

CPI *Unrestrained* Transcription

Episode 12: Maria Navone

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Host: Terry Vittone

Terry: Hello and welcome to *Unrestrained*. This is your host, Terry Vittone, and I'm joined today by my guest, Maria Navone, Safety Assistant and Lead Instructor and a 20-year veteran of the Milwaukee Public School District. Maria is a certified *Nonviolent Crisis Intervention*® Meritorious Instructor who has been training her coworkers at MPS in CPI programs since 1998. She's been the Lead Instructor in the district for the past 10 years.

Maria has trained nearly 3,000 staff members in foundational techniques and tailored strategies for enhancing verbal skills, working with kids on the autism spectrum, and handling particularly violent physical behavior. As Safety Assistant, Maria is the lead gang investigator for the district and conducts interventions and promotes gang awareness amongst school staff, parents, law enforcement, and the community. Maria is also closely involved with bullying prevention, including cyberbullying, and she promotes knowledge about prevention strategies to her staff.

Good morning, Maria.

Maria: Good morning, Terry. Thank you for having me.

Terry: Thank you for being here. So let's start. Why don't you talk about your role at MPS, how you got there, and how you came to be exposed to CPI training?

Maria: All right. Well, I guess my role, as you described just now, I have several different duties that I perform. One of them, of course, being the CPI Instructor. But when I'm not training the CPI classes, I usually go out into the schools. I'm usually called upon from either a teacher that's attended one of my classes or word-of-mouth to come out and talk to kids, kids that are in crisis or headed down a path, certain behaviors that are not being managed.

So what I do is I go and just kind of pull them aside out of class and have conversations with them, feel them out on what's going on with them, and eventually establish a rapport with them so that I can come back and we can work on some intervention strategies for them. Kind of giving them the skills they're going to need to maintain focus on learning in school.

Terry: Let's talk about how you got there. When you came into MPS, what was the year?

Maria: Well, I became a Safety Assistant back in '98. Prior to that I was a Head Start teacher and I worked for SDC and unfortunately wasn't making a whole lot of money and didn't have the benefits, and this job came around. My husband actually started out as a Safety Assistant for the district and he said, "You know, you should try this out." So I did.

Basically, that's my involvement in how I became a Safety Assistant. As a Safety Assistant, every single Safety Assistant has to go through the CPI course prior to being allowed to go into a building, and that's including former police officers. So everybody has to be trained in CPI specifically.

And the reason I decided to become an Instructor in the first place is because my Instructor, my CPI Instructor when I first came in, I tell this story all the time because I find it so humorous looking back. Looking back, I thought to myself, "Well, my Instructor," let me just say this. My Instructor, do you know the comedian Ben Stein?

Terry: Sure.

Maria: Okay, he has that very monotone, dry voice.

Terry: (Imitates Ben Stein) Wow.

Maria: So this is the Instructor for CPI, and the problem was he read literally verbatim out of the CPI book. He never gave examples. He spoke in that very monotone voice, so half the class was sleeping and the other half was daydreaming. And so imagine my first day at South Division High School. I have my nametag and my radio and I'm ready to get in there and do what I've got to do. And the bell rings and there's this big, tall, young man in the hallway.

I went up to him using my best Sister Mary Sunshine approach, "Good morning. I'm Ms. Navone. You know, sweetheart, that was the bell. Do you need a pass to class or would you like me to walk you there?" And he kind of looked me up and down and he kind of gave me the smirk and he says, "You know what? If you don't get out of my face, I'm going to mess you up."

I kind of stood there looking around like, "Who are you talking to?" And he says, "I'm talking to you. Get out of my face." And I thought, "I was so not prepared for that," coming from Head Start and dealing with four- to five-year-olds, that I literally froze. I didn't know how to respond. So he literally turned to me and laughed and walked away. I felt so ridiculous.

It just so happens that my Instructor was also my supervisor. So later on that day when he came to check on us, he says, "How's it going, Navone?" And I said, "Oh, about that, sir. You never told us that people were going to threaten our lives or call us out of our names just for asking for a pass and that sort of a thing." He said, "Oh, Navone, don't worry about it. You'll get used to it." And damned the devil if he wasn't right because now they can call me anything they want to and it's like water off my back. CPI had everything to do with that.

That's when I said to myself, "You know what? I'm going to look into becoming an Instructor, because I think I could do a better job, for one. And for two, I really think it's my responsibility to prepare people for what it is they're getting into, especially when they're dealing in an urban city area with the population of kids we're working with." So that is how I decided to become a CPI Instructor.

Terry: I see. And so do you have initial memories of that first training?

Maria: Well, the good thing for me is that by that time my husband also became a CPI Instructor, and his partner—we used to call it the Jay and Jerry show because they just

did such a magnificent job of presenting the material—that I wanted to be part of that. So thankfully, having those two with me, they kind of molded me and guided me. But the very first training, I pretty much stumbled a lot and sounded like Abbott and Costello a lot of times.

But you live and learn, and the more comfortable—and because I have such a deep passion and philosophy for the program itself, it kind of comes easy. It flows easy when you're really comfortable with what you're talking about. So the more you do it, the better it gets.

Terry: So what sort of current populations in the student world do you work with now?

Maria: Well, 44% of our students live at or below the poverty level, and I'm so grateful right now at this particular point in time.

Terry: Is that for all of MPS?

Maria: For all of MPS, yeah.

Terry: Wow.

Maria: Yeah, 44% of our kids. I'm so grateful that right now the government gave us a grant for free lunches because a lot of our kids are hungry.

Terry: Hard to learn when you're hungry.

Maria: It's hard to concentrate on reading and writing and everything else if your stomach is growling and you don't know where your next meal is coming from. So just being able to provide them that breakfast and lunch, I wish we could provide them dinner, because a lot of these kids only have that breakfast and lunch opportunity to eat.

And so I just noticed the change in the whole climate around the city where kids are being fed and there's not that—because they turn into little Joe Pescis. You know those commercials, the Snicker commercials? They either turn into Joe Pesci or Betty White because they're just so angry. They're upset because they're hungry. And I've noticed that feeding them has not eliminated all the behaviors, but it has significantly impacted in a positive way those behaviors.

Terry: And the schools, do you work in a number of schools? Are you focused on one?

Maria: Right now, I kind of bounce from high school to middle school to elementary, wherever a need is if I get a call from an administrator. Lately though, I've got to be honest with you, I've been dealing a lot with elementary students.

Terry: Can you describe the mechanism by which you would get a call? How if somebody sees a behavioral issue, and somebody says hey, I've got the person to call?

Maria: Well, usually it's through referral I would say. What I call it, either a staff person has attended one of my trainings and we've known each other that way or we've worked together previously in other situations. That's usually how I get a call. "Hey, Maria, I have so-and-so and I was wondering if you could talk to them. These are the behaviors that we're seeing." More or less, that's how I go about getting referrals for individual students.

Terry: And the people that make the referrals, generally have you trained them in CPI techniques?

Maria: Most of them.

Terry: Really?

Maria: Most of them.

Terry: So they're experiencing behavioral problems outside the scope of their mastery of de-escalation techniques and that's where—

Maria: Yeah, that's where they call, and they're like, "Well, Maria, we've watched our proxemics and our kinesics and our paraverbals and nothing's working. Nothing's working on this kid." And so the emphasis years ago, I've got to be honest with you, it was when I would get a call from an administrator it would be there was this misnomer going around that our class was about how to take kids down, literally.

Terry: The takedown course, right?

Maria: The takedown. The takedown course.

Terry: That still sometimes haunts CPI.

Maria: And you know the great news, Terry? Right now, and I would say within the last three years in particular, MPS is more or less kind of embracing more the de-escalation part versus the reactionary, physical intervention.

Terry: This is your impression. How do you come by it?

Maria: For one, I haven't been getting so many calls where literally, "Yeah, I have special ed teachers here and they need to know how to take these kids down." I'm like, "I'm sorry, this is not a takedown class. We don't take kids down." And we've gone to administrative meetings. The principals have meetings that we try to present at and try to inform them of what CPI is all about.

The emphasis has always been on training administrators first, special ed teachers second, and the rest of the staff third. So we have been getting more administrators involved in the training and coming into the training. So they're the ones actually going out there and telling their staff, "We want you guys to be trained."

That's something that I've been working on for the last 10 years, trying to make them understand the importance of using the same language, of using the same techniques, and of everybody doing the same thing at the same time so we kind of are consistent in our approaches. And that's what these kids need more, is that consistency that we provide.

Terry: So you're finding that the receptiveness of the administrators to hear this message is starting to change the culture and their recognition and approval of this technique? Or they recognize that it's effective?

Maria: They do. They do, and especially when they attend themselves because I have a lot of principals that, unfortunately, sometimes are reluctant to send staff because it is a two-day training, and I do understand that it requires some commitment on their part having staff out of the building. But what I try to tell them is the more staff you have trained, the more comfortable and confident they're going to be in handling situations and the less administrative work that you have to do, really.

Because if they're handling their situations in the classroom, maintaining that classroom management control aspect of it, there are less referrals that are being written, the less disciplinary problems that you're dealing with. And so now that they're starting to attend the classes themselves, they're starting to see more about what it is we've been trying to tell them for quite some time.

Terry: That's great. That must be very gratifying to see that start to happen.

Maria: It is. It's the best feeling, because like I said, I've been trying to get this program mandated literally in MPS for at least 10 years. You know, it's a slow process but I'm just grateful for the opportunity to be the one to continue to pound at their doors, "Hey, come take a look. Experience it for yourself. See what we're talking about." And now to have them actually be the ones to advocate for me, it's just something that I've—

Terry: Well, I sense that you have a brand of positive persistence that's hard to say no to when you're around.

Maria: Yeah, being Capricorn. My brother refers to it as being stubborn. I guess so, but like I said, I'm just so passionate about the program because I know how it works and it does work and you just have to work at it. Getting that message across has just always been my passion, my goal, because I wouldn't be able to do the job that I do as a Safety Assistant, going to different buildings, working with kids who don't know me from Adam, and being able to intervene during a potential crisis situation and having that kid cooperate and getting their compliance.

Terry: Well, let's go to so you get a call. Why don't we go through a recent call that you found memorable?

Maria: Okay. Well, I just as a matter of fact—right before Christmas break, I was called to one of our high schools by a young lady who had attended my gang presentation that I had done for some staff.

Terry: Now just so our listeners know, Maria is—as we said in the introduction—you're the lead gang investigator in the district. I just want to re-emphasize that to frame this.

Maria: Right. So as the lead investigator, I also do presentations for the staff, the students, the community, law enforcement. So I did this particular group of staff, and one of the participants in the presentation that I did, I ended up getting a call from the very next day and she was like, "I have this student and he's having severe behavior problems." I said, "Kind of tell me a little bit more about this. What am I getting myself into?"

Basically, the bottom line is we have a 14-year-old male who, because of the situation that he is in, is not in a very safe, caring home environment. And so he's now acting out, hanging out with the wrong kind of people, doing not-so-good things. And she was very concerned for his well-being and the choices that he's making, and she just wanted me

to come out there and kind of get a feel for him because she thought at the time that he was actively involved in a gang.

And so my job was to go there. I pulled him out of class. I introduced myself. The look on his face was like, "Oh, lord, who is this?" What I do is I just sit down with the kid. I tell them straightaway I'm not a police officer. I'm not here to arrest you. I'm not social services. This is what I am; this is what I do, and I just wanted to come and talk to you because apparently you've got people who really love and care about you, and they're concerned with what's going on with you. One of the concerns was that he's being beaten by his mother and a very physically abusive situation.

Terry: That's hard.

Maria: Yeah, and he didn't want to talk to anybody about it, and he didn't want to talk to the social workers, and he didn't want to get his mom in trouble. It's just a whole big dynamic of, "If I get my mom in trouble I'm going to end up somewhere worse. What's going to happen to my siblings?" I mean, it's not just this one part of it.

Terry: No, it has repercussions all around.

Maria: All around. So what I did was we just talked. He told me about the things he likes to do and I tried to weave some into the conversation, "Well, these are some of the concerns I'm hearing about." It slowly built up to the fact that there might be some physical things going on at home that people are concerned for his well-being. While he didn't open up completely and admit to anything, it was a more roundabout conversation.

Terry: Sure.

Maria: Basically, his father is in prison. His mother has a new boyfriend. He's a drug dealer. He is 14 years old and he told me flat out, "Nobody cares about me. Nobody cares about me. I have nowhere to go, and nobody cares about me." And when you have a child who comes into a room kind of with a swagger is what I call it, like he's in control and he's made of steel and nobody or nothing can get to him and then the further into our conversation the more that steel starts to break down a little bit. Within that time he just—

Terry: For you to get a disclosure like that in that amount of time is remarkable. To have somebody say, "Well, I feel like nobody cares about me."

Maria: Yeah. What got me was when he just started crying. He just burst into tears and he was just crying. I had to tell him, "You know, it's okay to cry and it's okay to be upset and it's okay to be angry. You have every right to be." Because I think we tell kids being angry, that's an ugly emotion. I think that's a disservice to these kids because they are angry. And I've got to be honest with you, in these last five years in particular, I have dealt with some of the most angriest, rage-filled kids I have ever seen in the 20-something years I've been working with kids. And it's just this—it's not getting any better. To be honest with you, it's very sad to see so many kids.

One of the things I tell people in my class is I think that we're just now reaping what we sowed because Milwaukee in particular, the city of Milwaukee, led the entire nation in the highest teenage pregnancy rate of all the United States of America. We, in Milwaukee. So when you have babies who are having babies who have never had any type of home training, you know kids don't come with instructions, they kind of go with

what they know. And if all they know is disorder and dysfunction, that is what they go with. And unfortunately, that is what we're starting to see now.

I've gone to schools and I've had complaints. "His parent is coming to our school. He's (the parent) a big gang member, and he's trying to fight with our students." So I went to the school to check out who this parent was, and lo and behold he was one of my students when I worked at the high school. Here he is, a grown man still with the mentality of a 12-year-old.

His daughter has more intelligence, literally a higher IQ, than her parents do. So she easily manipulated the situation. "Oh, this kid is picking on me and blah, blah, blah," just starting a whole bunch of drama and here's this grown man, now 30 years old, trying to fight one of my students, a 12-year-old or 13-year-old on a bus.

Terry: Wow.

Maria: And so these are the types of kids that we're dealing with on the daily. So when I have—

Terry: How do you de-escalate that?

Maria: How do I de-escalate that? And so I just have to talk to them the way I would want someone to talk to me when I'm upset. And that's not, "Hey, you, get out of here. You can't be here. I'm going to call the police," because that doesn't mean anything to some of these folks. They deal with the police on the daily.

So when this young man just broke down and started to cry, all he wanted—and that's a common thread with a lot of the kids I've talked to—all they want is mother and father to take time and take care of them.

Terry: The basic human needs.

Maria: The basics. Very basic. He doesn't want—

Terry: Extended gang family. He wants a mother and father.

Maria: He just wants what every kid on planet Earth wants, and that's someone to care about them.

Terry: And so how do you gauge the outcome of a meeting like that?

Maria: Well, to be honest with you, when that happened I get verklempt for lack of better words. Verklempt.

Terry: Yes. Do you get emotional? How can you not?

Maria: I do, because I mean I just want to reach out and I want to hug them and I want to tell them, "Oh, it's okay." And I tell my husband all the time he's so lucky I don't have a bigger house because I'd be like the old woman in a shoe. I'd have so many I wouldn't know what to do, because there's such a need and such a basic need. And so we kind of work through that, and he did most of the talking. Let's put it that way. I just let him talk.

At the end of our conversation, he told me that he wants to get a PlayStation. For Christmas, it's what he wanted. I said, "Did you talk to your mom or dad?" He said,

“Because if I have a PlayStation, I wouldn’t have to go out into the neighborhood, and I wouldn’t have to hang out with some of the characters” that he’s been hanging out with.

Terry: If I have a distraction at home, that would keep me from the street.

Maria: Exactly. I said, “Did you talk to your parents about that?” “My mom told me she can’t help me.” And then I said, “What did your dad say?” He said, “Well, if I need something, I need to get it myself.”

Terry: That’s the message to a 14-year-old boy?

Maria: That’s the message to his 14-year-old son. And seeing how he’s in prison now for drug dealing, basically street language means “figure it out.” It means go hustle for your money, is basically what he’s telling his kid. And once again he started crying. And I thought to myself, “If I had the money right now in my purse, we’d be driving down to Walmart and I’d be buying you a game for yourself.”

I said, “Well, buddy, I can’t really help you with that, but how are your grades?” He said, “Grades?” I said, “Yeah, how are your grades? Because what I can do is help you get a work permit and maybe you can make your own money and buy your own things and you wouldn’t have to worry about depending on anybody else.” He said, “I can do that?” “Of course you can. But, once again, how are your grades?” “Um, well, I need some help with this and that.”

I said, “Well, have you asked your teachers for help?” He says, “No.” I said, “You know, your teachers are really good, but the one skill they just have not mastered yet is the skill of mind reading. So unless you tell them, they don’t know. So you’ve got to raise your hand when you have questions. Make people earn their money. They went to school and they know how to teach; you just have to give them the opportunity to try to help you.”

So we came up with a plan that after Christmas break I was going to come talk to his teachers, the ones that he needed help with. I took him straight to the office and I asked the secretary for a worker’s permit form. I said, “Clearly it states on here you have to have at least a 2.0 grade point average in order to qualify for a work permit. You have to have an ID and you have to have \$10.”

He says, “Well, but I don’t have \$10.” Right away, he looked to the money aspect of it. I said, “Well, I’ll tell you what. If you work on the GPA and you have your ID, I’ll work on the \$10 part.” He says, “Okay. Okay. I can do that.” I said, “Okay. That sounds good.”

Do you know, as we’re walking back because I’m going to take him back to class, this young man stopped. This is in a hallway full of high school kids. He turned and he said, “You know, I really want to say thank you.” He gave me a big hug in front of everybody. And I just thought, well, that was—once again, I got verklempt.

Terry: Yeah. That’s tremendous.

Maria: I was just grateful for the opportunity. And so we agreed that I would come back this past Monday to check on him to see how his vacation was, knowing that he wasn’t sure how that was going to go with the new boyfriend. So he had a lot of apprehension and anxiety about what was going to go on during Christmas.

Well, Monday morning before I even had a chance to get back to the school, the person who had called referring him to me in the first place called to inform me that Christmas Eve he got into it with his mother and the boyfriend stepped in and it became a physical altercation, and the boyfriend ended up punching him in the mouth and knocking out his teeth.

He had to run out of his house, go to a neighbor's house, and call for an ambulance. This 14-year-old boy ended up going to the hospital by himself. They ended up having to send the police back to the house to reclaim his teeth so that they could try to put his teeth back in his mouth. And apparently, for whatever reason—we don't know all the details—he was placed back in that home.

An uncle from Minnesota apparently stepped in, who also just got out of prison, but stepped in and took him to Minnesota. So at this particular point in time, this child is now in Minnesota. I told the contact person if he does come back to town please let me know. I gave him my contact number to give to him if he should happen to come back to town and need some assistance. He can call me.

Terry: Wow.

Maria: But those are the types of kids, Terry, which we're dealing with. And for every one of these kids that I'm telling you about, there's at least a hundred more just like him going through the exact same struggle.

Terry: I'll bet. You know, it would be interesting now I think to go to an intervention that you've talked about to CPI, to show what happens when you work with somebody a little bit younger. I know you had two special ed teachers call you. Can you tell our listeners about that?

Maria: Well, I was called by two teachers that had just attended my class the week prior. They're like, "Maria, we have these two kids and they're completely out of control, and none of this is working on them. We really need you to come out and kind of let us know what we can do."

So sure enough, I went out there and it's a special ed self-contained classroom. There is one desk and one chair because they have thrown furniture throughout the classroom and broken everything so they're reduced now to one desk and one chair.

And as I walk into this classroom, I kind of see that there's a whole lot of nothing going on, is what I call it. Nothing structured or organized, just kind of kids randomly coming in and out. I just kind of quietly stand off to the side to just observe. The first child I encountered, I saw him when I walked into the building and signed in. He was kind of gallivanting. You know, probably five or six years old gallivanting with this little pass in his hand. I said, "Good morning," to him, and he didn't say anything; he just ran away.

It turns out this is the same young man, now that I'm in the classroom, who comes into the classroom with his little pass that he was walking on. I happened to be standing in front of the hooks where you're supposed to hang the pass back up. His response to me was, "Move, bitch."

Terry: That's direct.

Maria: I looked at him. This little tiny child, a little tiny guy, you know, five or six years old at the most.

Terry: That's surreal.

Maria: I'm like, "Excuse me, sir?" He said, "You heard me, bitch. Move out of my way." And I thought, "Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness, really?" And so I stepped to the side. I let him put up his pass. And then he proceeded to cuss a blue streak. Let's put it that way. And the words and the language coming out of his mouth were—and he was angry at me because I didn't move, apparently, fast enough for him.

Terry: So he was going to let you know?

Maria: He was going to let me know that he was not happy with me at this particular time. So he then jumps on one of the bookcases and is standing there, screaming profanities at me. The principal happened to be walking past the classroom at this time. He's like, "That's it, you're out of here! You're coming with me!" And he grabs the little guy.

I'm still standing by the door. I said, "Excuse me, is it okay if I talk to him?" He's like, "I don't want to talk to you, B. Just shut up talking. I hate you."

I said, "All I want to do is talk to you for a second. Can I talk to you?" He covers his ears and goes, "La la la." So now I'm kneeling. I'm in a squatting position. I said, "You know, it's such a shame that such a handsome little dude has such an ugly vocabulary right now."

He says, "What?" I said, "Yeah, you're a handsome little guy. I don't understand why you have to use such ugly words." He says, "Wait, you're not mad?" I said, "Mad at what?" He said, "Mad I called you a bitch. You're not mad at me?" I said, "No, baby. That's the best you've got?" He just kind of looked at me and then he put his hands down.

And as he's putting his hands down, I kind of reach out and just grab his hands lightly. I said, "Is it okay if I talk to you?" He let me sit him on my knee, my bended knee. I said, "So, my love, what seems to be the malfunction today?" I don't like to use the word problem because it has a negative connotation. If I say, "Terry, what's your problem? You have an attitude problem. I don't like your problem."

Terry: Plus little boys like words like malfunction.

Maria: He looks at me. He's like, "What is malfunction?" I said, "Lovely, that just means things aren't working out the way you would like them to. How can I help you?" "Well, first of all, you could give me a piece of gum." I said, "Oh, well, we're going to have to work towards that piece of gum. But for right now, let's talk about what's going on here." And the thing about it is while this is going on, the whole malfunction in the classroom stopped because everybody's looking at, "Okay, Navone, now what? What are you going to do now?"

Terry: Sure.

Maria: And so we proceeded. And then within the next couple of minutes he's reading a book to me because in his words, not only is he handsome but, "I also know how to read." So he proceeds to read to me. He proceeds to show me his artwork. Yeah, and everything is settling down. But in the meantime, the other young man that I was supposed to

come and talk to, he is angry that we're there because he knows that we want to talk to him also.

Terry: Oh.

Maria: So there's a big area rug in the classroom. He actually rolled himself up into this area rug like a burrito in the middle of the room. And my partner came with me, Mr. Jacobs. And Mr. Jacobs is more or less trying to convince him. You know, "Come out. Come and talk to us."

Terry: Unroll yourself out of this.

Maria: And I'm listening to the whole thing because I'm still dealing with the first one. I'm listening to this and the first one had to go for testing. So I said, "Okay, buddy, you do your best and I'll see you when you get back." So then I grabbed a chair and now I'm sitting at the head of the burrito with his head. I'm not saying a word to this kid; I'm just sitting there. And he keeps rolling around.

In the meantime, he's in this rolled-up area rug and he's cussing and swearing and threatening and, "You'd better get out of my face. I'm going to kill you. I'm going to kill everybody in here." The language he used, let's just say, was rated adult.

Terry: Gotcha.

Maria: And I just ignored him. I sat there and ignored him. I said, "You know what, love? As soon as you're done, you let me know because I do want to talk to you. Go ahead and let me know when you're done." And I proceeded to sit there and I watched the rest of the kids. Now I see him poking his head out. He's like, "Who is this crazy lady?"

Terry: Why can't I push your buttons?

Maria: Why can't you get to me? Or why can't I get to her? And I could see this look on his face. It's like she's not flinching. And so sure enough he unrolls himself. But now he wants to show us how tough he is, so then he starts going after the other students. And this is one of the reasons I was called. The complaint I got was he leaves the classroom whenever he wants to. Not only does he leave the classroom, he runs through the hallways. Anyone that is in his path he punches in the face. If he doesn't see anyone in the hallway, he will literally go into a classroom, pick somebody out, and punch them in the face. He's 10 years old. Yeah, and so this is the reason that I was called for that one.

So now I see that he's trying to go after the kids and we're not giving him that type of attention. I said, "If you hurt anyone here, I will have to put my hands on you." I think he was kind of testing the waters. So then all of a sudden he tries to run towards the door. All I did was place myself in front of the door. I'm like, "Buddy, I just need to talk to you. So if you could give me a few minutes of your time, I'd really appreciate it."

Finally, it took some convincing. I tell folks things don't happen according to a sitcom time frame. There's not a beginning, middle, and end in a 30-minute period. So it did take some time for me to convince him that we weren't going to hurt him or take him anywhere. But eventually he calmed down. And by calmed down, I meant he stopped trying to attack people. And then we were able to escort him into a classroom across the hall from where he was. And the entire time I had to stand by the door because he had his fist clenched. He's foaming at the mouth, literally, and he's standing right next to me.

He's invading my personal space, but he's not touching me. Instead, he kept flinching and he kept saying, "I'm going to kill this person. I'm going to kill that person. I'm sick of this stuff. I'm going to bring a gun here and I'm going to shoot everybody, and I hate you and I hate everybody. Just leave me alone."

The entire time, he was just tensed up like a board and his fists, like I said, were just clenched and he kept acting like he was going to punch the wall. And the language, once again, that was coming out his mouth to describe this malfunction was something else. Still, I've been working with kids for years, but just to hear that type of anger and that type of language coming out of such a little soul is just hurtful to hear sometimes. Not because they're hurting my feelings, but because what's happening inside, buddy? Why are you so angry?

So long story short, he was able—I finally got him from clenching at the door to sitting across from me at the table to then, by the end of our conversation, sitting next to me. But the entire time, he kept complaining.

Terry: How did you get him from the clenched standing up to the sit down? How did you direct him towards that?

Maria: I said, "You know what, lovey, why?"

Terry: Set some limits?

Maria: No. I didn't have to set limits because I notice that when people are very upset at that particular time, the more limits you put on them, the more they want to act out. So I let them act out. I would rather you verbally act out and release all that ugliness than me have to put my hands on you because you're trying to physically attack me. I've got all day as far as I'm concerned. When it comes to intervention, I can talk my way out of any situation because I've got all day. But when you make the decision to put your hands on someone, you take it to a whole other level that you have no control over. Literally, sometimes you really don't have control because accidents can happen in the blink of an eye.

Terry: Absolutely.

Maria: Especially when you're dealing with someone who is so angry and so wanting to get away from you they're willing to do whatever that takes and whatever that looks like to do so. So what I did was we just started asking questions. "So, buddy, what do you like to do? What are your hobbies? What are you good at? I've heard you're a really good artist," because the teacher told me he likes to draw. I said, "One of the things I just love in the whole wide world is artwork from my students. Do you think you could draw me something?" You know, something like that.

He's like, "You like art?" I said, "I love art. And my cubicle is filled with artwork from kids who have drawn me pictures. Do you think you could do something like that for me?" "Yeah, what would you like? I can draw anything." Then we got onto the subject about how great of an artist he was.

And then we started dealing with some of the issues. Then I just started asking him, "Buddy, why are you so mad? Why are you so angry?" Well, he didn't know that I knew that prior to me meeting him some of the information I received was here's a young man who is 10 years old. He just moved from Chicago. He has a very young mother.

Unfortunately, when he was seven years old, he witnessed someone being shot in the face point-blank. He was involved in the commission of a crime. He was in the car as a crime took place. He was also sexually molested by two of his mother's boyfriends. Not only was he sexually molested, he was given two sexually transmitted diseases.

Terry: So that's the kind of burden that—wow.

Maria: That's just the tip of that little iceberg. And he was so angry because—first of all let me just describe for you a tiny little, cute little boy whose clothes—he looks like he's literally waiting for the next flood. His pants are so high; his shoes are so small; his toes literally look like they're coming out of his shoes. His sleeves on his shirt, which was supposed to be a long-sleeve shirt, were now three-quarter length. He's telling us that when he was selling weed, when he was selling drugs, everybody wanted to be involved with him and everybody wanted to do things for him and take him places.

He said, "And that social worker—" What did he call her? I want to say, "The counselor keeps telling me I'm a little boy. I need to act like I'm a little boy. So I decided that I'm going to stop selling weed." This is this child talking. "Now that I'm not selling weed no more, nobody wants anything to do with me. Nobody cares about me. Nobody takes me anywhere. My only mom, I haven't heard from her. You see these clothes I have on my back? I bought these clothes. You know what my mama has done for me? Nothing. Nothing." This is him talking to us.

Terry: Oh my God. Yeah.

Maria: And you can see he's working through that anger and rage just by talking about it. And once again, I reiterated it's okay to be angry. Tell me why you're angry. Why are you so upset? You have a right to be. It's okay to cry. Because a lot of times, especially with boys, the message is, "Oh, boys don't cry. Only girls cry." And I think that letting them know it's okay and you're safe and nobody is going to laugh at you and nobody's going to make fun of you, it's okay to be angry but more importantly it's okay to cry. And he did.

He tells me that this is—first he tells me he wants to be an entrepreneur. He wants to start his own lawn mower service, and all he needs is someone to borrow him a lawn mower because then he can print out some flyers at school and then send them. He had this whole business plan that he could articulate.

Terry: That's incredible. And he's 10.

Maria: And he's 10. "And I can make my own money and I won't have to worry about doing bad things and then maybe people will care about me again," is what he said. And we went from that, Terry, and we had a whole bunch more in-between there. But by the end, because literally I was with him for at least over three hours. Closer to four.

And by the end of our conversation, do you know what this little boy—I said, "What do you want most? What do you want most? If I could give you anything, if anybody could give you something, what would it be?" And he says, "I want a foster mother and father who will take time and ride bicycles with me."

Terry: And that was in his heart? That's what he wanted?

Maria: That's what he wanted. He loves to ride bicycles and all he wanted was someone to ride bicycles with. He said—I have to laugh, because like I said, I would take him home if I could. He says, "Ms. Navone, can I come live with you?" I just met this child. He doesn't know me from Adam, but because I'm giving him a little bit of time, care, concern, he's willing.

I said, "Honey, you don't want to come stay with me. I'm a mean, old lady. I'll give you chores. You'll have to do your homework. You can't hang around with your buddies." "Oh, that's okay. I can handle that, Ms. Navone." I said, "Well, you know what? My husband really does not like foul language, and let's face it, buddy, that mouth of yours is really scary." He says, and I'm quoting, "Actually, Ms. Navone, I only speak that way when I have to. I know how to talk and I know how to behave myself."

Terry: That's remarkable.

Maria: Clear as a bell. And so that brings me always back, and part of my class is I tell folks that kids act according to a habit or if they've learned it to adjust to their environment. That's a primary example of adjusting to your environment. And where he comes from, he has to put on this facade. He has to be this tough guy. He has to be hard. But he knows better. He knows better.

Terry: But he's articulate, and he's a 10-year-old with a business plan.

Maria: Exactly.

Terry: Unbelievable. So that's the kind of potential that's in there.

Maria: This is the kind of potential I see in every single one of the kids that I deal with. They just need—they're like the little seed. They just need some TLC, someone to shine some light on them, someone to give them some water. You know what I mean, just make them flourish. Take that idea and make them run with it.

This is a baby. You know what I'm saying? As far as I'm concerned, it's our duty to prepare these kids. Because let's face it, Terry, what initiative, what incentive, does a child who has never been shown care, concern, empathy, compassion, what incentive do they have as they grow up? If you never know what those things are, if it fell from the sky and landed on your face, you wouldn't know what it was; you wouldn't know how to deal with it. If you've never been given it, how would you be able to give it away?

Terry: True, true. There's not any surplus of love and concern if there's none shown to you.

Maria: So now when we need someone to change our diapers and feed us because we're no longer able to, who is going to do that? These kids who have never been shown care and compassion are now going to be the ones to show us care and compassion in our moment of need?

I just get so frustrated because we're always so concerned about how we look like on paper. Suspension rates are down and blah, blah, blah. That might look good on paper, but kids need consequences. They need to know. We need to prepare them for the real world because in school if we just give them a little slap on the wrist and we tell them, "Oh, you're just a baby. Forget about it. Keep doing what you're doing," because people

go with what they know until they know better. And if nobody's ever shown them any better, how would they know?

So we tell these kids you're so special and you have labels and disabilities and whatnot and then we put them out into the real world either when they're 18 or 21 depending on what kind of label they have on them. Then, we have kids struggling to make it in the real world. The real world doesn't give a care about the labels you have. The real world doesn't care about your learning disabilities. The real world does not care anything about that. And if we cared so much about mental health and labels and disabilities, why do we have people living under bridges and on overpasses with signs? "Help me. Give me money." Why do we have people on death row with the cognitive ability of a small child? We don't.

Terry: You might well ask. You might well ask.

Maria: And I get so frustrated because a lot of my time is spent with the special needs kids. I have a special rapport with special needs kids. They just—we like each other. We're like magnets, peas and carrots if you will. So when I worked at schools, they would call me the mother of the children of the corn. It was a term of endearment because my kids had so many labels on them. They would call them the alphabet soup gang because they'd dump just so many labels on some of these kids and so many malfunctions that they were dealing with.

So, "Ms. Navone, come and get your son. Ms. Navone, come and get your daughter," because when one of my kids was going off, I would be the one to go in there and kind of check them. I'm the motherly type and I talked to these students the way I would talk to my own.

Terry: Sure.

Maria: And when they're being a donkey, I point it out to them. "You're being a donkey and people will treat you like a donkey if you act like a donkey. So I need you to breathe in, breathe out, and I need you to put on your game face. And your game face, I want you to be a gentleman. I want you to act like a lady, and this is what a lady does and this is what a gentleman does." Like I said, if they've never been shown or told any differently, they don't know. So I literally would say, "This is what a gentleman does. This is how a lady acts."

I really think they need to hear that, but we're so busy and so concerned and more worried about how we look like on paper that we're not preparing them. We're not giving them the skills that they're going to need to survive in the real world.

Kids that don't know socially how to reach out and shake somebody's hand or even answer a telephone properly or how to interview or how to open a bank account. Nobody's showing them really. I remember as a kid, we had one class, it was called Consumer Math and it was about half a semester long. I learned more in that half a semester about mortgages and bank accounts and paying your bills on time and the importance of establishing good credit.

So my kids are not disabled, and I really get angry when people diminish their ability because they have a label on them. And I call them my kids because I spend more hours of the day with some of these kids than I do my own, so they're my kids. They're our kids. These are our kids. That's the way I look at it.

Terry: No wonder they want to come and be part of your family.

Maria: Yeah, it's funny, because like I said with this young man, he's like, "Oh, Ms. Navone, I'll come and stay with you and I'll help you." I've had so many requests like that. I had a young man tell me, "Ms. Navone, can I come and stay with you?" My two youngest sons are not biologically mine. They're adopted. I've had them since they were two months old and five days old. I picked my youngest up from the hospital. They're biological brothers, 14 months apart.

So we did a public service announcement for foster care because at the time, 10,000 kids were in need of foster placement but they only had 2,300 licensed providers. So we did a public service announcement for being a foster parent, and so my kids started seeing this commercial. "Oh, Ms. Navone, I bet you're making lots of money, huh? I see you on TV all the time." I'm like, "No, sweetie, it's a public service announcement. It was free." "Oh, next time let me be your agent. I'll get you some cash." That kind of thing.

Terry: So you had some offers of representation, huh?

Maria: Yes, offers of representation, but they also wanted—now everybody wants to come and stay with me. One in particular says to me, "Ms. Navone, can I come stay with you?" I said, "Why would you want to stay with me?" "Well, they're going to move my group home again." And for those that don't know, group home, for lack of better words, more or less, is like an orphanage. It's where you go when you have no place else to go. He says, "They're going to move my group home again, Ms. Navone. But I talked to my mama, and she told me at the of this month, she promised on everything that I'll be able to come stay with her at the end of this month."

I said, "Really?" I said, "How long have you been in the system?" Because the kids in the system know the lingo. He's like, "Since I was seven." He's now 15. So for eight years now, his mama has been telling him, "At the end of this month. At the end of this month. At the end of this month. At the end of this month."

So he said, "Ms. Navone, I promise I'll come to your house. I'll clean. I'll do chores. I'll babysit your kids. And I promise, Ms. Navone, I promise I won't eat too much." And I said, "Excuse me?" And he said, "Yeah, yeah, my last foster parents said that I ate too much and that's why they didn't want me." It was like someone just put a screw right in my heart and just gave it a good twist because I thought, "What do 15-year-old boys like to do most in the whole, wide world? Eat."

Terry: Absolutely.

Maria: And here's this kid promising me he won't eat too much. Just please, please let me stay with you. Yeah, these are the types of kids, Terry. So when I have staff that come into my classroom and they're like, "These kids," and they have nothing positive or nice to say about what's going on, I kind of have to stop and remind them, "This is nothing to do with you."

Terry: Right.

Maria: And so I call CPI my philosophy in the art of communication. That's what I like to call it. It's making people do things they don't really want to do but in a very nice way. It's not necessarily what you say all the time, but it's how you say it, and you have to put

yourself in that situation. If you're very upset and angry and just full of piss and vinegar, do you want someone coming at you and barking commands and threatening you with consequences and getting in your face? "I'm the adult and you're the child." They're just going to set them off even more. I know as an adult someone coming at me with that negative kind of vibe just really upsets me.

Because I notice that some adults think they can speak to people any old kind of way. And to me, I don't understand that philosophy. I understand that you might be the VP of a corporation, but if you don't have interpersonal skills you can't be a skilled intervener. You have to be approachable. You have to be kind, compassionate. You have to be able to step aside, build a bridge, get over yourself, first and foremost, because their malfunction has absolutely nothing to do with you.

Terry: I think the CPI behavioral models give people the structure to take themselves out of the equation a little bit.

Maria: It does, absolutely. Once they realize that these malfunction behaviors that they're dealing with, for the most part, have nothing to do with them personally, they're more able to step back and take a breath and say, "Okay, times. Let's start over. What can I do to help you?"

But if they're constantly in that fight-or-flight mode, if they're constantly not being able to rationally detach from the situation, if they're constantly taking behaviors personally, I tell them all the time, "You're going to burn out quicker than a cheap candle from the dollar store. You're burning both ends; you're going to burn yourself out. If you're not good to yourself, how can you be good to anyone else?" So that's always been my emphasis, the art of communication.

Truthfully, if it works on the most difficult student at the most difficult time—and not that we're perfect because sometimes people catch you on the wrong moment at the wrong time at the wrong point in your life that they say something that can hurt deeply and cut you and wound you. But I tell them, "Never let them see you sweat, because the moment they see you sweat, they know they've got you. You're done. Put a fork in you, it's over, because they know that they have won that little battle right there."

Terry: Right.

Maria: So being able to step aside and just breathe and not take this acting out personally really just helps think more clearly about how you want to approach that situation, what your intervention is going to be, and that's what the great thing about CPI is. It gives you so many different strategies, all the keys that you're going to need to identify where you're at with this person. What level are they at? And how to respond appropriately. That's the key component I always feel for CPI, because no matter what comes at you, you know how to deal with it appropriately. That's why I'm just so passionate about this program.

I do have one thing that I like to share with my classes. Because people are like, "Oh, it's so much easier said than done," and it really is. Please don't get me wrong. Even after all these kids, I go into a crisis situation and whether it's a five-year-old cussing me out or an 18-year-old cussing me out or a parent who's irate and making threats or whatnot, it never gets any easier. It never does. It's never easy to receive a verbal assault. It really isn't.

Terry: Right.

Maria: But the thing that helps me is understanding that they too are malfunctioning, and let's face it, it's just easier to take out your rage and anger on someone you're familiar with or you feel safe with than a complete and total stranger out on the street. And so I have this little girl that I tell a story about. My partner and I, we used to do our rounds together. Every morning we would see Norma. Norma would see us, me and my partner, and my partner would be like, "Good morning, Norma. How are you?" Norma would be like, "Oh, Ms. Mack, good morning." She would be all happy. And I'd say, "Good morning, Norma." And her response to me was "F U, B."

Terry: Okay, Norma.

Maria: "Okay, Norma. Thank you. Have a nice day." I didn't know where that was coming from. But then it kind of became a pattern, and every day it was the same thing. Every time this child saw me she was cussing me out, threatening me, telling me to go do things to myself. It got to the point where I'd be like, "Yeah, I know Norma. I've got to go whatever myself and thank you. Have a nice day. Same time, same place tomorrow?"

And literally, Terry, this happened for months. Months. And everybody's like, "Well, you should take her to the office and she should be written up." I said, "Why? I didn't do anything to this child. I obviously rub her the wrong way for some reason. I'm not going to worry about it." So sure enough, my sons were real little, because they could still fit in a shopping cart. We went to one of the stores; it's El Rey, which is a Latin food store. Here I am with my two sons. They're in the cart. Who do I see at the other end of the aisle? Norma.

I panic, because I'm thinking, "Oh my dear Lord, she's going to beat me up in front of my sons." These are the thoughts coming through my head, because now Norma's coming at me at a fast click. So I pull my sons to the side and tell them, "Buddies, whatever happens, stay in the cart." Because now I'm getting into my supportive stance. Now I'm kind of bracing myself. I put my hands up in the please stop position. She's running at me and she's smiling. She has this really peculiar look on her face and she's approaching me. Because the next thing I know, she reaches over and she grabs me in a hug. I'm stiff as a board because what is she going to do? I didn't want to be the one to physically stop her.

Terry: Sure.

Maria: So she's hugging me, and she can sense and feel that I'm stiff as a board. She looks at me. She's like, "Ms. Navone, what's wrong with you?" I said, "Norma?" She's like, "Yeah, Norma." I said, "Norma from high school?" She's like, "Yeah." I said, "The Norma that cusses me out every day and tells me to fly a kite in not so nice of words?" "Oh yeah."

I said, "Oh yeah? About that, Norma, what's up with that?" "Ms. Navone, you look really nice with your regular clothes on." I said, "Okay. Thank you? Yeah, Norma." I'm literally thinking to myself, "Okay, where is the pod and who are you? Because this is not the Norma I know."

Terry: The Invasion of the Body Snatchers!

Maria: Exactly. I'm thinking where's the pod? It's got to be around here somewhere. She's looking at me. She's like, "Ms. Navone, why do you look like that?" I said, "Norma, every

day for the last six months you've threatened to kill me, cut me. You cuss me out. You hate my guts. I can't even look at you." She says, "Oh yeah, about that." I said, "Yeah, about that." Once again she brings up the fact that I'm not wearing my uniform.

I said, "Well, you know what Norma? What's up with the uniform? I don't get it." She's like, "Ms. Navone, are you hungry?" Because they had a little restaurant inside the store. "Yeah, I am actually. We're here for lunch." "Okay. Let's go eat lunch." She's totally avoiding the subject.

So we get to talking. "Are these your kids? Oh, they're so cute. Blah, blah, blah." And the whole conversation she's steering away from the fact that for the last six months she's hated my guts. I say finally, "Okay, Norma, I've got to know. Why is it that every day when you see me you just hate me so much?" She says, "Oh, Ms. Navone, when you're wearing your uniform you look exactly like my B stepmother."

I said, "Okay. I'm sorry?" She's like, "Yeah, well, she's not a nice person, Ms. Navone, and you look just like her." I said, "Wait a minute, Norma. I know all us Hispanics look alike, but really?" She said, "Hispanicals?" I said, "Yes, I know it's not a word but I like to use it. Anyway, what?"

She said, "Well, she's not a nice person, Ms. Navone. And when my dad's not home—" And what she got into is she's physically abusing her and her siblings. Torturing is more or less what this lady was doing to them, physically torturing them. The dad's taking the stepmother's side and he doesn't believe the kids. It's a really ugly situation.

So we came up with a plan of action right then. I said, "Okay Norma, from this point forward, when you see me at work, I want you to look right here." I just kind of squared my face like Madonna "Vogue-ing." I'm like, "I want you to just look at my face. From the neck up, I just want you to look at my face. Don't look at my uniform. We'll work on it." "Do you have to wear your uniform, Ms. Navone? Please don't." I said, "Honey, I will get fired if I don't wear my uniform. I have to wear it. So we'll just work on the face thing, okay?" So okay, we promised that. Hugs, kisses, the whole nine yards. We parted ways. Monday morning comes around.

Terry: Oh boy.

Maria: She's in the hallway with my partner. "Hi, Ms. Norma." "Hi, Ms. Mack." "Hi, Norma." And she growls at me, "Grrr." Literally growled at me. And I thought, "Yes!"

Terry: There's progress.

Maria: There's progress in that, right? She went from threatening my life now to just a mere growl. I thought, "Norma, I love you too! God bless you. Have a wonderful day." She just kind of grr-ed and she turned around and walked away. Well, by the end of the week she went from a growl to a "Hey," she actually said hey, to a nod. She's at least acknowledging me. And every time I saw her in the hallway, I'd be like, "Norma, remember!" I would do the vogue of the face. I just wanted to make kind of light of the situation just so she knows that I know that we made up this plan and I want you to continue to picture my face and we're going to work on this.

It got to the point where she was a great kid. That's when she was a freshman. She graduated. She's now married. She has five kids, and she calls me and asks me to go to bingo with her. So it's a happy ending to a story, and I like to tell that one because I see

so many staff getting so caught up in their feelings that they don't give these kids a chance, a second chance or a third chance.

"She's useless." I hear that expression all the time, useless. "There are no redeeming qualities." I think to myself, "You have no idea what this kid is going through to make them look and act and feel the way they do towards other people." So if you never give them a chance, if you never give them a break, if you never try to look past that, you are losing out. You're losing out.

Terry: Excellent. If you have some remarks about the culture at MPS that we might close with or a takeaway that you feel really strongly that you'd like to give our listeners—so how about it, Maria? Is there something you want to say to a lot of the teachers and administrators and Certified Instructors that are listening about the culture at MPS or the CPI program and crisis intervention, some takeaway or burning message that you want to give to those people? I mean, the whole interview has been that, and I guess it's not fair to ask you for a summary but I will.

Maria: Well, I guess I want staff to come away with the hope, to have faith that if they set these goals for themselves, if your goal is to train an entire school or an entire side of town or district or whatever your goal is for your training, stick to it. Don't give up, because it's just so much easier to say, "Oh, it's an uphill battle and I'm not getting any response." If that was the case, I would've stopped 10 years ago and CPI, in my honest opinion, would've been done and over with in MPS, because there was nobody advocating for the program. I'm not trying to toot my own horn or anything like that.

Terry: It's fine, no.

Maria: Just it took a lot of persuasion, a lot of persistence, a lot of I didn't accept no for an answer. Every time they came at me with an excuse not to train, I came up with an example of why you should. For example, "Well, I've had umpteen staff get injured this year. I've had umpteen students get injured this year." "Well, why don't you send them to my class? Let's work on some strategies. Let's work on getting them certified. Let's work on that de-escalation part of it. And tell me in six months. Give me six months and let me know is it working? Is there a decrease?" And when they come back and say, "You know what? Yes. We see it."

Terry: Excellent.

Maria: But that's the key, guys. You just have to be persistent. You have to be passionate about it. You know that anything you can do to attract and retain—and that's one of the philosophies at MPS, we're always trying to attract and retain talented staff but we also want to attract and retain quality students. And so providing that great customer service is internal and external. It goes both ways. And when you have staff that are highly qualified, competent, confident in handling situations, it just makes for a safer learning environment. That's what these kids want, really, a safe place to be.

Terry: Thank you for the brilliant takeaway, and thank you for the interview. My guest today has been Maria Navone. She's Safety Assistant and Lead Instructor at the Milwaukee Public School District. Thank you, Maria.

Maria: Thank you, Terry.

Terry: All right!