

[Theme music: upbeat electronica plays in the background as Katie speaks.]

Katie Axelson: Welcome to Have Hope; Will Travel. When we travel, we get to know people who are different than we are. We hear different perspectives, we better understand other stories. We learn to stand with people instead of having opinions on issues. I'm your host Katie Axelson. This is the episode I mentioned to email friends during Advent. If you want to be email friends and sometimes hear about podcasts before they're released, hop over to [KatieAxelson.com](http://KatieAxelson.com). I mentioned the episode because it's a heavy one. In this episode we're going to talk about suicide, we're going to talk about depression, we're going to talk about poverty, we're going to talk about divorce. It's heavy. If you're not at a place where it would be good for you to listen to this episode, it's okay to skip this one. Maybe listen to Episode {84} instead, where Karis Meier talks about is suffering redeemable. But don't forget to hit subscribe, so you don't miss other powerful voices who are going to come share their stories.

[Theme music: upbeat electronica continues to play in the background before Katie begins to speak again. It fades out after a few moments.]

Katie Axelson: Welcome to Have Hope; Will Travel. I'm your host Katie Axelson. I'm here with a new friend, Sequana. Sequana is a queer hip hop artist of faith, she's a queer Black woman who's a poet, she's a divorced mother of four, she's a suicide attempt survivor and she's here to share a little bit of her story. So Sequana, welcome to the show.

Sequana Murray: Hi. Thanks for having me.

KA: I am so glad that you are here because I know you have a really powerful story and I look forward to getting to hear more than what we've already shared together so let's just open up space for you to share a little bit about who you are and what brought you to this place.

SM: Yeah I'm a thirty-two year old divorced, single parent of four who's also Black, queer, impoverished, and Christian-adjacent and a hip hop artist. And how I arrived at each of these points is really a story of within itself. I'm originally from Charleston South Carolina but my mom was military so we moved around a little bit throughout my childhood. I have three other siblings that I grew up with, an older brother and then two younger sisters. I also have a half sister that I did not grow up with. When it came to like, just moving around the most impactful move to me was when we moved to Italy when I was fourteen years old. And we stayed there for three years and for me it definitely was an amazing coming of age, just getting exposed to a completely different culture and different food and getting to travel to other European countries while I was there. And I just absolutely loved it. And I doubt that I'd be able to return one day to visit. And so after that we moved to Maryland and we were there for four years and during that time I started college as a film major but that got cut short after I got pregnant out of wedlock with my first child. And then when my mom was done there she retired and moved down to South Carolina and my younger sisters and I moved down with her, but my brother stayed in Maryland. And so after my first year back down in South Carolina I moved back up to Maryland and ended up getting married to a guy that I had met from my college days. He and I had a very rocky marriage which ended after seven years. Together we have three children. And I started writing music back in 2016.

KA: Okay.

SM: Music choose me, like I didn't choose music. I literally was just minding my business one day, just driving down a highway and the next thing I know I get this melody stuck in my head and I just had to get it out. And I recorded it on my phone and then within a few days I had what sounded like a hook and then a few weeks after that I had the song fully written.

KA: Wow.

SM: The song, it discussed how I was feeling at the time being separated from my husband, and being a functionally single parent. And my song catalog has only grown since then. But it usually, when I write songs that's kinda how it happens. I'm just doing something random and then something random will come in my head and the next thing I know, I have a song. So...

KA: That's a cool way to write.

SM: Yeah yeah I love it. I do. A lot of my songs were written in my kitchen where I live now and for a while, I kind of saw my kitchen as my sanctuary. I would get the most inspiration. So it's been cool to experience music in that way, where it just feels more natural and I don't have to like, force myself to write. It just comes to me.

KA: That's awesome. I wish inspiration came to me more easily like that. So refer to yourself as "Christian-adjacent." Can you define what that means for us?

SM: I grew up very religious, and not necessarily because my family was super religious, but just, that was just how I interpreted scriptures. And so I was very legalistic from a young age and how I viewed the world was very black and white: don't do this, do this. Like, that type of view. And so from the time I was about nine to twenty-one I was, I just had that perception of the world. And I was "like a goody two shoes." I gained a lot of things, I didn't party, I didn't drink I didn't do drugs, I didn't cuss out loud. I was very much a poster child for legalism. And it wasn't til I was twenty-one that I feel like I really met like God for real and I really looked at things less from a scope of a workspace righteousness, and seeing that Jesus was enough for me, and just functioning out of that mindset. And that carried me all the way until, I want to say early this year. My faith was something that I had never felt, um that always felt safe, that always felt that I would never lose, like no matter what happened to me, that that's something that I would cling to like forever. Like it was something I felt that I was established but early, early this year I just kinda hit a point to where I was just tired of feeling like forgotten by God, or feeling like I was getting bread crumbs of Him all the time. It was like, you know, almost feeling like God was stringing me along, and giving me just enough of what I needed to get through whatever hard time but not enough to like feel peace and really be at rest for an extended period of time. And I just, I noticed that like, after all the years that I put in and I just was like, "I don't know how I feel about You anymore God, because this doesn't feel like love. This feels like something else that I can't quite define." And so for the first time, ever since I like picked up the Bible since I was nine years old, the first time this year I put it down and I just paused everything that was religious about me, in terms of like praying to God and having faith, and being secure in what I believed spiritually. And I wasn't - I didn't feel that security anymore and I'm still kind of in that place of figuring out God. And like, God why are you the way You are? Like -

KA: Sure

SM: And asking questions that maybe people feel afraid to ask. And that's just kind of where I am. I'm - I haven't quite landed in any one place or the other when it comes to that, but I'm, I can't say confidently that I'm a Christian right now.

KA: Okay, yeah.

SM: So yeah, it's been - it's been a journey. I've described it to one of my friends as like, it's just feeling like floating in space untethered.

KA: Sure.

SM: Trying to find a lifeline to get myself tethered to something.

KA: Yeah. So you want to be tethered to something?

SM: Or just to feel like what I'm doing has an end goal or an ultimate purpose, that I'm working towards something. And you know, that life isn't just life on Earth and that's it. Yeah so just me wanting answers.

KA: Yeah. How has your experience with depression affected this journey?

SM: I think that it definitely has played a role in where I am now.

KA: Okay.

SM: And a lot of things that are contributing to that depression, with just being chronically in poverty and not having the support that I need from my kids' father.

KA: Yeah.

SM: And like, me feeling like because of those things and other things that play into that, but because of those things, that God is neglecting me. Like, God where are You? You said you provide for our needs, but I feel like even basic things, You're not meeting those needs. And with my faith being such a central part of who I was, and how I identified, like as that started to unravel the revelation of all these things, the realization like, everything else started to unravel as well. It's like it's all connected and it's all a big mess.

KA: Yeah.

SM: Yeah. It's definitely been quite a journey.

KA: Yeah. I can imagine. What kind of - what has help looked like? As you've walked through poverty, and through depression, and through single motherhood?

SM: Well just speaking to just, just single parenting, just from my own experience, like some things that are helpful for me are not assuming that all we need are clothes and food. Like for instance, I live in a low income part of town. And every now and again, like I'll open my door and I'll see like, a box of food just on the porch. And I'll see that they would have done that with everybody else in the neighborhood. But in my mind, I'm thinking, you know, I appreciate the thought but you know, this isn't the best thing that I need right now. I have EBT. I don't need

food. And people just kind of take the easy way out of offering help and assistance, but I feel like mental healthcare is something that is in need as well. And because, for someone like me I tend to be alone most days. I don't always get to have extended adult interactions and sometimes help looks like just being able to have a deep conversation with another adult. Sometimes it looks like funding me having some time away from the home life, just to be an adult, to be able to do something that I like, to you know, just feel like myself again.

KA: Yeah.

SM: Because that's helpful.

KA: Sure.

SM: Just regaining, maintaining my sanity, in the midst of everything I'm dealing with. And there are times, like when the stress of everything, the chaos of the busy-ness, the tears, the trying to fix everybody's problems, keeping the house clean, it can all feel suffocating.

KA: Sure.

SM: And just having the ability to come up for air every now and again can be like super helpful. And I feel like people think that recreation is a luxury, when really I think it's a necessity. Like it's not something that I feel like only the rich should have, or only people who are mentally stable deserve to have.

KA: Sure.

SM: I think we all need that as human beings, to function at a healthy level.

KA: Yeah.

SM: And so I think having more access to recreation, or just being able to do things that we enjoy, would be so much more helpful. Like if someone had left movie tickets on my porch, that would have been a whole lot more helpful for me. [Squana laughs.]

KA: For sure.

SM: Than like a box full of cans and rice. It just goes a whole lot further.

KA: Teah that's a good call especially with EBT. Like, you're right - food may not be the biggest need and if you're just leaving something on the porch, you don't know what the biggest need is.

SM: Right.

KA: What are some other barriers that we can together work to remove?

SM: I just think, I think in a general sense, like and particularly with people who struggle with like have mental health issues and they need access to a therapist and medication. I think getting help can look like, look like giving that to them. Or even like getting adequate childcare to give you the freedom to be able to go to therapy or go to work to be able to even afford these things, for whatever insurance might not be able to cover. And yeah, 'cause sometimes a barrier is not having access to things graphically like sometimes there aren't enough providers in your area for you to go to, who are qualified to assist you in the way that you need. I think also like, just

when it comes to insurance, I think if they were able to expand their networks to make it easier for people to tap in because sometimes there are qualified providers but your insurance won't cover it, and it's like "Well that's not helpful."

KA: Right. Not helpful.

SM: Yeah. I think also transportation is also a barrier because not everybody has a car -

KA: Sure.

SM: - to be able to get to these places and so making things more accessible in that way, whether it's having programs where people can have access to transportation when they needed or making - having providers have more virtual options.

KA: Sure.

SM: For their services. And I have noticed there has been a more of an uprising in that since the pandemic so I do think that there are things that are happening that are being - that are helpful.

KA: Yeah. That is super helpful and that's a change I noticed when the pandemic too, more virtual options for everything. Which does remove out of the transportation barrier.

SM: Yeah.

KA: So you've attempted suicide multiple times. Would you be willing to share a little bit about what that journey looked like and what got you to that point?

SM: Yeah. So my journey, it started all the way back when I was about thirteen.

KA: Okay.

SM: And back then I was a quiet kid who didn't have a whole lot of friends at school. I was very socially awkward and this was before I really had a, knew a label to call that. And I just felt misunderstood, not only by my peers but by my parents. And I - back then I didn't want to seek the help of a therapist because I didn't want to bring shame to my family for needing that kind of help. Because in the Black community, seeking mental health services is a very hush hush kind of thing. And to this day I don't know anyone in my family who sought that kind of help or who might take medication for their mental health. Like, we just don't talk about it. So fast forward to college where I was still trying to find myself, but coming to term with my social awkwardness and seeing how isolated it made me feel. And I had had some suicidal like, thoughts back then but it never went further than just the thoughts. And all the while like, I'm still very religious and I kept just trying to pray it away and trying to glean whatever I could from the scriptures because there was a part of me that believed that being depressed constantly was tied to some kind of sin in some kind of way. But then by the time I was twenty-one I was a new mom, a single parent, and I had dropped out of college. I was living back with my family, and I had very little income, I had no health insurance, I had no direction for where my life was going, I was angry and depressed and suicidal because in all areas, friendships, finance, religion, healthcare - I just had very little to work with. And - and then this is the part where I feel like I met God for real, because this is the part where He met me one night and I just felt like this joy and undeniable like, peace.

KA: Yeah.

SM: That overcame me. At the height of all of these feelings. And that's when my gears shifted about life. So fast forward to twenty-two, that's when I got married. And like I said, my marriage was the marriage hell from day one. Within the first two months, yeah, within the first two months I was in the hospital because I had my - I had attempted suicide for the first time.

KA: Yeah.

SM: And I had just gotten to this point where I just felt like I wasn't enough.

KA: Okay.

SM: Just as a mom, as a wife, as a friend. My ex-husband and I, we would just argue all the time, and for hours. And I was not used to that. I had never argued with anyone in my life ever, like, until that point, until I met him. And I just constantly felt like my opinions didn't matter and that as a human being, I just wasn't respected and that no matter how hard I tried I just would never meet his standards. So when I was put in the hospital I was finally in a position to where I had to deal with my depression in a practical way, 'cause I couldn't get released until I got evaluated from a psychist. And I ended up getting diagnosed with clinical depression. And after my time in the hospital I started trying to get it set up with a therapist, or just reaching out to see if someone would listen within my friend circle. But then a year later I had my second attempt and it was a similar thought process, similar triggers, that stem mostly from my marriage even though like, at that point in time my ex-husband and I were separated. I still was feeling like I wasn't enough. And I was just ready to meet God because I was over everything. But my next suicide attempt, it happened about eight years after that. And during that time period I found myself - I had learned to stop letting like, who my ex-husband defined me to be, to be if I don't agree on how I saw myself and how I felt that God saw me. I matured emotionally. I learned how to better take responsibility for my actions. I did everything I could to be a better mom and a wife and a friend and I leaned more on my friends and just became more vulnerable with trusting people. I accepted the fact that not all marriages are from God, and that is not wrong for me to detach myself in toxic situations which guided me to getting a divorce.

KA: Yeah.

SM: When in the end, I was just metamorphosing in leaps and bounds, in ways that I never would have imagined that I was discovering myself. But my momentum got shattered shortly after I broke up with my ex-fiance.

KA: Yeah.

SM: And I just had gotten in to a point where my soul was just tired. I was tired of poverty, I was tired of struggling - I was struggling financially, tired of struggling as a mom. I was just tired of how the world coddles men who just refuse to grow up. I was just tired of everything and I really just wanted rest. And thankfully I ended up surviving that attempt.

KA: Yeah!

SM: And just from that point, just this time around I just kinda - I slowed down and I just paused everything, and it took a few days after my attempt for me to soul search and just regain a sense of purpose and to be sure of myself, and that I wanted to stay on earth, to be able to say confidently that I was ready to try again. And so here I am.

KA: Here you are.

SM: And I've been in therapy for over a year, and I have established friendships with people who informed me I can lean on them whenever I'm having these kind of thoughts

KA: Nice.

SM: I also, in recent months I've changed career paths just to help establish and ensure more financial stability. So I'm trying to pivot into tech.

KA: Cool.

SM: Yeah. Just things have just been better. I'm just trying to set up a better foundation for things, so I don't get to those same points.

KA: Yeah that's really smart. Knowing where you tend to trip and then making sure you've got safeguards to try to avoid tripping in those same spots.

SM: Mhmm.

KA: What do you wish everyone knew about suicidal ideation?

SM: My only thoughts to that are just, just it's not always easy to know what will trigger them.

KA: Sure.

SM: But in that learning those triggers just takes the awareness and sensitivity, not only for yourself but from others as well. Yeah, that's the main thing that I have to say about that.

KA: Yeah. What is helpful if we know that someone we love is struggling with suicidal ideation?

SM: So I'm saying this and I'm not a medical professional -

KA: Of course.

SM: - I can only speak from my experience but I will say just being real with people.

Acknowledging their pain, and not being dismissive of it. Like for me, toxic positivity is something that I absolutely despise. Like people just feeling like "positive vibes only" and you know, "everything's going to work out" and these false promises of hope with everything working out - they're not usually helpful, because chances are that person has already gone through every possible scenario in their head of how things can work out with the resources that they have and have determined that it won't work out. And so if people are coming and insisting, that it can cause just further frustration and detachment from those people. And I think also just listening. Listening is helpful. And just giving like tangible action steps for how situations can be remedied even if it's not like, having all the answers. Just something. Not saying like, "Well, let me know if you need anything," not those generic type statements because a lot of times these people who are struggling, like they probably have already let you know what they needed. And

they're crying out for help and have felt ignored because of that. So I think, you know, having specific conversations and being very direct about how you can help is helpful, and not assuming what you think people need. Because it's like, "No, I don't need random people telling me they're pray for me. I need someone to hang out with me, like so I can vent." Just being very specific.

KA: Yeah, that's good. Phe thing you've talked about online is what does it look like to befriend your depression. Can you share a little bit about more about that?

SM: Sure. Befriending my depression just looks like me first acknowledging its presence, because it's a condition that I think tends to get dismissed or diminished as simply stress or in religious circles like a lack of faith or prayer towards sadness that just needs a little cheering up.

KA: Yeah.

SM: And I think acknowledging it requires a level of honesty that some people aren't always willing to offer. But I think that's a first step and I think once that hurdle is cleared, you know, then like for me it just became "Oh well I just want this thing inside of me to go away. How can I make it go away? I want to be normal." Just the shame that comes along with being labeled as depressive, like you know the stigmas can feel overwhelming. But I got to a point where I discovered that maybe I wasn't asking the right questions. Like instead of asking, "How do I make it go away?" Maybe a better question is, "How do I understand it?" And I was fighting so hard to be normal, but it was like, maybe I should have been fighting harder to be safe because normal is subjective.

KA: Right.

SM: And like, maybe finding a safe normal is a better goal. And for me I felt - I felt like this put me in a more open and teachable position to understand the root of my depression, to understand my triggers, to respect my emotions as a valuable part of me and not a burden. Because our emotions are indicators of like, something that could be wrong or sometimes. Its's not helpful to ignore them. So by doing those things, it helped me to figure out what guardrails I could put up to protect myself.

KA: Yeah.

SM: And to understand what I needed to feel safe in my mind, to feel safe in my physical location, to feel safe financially, and to just work towards establishing those parameters on my own and with the help of outside resources and with friends. So befriending my depression was treating my depression with care and discernment for however long it would accompany on my life journey.

KA: Yeah.

SM: And instead of attacking it and having a harsh attitude towards even the idea of it, I opted to hold its hand and I'm just letting it teach me whatever it needs to teach me about myself and about life.

KA: Sure. That sounds really powerful. Sequana, where can we find you online?



SM: You can definitely find me on my website which is BandysNotebook.Net. On there I have like a blog and music. You can also find me on Instagram at my handle is @BandyTheNomad. I would say Twitter, but Twitter's kind of in chaos right now.

KA: Twitter is a little bit of a mess. [Katie and Sequana laugh.]

SM: But if it's still around by the time people hear this podcast you can find me at @MurraySequana on there. And yeah those are my main places. I have a TikTok but I don't really be doing nothing important over there. [Sequana laughs.]

KA: I get that. So the show is built around the idea that we're always learning something, we're always listening to different perspectives and so I would love to learn, or to hear, what is something you learned recently?

SM: Lecrae recently came out with Church Clothes 4. I don't know if you listen to Christian hip hop music.

KA: Yeah!

SM: That came out a couple weeks ago and there's a song on there, it's called Journey and the hook, the premise of the song, is like it's not necessarily about the destination it's about the journey, of how - what happens, how you transform in the journey of getting to a destination. And I've just been playing that song on repeat because he talks about his deconstruction in the album, and then I feel like I'm kind of where he might have been a couple years ago but I haven't quite landed.

KA: Sure.

SM: So just recently, a couple days ago, I had to present a project for – in front of a panel of people – for this internship that I currently am in the runnings for. And the final phase of the internship was presenting this project of something we had to, of this dashboard we had to make in the cloud. And I presented, but I was very sad because I didn't get to finish the project. I didn't get to the part to where I could visualize all of my data like everyone else did. But - and I let one of the panelists know what was going on in my head and my process and where I was, and she was like, "Well just show up anyways." And I did. And just encouraged everyone to present what they had and however far they got.

KA: Yeah.

SM: And for me when it comes to presentations I like to go all the way out. I like to knock things out of the park and really impress people. So the fact that I didn't get to get to that portion, to the finish line to be able to really wow everybody like that took a toll on me and that was really sad. Not only because of that, but because like this internship means a lot to me, and getting it could really be that foot in the door that I need to really start climbing up the ladder in the tech world. So it was a lot riding on the line. And so I presented what I had and I just went through the process of how I got as far as I did with the panelist and with the group, and by the time I was done presenting like I was crying and in tears. And towards the end of like, the meeting they had everybody turn their cameras on because they wanted to take a picture, and because my

camera was off the whole time. And I turned it on and they saw that I was crying. And they had me stay back after the meeting was over.

KA: Yeah.

SM: And they were just encouraging me.

KA: Yeah.

SM: Just saying like, "You know, this isn't - this process really wasn't necessarily about getting to the finish line but just seeing your thought process, of how you are getting through each of the steps." And they were saying, you know, "You're standing out to us in ways that the other people others aren't, maybe in ways that you even can't see." And they were just really, really encouraging me and like - that whole thought process of: okay well it's not necessarily about the finished product sometimes. Sometimes it's just about the journey. And so if I was able to just demonstrate just my talents to them, just off of the journey alone. Like if they were able to see that from me. But that alone, like that encouraged me.

KA: Yeah.

SM: You know? Maybe I am putting a bigger emphasis on this than I realized, I might just be okay. Because one of the guys was like, "I hope they pick you. I think X So-And-So would be thrilled to work with you." And I was like, "Wow."

KA: Wow!

SM: So yeah. That's something I've learned recently.

KA: That's awesome. It is very much about the journey and I think we like to make it about the destination sometimes, yeah. Sequana thank you so much for trusting us with your story, for being willing to share the hard parts with us, to be willing to give us a glimpse of your perspective. This has been incredibly insightful to me and I hope that it was helpful for you as well.

SM: Yeah absolutely. And thank you again for having me.

KA: For sure!

[Theme music: upbeat electronica plays in the background as Katie speaks.]

KA: As always big thanks for listening, if you find yourself in not such a great mental space, know that there is hope and know that there is help. If you're in the United States, you can call 988 for free confidential support for yourself or for your loved ones. It's like 911, but for mental health. Y'all I didn't know this existed, like I just Googled "what's the national hotline for suicide prevention?" And I thought I was going to have to give you like a 10-digit 1-800 number. No! It's 988. Same concept is 911, but for mental health. I will be honest: I did not try it to confirm that it actually works because I call 911 on accident enough that I thought, "I don't need to intentionally dial a number I don't need right now." So if it doesn't work I'm going to blame the internet, but the internet says it should work everywhere in the United States. And know that there are similar

resources in other countries as well. If you want a little bit lighter episode as a chaser, maybe check out Episode {54} where Tanya talks about raising her family on a boat. Or if you want to hear a different perspective on poverty, explore Episode {73} where my dad talks about what it was like to grow up in a single mother home. My friend, I am so glad you were here. I am so glad that you are willing to hear a different perspective, you're willing to learn, you're willing to grow, you're willing to change, you're willing to talk it out about uncomfortable things. That's what Have Hope; Will Travel is all about. It would mean a lot to me if you would hit the subscribe button, and if you would leave a review. That's how other guests know that their stories are going to be safe as well. Until I see you next, know that you are loved, know that you matter, know that your story matters, know that you bring a valuable perspective the table. We'll see you again in two weeks. Bye.

[Katie stops speaking and the theme music: upbeat electronica ends.]