

the dots

a podcast about connecting.

Keith Somers Transcript

Announcer: [00:00:04] Welcome to The Dots, a podcast about connecting. The Dots is a series of conversations with artists, community leaders, entrepreneurs, and change makers who talk about how they connect the dots and bring things together for their communities, companies, and themselves for a better life. And now you're host, digital strategist, speaker and entrepreneur Kathleen Buczko.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:00:31] Childhood star, industrial security professional, and motivator. Keith Somers was sentenced to life in prison for the DUI that resulted in another driver's death. He represented himself and after 18 years in prison, got out. Today he's motivating and keeping people on the right track. Keith, welcome to The Dots.

Keith Somers: [00:00:52] Hi. Thank you very much for having me today.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:00:54] You've done so very much with your life. But tell me a little bit about your journey today.

Keith Somers: [00:01:03] Today I have embarked on a life calling which is Keith A. Somers International Foundation. There's four projects under that flagship banner. The first is distracted and impaired driving. The second deals with suicide and depression. The third component is bullying and cyber bullying, and the fourth deals with cultural racial ethnic and gender sensitivity.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:01:34] So you're doing everything except world peace, because if you solve those four problems I'm sure there will be world peace.

Keith Somers: [00:01:42] Yes, especially amongst today's youth.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:01:45] No absolutely. I'm the mother of 25-year-old a 20-year-old and a 14-year-old and just the span between 14 and 25.

Keith Somers: [00:01:56] Oh yeah.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:01:56] So that when I look back at when one was zero and one was 10, and their difference in their life in that amount of time, the maturation process... exponential. Absolutely. And then you know just the world we're living in today right?

Keith Somers: [00:02:14] Yeah.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:02:17] You know I'd like to say that today has brought us more clarity and we're nicer to each other and we're inclusive.

Keith Somers: [00:02:25] In some ways we are; in some ways, my engagement with the youth inside and out of the penal setting-- I've seen where they are not so predisposed to going with what they're told. They're more inquisitive, they're more searching, they're more probing when it comes to what's true. And they've seen a lot of things that been impeded for a very long period of time that they're not just buying it outright. Hence, the last election with all the youth rising up, having

rallies, protesting, appealing the status quo because they basically say, 'Don't tell us how to feel, don't tell us what to believe, don't tell us whom to choose.'

Kathleen Buczko: [00:03:21] But how does that-- Well you know tell me a little bit about you, Keith, the young kid and kind of how you got here.

Keith Somers: [00:03:32] Life for me as a child was pretty traditional with regards to the home life of coming from the stability of a mother and father -biological mother and father that were married. I was always raised in the exact same home, so there wasn't a lot of relocation like a lot of military kids have to endure.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:03:55] Right.

Keith Somers: [00:03:56] I went to the same school district from kindergarten through graduation of high school.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:04:01] Wow. That doesn't happen.

Keith Somers: [00:04:03] No. The kids that were to my left and to my right in first grade were the ones when I graduated as a senior to the left and to the right of me. So I realize now looking back, how that was traditional for where I was at that time and how nontraditional it is today. Yeah it's like people I tell them that like wow that's weird.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:04:31] Yeah.

Keith Somers: [00:04:31] You know like, your mom and dad are still married the ones that gave birth to you?

Kathleen Buczko: [00:04:35] Yeah.

Keith Somers: [00:04:35] Because now it's the nucleus family now it's you know three different dads, three different moms, kids, step-kids, half-brothers adopted and everything so... and I do see the benefits to that too. But I guess you always wax nostalgic about you know, your own path.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:04:54] Yeah. But you were a risk-taker perhaps as a young man.

Keith Somers: [00:05:02] Yeah, I was acting out because I wasn't happy with myself. I was looking at something to fill the void outside of me. I thought--I suffered from a very prominent case of, "When I Get, Then I'll Be." When I lose the weight, then I'll get the girl. When I lose the weight and I get the girl and when I got into the entertainment industry as a dancer first then acting, when I get that role, then I'll be. And then when I was a Chippendale Dancer in New York and Philadelphia and I decided this is too small for me because I had delusions of grandeur, that I need a bigger pond to frolic and play. And though I was a somewhat big fish in a little pond, I wasn't content. And then I decided to come to California to spread my wings and find my Zen to soar amongst the eagles; but what I didn't know is looking back I was doing what we call in recovery a "geographic" where I was taking me with me and I was blaming everybody, everything, and every outcome of working with the bad CPU between my ears.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:06:26] I like that--a bad CPU between your ears.

Keith Somers: [00:06:29] I had a virus and didn't know it. And so, when I got out here I took that same faulty thinking with me where I was putting myself on the throne...

Kathleen Buczko: [00:06:40] You can't escape from yourself.

Keith Somers: [00:06:42] And I wanted... I felt if I could orchestrate everybody, every person, place, and thing in accordance to my desired outcome, life would be great and I couldn't do that back in southeastern Pennsylvania. So, I figured I need to strut my stuff and spread my wings out here and then I'm responsible for what happens. And boy was I ever.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:07:08] Yeah. So that risk behavior that bad CPU, kind of stuck you.

Keith Somers: [00:07:16] And it was the pain that I never dealt with. You know of not fitting in, not fitting in with my race, you know trying to figure out because I'm tri-racial: black, Italian, East Indian. Trying to figure out which one do I belong the most to.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:07:34] Who am I?

Keith Somers: [00:07:35] And if so am I received by those of that race or am I ostracized? Am I cast off? Am I looked down upon from those to whom I'm supposedly belonging to?

Kathleen Buczko: [00:07:50] Right.

Keith Somers: [00:07:51] And so they didn't have designations like racial ambiguous/ ethnically diverse back in the 1960s, in the 70s, and 80s, in the 90s.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:08:01] They just got "multi-racial" on the forms.

Keith Somers: [00:08:04] And even the entertainment industry didn't even have it--not till The Rock and Vin Diesel, who I predated, established themselves. And now you see it on casting breakdowns you know, and they're looking for people because they want that homogenization of ethnicity for the inclusion component for their products or their goods or their services. So, being one of the pioneers of trying to let people know we're here, we're no less than or greater than you but, just know that we're here and we're different than you.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:08:40] Right.

Keith Somers: [00:08:42] And we are looking for our identity, just as you are. You're looking for your equality, just like I am. So, when you come to terms with the fact that our peace--our inner peace--that surpasses external influences, comes from the similarities... focusing on the similarities, embracing the similarities. From that position of comfort, you can gradually, progressively embrace the differences.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:09:16] How did you get to that point of comfort?

Keith Somers: [00:09:20] When I had no choice. There's an old saying: "You don't have any idea how strong you really are until you have no other option." When I suffered the consequence of my bad programming, it resulted in the loss of a life and the consequence was, I paid with my life. And when I got sentenced to California State Prison for the remainder of my life, everything I knew and I cared about was removed from me forever. I couldn't even hold my mother and father or my brother or a female love interest without being admonished or beaten for touching them or holding them or caressing them too long, or too intimately, or too tenderly. I couldn't turn on the light switch because it was all controlled by the facility. I couldn't even look up and see the stars at night because the penitentiary lighting drowned out the solar system. I would never put my feet in sand. I

would never have the waves crash over my feet. I'd never wake up next to a woman. I would never have these experiences unless I got free. And so either I could be tormented with that reality, or I could strive to make that my reality. And so, I ended up studying the law.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:10:55] So as the world got narrower, your choices got broader.

Keith Somers: [00:11:01] Yeah, it's pretty ironic; it's an inversion of everything that I knew. I got my sight in the depths of a dungeon. When I was on top of the mountain and there was nothing obscuring my view, I was blind and didn't know it because I was working with a filter. I was working with blinders that didn't allow me to see the things I needed to see for the true development of self. I learned that in the time I started drinking and using drugs.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:11:38] And you did that at a relatively young age?

Keith Somers: [00:11:41] 13, 14.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:11:42] Yeah, that's when a lot of kids are trying to find out who they are and think that that gives them definition.

Keith Somers: [00:11:49] Yeah. And I-- what I did is the ultimate harm to myself was stunting my maturation; my mental, emotional development was stunted at that moment and it stayed stunted until I stopped the ingestion of drugs or alcohol. And then I would have been sober, but I would not have been recovered. Because then comes the work. Then you have to come to the knowledge that you're sick. That you're insane. But there is hope in that knowledge. It's not a desperation of "There's nothing else," but it's an awareness that you're sick. There's a hope: others have found the way and they're willing to lead you there.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:12:36] [Sponsorship] Speaking of people who get it done, this broadcast is brought to you by Chapelure Media: digital media, analytics, strategy, marketing, creative products, training. They do all that. Visit chapeluremedia.com to find out more.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:12:51] So you were in the California State Prison System?

Keith Somers: [00:12:53] Correct.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:12:54] You had been put in, as we talk, to the prison pine box by the State of California's determination. You're leaving when you leave in that pine box.

Keith Somers: [00:13:05] Yeah. Yeah, it's called toe tag parole/pine box parole, meaning a toe tag adorning your big toe.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:13:13] Yeah.

Keith Somers: [00:13:14] Entombed in a pine box and you'll be taken out of the penal system foot first.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:13:18] Right. And the choices that you have have become narrower and narrower but, in this darkness you see some light. Some ability to understand that from where I'm at, there's still hope to move forward.

Keith Somers: [00:13:41] Right. I learned that rock bottom is actually the best foundation to build anything. So, once I'm in that position of rock bottom I come to that comprehension, now it's--I was

gun shy.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:13:58] Really?

Keith Somers: [00:13:59] How do I build this house?

Kathleen Buczko: [00:14:01] And again you know that's my question. Here you are in a system that's not designed to build people up, right?

Keith Somers: [00:14:06] No.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:14:07] It's designed to break people down. It's designed to make people conform, get along... We control your reality. We control your ability to see the stars.

Keith Somers: [00:14:19] Correct.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:14:20] So how do you then, in that most difficult moment, right? Lots of people hit rock bottom, right? And when they hit rock bottom, they find a way to create a toe tag.

Keith Somers: [00:14:34] Yes. Yes.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:14:35] And then, in that time it's not just a single moment ever, but in that time, how did you begin to reprogram the CPU?

Keith Somers: [00:14:49] I had to get down to the causes and conditions. Yeah, I had to do the uncover, discover, discard. Find out: where did I start having this skewed perception of self? And then it becomes the filter, the eye glass that I see in not only myself but others in the world at large.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:15:09] Right.

Keith Somers: [00:15:11] And when I got to that causing condition which was very painful and emotional because it came to my own identity of being a mixed-race kid and not fitting in. And when--no matter how much my mother and father tried to impart their pearls of wisdom on why I looked the way I look, all I know is that's theology, then I have experience. Experience will always trump that theology because it's feeling-based.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:15:40] Actions speak louder than words.

Keith Somers: [00:15:41] Right. And so yeah, it's like, "Don't talk to me. Your actions are speaking too loud," well that's how it is. Like, don't tell me the theology because I'm having this day-to-day, 8-hour, five days a week experience with those kids. And they're telling me something different than what you're saying. And you're not there to protect me. So that being betwixt and between the truth that they're trying to espouse and then the truth that I'm dealing with on a daily basis and then trying to find my identity in it. And that pain manifested in childhood obesity. And then it came in to acting out in class as the class clown and I was never violent kid. I was never one to put my hands on anybody, unjustly. Even when I was hit, I would push them away. I would never retaliate with force. And I remember being in school where my brother came home and told my father that I was being bullied; that I was getting on the school bus and the black kids were actually resorting to physical violence when they were pulling my schoolbag out of my hand and pushing me and hitting me, and my brother told my father that this was happening. And my dad pulled me aside by myself with my mom and said, "Is this true? Is this happening?" And I said yes. "But why aren't you responding? Your mother and I spent a lot of money for you to go to martial arts to learn

how to defend yourself." I said, "Because Daddy, if I do, I'll get in trouble." My dad said, "You let your mom and I handle that." So, when he gave me that license I got on the school bus and I felt like Superman. And when they grabbed that it was it didn't go down the way it did all the days before. There was a market stop.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:17:26] There was a power, right?

Keith Somers: [00:17:28] And I never got treated that way again by those kids, but it didn't make me a bully because the pain that I had in my side, that made me more sensitive to those who were bullied because I know what it's like to be bullied by the bullies in the school. I also know what it's like to have your lunch money taken your books knocked out of your hand. The girl to choose the jock over you because you're obese as a child. Kids make fun of you because you're attending other students' bar mitzvahs are bat mitzvahs, and so you either get thick skinned, you develop a false persona based on anger (because anger is the mask that fear wears) and they all have their consequence. Like my sponsor, Herb says, "Keith, I'm going to give you loving suggestions. If you adhere to those suggestions, it comes with a consequence. If you don't, well, there's a consequence. You choose which consequences you want." Well when I was incarcerated, it was the same thing consistently thousands of times a day and night. Every single thing had a consequence. If you do this there's a consequence. If you don't do this there's a consequence. To me it's pretty clear which one lead-- which choice--at that exact moment led to the possibility of freedom and which one didn't.

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Kathleen Buczko: [00:19:55] So let's talk about freedom.

Keith Somers: [00:19:59] Good subject.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:20:00] Yeah great subject, right? So, you're incarcerated. There's not a lot of hope at the end of that tunnel and you play by the rules. And playing by the rules does not accomplish any success.

Keith Somers: [00:20:22] Not outwardly. Not in the powers-- in the eyes of those who had the power and the powers that be, because.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:20:31] You went up for parole how many times?

Keith Somers: [00:20:35] Six? Seven?

Kathleen Buczko: [00:20:37] And you were rejected.

Keith Somers: [00:20:37] Yeah. And it wasn't because of what I did, because I did everything I was told to do. And it wasn't because of what I failed to do, like being disciplinary free, because I appeared without ever incurring a single disciplinary write up. And yet they denied me because of

the crime I committed, at that point, over 10 years previous. So here I am in 2002 applying for parole and my life offense occurred in 1992. And I already, at that point, served two times the maximum punishment for a vehicular manslaughter. And I had been disciplinary free and they said, "Come back. Keep doing what you are doing, but come back." I did go back and I had the exact same outcome.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:21:36] Yeah. So, you had said earlier the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again expecting a different outcome. So, you changed that and you became...

Keith Somers: [00:21:52] I figured there had to be somebody in authority that could see differently. Take the exact same set of facts, the exact same evidentiary support for my claims, and arrive at a different outcome. And then eventually it happened but it took five and a half more years for that to happen.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:22:15] Yeah. But you kept going.

Keith Somers: [00:22:19] Yes. Because that was my anchor; that was my tether cord to sanity. That little, thin, microscopic line through the court systems was the only chance I had. Because every court denied the appeal of the conviction.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:22:41] I've had not nearly as difficult road as you, but I had a very chaotic life as a young child. And I talk about, "You've got to find your line. You got to find your line."

Keith Somers: [00:22:57] Yeah, yeah it's the one that you're born with that you have to arrive and discover that it was always within you, which is, "What is your what? What is your why? What is your reason?" and that little litmus line is the one--that little plumb line is the one that you derive your identity from, and is the one that's not based on outward circumstances.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:23:27] Yeah. It's yours; it's yours.

Keith Somers: [00:23:30] So when they stripped me naked and made me bend over and squat and cough three times only to be put into a wax paper jumpsuit, shackled neck, wrist, waist, and ankle and escorted down the L.A. men's central jail corridor where I attended my very first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting proctored my Sister Christine at the Catholic chapel.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:23:55] Gotta love a nun.

Keith Somers: [00:23:58] And I heard Sister Christine say something pretty profound and all I learned after that, or once I got immersed into recovery, that she was only reading out of the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. And there is a part in there, what we refer to as ninth-step promises. And she said things like, "No matter how far down the scales you have gone, you'll see that your experience can benefit others." She said things like, "You'll neither regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it." She said, "You will intuitively know how to handle problems that used to baffle us." And when I was hearing her say these things as I'm wearing L.A. County blue and I have a green wristband for million-dollar bail or more and I'm facing life imprisonment right for a fatal car accident, I'm thinking this lady has no concept or understanding why I am here. Why was I shackled and brought here under, you know...

Kathleen Buczko: [00:25:03] "How does her world relate to mine at all?"

Keith Somers: [00:25:06] And it took 19 years to find out that answer because after I got out of

state prison and I saw my mother and father a football field and a half on a concrete parking lot away from me and I realized those are the same two people. I wrote individual ninth step amends letters (which is the amends process) and I said, "Mom and Dad, you didn't make this bed for me I did. The bed that I sleep in for the rest of my life till I draw my last breath of my own making." So, I find a way to go on. "Don't do this time with me." My parents still came out to California for two weeks every year. Not even knowing whether they'd see me, whether we're on institutional lockdown precluding or visits, and stay in a hotel, and they'd rent a car, and they'd a book two roundtrip flights and absorb of all the costs and expense and sacrifice for doing it. And they did it for the 18 years I was out here. And I immediately employed the tools that I amassed incarcerated, in the life of recovery. So, I walked out with 18 years two months and eight days of recovery and sobriety and I had no reason to change that daily practice. Because it worked so successfully inside at the worst of scenarios. So, I employed it out here and I immediately started going-- within 24 hours, I was in an AA meeting. Within 48 hours after that I started speaking. And I had people like Sir Anthony Hopkins come up to me after I shared with tears in his eyes saying, "You have an amazing story and you talked about a story that was my worst nightmare that drove me into recovery." And I just gave him this 40-year cake not too long ago. So... and I remember speaking at a meeting-- a young person's meeting-- on Ohio and Sepulveda, June 5th, 2014 and this girl comes up to me and she has tears streaming down her her face and she grabs my single outstretched hand between both of her hands like a clamshell. And she keeps swinging your head to the left and to the right while saying, "You don't know what you just did to me. You don't know what you did to me." And I'm like, "Sweetheart, what did I do to you?" And she says, "I wasn't supposed to be here tonight. You don't know that I wasn't supposed to be here tonight." And I said OK. She said, "My friend made me promise I'd be here so I showed up. I walked in the door just as you got up to the microphone. But what she doesn't know is before I came here I wrote a note and left it at home because I was going to leave this meeting and go home and take two bottles of OxyContin and a half gallon of vodka and end my life tonight. So I was going to commit suicide before I heard your story."

Kathleen Buczko: [00:28:16] Everybody needs a line. Everybody needs a line and everybody can hand a line to someone.

Keith Somers: [00:28:21] Yeah. Yeah.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:28:24] You know we define success in a lot of different ways, right? And mostly it's externally, right? Yeah, it's always...

Keith Somers: [00:28:31] It's smoke and mirrors.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:28:32] Absolutely smoke and mirrors.

Keith Somers: [00:28:34] And no value whatsoever-- I don't care what price man puts on it it's smoke and mirrors.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:28:38] Absolutely. But the ability to touch that young woman.

Keith Somers: [00:28:44] Absolutely. And I tell those young women and young men who I sponsor in recovery or I see as new arrivals to the world of recovery and I say, "Listen, I used to be that guy chasing that proverbial carrot. I used to be the guy that: When I Get Then I'll Be."

Kathleen Buczko: [00:29:03] Right.

Keith Somers: [00:29:04] But I've had a lot of examples of people that I knew like Whitney

Houston, like Prince. Nobody could tell me the woman didn't have talent. I used to see her go to stadiums and people didn't understand English but knew her name and knew her and would cry at the sight of her. Yet she would leave a stadium of 100,000 people screaming her name, go into the dressing room and freebase cocaine trying to escape, trying to fill that void.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:29:39] Fill that hole.

Keith Somers: [00:29:39] All the money, all the talent, all the beauty, all the world recognition was not enough and will never be enough because it wasn't designed to be enough. Anything made by man's hands or man's assignment of value will never be enough to quench that void that we're all built-- all born with.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:30:06] You have found your voice and you share your voice. And I want to thank you. Thank you for sharing your voice.

Keith Somers: [00:30:20] I will. I will do that. As long as you have an ear to hear, I will drop the seed.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:30:24] I will always listen.

Keith Somers: [00:30:26] Thank you.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:30:27] And your foundation and what you're doing for young people and their abilities to see that there is another side, is really so critical and so important in the world and the environment that we're in right now, where I think that we could have one minute to stop and listen and think.

Keith Somers: [00:30:52] Well that's actually the origin of mankind that we, by default, we used to sit around the campfire and the older elders would tell and pass on the stories to the younger ones. And if you look at Discovery Channel where you look at National Geographic, you'll see the composition of the wild at play in the wilderness in the Serengeti. The youngest and the eldest will be in the center of the circle, the healthy and the viral will be on the outside, because they're the protectors of the most vulnerable. And then you'll see the one who thinks he knows better and he's going on his own way. But then you see the camera pan and they see the pride of lions down in the tall grass and they're looking at the one who's gone away from the herd who thinks he can find it easier, softer way. And that's the one that's going to feed them that night. That truth should be our truth. That we should be protecting the youngest and our elders. But yet, we look at them like they don't have any value. They can't get me in my next position and my job, or my career. So, I don't need to take my time, my efforts, my resources and focus on your young life or your geriatric life.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:32:15] Right.

Keith Somers: [00:32:17] And that needs to be fixed.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:32:20] And I think that's what we're trying to do here. So, I want you to come back. And I want you to share more stories and I want you to help us connect the dots. So, thank you Keith. I really appreciate it.

Keith Somers: [00:32:32] Thank you.

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