:** I'll share one other resource, and this is a workshop that I've created that I found to have so [00:29:00] much fun hosting, and it seems to be really useful. important and effective and it's called cultivating an anti racist family network for transracial caregivers. And essentially it's like, I was finding that I was doing a lot of education around race and transracial caregiving to groups of parents who are really committed, but then they would go back home and they had sisters and brothers, so aunts and uncles of the kids or grandparents who.

didn't have that same level of commitment. And I just thought, for the adoptee, it's really important that they're in a family network where everybody is speaking the same language, not just the parents. And so I started this workshop and it's virtual, but for a family unit. So a couple with their child, like I build a whole workshop around that, and then they can invite.

All the people they know in their community that they want. So friends and neighbors and relatives. [00:30:00] And so it's, hyper focused on this. adoptee and a safe Zoom space where people can ask their questions without feeling ridicule and the, the adoptees aren't on the call. But this has been a really neat way to strengthen families instead of just the focus on the parents, which I think we put a lot on parents when in reality we need a lot of people to support.

So it's been really neat. I know even this Christmas. It resulted in a grandparent seeking out a wrapping paper that had black Santas on

**Liz:** Oh

**Angela:** A result of just having these conversations and felt really confident and excited to know there was something that they could do to help instill a healthy racial identity for their grandchild.

And.

**Amy:** Yes. Love it. And things that maybe would not have been thought about before.

**Angela:** Wouldn't have been thought about, but don't need a lot of change in your daily life and the love inside is [00:31:00] already there, but we know that we need you to show this and your behavior show that you understand who we are and that you validate and celebrate us. So yeah,

**Amy:** Love that. So where is the best place? Tell us what your best where we should go. You have an Instagram and is there also a website that would be the best options for people to find all these resources?

**Angela:** both. So my website is AngelaTucker. com and then I'm on Instagram at Angie Adoptee. A N G I E, adoptee, and I am, like, very active on both, so I'll respond however people write to me.

**Amy:** Well, yay. Thank you so much for your time and wealth of knowledge and just the amazingness that you're putting into the community. It really makes a huge difference. So

**Angela:** thank you for having me on. This has been a joy.

**Liz:** Oh, good. I was so excited that we got to talk to you because , like I said, you're like a rock star. , anybody in the adoption space knows you. you've already done so much good and you're obviously just expanding that good. It's amazing to watch.

 [00:32:00]