

Trans Heartbeat Episode 6: Michael Woodward and Elle Cree – Project Open Arms

[mellow guitar] 🎵

MICHELLE MATLOCK: Hello, and welcome to Trans Heartbeat. I'm your host, Michelle Matlock, and I encourage the use of all pronouns. In this very special episode, we're going back to where it all began with TRACTION's very own co-founder and executive director, Michael Woodward and the incredible Elle Cree, a beloved board member, advocate, and the first recipient of TRACTION's Project Open Arms. You'll hear how TRACTION was born out of the need for connection and how Elle's powerful journey from crisis to community is a testament to what's possible when we care for each other. If this conversation moves you, we invite you to give generously today or any day that you may be hearing this conversation. Your support helps TRACTION continue to be a lifeline for trans and gender diverse people across the country. This is Trans Heartbeat.

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MICHELLE: Hey, Michael. Welcome to Trans Heartbeat.

MICHAEL WOODWARD: Hey. Thank you. Thanks for having me.

MICHELLE: Let's start with your name, your title, and your pronouns.

MICHAEL: Sure. So my name is Michael Woodward. I am the co founder and executive director of TRACTION, which stands for Trans Community Action, as we know.

MICHELLE: Awesome. I'm really excited to have a little conversation with you today just about TRACTION. We haven't done that yet on Trans Heartbeat which is [laughs] kind of crazy.

MICHAEL: Right?

MICHELLE: But it's happening now. So since you are, you know, co founder of the organization, I'd love for you to talk a little bit about what was the spark that led to the founding of TRACTION and what need were you responding to at that time?

MICHAEL: We decided we wanted to start a new organization that was service based because the volunteering part was really important to folks. And, you know, getting to meet other people was sort of an extra added bonus. But what we realized is it really helps reduce isolation and, you know, it helps combat some of the disparities that our community faces just by being together and knowing other people and things like that. So, what we were really doing was addressing the need for community building in our community. It was just a new way to bring folks together. That was something different and new, and folks seemed pretty excited about it.

MICHELLE: Nice. It's good to have that little bit of that backstory, remember that founding. And then, of course, that started in 2019, right?

MICHAEL: Correct.

MICHELLE: And then pandemic hit.

MICHAEL: Right. Yeah. So we got our 501(c)(3) in the middle of 2019. So we were really just getting started when COVID hit.

MICHELLE: Right.

MICHAEL: We'd had one gathering. We had our Emerge Summit, which is actually where we met you, Michelle.

MICHELLE: That's right.

MICHAEL: You were our emcee. That was great.

MICHELLE: That was an awesome event. I loved that event.

MICHAEL: Yeah. It was totally fun. Yeah. And then COVID happened and nobody went outside for-- or nobody got together for two or three years.

MICHELLE: Right.

MICHAEL: So we kind of feel like even though we're technically seven years old, I guess, coming this April, you know, we're really only a few years old because we didn't really get that opportunity to spread our wings right at the beginning. So we're to do that now.

MICHELLE: Yeah. Got it. And so as TRACTION has grown, how has the mission, or has the mission evolved or stayed the same, especially when it comes to visibility, belonging, and serving underserved trans community? How has that transformed?

MICHAEL: Well, you know, it's sort of changed a little bit. I think that we've, our approach maybe is a little different than we've initially started. We were gonna build this volunteer army and go out and do good in the community and find service projects to work on. Well, turns out the service project came right to us. [chuckles]

MICHELLE: Right.

MICHAEL: All the folks that are moving here, and we started Project Open Arms to try to help folks figure out what they needed to do to escape persecution in other states.

[contemplative music]

MICHELLE: Open Arms has become such a powerful part of TRACTION's impact. So can you walk us through how it came to life and what it looks like in action?

MICHAEL: Yeah. So Project Open Arms came about, I read an article that Erin Reed wrote two or three years ago now about the fact that there were a lot of folks migrating from red states to blue states trying to escape the hate and the persecution that was happening for trans folks all over the South especially in you know, Midwest. And you know, as I was reading that article, I'm like, there's gotta be something that we can do to help folks. And so, you know, started thinking and talked to some other folks and we came up with this idea of Project Open Arms, which helps people figure out, you know, if they don't already have a plan, it helps them figure out where they want to go, you know, because we know Washington State is not necessarily affordable to everybody. So, we try to help folks go wherever it's gonna work for them, but of course, we're experts more on Washington State and Pacific Northwest. So, that's where a lot of folks come to us. There are other agencies around the country that are doing this but not many.

So, as we have, you know, leaned into this project more, like people are coming out of the woodwork not just to request help but also to do helping, to be become volunteers, to do intake process, and to be peer navigators. We still need more. We especially need more peer navigators, folks that are familiar with the community. But, yeah, it started out as something more simple than it is now. It was really just kind of advice, but now it's really coming into its own as far as a whole program. Like we're offering, you know, helping people figure out where they wanna go and then how to find-- get a job when they-- before they get here, hopefully, helping them find housing, even transportation to get here, helping them come up with moving expenses, you know, the whole gamut. And that's been quite a challenge. We're still working out a lot of it, especially around expenses for moving and things like that. But I gotta say I'm so blessed to have such a fantastic team of volunteers.

MICHELLE: Awesome.

MICHAEL: Sophie Debs and especially-- especially Sophie and Aspen Coyle have been true leaders in this project. And really, I've just kind of sat back and let them tell me what they needed to do. [chuckles] That's great! Yeah. Go forth and conquer. It's great. And they've done an amazing job, and I'm so happy with them. And I just wish we could have more funding for this project so we can actually pay folks to do this work.

MICHELLE: Yeah, let's get more funding. That's what's happening. So that's great. Thanks for giving us that sort of overview of Open Arms. And so, as you know, this episode's gonna also feature the very first Open Arms recipient, Elle Cree. Is there anything you want to say about Elle Cree? Maybe you're gonna, as you pass the baton and I go to interview her next with anything?

MICHAEL: Elle is amazing. She just such a good soul. I love her to death. You know, when we were talking to her-- so she is our first transplant who who came here with our help. She had been beaten down by all the discrimination and hate and stuff. We didn't even know until she got here that she was actually formally an attorney. A civil rights attorney. And then she transitioned and lost everything. Her marriage, her practice, everything.

MICHELLE: Right.

MICHAEL: So she was she was kind of a mess when we got to her. Or she got to us. And but, you know, since then, since she got here, she arrived on New Year's Eve of 2025.

MICHELLE: That's what I was gonna say. I just remember that being such a joyous moment, right? Like just that first person is on New Year's Eve start to 2025 with such a positive, amazing experience. This person getting out of what, you know, getting out of that situation to come here. I mean, you know, it was just really a great feeling. So, yeah. So I get to talk to Elle next. So thanks for that intro. And thank you, Michael. Please let me know how, all the ways for TRACTION and for Open Arms that people can find out more information and connect.

MICHAEL: Sure. Well, the easiest thing to do is to go to our website, of course, TRACTIONpnw.org. We also have a link Linktree, that'll kinda help you go right to the spots you wanna go to. So that's linktr.ee/TRACTIONofficial. I think is the link for that. And you can, you know, we, like I said, we need volunteers. We just need donors, of course. Donors are super important to us. But we're also looking for other groups in the community, whether they're here in Washington or anywhere really in the state, in the country, anywhere in the country that are doing similar work that we can connect with and refer folks to or have you send folks to us if you are at over capacity. So there's so many different ways you can plug into this program. Or you can just cheer us on from the sidelines too. That's fine.

MICHELLE: Awesome.

MICHAEL: But if you know folks that are wanting to move, to get out, they don't know what to do, where to go, just go to our website, fill out the Request for Assistance Form on the Open Arms page. So then you get an invitation for an intake appointment, which usually takes 20, 30 minutes. And then you'll be assigned to a peer navigator. And the peer navigator is the person who helps you figure out your plan, you know, helps you-- points you to job resources, depending on what type of career you have or don't have. And, you know, we just kinda go from there. And everybody's story is different. Everybody's plan is different. And the important thing to know is that you as the transplant are always in control. We're not gonna force you to go somewhere that you don't want to go or you don't know-- You might not know anybody but we're not gonna force you to go somewhere that you don't wanna go. We always look for folks that maybe have family somewhere, or friends so that they're not completely alone.

But we're also here to help build community. So another thing that we're gonna be adding next year is, hopefully, a collaboration with another local organization here. I'm not gonna name them yet because it's not official. But, we're doing a monthly hot meal for all of our community, for folks that are new to town, and folks that have been around a while to come and meet the new folks and, you know, help them feel more comfortable here and get to know people and start rebuilding their life. So hopefully, we'll be able to do that at least once a month, if not more often. But I'm really looking forward to that piece of it because, you know, getting here is one thing but then, living here and finding community is a whole nother step.

MICHELLE: Right.

MICHAEL: And we haven't done a whole lot to address that yet, but that's our next answer to that part of the equation.

MICHELLE: That's beautiful. there's so much to talk about about and so much to the work that you're doing. This is just the beginning for real, Michael. We will definitely have you back to talk about, the new developments that are happening next year, you know, and just to get the word out more about TRACTION, about Open Arms. But thank you for the work that you're doing. It's so needed. And, I just have so much gratitude that you're doing and taking lead on this. And so thank you for being-- your first time on Trans Heartbeat! I think we I got it! [crosstalk and laughter]

MICHAEL: I love this series. I really especially love the one last time with Storm Miguel and Luna.

MICHELLE: Oh, yeah. Santes.

MICHAEL: Yes.

MICHELLE: Yeah, that was great. Yeah, we're trying to do the thing here. We're trying to just sort of get how to do this, how to... produce those things every month and get a wide range of type of interviews. So this is cool. And it's-- I think it's about time that we do a little a little feature on TRACTION. [laughs]

MICHAEL: Right?

MICHELLE: Don't you think?

MICHAEL: Right? Yeah, we came up with this whole show. We should-- 'cause nobody's gonna-- you know, what my communications classes-- my professor was always like, "Nobody's gonna promote you if you don't do it yourself."

MICHELLE: Yeah. Exactly. [laughs] So here we are. We're TRACTION. Hi. But I don't want people to think that the only thing TRACTION does is Open Arms 'cause we obviously do other other stuff, like this show. Right? We're hoping to introduce another show next year that's gonna be another monthly, more of a news magazine format or something like that. We don't have it all nailed down yet. [crosstalk]

MICHAEL: And we're also always looking for other projects. So if there's an organization out there, like I said, our original goal was to, you know, work with other organizations to help spread the news that trans people are cool. Like, we can do everything else everybody else can do. And, you know, we're not the single thing that people seem to think we are.

[contemplative music]

MICHELLE: Thank you, Michael, for sharing the powerful roots of TRACTION and how it all began. TRACTION launched Project Open Arms in 2023 right when anti-trans laws and violence were rising fast across the country. It's a grassroots effort to

help trans and gender diverse people and their families relocate from unsafe areas to more affirming places like the Pacific Northwest. And now that brings us to someone who knows this journey firsthand. We're honored to have Elle Cree, the first recipient of Project Open Arms.



MICHELLE: Hello and welcome to Trans Heartbeat.

ELLE: Thank you.

MICHELLE: Let's start with your name and your pronouns.

ELLE: Absolutely. My name is Elle Missouri Cree and I love saying that. And my pronouns are she and her.

MICHELLE: Excellent. I'm so happy to have you on Trans Heartbeat right now. And to be doing a little profile on TRACTION and Open Arms, finally.

ELLE: Yes, thank you. I'm very happy to be here. You know, it's near and dear to my heart. So thank you.

MICHELLE: Yeah. So Elle, you were the very first person to receive support through TRACTION's Open Arms. So can you take us back to the moment you first learned about the Open Arms program and TRACTION? and what was your life like at that time?

ELLE: Yes, I can. And I'll be emotional. It's just the way it goes. No, it was last year. It was a year ago, November, it was the day of the election, it was Tuesday. And... I was living on a mountain in rural Arkansas, very cold, broke. I was not presenting as I am today. I was transgender living in rural Arkansas, very frustrated, very desperate, in a little one room cabin, literally. Didn't know what to do. The election results had come out. I-- I had thought that things were over. I had very little money and, just very little hope. I was, being harassed. I was being... my heat was being turned off at my propane tank. My water was being turned off. I had been run off the road. I had an open case with a federal organization for civil rights violations. I was truly desperate. And I had applied for help a long time before this. And-- to me, it was a long time. And I just really thought that things were over and, um... excuse me.

MICHELLE: It's fine, take your time. I just, I'm so grateful that you're, you know, sharing this story with us.

ELLE: Thank you. And so I had my phone, which I still have and I looked down and there was a message and it was from Michael Woodward and he is the director for TRACTION. And it was just a little message. And if you know Michael, you know that he is, you know, he's just, he's Michael. He's wonderful and I love him. God, I love him so much. And... he's just very direct and he's like, "Hey, we got this application and," he said, "We have some availability." And the availability was on the eve of Thanksgiving of last year. "And so we would like to talk to you on that day" and I... (sighs deeply) I had to pause before I responded because I was like, this is just

unreal because at the moment that email came in, the universe doesn't make mistakes, I say that quite frequently. My mindset was incredibly negative and I had... I mean to say 'given up' was an understatement.

My meal that night was (voice quivering) very humble. And it was cold. I had, you know, the propane was off again and watching the news come in. And so I took a moment and I responded and I said, absolutely, I'm willing to talk. And I want to talk. And I want to see what you all have to offer.

And for the next few weeks, I waited very patiently. I talked to my therapist on Thursday of that week. I was meeting with her biweekly because I was in a very much of a desperate situation at that time emotionally. And I told her, I said, "This organization's out there, TRACTION, Open Arms. They're talking about offering me help on getting out of here and, I don't know what's gonna happen. I don't know." And I said "They wanna meet the night before Thanksgiving." I felt like it was gonna be lip service. I didn't-- is this just gonna be another one and done? I-- you know, and I was-- I had all these different things going back and forth in my mind, you know, analyzing it into a 'no,' that I'm not-- this is gonna be another organization that's not gonna want me. Or help me. And... it was just-- the buildup was huge.

MICHELLE: And just to go back for a second.

ELLE: Sure.

MICHELLE: Had you just done like a search online or something and found-- you know, TRACTION popped up with many organizations, maybe, that were, you know, offering some-- this kind of help or...

ELLE: Yeah, Michelle, was really weird. I had talked to a veterans representative from Chicago, of all places. And in a roundabout way, they said, 'hey, look, Chicago is great, and we love Chicago. But have you ever considered Seattle?' And I said, you know, 'I don't know anything about Seattle. I don't know.' And they said, 'you need to look at Seattle.' And so I googled Seattle and I started looking, and that's how I found the TRACTION website and the Open Arms. And I had forgotten all about that. And that's where I filled out the intake form for Project Open Arms.

MICHELLE: Right, right.

ELLE: Yeah, and it was so-- and I'm sure, you know, like I talk, it was this rambling, you know, 'once upon a time I was born back in...' [both laugh] And then it got to the end.

MICHELLE: Well, I think they were getting the point since you got that text from Michael. And so... what were those-- once you're like okay, TRACTION, Open Arms, seems like they're-- this is gonna happen, what were those first steps you took with Open Arms? I mean, how did the... How did that support kind of shift into reality for you? What were those first moments where you were like, okay, this is gonna happen?

ELLE: Oh, it was that night, that Thanksgiving-- the eve of Thanksgiving. I flipped on the computer like I did tonight with you and there's Erin and she was there first. Michael was running late. And the tears-- I didn't even talk. And Erin, if you know Erin, she's... She's the roughest, toughest, kindest person you'll ever meet. I mean that.

MICHELLE: That's right.

ELLE: ...said, Honey, you let it flow. And I just started crying. And she said, "We got you." Those were her words. And I didn't say a word. I cried. She said, "We got you." She said, "We are gonna help you." And I said-- And she would ask me a few questions and she said, "When do you want to leave?" And I said, "Right now." I said, "I'm ready to go." And she said, well, she said, "I appreciate that." And she said, "But when is-- practically, when do you wanna leave?" And I said, "As soon as possible."

And so what she did and Michael did from that point forward were a couple of things. One of them was they asked me, they said, "Do you have a game plan when you get there?" And I said, "I'm pretty sure I do." And I talked to somebody with my employer and I said, "Hey," I said, "What are the odds of me being able to find a job when I get there?" And they were like, "Look, we don't do relocation, but if you show up, we can get you there. We can get you a job." And so this dialogue kept going back and forth over from Thanksgiving until December 1, which is a very short period of time. It's what, eight, nine, ten days. So I'm talking to Michael, talking to Erin back and forth. And I said, look, I've got a job when I get there. And they said, "Okay, what else do you need?" And so they basically kept asking me what my needs were. You know, "What do you need?"

There was never a question about coming. It was always a question about, what do you need? We believe you're going to be successful. We believe that you've got a good head on your shoulders. We believe this program is right for someone like you. There again, I'm gonna say that again, that this is to get you out of a very negative situation. I mean, the threats were real where I was, they were incredible.

And so that dialogue kept going until December 1, when Erin called me and said, "We have a donor." and somebody donated airline miles on my behalf through the operation, Open Arms to get me out of Arkansas. And so they had a ticket for me leaving Arkansas. And she said, "When do you wanna leave?" And I said, "I would love to leave before the end of 2024." I said, "My goal would be to get outta here, if that can happen." And they made it happen. And so I left Arkansas with two bags and a very positive attitude on December 31, (tears up) New Year's Eve. New Year's Eve I'm flying into Seattle and (voice quivering emotionally) I say that the city of Seattle load up the fireworks for me. When I landed, I landed before midnight and-- because of the time change--

MICHELLE: Right. Right.

ELLE: You know, and I get off the airplane and and there's Michael and there's Erin to greet me. And... life saving. Life changing.

MICHELLE: Were all so excited that day. We are all in different places doing different things. I was downtown running the New Year's Eve celebration in Tacoma, and but we all knew that this was happening, that you were flying in, and it was such... we were so happy. If I could have been there to greet you, I would have.

ELLE: Yes!

MICHELLE: But I just was like thinking about you, as the first recipient of actually, something that has been talked about and sort of dreamed about. There were many, many folks feeling the excitement on that New Year's Eve into the year 2025.
[Michelle laughs joyfully]

ELLE: And I remember your texts, I remember everybody's texts. And it was just-- it literally was, It was like a moment by moment. And... Yes, it was truly... you know, and the other thing I remember feeling was an honor. You know, I mean, knowing that I need to succeed, being the first, you know? I mean, there were no expectations. I mean, I could have rolled into town and gone to the casino and disappeared and TRACTION would have been none the wiser or, you know, they would have kept going. But that's not how I felt. I felt... I felt more than privileged and more than honored to be that first recipient. And... I felt in my heart, have a duty to make sure that I succeed so that I can make it easier for the next person. And I told Michael and Erin both that in the interview. They said, "What do you wanna do when you get here?" I said, the first thing I'm gonna do when I get to the top of that mountain is turn around and put my hand out for the person behind me.

MICHELLE: Mmm... mm. That's-- oh my gosh, so beautiful and I feel like exactly what you've been doing is just ever since you landed, giving back, giving back, and giving your time and your energy, right back to the community. So... so sort of looking back at that experience with Open Arms, how are you feeling about today? You know, like how are you feeling that it's helped shape the version of yourself that you are today? You just sort of went into that, but is there anything that you could, you know, anything more that you would say about how that experience with Open Arms shaped who you are today?

ELLE: Oh my gosh. Okay, so... Let's go back. And Michelle, you've seen it. I mean, you've seen, you saw me seven, eight months ago, right?

MICHELLE: Yeah.

ELLE: This is all different. This is all brand new. And it beyond changed me--

MICHELLE: You're gorgeified baby. [laughter]

ELLE: Thank you. Within this time period, one year ago today, I was completely different. I've completely fulfilled who and what I need to be. I have fully transitioned. I would never have been able to do that in Arkansas. I would still be languishing over whether or not it was right. Not me, but other people asking that question. They were suggesting that I was to go through conversion therapy. I mean, how has it affected me? I mean, I have gone through facial feminization surgery. I mean, I've done everything. I have finally achieved the goals that I dreamed of. And you know, and--

You know, when Michael told me 'cause I asked Michael the question, I go, "Do you think it's possible that I could do this?" And Michael just shrugged his shoulders, and you gotta know Michael, you just have to know him.

MICHELLE: Well, just so you know, I just finished the interview with Michael that will be paired with this. So he's-- Your stories are connecting and weaving together. So it's beautiful.

ELLE: So he just kind of shrugged his shoulders and he's like, "Yeah, you know, if you think you could do it then, yeah, you're gonna be able to breathe here. Yeah, it's highly doable." The way he said it, I'm like, "You gotta be full of it! There's no way I can transition in a year." Well, guess what? September 17, I had my surgery. I'm now recovering and I'm moving on. My life is totally different.

My therapist said this the other day, she said, "You know, this last surgery was transformative." I went to a meeting the other day and I spilled something on me. And this is how it's changed me. I spilled something on the front of me. And, you know, five years ago, I'd have walked around all, you know, worried about how I looked. Now I embrace it, and I make it part of me because it's who I am. Because I'm truly, truly one. I'm not walking that divided line anymore. And I could not have done it without Open Arms and TRACTION. I would-- Without Open Arms and TRACTION, I would not be on this planet. I wouldn't be here.

MICHELLE (sympathetic): Yeah. That is real. That is truth. And, just honesty, I love your story. I love that you're open and willing to share it with us today on Trans Heartbeat. And I know that it is going to touch so many folks out there. I really appreciate you today, Elle. This story, this beautiful transformation, this beautiful, just moment in history for TRACTION, for you, for Open Arms. So, thank you for being on today.

ELLE: Thank you. And you know how much I... thank you. You know how appreciative I am. So thank you.

MICHELLE: Of course. Thank you for joining us for this powerful episode of Trans Heartbeat.

MICHELLE: We're so grateful to Michael and Elle for sharing their journeys and reminding us how essential community care and courageous action are in times like these. In honor of Giving Tuesday, we invite you to support the work of TRACTION and Project Open Arms. Your gift helps trans and gender diverse folks find safety, belonging, and the resources they need to thrive. Every contribution, big or small, makes a difference. Until next time, take care of each other and keep the heartbeat strong.

[mellow guitar music] ♪♪

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