Episode 001: You're Not Alone - Jamie Tworkowski

Please note: This transcript has been lightly edited to remove filler words or sounds.

Lindsay Kolsch [over music]: You're listening to the To Write Love on Her Arms podcast, a show about mental health and the things that make us human. We'll be sharing stories and conversations about topics we tend not to talk about, like depression, addiction, self-injury, and suicide.

Each week you'll be hearing stories from some amazing people. We'll talk about how mental health has shaped their journey, and you'll continue to hear ways how you can carry this conversation into your community. We hope you'll not only connect to the episodes and conversations in a meaningful way, but we hope that maybe this podcast will make it easier for you to have conversations in your own life.

[music playing]

Lindsay: Welcome to Episode 001 in the first season of the TWLOHA podcast. My name is Lindsay Kolsch. I'm part of the TWLOHA team, and I'm really excited to bring you some amazing conversations that we hope will be encouraging for you. On this episode, I sat down with To Write Love on Her Arms founder Jamie Tworkowski and we talked about our hopes for the podcast, how the organization and this movement began, and really his experience with mental health and navigating this conversation over the past 12 years.

Lindsay [over music]: We do want to provide a quick warning that this episode contains some strong language and description of self-injury. If you're in a difficult season, where this could be hard to hear—we suggest you listen with a friend or perhaps save it for another time.

Lindsay: So for the first episode we wanted to start a little bit at the beginning. We wanted to make sure that if you're finding this for the first time and wondering

what the heck is To Write Love on Her Arms, that they might have some background knowledge and kind of set the tone for the stories and conversations we're going to have. So Jamie, where would you start in the story?

Jamie Tworkowski: I would start in 2006 when this whole thing began, and back in 2006, there was no thought of starting a nonprofit. No thought of starting a movement or a charity or a brand or any of the things that we've been called over the years. It was just an attempt back then to help a friend and to tell a story. And specifically in 2006, I was introduced to a girl who very quickly became a friend, and today we would say our friend Renee Yohe. And when I met Renee, she was struggling with depression, addiction, self-injury, and had attempted suicide and was denied entry into a local treatment center in Orlando. And she ended up spending the next five days with some friends and I at the house that I was living at in Orlando at the time, and I was moved by the conversations that we had, and I had never had conversations like these. And we stayed up late five nights in a row getting to know Renee, getting to know her story, learning about things that had happened to her, learning about ways that she tried to cope, learning about a life that was filled with pain, but also a life that still had hope and also a girl that was incredibly gifted, creative, beautiful, talented. And I saw a life that was filled with contrast, and halfway in the middle of the five days I asked her what she thought about the possibility of telling her story and would have totally understood if she said no or no way or get lost.

Jamie: But instead she said she loved the idea that there could be a purpose for her pain. That maybe someone else could be encouraged by her story being told, that maybe someone else, some family, some individual could be introduced to hope by her story being told. After the five days that we spent together, she checked into a treatment center in Orlando, and I sat down and wrote a short story. I wrote two and a half pages and kept coming back to a phrase that I had written in the story. The phrase was "to write love on her arms" and really that was a goal and it was a goal that went back to something that happened the night that I met her. She, after I met her, took a razor blade to her left forearm and wrote the word "fuck up" and it occurred to me that so much of that was not about profanity but was about identity,

and I believed and I think I was among a group of friends who believed that she deserved better. That she deserved the chance to start over. That she was quite honestly not a fuck up, but she was someone who deserved love, who deserved healing, who deserved sobriety and redemption. And I remember thinking that would be a curious or unusual title, but it felt like perhaps the appropriate title to this story, and so I settled on those words "To Write Love on Her Arms" as the title of <u>this story</u>.

Lindsay: So what happens next? You write the story and then what?

Jamie: I write this story and it's 2006 and I quickly realized that I'm proud of what I've written, but we have the opportunity to do more because Renee is now in treatment. Her family doesn't have much money, she doesn't have any money, and someone has to pay for the treatment. Someone has to pay for her to get the help that she's now getting. And so I wonder if we can do more, even if I can do more than simply tell this story. 2006 was the moment of Myspace. It was the beginning of social media as we know it today in terms of social media becoming part of people's everyday lives: status updates, friend requests, comments, likes, followers. All of that can kind of be traced back to 2006 and Myspace becoming this massive mainstream thing out of nowhere. And so I decided to create a Myspace page to give the story a home and then also decided to print and sell t shirts as a way to help pay for Renee's treatment and initially just had the idea maybe we could sell 100 t shirts to friends, to friends of friends around town in Orlando, in central Florida, and the first box of these t shirts showed up at a friend's concert in south Florida.

Jamie: I had gotten to know some guys that play in one of my favorite bands, a band from San Diego called Switchfoot. 2006 was a huge moment for them as a band. They were playing to the biggest crowds they've ever played to because of a song called "Meant to Live" that was this hit single and so they're about to play to 2,000 people at a show in south Florida at a college in South Florida. And we opened the first box of these To Write Love on Her Arms t shirts. And my friend Jon Foreman, who's one of my heroes, one of my favorite people, is standing with

me. I think I've told him the story of Renee. He's maybe read the story that I had written, and he sees this first t shirt and just asks if it'd be okay to wear it on stage. And I was probably blown away and grateful and just sort of played it cool and said, "yeah, Jon, that would be great."

Jamie: And he ended up putting on this black t shirt that said To Write Love on Her Arms on the front in white. And Switchfoot took the stage, and he just mentioned it somewhere during their set in between songs and that first night we started to hear from people who found their way to the Myspace page. We heard from people who read the To Write Love on Her Arms story, and they responded because it sounded like their story or it felt like the story of someone they knew, maybe someone they had lost, someone they loved who they were concerned about. My friend Chad plays the drums in Switchfoot. He wore the shirt the next night at another show in Jacksonville, Florida, and more messages came in, and it was people asking for help. It was people asking how to help loved ones. It was so many people asking difficult questions, maybe sharing parts of their story that they had never shared before. And that is how it all started.

Lindsay: So you have messages now in a Myspace and what do you do with that? I mean, you're at this time, I don't know if you want to share a little bit about what you were doing kind of in your own life, but this was not something you were trying to start a nonprofit. So what was that experience like to have all of these questions coming at you about pretty significant life situations and, and mental health and things people weren't talking about. What was that like?

Jamie: Definitely. So back then I was working as a sales rep for the clothing brand Hurley, and that was my dream job when I got that job four years prior. I grew up a surfer. I grew up in love with the surf industry and was so happy and felt so lucky to get a job in that industry, especially at an early age, but I had dropped out of college to pursue this career and as you mentioned, I was not someone with nonprofit experience or mental health training and so part of it was surprising. Part of it was exciting to be getting these messages, but part of it was overwhelming and scary, and I knew I didn't have answers to these questions, but I also knew it was such a privilege to be the one reading and to have the opportunity to respond. I started to do the homework to learn about the resources that might exist.

Jamie: I wanted to be able to point people in good directions. I started to learn about treatment centers and crisis hotlines. Started to learn about support groups, books that people were recommending, websites that offered resources. Then I started to learn that there were so many people who wanted to help and there were so many places that were offering help, and if the story was the first blog that I posted on this myspace page, I think the next thing that went up was a find help blog and in a way that <u>lives on today</u>. We've been building this list of resources ever since and it was amazing to begin to see people take a step and for many of them perhaps the first step in the direction of being honest, in the direction of asking for help, and hopefully in the direction of recovery, sobriety, healing.

Lindsay: I'm wondering a little bit about the moment you realized that maybe this was more than just about Renee or more than just this season of people responding to that specific story. How did you know it was going to become something more that had its own kind of existence outside of that story?

Jamie: That's a great question. I think at first, as I mentioned, it really was this mix of emotions and some of that was excitement. Some of that was realizing the weight and being overwhelmed by what was coming, but it just kept coming and you know, more bands began to wear the t shirts. More messages began to come in. At first, if we heard from someone outside the state of Florida that felt far away, that felt exciting. And after a couple of weeks we're hearing from people in Canada and Australia and England, and it was undeniable that something was happening as you mentioned. But I think honestly the focus was just on trying to keep up and and really trying to respond. But it was easy to believe that if, if a thousand people responded a certain way that it was going to continue or that it could continue if, if not just the story, but maybe these ideas. The idea of hope, giving people permission to talk about these hard things. That if this could continue to get out in front of people, perhaps the response would and could continue as well.

Jamie: And so it was later that summer of 2006 that I ended up quitting my Hurley job and deciding to go full time with To Write Love on Her Arms, whatever that meant. You know, specifically it meant trying to start a nonprofit because even specifically financially, we were in a position to now do more than just help Renee, to now do more than just pay for her to go to treatment. Very quickly I had to realize that as you said, this was bigger than just Renee's story. This was bigger than just the To Write Love on Her Arms story. This was the chance not only to do more than tell one story, not only to do more than help one person, but suddenly this was about bringing hope and believing in the possibility of recovery for hundreds and pretty quickly thousands of people, not just across America but around the world. Because of, because we were using social media, we very quickly got to see the best of social media and the Internet in terms of communicating with people in places we had never been, in places I've still not been today, that we get to use social media and the Internet to bring hope and to bring stories of hope and to bring encouragement and resources to people in so many places.

Lindsay: So the story is out there. People are responding. You've left your job. So how did you get from that point to where we are today?

Jamie: So for the first year we operated under the umbrella of another nonprofit organization, and that gave us a big brother, that gave us someone that we could learn from. It was my friend Craig Gross, and I moved into his basement in Grand Rapids for the first month and just asked him a million questions, followed him around, had to learn what's a budget, what's a board of directors, how do you do speaking events, how do you build a website? All of these things that he had been doing for years and all of these things that were completely foreign to me. And so for the first year we operated that way. And then for the last, I guess 11 years or so, we've been on our own as a 501(c)(3), a nonprofit organization. Over the years, we have built a team. Over the years, we have built a home in Central Florida. We got our start in Orlando, and we have operated for years and years since about an hour east in Brevard County. We are sitting here in Melbourne, Florida, which is just over the bridge from where I grew up in Melbourne Beach. And what started as

just me and a Myspace page is now 15 people, full-time staff. We always have a house full of interns who come from not just across the country, but at times around the world to participate in this work, to work alongside our team, to live alongside folks they've never met before.

Jamie: We get to do so much online. We get to do so much on social media. Certainly on our own website. We get to hit the road and be part of more than 100 events that happen across the country and beyond every single year. We have now responded to more than 200,000 messages from more than 100 different countries, been able to give more than \$2,000,000 to treatment and recovery. And so it's just incredible as we sit here to be able to step back and think how far we've come and how we got to come from such a humble, simple beginning to what we do now where every day, you know, the work within these walls touches thousands and thousands of people literally around the world.

Lindsay: People may be curious: Why a podcast? I'd really love for you to share how the podcast connects to TWLOHA and the work we've been doing.

Jamie: It took me a while to realize that the primary thing we do as an organization is communicate. And we do that in a lot of different ways across a lot of different platforms, different mediums, different places. Even physical geographical places, events that we get to participate in and even create on our own. And so we love to communicate and, specifically, we love to communicate hope. And with everything we do, we are usings words to try to move people. We try to move people from a place of isolation, pain, sadness, grief to a place of healing, hope, recovery, change. And, obviously, in 2018 podcasts are so incredibly popular and so we love this idea of using this medium to bring hope to people.

Lindsay: At the heart of it really, it's still that core message of communicating that it's okay to talk about the issues: depression, addiction, self-injury, and suicide. It's okay to ask for help. And so we've built out programs and, you know, continued to go and do different types of events that allow us to simply communicate that specific message. So it's interesting to me always when, when we tell the story

about To Write Love on Her Arms, how people want to say, "okay, so is it like, is it like lobbying?" or like they're not quite sure where to put it. So I'm curious if you've kind come to a place where you can explain shortly like at the heart of what we're doing with our programming and with everything that we do basically.

Jamie: I may have touched on it earlier, but in my mind, the biggest thing we do, the primary thing we do is communicate. And with that, we want to move people. I often hear another kind of catchphrase is people say, "Oh, you guys raise awareness" and it's actually our friend Aaron Moore, who's a licensed mental health counselor, who kind of...I first heard push back at that idea. I think people are aware that depression exists. People are aware that self-injury, addiction, suicide these things exist. And I heard Aaron say we want to raise awareness about people. We want to invite people to be aware of the folks around them and the ways they might be hurting, the ways they might be struggling. And then as you said, we want to invite people to be honest and to know that it's okay to ask for help. And so I also come back to this idea: We just want to move people. We want to move people out of shame, out of isolation, out of sorrow, grief, depression, addiction into a place of healing, recovery, sobriety, believing that life is worth living, believing that things can change, believing that things can get better.

Lindsay: Yeah. When you look back over the past 12 years, and all of the different moments, and I imagine the hills and the valleys, what kind of things stand out to you as being most significant when telling kind of the story of To Write Love on Her Arms.

Jamie: So there's a couple examples that come to mind or a couple things that come to mind. I think the brightest, biggest moment we've ever had as an organization was at the end of 2011, the American Giving Awards, when we won \$1,000,000 on national television, when Bob Costas handed me a fake check for \$1,000,000. And that's a night it's hard to believe that it even happened, that it was even real, you know, not only to be given that amount of money as an organization, but to be given that platform of national television prime time it, it was a night that

looked and felt like the Grammys or the Oscars and just to be in the room was an honor, was exciting. You were there.

Lindsay: Yeah, it was awesome.

Jamie: Yeah, but to, to not only be in the room but to win, you know, to go home with this check that just changes not only the next year but the years to come for us was incredible.

Jamie: And so I think that's, it's hard to imagine a bigger moment than that. For me personally, I was able to speak for 60 seconds on television, and it was the chance to think about what would you say if you had a minute in this giant audience. And so that was really special for me personally, but I think the best moment that I get to have pretty consistently is just meeting someone who says, "I'm still alive because of the work you guys do." And I get to have that conversation face-to-face, sometimes meeting a stranger who has tears in their eyes, meeting someone that has a To Write Love on Her Arms tattoo, but they talk about what this organization has meant to them and how we somehow brought them hope and somehow invited them to think differently about their story, about their pain, perhaps about their recovery. And that never gets old to meet people who say they might not otherwise be here, they might not still be breathing, they might not still be alive, if not for the work that we get to do. And so to me, that's the heart of the matter. That's, that's the best thing. That's what, what keeps us going.

[music playing]

Lindsay: So I wanted to turn it back a little bit to you. We've talked a lot about To Write Love on Her Arms is the organization, but as a person, you get to use your platforms a lot to share your own experience with mental health. And I was curious if you could kind of talk about what To Write Love on Her Arms has taught you about your own mental health experience and if you'd share a little bit about that.

Jamie: That's a great question. I am someone who struggles with depression. That's been true for years. I think in my life it's most often attached to heartache. Breakups have always been really hard for me, but depression has been something in my life on and off for years. And I, in a way, learned the hard way that the stuff we talk about is true. And I think I got comfortable standing on a stage or being in an interview telling people it's okay to be honest. Telling people you're made to have honest relationships. You're, you're made to be in community. Telling people it's okay to go to counseling. But I had not yet taken those steps. Even specifically telling people it's okay to take medicine before I got to a place of realizing I was someone who needed to take medicine. And so over the last seven or eight years, all of those things have changed in my life, and I'm really thankful for the advice that we give and even the advice at times that I give because these are tools that I am now thankful for.

Jamie: You know, I'm someone who goes to counseling. I'm someone who takes an antidepressant every night, and there's no shame. There's no, I think like anything as you do something, it gets easier. And so I'm totally comfortable saying those things, saying that I struggle and saying I'm thankful for the tools that I take advantage of to find stability, to find healing. You know, even in the context of my job and my history here, there's, there's been times I've taken a sabbatical or taken a break or certainly taken mental health days to make it a priority, to make my own recovery a priority. One thing I've realized is me being honest about my life, and specifically about dealing with depression, gives other people permission to do the same. And so I think that is something I'm so thankful for is, that by me choosing to be honest, whether it's on the To Write Love on Her Arms blog over the years or today on Instagram or Twitter or in a talk at a school, that hopefully it lets someone else know that they are not alone in what they're feeling and what they might be struggling with.

Jamie: And that to me is definitely something I'm thankful for, is this idea that our honesty is contagious and that all of us, regardless of your job, regardless of your platform or influence, that we all can do that, that we all can choose to be open and honest. We can choose to talk about things that people tend not to talk about. And

somehow it just continues to spread. That if you're honest, it gives someone else permission to be honest and that gives someone else permission to do the same. And suddenly that stigma begins to go away. If the stigma is the idea, *you can't talk about these things. You can't go there. You can't say that.* But just by talking about it, just by us being willing even to have this conversation, the hope is that we make it easier for other people to be honest, to be open, and not only to do that, but ultimately to ask for help and to believe that it's okay to ask for help.

Lindsay: Yeah. I keep coming back to the idea that this story really took root in social media and yet we've seen over the past 12 years kind of what social media has become and the desire to make life look so perfect...the pressure that people today are facing, that you and I face, that everyone really faces that's even using social media. And wondering like how do you find a balance of sharing honestly?

Jamie: I think that balance might look different for each of us, and it might look different during different seasons or even on different days. And I think what I come back to, I think as I've gotten older and further even along this To Write on Her Arms journey is the idea that that can't be that social media can't be the primary thing in my life. It can't be the primary way that I connect with other people. It's a platform that I'm thankful for and I want to encourage people, I want to inspire people, but I, at this point in my life, I'm more and more thankful for my friends, for the people that have known me since long before this organization began, I'm more and more thankful for my family. And I think I love the irony of what we do, where we do so much online.

Jamie: We do so much on social media, and we love and embrace social media, but we also tell people at a certain point you have to put your phone down and look someone in the eyes and have an honest conversation. And I love that it's not all or nothing. It's not one or the other. We can embrace social media, we can use it, we can use it to move people. We can use it to be honest, we can even use it to ask for help, but there's so much value to be placed in that physical proximity. You know, even the idea of going to counseling that it's so, you know, I cherish the one hour a week where I sit in a room with a counselor. There's no phones, and we just have an honest conversation about the hardest things in my life. And so I feel like that balance is so important.

Lindsay: So you talked a little bit about your own experience. What kind of other things do you feel like...self-care is kind of a topic that a lot of people talk about, and obviously we encourage that and we believe that that's really important. What kind of things do you feel like best represent you caring for yourself?

Jamie: I think some of it's as simple as hours. When this...when To Write Love on Her Arms was taking off and when our team was much smaller, especially when it was just me, I would work around the clock. I would work at night, I would work weekends, holidays, and I just thought if I wasn't working to build and maintain this thing, it would go away, it would fall apart. And a lot of that was rooted in stress and fear and worry, and I think I had to learn the hard way that you can't work all the time and that you'll actually do better work if your life has other things, you know. So I've, I've come to value even reconnecting with things I loved as a kid. So things as simple as surfing and basketball. Even being a basketball fan today, being an uncle, you know, treasuring my relationship with my nephews, being a brother, being a son, being a best friend. I've realized my life has to have more than my job, and my identity can't only be found in my job or in this organization.

Jamie: And so that was, and it is a bit of a buzz word, but I think it's a good one. And I also love to tell people it. It will likely look different for each of us. You love yoga, you love podcasts. Your self-care might look different than mine, but we both need it. And so I love to tell people it's sort of a buffet where we might pick different things, but the important thing is that we do it, is that we have some space, even things as simple as sleep, like just realizing these things matter. What we eat, you know, do we, what do we do to find time to smile? I'm thankful for all of these things that 10 or 12 years ago I was not thinking about.

Lindsay: Yeah. So I mean 12 years...I keep coming back to that number because I think...whenever someone's introduced, and they say, "how long have you all been

around" and you say "12 years old" they say "wow." So how has, how has the conversation just even about mental health changed in your opinion?

Jamie: I do think more and more people are having the conversation, which I think is so good. You see more and more headlines. You see more and more articles. You see more and more online. I think 15 years ago a lot of people didn't know what self-injury was, maybe they had never heard that phrase, and there's still so much work to be done. There's still so much...there's so many people who struggle, but I am thankful that more and more people seem to be talking about these difficult issues about mental health issues, about addiction, self-injury, suicide, anxiety, eating disorders, and we want to meet people in their pain. We are thankful that the conversation continues to grow, but we know there's still so much work to be done.

Lindsay: So I'm curious to hear from you, Jamie, what...what's on the horizon for you?

Jamie: I'm going to work on another book. My first book, *If You Feel Too Much*, was a dream come true. Just the whole process of releasing a book and doing a book tour and getting to interact with people who read the book and cared about it. So I'm excited to do that again. I've been hosting some workshops, two-day workshops that are sort of two-day conversations with a small group of people. Each one is right around 40 people. We did the first two in Florida, did one in California, we just did one in Nashville, and it's a chance for me to share a lot of what I've experienced over the last 12 years and really in my life in general, to talk about my work and my journey as it relates to To Write Love on Her Arms. And so that's a little bit about what life looks like for me.

Jamie: I just know that with everything I do, I want to encourage people. I want to inspire people. I want to invite people to have conversations like this one that we've been having...to know that it's okay to talk about difficult things. It's okay to ask painful questions and to know that you are not alone and to know that life is worth living.

Lindsay: And if you could talk to anyone struggling right now, um, what would you tell them?

Jamie: If you're listening and you're struggling, I would start by saying I'm sorry. I'm sorry for the pain that you feel. I'm sorry for what you've been through. I would say on behalf of this organization, on behalf of our team, that you are not alone and that you are not meant to be alone in the places that hurt, in the parts of your story that you don't like.

Jamie: I would encourage you to know it's okay to be honest, that it's okay to speak up, that you were made to be in relationships. We believe that people need other people, that we're not intended to live this life and walk through this life alone. But it requires us to speak up and to say how we feel and to say what we need. You deserve people who know you beyond social media...they know you beyond accomplishments and vacations and promotions. You deserve people who know you and meet you in the hard places, the parts that hurt, the questions. And more than anything, I would encourage you if you're struggling to know that it's okay to ask for help. We would point you to professional help. I am someone who has benefited from professional help. I'm someone who, for the last several years, basically every single week, has sat across from a counselor and had a really honest conversation about the things in my life that hurt. And I would hope that you could do that.

Jamie: I would hope that you could have that, that you could have and get whatever help you need. Whether it's sitting with a counselor, whether it's stepping into treatment. Maybe it starts by calling a crisis hotline. Maybe it starts by sending a text to Crisis Text Line. Anyone, anywhere, at any hour of the day in America can send a text to 741741, and you will get a response from a trained crisis counselor and so almost instantly you won't be alone in what you're going through. You won't be alone in what you're feeling and how you're struggling, and so I would encourage you to reach out, to be honest, to believe that you deserve friends, to believe that you deserve a support system, and to believe that you deserve whatever help you need.

Lindsay: Thanks so much for sharing that Jamie. I'm sure there's somebody listening who really needed to hear that.

[music playing]

Lindsay: And that's our first episode of the To Write Love on Her Arms podcast. As Jamie mentioned, we're excited to communicate the message of TWLOHA in this new format. We hope each episode is a reminder that your story is important, you matter, and you're not alone.

[music playing]

Lindsay: We understand that so many of you listening might be struggling or know someone who is struggling with the issues that we've been talking about. We believe that help exists. Part of our mission is to connect people to the help that they need and deserve. You can find local mental health resources at our website twloha.com and click the FIND HELP at the top of the page. Or if you need to talk to someone right now, you can always connect with our friends at Crisis Text Line. Simply text the word TWLOHA - that's TWLOHA - to 741741 and you'll be connected to a trained crisis counselor. It's free, confidential, and available 24/7.

Lindsay: If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, we hope you'll subscribe on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts. And if you can do us a favor, we'd really love for you to write us a review. It will help more people find this podcast and the mission of TWLOHA. If you have any questions, please send us an email to podcast@twloha.com.

Lindsay: A big thank you to our friends at Copeland for the original music on this episode. The TWLOHA podcast is produced by Mark Codgen. Editorial support was provided by Claire Biggs and Jennie Armstrong of Lore de Force. And music assistance provided by James Likeness and Ben Tichenor. I'm Lindsay Kolsch. Thank you so much for listening.

[music playing]

Lindsay: To Write Love on Her Arms is a nonprofit movement dedicated to presenting hope and finding help for people struggling with depression, addiction, self-injury, and suicide. TWLOHA exists to encourage, inform, inspire, and also to invest directly into treatment and recovery.

Lindsay: You can find more information on TWLOHA at twloha.com.