

**A Conversation with Ashley LeMieux,  
Author of *Born to Shine* and Founder of The Shine Project**

**Q. First of all, thank you so much for making time for this today--you're doing about a billion different things! Congratulations on the new book, *Born to Shine*. Had you always wanted to write a book?**

**A.** Yes--when I was 8 years-old, if you had asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would have told you that I wanted to write books to help heal people's hearts. It's something that I have always wanted to do.

**Q. Wow. That's specific motivation for writing--and it's mind-blowing motivation for an 8 year-old to have. Where do you think that passion came from?**

**A.** Honestly, I was always the shy kid who would look out for other kids who might be having a hard day or a sad day or who might feel left out. It's just always been who I am. I remember being little and shy all throughout the day, and then I would go home and write everything that I wish I would have said or wanted to say, and hide it under my bed.

I just knew that I wanted people to read it so it could help all the people who felt left out and sometimes alone or afraid like I did.

**Q. The book is such a compelling blend of memoir and advice. You share so much of your story, which is a vulnerable decision to make. Why did you decide to offer advice and then, basically, yourself as well?**

**A.** I have seen the darkest times. I know what it feels like to feel like you're buried alive. I know what it feels like to not want to keep going and to truly believe with all your heart that there is no end to your pain in sight and that there's no hope anymore. I know what it feels like to feel like your life has been completely sucked out of you.

Once I started to find my own light again, and as I really fought for that to happen and learned a lot of things along the way, I knew that my pain was becoming my privilege. My privilege became being able to go alongside other women who have felt like I have felt and to hold their hand and let them know that it is going to be okay, and to give them the tools that helped me dig myself out of it.

I knew that if something helped me, it could help so many other people too. I felt like it wasn't something I could just keep to myself and that there had to be a bigger purpose to the pain I had felt.

**Q. The pain you write about is unimaginable to many people. You and your husband became legal guardians to siblings. Then, after you'd become their parents--you'd formed a family--their biological family demanded and took them back. You write about how this experience has changed the way you see other people--just people**

**walking around on the street. It's one of the most surprising and beautiful parts of *Born to Shine*. Can you talk about that a bit?**

**A.** On the one-year anniversary of when we had lost our kids, my mom called me and said, "You know, there are so many people hurting in this world, and before this, we didn't know."

When you enter what I call the Club of Life, which I talk about in the book, you start realizing that if you have things that other people can't see that are hurting you, then that must mean that everyone else around you has them too. We enter the Club of Life in different ways: loss or sickness or just having dreams shattered.

It made me see people differently because I started understanding and recognizing that maybe if someone was acting a certain way, it had nothing to do with me and everything to do with the pain or the hurt they were carrying.

When I have acquaintances, friends, or neighbors go through something hard, I now know how to show up for them in a way that I never would have known had I not gone through my own pain. I've just been able to relate and see people differently. I call it having new lenses. These new lenses allow me to experience life and relationships and strangers in a way that I couldn't have during my life, pre-pain.

**Q. In the book, you include beautiful letters that you wrote to your kids because you didn't have the chance to say goodbye to them in person. Why did you decide to share those letters with us?**

**A.** I put in those letters, honestly, because I hope one day my kids will read the book, and I hope that if they lost the letters or the letters aren't in their possession anymore, that they can read the letters again. It's the best way that I could come up with to put the letters in a place that would be the most easily accessible to them.

I've written them a lot of letters since then. Those are letters I keep to myself and hope to be able to share with them at a later time.

I also felt like the letters I included could help the reader, too. But, the main intention behind it was just hoping that my kids read the book or somehow stumble upon it someday, maybe even decades from now, and then remember how loved they were by us.

**Q. The book will help everyone who reads it, no matter what kind of pain they've experienced. But because you shared such a specific trauma, did it also lead you to find and hear from others who have experienced something similar?**

**A.** Yes. I started getting so many messages and emails and DMs from people who have gone through the same thing--losing kids in this way.

The juvenile foster care system in our country is America's worst-kept secret. Until you're in it, you don't know the pain that lives inside of it. But once you're in it, you realize there are thousands and thousands and thousands of children and families affected by it.

Once you share part of your story, others want to share theirs because then they feel less alone. Because the experience can be so isolating. Walking through our loss and going through what we did with our kids, specifically, the system, was one of the loneliest battles that we've ever fought. It was something that had to be really private, and the injustice was so painful.

Unfortunately, like I said, there are tens of thousands of other people who have gone through similar things. It's been amazing to have a lot of those people come forward, share their stories, and feel less alone.

**Q. Let's talk a little bit about where it all started for you: Where did the idea for [The Shine Project](#) come from?**

**A.** When I was in college, I had one semester left in school, and I was newly married, living in a cockroach-infested condo, which I write about in the book. As graduation approached, all I knew was that I wanted to do something in my life that filled me up and also filled other people up. I'd always wanted to be a writer, and I was trying to figure out how to make writing my career *and* how to make helping people my career.

I had written all my goals and fears out. I knew that if I was experiencing those feelings of absolute fear just trying to reach my goals but still wanting to press through to get to the other side, there were other women who felt the same way, and who needed resources and encouragement to do push through, too.

So back in the days of blogger.com, I started a blog. I called it The Shine Project, and I started writing for women to encourage them as they pursued the things they wanted to do in their lives. That's how everything started.

**Q. From your kids to the Shine Project, you have such a heart for young people. Can you tell us about how The Shine Project has helped more kids get to college?**

**A.** The Shine Project started out as a platform for women, and that's really still our focus: helping women have the tools that will help them shine in their lives.

When The Shine Project platform was first growing, I also took an internship at an innercity high school in Phoenix. I met a lot of students who wanted to go to college, but they didn't have the means and resources to get there.

So, I had an idea: I decided I would employ these young people. They started making jewelry that the women reading my blog would want to wear. We sold it through the site, so the kids had jobs and raised money to get to college. That's how the product side of The Shine Project began.

I don't think it's necessarily just youth that I have a heart for, but it's a heart for all people and helping them reach their potential. I believe that everybody should be able to reach their potential in this life. If they have the tools and the cheerleaders and the confidence they need in order to make that happen, so many people could do so many amazing things in their lives.

I feel like I need to share the resources and knowledge I have so that I can keep learning and so that other people can learn, too. We can all learn and grow together.

**Q. You just put that so matter-of-factly: “I’ll have these high school kids make jewelry and then we’ll sell that jewelry to my blog audience.” But that entrepreneurial savvy is not something most writers have--have you always had it?**

**A.** Yes, I’ve always been entrepreneurial-minded. I love finding solutions to problems. I love being able to strategically figure out what simple steps are needed to solve a problem. When I can do that, I get really excited. A part of being an entrepreneur that I love is that I get to use whatever resources, creativity, and ideas I have to bring something that doesn’t exist to life.

There should be no reason for youth to not have a way to get into college. Seeing the problem compelled me to figure out some type of solution--at least for the students I knew. Once I saw what they were going through, I felt like I’d be responsible forever if I didn’t step up and do something. If I would have just turned away and pretended like it wasn’t happening or thought they needed to figure it out on their own, I feel like I would be held accountable for that. I needed to try to come up with a way to get them to college.

**Q. Your entrepreneurial side also led you to launch your eponymous own [clothing line](#). Tell us about that.**

**A.** During our court battle for our kids, my husband and I spent well over six figures in a little less than two years on just attorney fees, not including everything else. We were being drug through the mud. I didn’t have a lot of choices in my life. We were watched by the state--there were so many rules around what we could do. I felt like I didn’t have control over anything.

It might sound trivial and simple, but one of the only things that I could control was what I was wearing every day. I’d have to get ready in the morning to see a judge in court and fight for our kids. Then, I’d have to go to the office to run The Shine Project, which had 20-30 employees at the time. Then I’d go be a mom and get my kids from school.

I was so overwhelmed and exhausted. I would stand in my closet in the morning and think, “What does a person wear on a day like today?”

I didn’t know. So I decided I was going to create [Ashley LeMieux](#), clothing for women who *do*--women like me who don’t just fit into one category and *who do so much*. That’s all of us, right?

I wanted to create a clothing line that also made women feel like we’re part of a bigger community that supports and understands one another. So, we built an easy-to-shop online clothing destination for women who are busy and just need affordable, functional clothing that makes them feel good while they’re serving all those roles.

It was a stressful time in my life--probably not when a lot of people would think to start a company. [laughs] But it really became a creative outlet for me and helped reach so many women. We receive notes from women saying things like, "I haven't worn a dress in the 10 years since I had my baby because I have not loved my body. But I can't believe how beautiful I feel in this dress."

That's why we do it. It all comes back to building community.

**Q. You just wrapped up the first Born to Shine Tour. What was that experience like?**

**A.** Yes, we went to five different cities to bring different women together--to put them in the same room--and help them uncover their own power and realize they weren't alone. We also gave everyone a copy of my book.

And the whole thing was phenomenal. The tour completely blew my mind. So many of us feel alone and like we're the only ones feeling that way. On the tour, I would ask everybody to stand up if they had felt any amount of pain, frustration, fear, or loneliness in the past three years. And every single person in every city stood up.

At the end of the night, I'd ask the same question again--ask them all to stand up. But then, I'd ask them to hold hands with the stranger--the sister--that they didn't know sitting next to them. Then I asked everyone to raise their hands if they still felt alone. Out of 1,500 women total in all the cities, only one person raised her hand indicating she still felt alone.

That was the goal of the event: to help women see one another and to uncover their own power. No matter what we've all been through, there is still so much light inside of us that can be used for good and to bring joy into our own lives and the lives of others. Those five nights created this powerful tribe of women who are now ready to go back out into their world and shine again.

**Q. What is the most important thing you hope women who read *Born to Shine* walk away understanding?**

**A.** I want women to walk away not being afraid of the dark anymore. I want them to walk away with the knowledge and the hope that even though their lives might not be exactly how they thought they'd end up, they're still beautiful. Their light is a power that lives inside of them that can't be taken away. No matter what, it's still there.

**About Ashley LeMieux**

**Ashley LeMieux** has made a career out of helping others re-ignite the light within them. As founder and CEO of [The Shine Project](#), she launched both a movement and a company that empowers women in myriad ways, including teaching first-generation college students how to produce handmade products that they can then sell as employees of The Shine Project. The earned funds then support the participants' educational journeys and help shape the trajectory of their lives, creating a profound ripple effect. A gifted speaker and writer based in Nashville, Tennessee, LeMieux also inspires hundreds of thousands of women through in-person talks, The Shine Project's growing online community, and more.

Her first book, *Born to Shine: Practical Tools to Help You Shine Even in Life's Darkest Moments*, is slated for release in October 2019.

<https://theshineproject.com>