

Love Meets Joy Podcast
Episode 1: Meet Iva and Ashley, Cleft Advocates
Transcript

Ashley Barbour: Hello everyone. And welcome to the very first episode of the Love Meets Joy podcast of the Smile Train podcast network. We couldn't be more excited to be here with you today. My name's Ashley and I was born with a bilateral cleft lip and palate. I'm the creator of Cleft Love. And by day I work as a teacher consultant with students who have hearing loss.

Iva Ballou: Hey, everyone, I'm Iva . And I also was born with a bilateral cleft lip and palate, I'm the CEO of Real Sophisticated Joy, and a cleft confidence coach. So I think we have to share with the audience what a magical moment this is. This truly started from me randomly putting up on a vision board that I did last year. I just put podcast. I had no idea what it would look like.

Ashley: Did you have a picture on it?

Iva : I had a picture and all that it was, was a woman's head with headphones on and yeah, she was speaking into a microphone and it was the craziest thing ever, like I got it off of the internet, like I think Pinterest or something. Yeah. The craziest thing ever, it was February, which you know, is kind of when we started this thing to be here in this moment, guys, dream big, those dreams do come true. And one of the dreams that Ashley and I had was, to be advocates for a community. That means so much to us.

Ashley: Yes. And here we are, like, it is truly a dream come true. And for me as well, and my journey with how I arrived to where I am right now started probably six or seven years ago. It wasn't in the same way that yours was like, where you knew you wanted to do a podcast. I just have known for the last six or seven years that I really wanted to do something important and profound for this community. And I've wound up here with you.

Iva : You kind of navigated your way here. It was just, you wanted to do something, but you didn't know what, so what kick-started that?

Ashley: Yeah, so probably six or seven years ago, I was at the grocery store doing my usual thing. Right. Okay. <laugh> and I remember I looked down at my grocery list and then all of a sudden I looked up and there was this baby in the shopping cart with an untreated cleft.

Iva : Oh, wow. Yeah.

Ashley: And I don't know about you, but had, have you ever seen a baby in person with an untreated cleft?

Iva : Not in person. No. Not like, yeah. So I could imagine how that must have kind of hit you.

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Ashley: It was weird because of course I had pictures of myself from when I was a baby. So I knew what I looked like. I had seen pictures online, all of that, but like to have it right there in front of me was so impactful. And I had this really weird experience because I realized in that second that I had all these feelings, maybe leading up to this point about how I might feel if I ever saw a baby in person with an untreated cleft, like I thought, right. Maybe I would think it was scary or gross or weird or something. And then if I thought that about another baby, then it was like a reflection of what does it say about myself?

Ashley: It, honestly changed my life. And then I also, after I saw the baby, I was like tearing up <laugh> and I went over to the mom trying not to be creepy and weird.

Iva : Right. Cause that's a little awkward. We are in this grocery store.

Ashley: <laugh> I know we're in a grocery store and like I'm crying. And I was like, I just have to tell you that your baby is so beautiful. Even though I was worried, I would have all these negative feelings. I actually didn't feel any of that at all. And instead, I saw this baby as being wholly perfect and worthy. And I just, I had to tell the parents this. And also I feel like that was the start of truly, truly accepting who I am because I was able to then see it in this baby. Right. And I went over and I talked to the mom and the grandma and I realized in that second too, that they needed me as much as I needed them.

Iva : Yes. Yeah. That's what I was thinking. Like, I wonder how that for them was great. But also, for you, you, you didn't know that you needed that.

Ashley: Right. I totally didn't. And I went home that night and I was like, I need to do something. And I was like, I don't know what. And I went to my therapy appointment the next week and I talked to my therapist Cesar. Hey. And <laugh> and I was like, I want to do something. I was like, help me come up with a plan. I don't know if I need to go back to school. I don't know what I need to do, but I need to do something. And he was like, whoa, whoa, whoa. Like the way that you cultivate a dream is even though in our society, we often are like, this is exactly what I want. And these are the steps that I need to take in order to get there. He said, no, instead take a deep breath and just feel into that feeling. And the cool thing about not having an exact destination in mind is sometimes what's waiting is so much bigger than what you could have dreamed of.

Iva : I love that. I love that.

Ashley: And now we have a podcast that is available around the country.

Iva : I know. And internationally! We're claiming that now the listeners are going to love it so much that it's international

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Ashley: <laugh> put that, on that vision board

Iva : Hey, at this point I am a professional manifestor I got that. Like, I know one thing is for sure. That's how I came to get into this seat. Yeah. So we've talked about this before and in some of our other conversations from like maybe 14 to 26, 27 I was really trying to outrun my cleft and not acknowledge it, sweep it under the rug. And I was really striving for perfection, which we all know is not obtainable. I want to let the audience know now perfection, it's not obtainable. So stop trying. <laugh> right. I was really trying and I was doing an okay job of it, but like you were, I was in therapy and my therapist was like, aren't you tired? And I was like, yeah, I am, I am

Ashley: Exhausted.

Iva : <laugh> right. And so also I was coming upon 30 and I'm a planner. And so I was like, okay, wow. I wanted to go into 30. Right. I don't know what that meant, but I was just really obsessed about going into 30. Right. And that meant like really taking stock of who I was, how I was and accepting the things that I liked about myself. And didn't like about myself. And one of that was like, I had to really come to terms with my cleft. And so I went through a whole process of acknowledging, I do have a cleft I'm going to always have a cleft I cannot change that. And accepting that and getting active on loving that person and how she shows up. And I was like, okay, well, if I can do this, I want to help other people do that. Right. Right. And like you, I was like, okay, well what's what is my next step? So I went to my old plastic surgeon, um, Dr. Oby and I told him, this is what I wanted to do. First off. It was so crazy going back to his office because he didn't even recognize me he was just like, you have blossomed into this other person. And I realized that he wasn't talking about on the outside. It was like my inside.

Ashley: You can see it at the outside when all of it comes out that confidence and it's just this the way you carry yourself.

Iva : It just comes out. Right. And so that was, yeah. Gift enough. So now I was like, okay, I really got to give this back. Yes. So he set it up for me to go to Nemore's day or like cleft care day.

Ashley: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

Iva : Right. <laugh> and so there was one particular moment that will live in my head for the rest of my life and, it just fuels me and drives me. And there was another little girl who also was black and I have to preface this by saying yeah, for me, I didn't meet another black woman with the cleft until I was 30 plus. So right. Yeah. Walking in and seeing this little girl, she had to be no more than like six or seven. And she looks up at me and I'm looking at her and she just, you can see it in her eyes that it's like she saw herself and possibility. Yeah. And it was a gift

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that I didn't know I was giving her, but it was a moment. Yes. And then she like said touch, I, I bent down to talk to her and she touches my face and she's like, you're so pretty. And it wasn't a, a vain thing. It was just, okay, you look like me and, and I can see beauty in you. Yes. Like I can see beauty in me. And so as soon as she said that, I touched her back and I said, and so are you, and she just smiled at me and we smiled at each other and yeah, after that moment,

Ashley: Yes

Iva : Whatever I have to do, this is what I'm doing. Right. For the rest of my life. I'm going to help those in my community to feel that joy and that confidence. So that's how we got here today. And that's what the podcast, yeah. I guess meant I wanted to put that out into the world.

Ashley: <laugh> That is so beautiful. And now through social media and this podcast, yes. Like you're able to reach so many people, which is so cool and absolutely what I am hoping that this does for a lot of people is gives them a place to feel like they belong.

Iva : Absolutely

Ashley: Like you just said for a very long time, I didn't identify with my cleft I didn't place it as a part of my identity, so after I got home from seeing that baby, I remember I Googled or I went on Facebook I think, and I searched cleft groups or something like that. Okay. And I found a cleft mom group and some, cleft adult groups and in the mom group, especially I kind of sat back and watched for a while just

Iva : To see what's going on. Right.

Ashley: Yes, exactly. Just to see what's going on. And I wasn't sure if I should say something or not, because I'm not a mom, but one day I decided to start posting and I introduced myself and just kind of gave a brief background about, you know, how I was born with cleft. And it was so well received and I found such belonging in that group, but also in cleft-affected adult groups. Because I didn't realize that I was feeling, I don't know, like I didn't belong or that I needed that sense of belonging until I found groups where there were other people who were born with cleft and they knew what I was talking about when I talked about a cleft clinic day or they knew what I was talking about when I talked about, you know, not being able to blow up a balloon or, you know, like, or having awful surgeries and knowing exactly what that surgery was and how it felt for them. And

Iva : There's a difference between being able to, sorry, it's a difference between understanding a situation, but to have somebody that can feel it with you. I get,

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Ashley: Yes. Not only have I wanted to give back in my advocacy, but like in doing so I have just felt, I feel like you've said this before where you feel like you're home.

Iva : Yeah.

Ashley: I feel like I'm home around other people who have lived this very sort of unique experience.

Iva : Yeah. It's like, you didn't know that you were searching for this part of you, but once now that you find it's like, oh, this puzzle piece was missing. I didn't know that it was, but that's the thing that was missing, right?

Ashley: Yes. And now I feel whole,

Iva : Yes. Now you feel whole. So again, a lot of times we are very similar and <laugh> our cleft journey, which is again, comforting. Yeah. Because yeah. While I was in that 30 mode of accepting cleft and what it meant and all of these things, I realized that I needed to go do some research. Um, like you, I was like, I need to go face cleft more because I was really putting on blinders and to the point that I would have friends, that would be like, oh, did you see that person? They had a cleft and I'd be like, Nope, didn't see it. Yes. I did see it. But I would just, I just putting

Ashley: Oh my, right. Like part of you saw it, but then like, yes, the,

Iva : I was like, Nope, I can't acknowledge it. I can't acknowledge it. Because that's then that says something about me. So no. So I went on a deep dive of typing in cleft and looking up all of these things. And I'm someone who like goes through multiple pages through Google. Yeah. And during that I came across Smile Train,

Ashley: Ah,

Iva : Obviously there are other organizations out there, but for me, Smile Train I just connected with and they were doing stuff in the US because you always hear, oh, I just thought that clefts were only international. And it's like, no, right, no, no, no. It happens here too.

Ashley: And that support that a lot of organizations provide only internationally and they sort of forget about us.

Iva : Correct. And Smile Train was like, no, we got you too. And they had all of these different communities and it was through Smile Train that I actually got connected with a Facebook group for adults.

Ashley: Oh.

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Iva : I was like, okay kind of, same as you. I was in the group for a while and I wasn't saying anything. I was observing. Yes. Right. So one of the administrators had to come and say, you know, not, not no pressure, but you know, you can introduce yourself. <laugh> you've been in the group for about like maybe three months now. And you haven't said anything <laugh>

Ashley: You're like, I just want to watch leave me alone just now.

Iva : But what I was watching was, was because again, being cleft affected, you can sometimes be hyper-sensitive. Perceive like, I guess rejection. Yes. So I'm sitting there trying to watch and see how do they treat new people

Ashley: Totally.

Iva : And I kept not finding anything. So I was like, you know what? I have a, this is a safe space. These people, they understand what you're going through. It's okay. You are safe in this space. And that, that piece of home that you didn't know that you were looking for, I have to say thank you to Smile Train because they, again kind of directed me into that community that has embraced me and I have embraced them.

Ashley: Yeah. Like I'm curious on your advocacy journey. Have you found any parts to be especially challenging?

Iva : Oh, Ashley <laugh> yes. As I'm, especially in coaching sometimes as I'm yeah. Helping you get through what you're going through. Yes. I have to go back and observe wounds and sometimes like, oh yes, this is this wound. So open. I thought it was closed.

Ashley: Right.

Iva : And sometimes a lot of times, thankfully they have been, but there are some things that it's like, oh no, that still, that still hurts a little bit. And so I have to work through that. So that way I can help myself because I'm always going to make sure that, you know, we've talked about it healed and whole, and that I have that for me, but then also, so I can help somebody else who's going through it. So a lot of times with] the advocacy or something that can be a little tricky to navigate is making sure that my old wounds are covering you. Yes. But, but I think that you can relate that the more that you speak on it, it kind of helps with it.

Ashley: Exactly. And I totally know what you're saying because my coping strategy when I was growing up was to ignore it and pretend like it didn't exist. Yeah. I had all of these gaping wounds that I had like wrapped bandages over so that nobody could see them. There was like, you know, you

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Iva : Can't see it. It's like bloods dripping, but it's fine. It's fine.

Ashley: Yeah. No one could see anything and if it would drip more, I would just wrap it again. <laugh> um, and so I was like, you know, it's fine. You know, it's fine. But in, in navigating this advocacy, I also have had to go back and not only I can't get by with just covering them up. I've had to really go back and examine them and actually try to treat and heal them, which has been definitely challenging. And something else that I think has been hard for me and probably also for my parents on my advocacy journey has been how vulnerable I am in such a public space.

Iva : So you can't take it back when she put it out there.

Ashley: Just being so vulnerable is hard. Yeah. And a lot of times as I've been healing, those sorts of wounds and, and examining them either in therapy or as I've allowed myself, just to start thinking about these things more, then I process them. And a way that I process them is through writing. And instead of keeping it in a journal that I would post it for the world to see initially, I was very nervous so I started CleftLove after I realized that there was a need for parents to see that we're out here living our best lives and that there's, you know, a light. So I started posting on CleftLove. And I remember the very first time I posted on it, I literally sat there. I had my post ready and I like sat there for, I don't know how long. And I was like, okay, Ashley, that's

Iva : One of those like close your eyes. And it's just like, okay.

Ashley: Yes. I was like, you need to do this. And I was like, this is needed. And I was like, but what if something happens? Um, I was like, just do it. And so I posted it.

Iva : Did you walk away? Because I post and walk away <laugh>

Ashley: Yes, I closed it. I was like close the app, close that app. We don't want to see. And it was really funny because when I first started CleftLove, I didn't tell anyone it started as a Facebook blog. And I didn't tell anyone except for like my parents, my childhood best friend, and one other friend that I had met through the cleft mom group. Right. So like who is even going to see it. Right, right. But I was like, what if this blows up? But I have found, and I think my parents have found, even though it's been a challenge for them that it's through my vulnerability, that people are able to relate to me. And my experience is that it's vulnerability that's so key in being a good advocate because that's how people feel connected. And I think my parents are now able to see too how much it helps other people when I'm like that. So even though it's challenging for them and for me too, you know, to write about something that I've never talked to them about or that, because a lot of times when I write a post it's the first time that I'm even,

Iva : You're even saying it to yourself, right?

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Ashley: Yes. Like it's like the first time I'm having a reckoning. And so sometimes I think my mom has been like, why didn't you tell us? And I'm like, I didn't know

Iva : Until I didn't know. I felt that way.

Ashley: Yes, exactly.

Iva : And I didn't want to tell them that these, this is how I was feeling. Cuz I don't want you to feel like there's something that you're not doing.

Ashley: Yes, totally. Like

Iva : This is just internally how I feel and I can't explain it, but you also mentioned something about wanting to like almost sweep it under the rug. And I think that that's the beauty of our generation of that. We are kind of like, you know what I know, I'm not the only one going through this. I can't be the only one going through this. Right. So the more that I talk about whatever is going on with me, one it's therapeutic for me so I can get that out. But then nine times out of 10, there's going to be some, at least one other person who's going to be like, oh my gosh, thank you so much for saying this. I have been feeling that same way. Yes. So that increased vulnerability is helpful in so many ways. But have you found that because you've opened yourself up in this one way with your cleft that it's almost spread over into everything because I know for me, I think before I was like, emotionally shut down prior to this and now I feel everything.

Ashley: You know, what is an interesting thing is I of course I can't exactly remember, but when I was a kid, I don't think I regularly thought about my cleft. I don't think I regularly thought about having a facial difference.

Iva : It was in the back of your head. It wasn't there.

Ashley: I like was suppressing it. I think kind of like a beach ball underwater. Yes. Um, yeah. And so I like you couldn't see it and I couldn't see it and I oh like a

Iva : Duck, like a duck, his little feet's moving crazy. But, but on time I am cool, calm and collected,

Ashley: But you couldn't even see my, my duck. So my ball was like submerged beneath the water. No one was the wiser, even me. But now that that ball has popped up. It is there for me to see all of the time. And sometimes I find it kind of tiring. Now I sometimes wonder if there will be a point in my journey when I'm healed enough where it's not something that I think about daily, but, but maybe that's not going to be the case because in our work that we do, it comes up.

Iva : I think you'll think about it, but it'll be different, it'll be a growth of perspective.

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Ashley: Yes, that is true. Yeah. I can definitely see that. And I think something else that is really important to me as I've posted some of these things that are so deeply personal to me is I make sure that everything I post is with the utmost intention and nice. I also made a promise to myself when this whole thing started that I was going to be honest and truthful and I was going to talk about the highs, but I was also going to talk about lows. I wasn't going to sugar coat it and say,

Iva : You didn't get that balance. Yeah

Ashley: You do. Because I didn't want to be like, oh, like this thing happened, but guess what? I'm on top of it all. I'm confident. I'm perfect. And

Iva : It's not true. <laugh>

Ashley: Right. And like some days, some days I feel like I'm a 10, right? Like I'm, I'm great. Everything's good. But then there are some days when like those pass whatever kind of come back and bite me, you know, same. So I always make sure that I am truthful and then also I want to be an advocate for our community. So I speak out about things that are affecting our community. And sometimes there might be multiple viewpoints as we'll find out in this podcast, even you and I sometimes have differing viewpoints about, we do certain topics that come up and

Iva : How to approach things. And yeah,

Ashley: I make sure though that I speak to those things that I feel called to speak to, but also make sure that how I'm wording things are intentionally worded. And I usually sit with them for a few days before I actually post them just to make sure that it's exactly the words I want to use and that it's the message that I want to convey. And that it's still something that I feel called to post about. So,

Iva : Well, I can definitely say that you're posting does speak to a lot, especially like my experience a lot of times. And I'm like, yes, that's exactly how I feel. So thank you. And I know that the audience will say the same. Thank you. And so it's like, you're already kind of started on what we hope to accomplish with our advocacy. Yes. With this podcast, we've talked about like, what do we want this to be like, why are we doing this? Yes. I mean, it's great that right. We were given this opportunity, but we have to make the most of it. I want to one, for those of us that are cleft affected, no matter where you are in your journey, if you're a teenager or you're an adult or 10 years from now a baby that was just born listens to this, I want them to be able to see like the possibility of what can be. Right.

Ashley: I love that.

Iva : We're going to talk about the stories that we talk, tell ourselves, especially being, you know, facially different. You might tell yourself a different story. Right. But

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you can also tell yourself a story where you have joy and you're confident and you show up in the world as this person and you are accepted in love. Like for a long time. I didn't tell myself that story. Yes. But I'm telling myself a different story now and I'm sharing that story with the audience.

Ashley: So powerful

Iva : Then for those who aren't cleft affected, if I'm the first person that you hear with a cleft. Yeah. So that way you can be like, well, you know what? She was cool. I, I vibe with her being able to be more open to others yeah. With cleft affected because we are great people. I say that all the time. Yes. So true. And so, oh, I just want to encourage joy on both ends.

Ashley: I love that. And I definitely echo all of those feelings that you have and from this podcast, but also in the greater realm of the advocacy that I want to provide to this community when I was growing up. And I'm sure when you were growing up there wasn't anyone to look to.

Iva : Nope. There wasn't.

Ashley: There wasn't anyone to see possibility in, like you said, there weren't role models.

Iva : We didn't have cleft affected adults to look at.

Ashley: No. And, and so it was kind of like, you know, you just had regular people who weren't born with cleft. And so you're just like, okay, well, like who knows what my future holds? You know?

Iva : I mean, exactly. Like you couldn't even imagine it. You couldn't imagine it.

Ashley: Right. I mean, and in some ways it was fine, because I was like, you know, I still feel like I can do a whole lot, but the power that would've been there, if mm-hmm <affirmative>, there was someone that I could have looked up to. And so what is most important for me is for so long, our voices have been missing from so many spaces. So I want to be one of the many incredible voices that's out there speaking our truth and sharing our story. And that's available for people who need that role model or that connection. And I also just want people to feel that feeling of belonging that you and I both were missing. And we didn't know that we were missing. I want to be able to provide that. And I want people to feel like they're coming home when they listen to us.

Iva : I love that. And I, I know that those missions are going to come together and the audience is going to get that. Yeah. So I know that you have loved it so far. Ashley and I have so much to talk about, but we got to go to break. So make sure to come back.

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Speaker 3: We are happy to tell you more about our sponsor: Smile Train. Smile Train pioneered a sustainable model of partnering with local medical professionals in more than 70 countries. In 22 years, it has supported more than 1.5 million safe cleft surgeries, more than all other cleft charities combined. And as many people in our audience know, children born with clefts often need more essential cleft treatments than just surgery. Because their partners provide local, year-round care, Smile Train is also able to fund nutritional support, dental care, orthodontic treatment, speech therapy, and psychosocial support for those who need it. Smile Train invests in their partners, providing them with the state-of-the-art equipment and training they need to make safe and quality care possible for those who need it most. To smiletrain.org/donate/lovemeetsjoy today and donate \$21 a month to make sure that every child with a cleft can receive the care they need whenever they need it.

Ashley: Welcome back from break. We're so happy you're here. Yes. And we hope you enjoyed hearing that word from our sponsor Smile Train and something that makes me smile is that Smile Train is such a great partner for this podcast. Many people don't even know how you and I came together, but actually,

Iva : Ooh. Are we going to tell this story?

Ashley: <laugh> actually it was Smile Train who brought us both and introduced us together. I think it was the first Cleft Con that happened in 2020. And for people who don't already know, Cleft Con is a conference that's by the cleft community for the cleft community. Mm-hmm <affirmative>, it's hosted by Smile Train, and it was supposed to initially be in person,

Iva : But things happen. Yeah. Yeah.

Ashley: <laugh> 2020,

Iva : But we don't speak about

Ashley: It. Right? Mm-hmm <affirmative> so because of the pandemic, it had to become virtual. And what we learned is through having a virtual conference, people could come from all over the country, all over, all over the world. There were people from other countries who were able to join. And so it's going to remain a virtual conference and it features amazing speakers, including you and me.

Iva : Yes

Ashley: <laugh>. Um, and we all talk about navigating the emotional medical and logistical issues that are related to

Iva : Cleft. Every aspect of cleft is discussed, which is, I think is really great.

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Ashley: It's so cool. And so in that very first Cleft Con mm-hmm <affirmative> you and I were put on sort of a panel. I know mm-hmm <affirmative> and I remember even though there were other people on the panel, I remember thinking, Ooh, that I have a girl, I really like her. And I was like, I feel like we really vibe <laugh>

Iva : The feeling was the same. It was mutual. It was it's like, you know, I kind of like dating. It was like, I think so too <laugh>

Ashley: And so I was kind of like, oh, I kind of like her, I feel like I kind of vibe with her. Aw shucks. And then it was you who took our sort of relationship to the next level?

Iva : I did. I was like, okay, let's not play around, but no, seriously, because we were still in the pandemic and I was bored and I needed to connect with people. I started doing Instagram lives. Yes. And I was asking people to come on and we would talk about our cleft journey. And after we did Cleft Con, I was like, okay, I, I want to ask Ashley, but I have to admit, I was nervous to ask, thought that she would tell me no, I did. I,

Ashley: No, I'm like, I'm very nice. I'm the nicest person you'll ever meet

Iva : It. Wasn't about that. It was just like, I don't know. You might not have time. There's so many things that could come up. So I was just like, right. But I felt like that anytime I asked any guest, so I was like, okay. So,

Ashley: So I don't feel too special then

Iva : Yes. Feel special because there was nobody else that I wanted to do a podcast with. So <laugh> okay. So I reached out to her and she's like, yes. So it gets to the live. Yeah. And that is when I knew, I knew within the first five minutes, I was like, oh yeah, this is real because yeah. It was just our chemistry and how we were talking to the point that an hour flew by on the live. And we,

Ashley: We did, it was so fast.

Iva : We were still like, oh, I could keep going.

Ashley: I know. I really felt like we could have.

Iva : And so that for me was when I was like, uh, oh, and then we chatted offline. So, you know, it's a big deal. We took it off social media and we started, I was like, oh, okay. <laugh> <laugh>,

Ashley: It's becoming a real friendship.

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- Iva : It was becoming a real friendship. And then Cleft Con too. So we did 2021 together.
- Ashley: Yes. Right. And it was just you and me that time.
- Iva : It was just you and I. And um, we did dating and beauty and confidence. Yes. And we were talking, it was just so natural, even though it was virtual, it was truly like you and I were sitting in, in a room having girl talk.
- Ashley: Yes. And I felt like people who were watching felt that way too. Like they were just sitting with us hanging out. Yes they
- Iva : Did. Which is again, very crazy because people said in the comments, oh, I want this at the podcast. Well, we did deliver,
- Ashley: I know we after a whole lot of dreaming and like, you know, figuring out the steps, like we brought it to life. So again, couldn't be more happy to be here, you know, like, and to be with you. And it's so interesting because as an adult, sometimes it's hard to find friends.
- Iva : Oh, absolutely.
- Ashley: In your adult life, especially like the nature of my job as I move around to a lot of different buildings. So I don't see the same people every day. And you know, and it's also hard to find people who are at a similar stage of life as you, you know, not married with kids. I mean, of course I have amazing friends who are, but you know, sometimes the universe just knows when mm-hmm, <affirmative> two people need to be put in each other's pads. And so feel like the universe knew I needed you. So,
- Iva : And it's also great to have someone who's also cleft affected as a friend. I've never had that. I have never had that.
- Ashley: Yes. Right. And where we can openly talk about it.
- Iva : Right. And so I can sit here and say, Hey, did you have this? Is this weird? Yes. And you can be like, oh no, that, that same thing happened to me. And it's like, oh, okay. So I'm not,
- Ashley: Yes. You're not alone
- Iva : As we're going to, you know, in other episodes discuss how still, even though we are moving along in our cleft journey, sometimes navigating dating can still be tricky for us. And so we get to talk about that with each other that maybe our non cleft affected friends.

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Ashley: Don't get

Iva : It. They won't get it.

Ashley: Right. And I think it means more sometimes if I say something to you about like, man, I'm feeling really insecure about dating or whatever. And then like you hype me up or, or whatever, like I know that you at least know where I'm coming from. Yes. And it's not like a, oh, like, you know, brush it off, you know? Yeah. Because like you get where I'm coming from. And like, sometimes you just got to like share that with someone that you knows where you're coming from. Exactly.

Iva : And see that's the beauty

Ashley: Totally the beauty. And I also think something else that's really beautiful about this community, in general, is cleft affects all races, all ethnicities it's found in every country around the world, it's found across socioeconomic status, it's found across political [00:36:00] beliefs. And so it binds people together who otherwise might not have ever met or had the opportunity to meet just because we've shared this very unique, specific experience. And I think that's such a cool thing.

Iva : Exactly. No one is exempt, but then on the other side of that, it helps draw in you into other people. So that feeling of isolation or that I'm the only one going through this decreases.

Ashley: Yes. You're not.

Iva : So it's really great for the listeners who are cleft affected, like at least find one other cleft affected person. So you can have that sense of I'm not in this alone. That goes a long way.

Ashley: Yes. And I also found when I started seeking out other cleft affected people or in groups, mm-hmm, <affirmative>, it actually built up my confidence because you know, this is probably true for most people that like, I am much kinder to other people than the way that I speak to myself. Yes. And I'm trying to change that it's a work in progress. Right. Baby

Iva : Steps is cool.

Ashley: I realized, yes. In finding my community, I was able to see other cleft affected people and be like, wow, they're really beautiful. Or he's really handsome. Or she's doing really amazing things. And be like, if I could see that in them, why can't I see that in me?

Iva : Yes.

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Ashley: So having this incredible community has literally changed my life. And I just think it's such a, a beautiful place to be.

Iva : It is. And I'm glad to be a part of it. And I know that you are.

Ashley: Yes.

Iva : But I, for now at one of our favorite parts that I know that you guys are going to love it too. And this segment, we like to call Smile and Slay. We talk about questions that we've heard from friends, family, and even you, the audience. So today's Smile and Slay question is Ashley, do you think your cleft journey might have been different if you had been connected to the cleft community via social media when you were young? If yes. How so?

Ashley: That's a good question. And I'm not entirely sure that I know the exact answer because I feel like I identify with two parts of my myself. Right.

Iva : Okay. Explain that.

Ashley: Yeah. <laugh> the adult more healed part of me. Mm-hmm <affirmative> it wants to say immediately. Yes. Immediately. Yes. This would've absolutely revolutionized my, my growing up experience because I would've had a role model. I would have maybe been able to, to connect to other kids and teens who were affected by cleft and I would've felt less alone or isolated. Right. So there's that one side. But then there's another piece of me that is still in touch with who I was when I was young. And when I was young, I adamantly did not want to be, uh, associated with people in the cleft community because I was firmly trying to convince everyone, including myself, that I was just like, everyone else. I wasn't different. I didn't look different. I was fine. Everything was fine. This

Iva : Is fine. I don't have a cleft. I don't know what you're talking about. And it's like,

Ashley: I know. And so I was like hiding it. And so I never wanted to like talk to any, like, I, I don't know, like there was a big part of me that was pushing that beach ball down. Right. That like, I don't think I wanted to, would've wanted to associate with anyone. So I guess my answer is I'm not entirely sure which path I would've taken. What about you?

Iva : So I do see both sides, but I would have to pick that for me. Yes. It would have been different now. Yeah. I'm not going to sit here and say that I would've proudly been waving the flag. Like what? No, no, no, no, no. I know myself enough to know that, like I would've, I would've followed, but I would've never let anyone know that I listened to it and I wouldn't have ever acknowledged it. But just knowing that it was there and being able to listen to it or just to being able to see another cleft affected adult, living their life. And they're doing all of

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these things for me would have been so impactful because I'm a very visual person. I like, I can see things clearly and I will run with it. I had no vision of what a cleft affected adult was. Ah. Yeah. And so that, that was, I think, uh, the real problem for me. So yeah, I would've loved to have that a part of my,

Ashley: I can definitely see that. And I actually think having the opportunity to listen in private would probably have really impacted everything because you don't have to be loud and open about it, but like you see the possibility, like you said at the beginning, and that possibility is so powerful. But if you can believe it, we have made it to the end of our very first podcast episode. Oh my gosh. And I have had the most fun with you and I can't wait to continue on this podcast journey with you. Yes. To, but that's totally our chat for today. Thank you so much for listening everyone. We would love to hear from you. You can find me on Instagram at CleftLove IG or on TikTok at CleftLove.

Iva : And you can find me on Instagram and TikTok at RealSophisticatedJoy. Don't forget to go to smiletrain.org to learn more about all of the wonderful things Smile Train is doing for the cleft community and around the world. You can find us on your favorite podcast streaming site while you're there. Don't forget to leave us a five star review. We know that you love this first episode. So come back next week. It gets even better. If you thought this was great. You haven't heard anything yet.

Speaker 3: Don't forget to hit the subscribe button

Iva : [00:42:00] And we'll see you next time. Yes. Bye guys. Bye.

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