You First Podcast Episode 62: Disability Activism Through Art

Maddie Crowley (00:00:00):

You're listening to You First: The Disability Rights Florida Podcast. In this episode, we talk with Jen White-Johnson about using arts to advocate and celebrate the experiences of the disability community.

(00:00:28):

Hello everyone, I'm Maddie.

Keith Casebonne (00:00:31):

And I'm Keith, and we are the hosts of You First. We are back with another great episode, and with what an amazing guest. We're talking with Jen White-Johnson, a renowned artist, educator, and disability activist, who uses the arts as a medium to champion the life, joy, and experiences of disabled and neurodivergent communities.

Maddie Crowley (00:00:54):

Yeah, this really has been a dream episode in the making, and we love talking with Jen. Their work, and if you don't already follow them, please do it.

Keith Casebonne (00:01:05):

Do it, do it.

Maddie Crowley (00:01:06):

Their work is incredible. And just everything that Jen stands for, and everything that they do is just incredible, so definitely check them out. But here's a little bit about Jen. Jen uses she/they pronouns, and they're a distinguished Afro-Latina artist, designer, activist, and educator, whose creative expressions delve into the intersection of content and caregiving, with a profound focus on reshaping ableist visual culture, which we'll talk about what that means. Jen, an artist educator grappling with Graves' disease and ADHD, brings a heart-centered and electric approach to disability advocacy.

Keith Casebonne (00:01:48):

Yeah. Her invaluable contributions to these movements you mentioned, manifest through powerful and dynamic art and media that simultaneously educate, bridge divergent worlds, and envision a future reflective of her autistic son's experiences. Jen's activism extends to collaborations with notable brands and art spaces, including Coachella, Target, and Adobe, both in print and digital realms.

Maddie Crowley (00:02:15):

Her photography and design work have gained recognition in esteemed publications such as Art in America, Juxtapose Magazine, Afro-Punk, and she has contributed insightful essays and publications, like After Universal Design, the Disability Design Revolution, and an Anthology on Blackness, which we'll talk about, and she's going to dive into a little bit too. Notably, Jen's work is permanently archived at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National African-American Museum of History and Culture in DC.

Keith Casebonne (00:02:47):

Jen also holds a BA in visual art from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, or UMBC, and an MFA in graphic design from the Maryland Institute College of Art, where she also imparts her knowledge, currently, as an instructor there. Jen resides in Baltimore, Maryland with her husband and eleven-year-old son.

Maddie Crowley (00:03:07):

Yeah, they're really such a cool person. And in this episode, we talk about Jen and their son's experience with disabilities. And they talk about the intersection of being disabled and Black, but also what that means for other folks who are BIPOC, Black, indigenous, and people of color.

Keith Casebonne (00:03:27):

Yeah, we dive deep into the need for more disabled BIPOC representation in visual media, their efforts to bring disabled artists to the forefront, and how they work to deconstruct ableism in the classroom.

Maddie Crowley (00:03:39):

Finally, I got to ask all of my questions about their awesome artwork, and their work that celebrates disability justice, and celebrates disability joy, and that was through all of their art, through digital design, zine making, installations, and so much more. So we really hope you enjoy. Here's Jen.

Keith Casebonne (00:03:59):

Hey, Jen. Thanks so much for being our guest today. We are so excited and appreciative of you being here today. Please give us an introduction to yourself, a little bit about yourself, and your visual description.

Jen White-Johnson (00:04:13):

Sure. Yes, I'm Jen White-Johnson. Thank you so much for having me today. I am a caramel-skinned Afro-Latina woman, or Black and Latina, Black and Puerto Rican. I'm wearing cream-brown colored glasses, and I'm wearing a black cool T-shirt, soft, super soft fabric. And I'm wearing a headband that is like a leopard skin pattern with cream and black. And I love my headbands, and I have a gap in my teeth, and I'm smiling. And I'm in a hotel room now, in Prairie View, Texas, where I am currently meeting with students from the university and amplifying Black disabled joy. And recently, in a book called The Anthology of Blackness, the State of Black Design, where I contributed an essay that really helps to amplify Black disabled design justice and Black disabled design culture. So I'm really excited to hold space for this conversation, and to be here with both of you. Yeah, this is beautiful.

Maddie Crowley (00:05:28):

This is Maddie. I'm a white person with brownish-blonde hair, wearing a black shirt, and the silver heart necklace. And I'm in my room with lots of plants and art on the wall. We were just chatting about how we followed each other for a really long time, and it's so exciting to finally get to meet online, and talk about your work, and just get to know you as a person and your visions, and just everything that you embody. I know I have so much of your art, and I know so many people are going to be so excited to hear from you.

(00:06:07):

Could you tell us a little bit more about who you are? How did **Jen White-Johnson** that we're meeting today, become who you are? Tell us about yourself, knocks, and your frame of life as you talk about, as mothering as an act of resistance. It's a big question, I know, but-

Jen White-Johnson (00:06:28):

Yeah, again, I'm just happy to share affirmations about disability joy, and that really helps to encompass what I represent, and who I am as an artist. And as a little girl, I was always that super chatty, social butterfly who talked too much in class, and who was always misunderstood and got good grades. And I was never really targeted for ADHD or autism. I was a part of that late generation in the 80s and the 90s, where we just slid on by, and we were looked at as, "Oh, okay, she talks too much. We're still going to view her as someone who can really make it through the school system without getting any extra accommodations, or any extra help." And then of course, no one was really talking about ADHD and autism in little Black-Latina girls in the 80s. A lot of that frames a lot of my artwork and design, and my need for community and collective care, really stems from not always being understood as a kid, being understood within social spaces, and looking for that constant affirmation.

(00:07:50):

And I turned 43 this past December, and my mom and I, we have constant conversations about that, about "So mom, as I'm grappling with late-diagnosed ADHD and finally affirming that life for myself, what were some things that happened when I was a kid?" I have so many questions about hopping on the school bus when I was a kid, and that wasn't even my school bus, but I just wanted to go to my friend's house. Just being really impulsive about things like that and making decisions on my own, which is very similar to what my son does. And my mom found a letter that I had written to my teacher when I was in the third grade, and the letter was me literally using so much self-deprecating language to seek my teacher's approval.

(00:08:47):

And the letter, it's, "Hi, Mrs. Yehman, please, I hope that you'll continue to understand me. And I know that I don't do great in math, and I know that I keep getting bad grades on my report card, but I promise I'll continue to do better. And I know that I'm a bad girl. And I know that I'm a talking girl, but you like me, right? You like me?" And I'm literally saying that to her in the letter because I'm looking for that affirmation. Which is why so much of mothering and parenting, why it's important that my son feels like he's accepted and he's welcome, and he's loved within the spaces that we inhabit. Oftentimes, Black and brown autism families, and neurodivergent families, we love our kids, and we want to be able to show them that they're loved and accepted, but they have their own mechanisms of support that aren't always matched within ableism, within the society, within the school system.

(00:09:57):

And so kids that are coming from a loving home, are being consumed by injustices within the community that they face, and they realize, "Oh, wow, the world is actually what is debilitating to me. The world is actually the access barrier," versus what my mind and what my body is telling me. And so that's what really... I speak from the soul. Disability and access, it really isn't a logistical conversation for me. It's more of a heart conversation for me. And so I always try to pay homage to that little girl who was searching and lost, and looking for those affirmations. And that's what really helps to inform the work that I do now, as an educator, as a photographer, as a designer, as a parent, as a community disability advocate and activist.

(00:10:54):

So if I'm not teaching about design, about photography, I'm hosting zine workshops and holding space for beautiful opportunities, so that disabled folks can have a space to tell their stories, so that they have a space to use art and to use design, and to use a really beautiful language that they never thought that they could really use, or that they felt that they knew how to use, to tell stories about disability joy, and about their own positionality. And it's been exciting teaching here in Maryland, where I'm from. Currently at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, and also at Bowie State University. And that was where I really, those two spaces, I've been teaching in and out of those spaces for the past, oof, 12 years, just learning more about myself as an educator, and holding space for acceptance and for, as I had said, disability joy within the classroom. That's just a little snippet of what helps inform all of it, and I'm hoping that I'm prefacing it for the rest of the conversation.

Maddie Crowley (00:12:09):

Yeah. Well, thank you so much. And I think everybody listening can resonate with, even if they identify with disability or not, can really resonate with how little Jen navigated the world no matter what their identities are. And I think what's so beautiful and powerful about the work that you do, is I feel like it is understandable, and it reaches everybody in a way that matters to them. And I just think that is so wonderful. And I was thinking about little me, who was a lot of misunderstood things about my various disabilities and things. And yeah, it's just a very affirming and wonderful way to think about life and disability, and all of the rest. So thank you for painting that picture of where you've been and how it's gotten you to where you are today.

(00:13:15):

So I'd like to hone in a little bit on your work. As you mentioned briefly about being a young Afro-Latina girl in the 80s or so, and how people weren't necessarily thinking about those intersecting identities, and how that's the lost generation of folks who needed support and needed care. And then you talk about this in your work, as far as what is ableist visual culture, or visual ableist culture, and how we haven't been talking about all of the wonderful intersecting identities and people in their wholeness. So could you talk a little bit about that, and how your art and your work goes against that?

Jen White-Johnson (00:14:01):

Yeah, yeah. Thank you for that question. And yeah, I think as I started on my disability journey, and started to really understand, "Oh wow, this is a whole community and a whole movement that wasn't a part of my own American history or my Black history." So I feel like a lot of disabled folks had to provide their own sense of disability education, and disability studies, and that's what a lot of us have done.

(00:14:33):

And so it was really my son's autism diagnosis that really showed me how heavy, and how ableist, and how many access barriers are consistently present within society. And how disability and neurodivergence are always looked at from that charity, medical, cure-based modality and model, and how there's no real space for the social amplification, the cultural amplification. That's when I had really discovered the word ableism. And the fact that, wow, yeah, there is discrimination against disabled people that have been around for centuries, whether it's through eugenics, whether it's through forced institutionalization, forced sterilization against Black activists within the civil rights movement, and whether before the ADA, and before the IDEA, and before students could actually be within the classroom and get services, and get provisions and accommodations.

(00:15:47):

There was so much that I had to deconstruct and to learn, and it was painful seeing people view autism itself, as this label, right? "How dare you call me autistic?" Or "How dare you refer to me as someone who has a disability?" And realizing that, "Man, it's not, disability is not a bad word." And I'm so happy that we're in alignment, and that so many other disabled advocates that I love and follow, really have continued to just show me that, and to hold space for that, and know that my own disability and neurodivergence doesn't have to be rooted in so much stigma and shame. And things that a lot of disabled folks are subjected to, especially if you're Black, brown, and disabled. And as I was trying to fill my cup with narratives and stories of joy, and grappling my lived experience, my son's lived experience, and even my husband's lived experience, as we're all really open and comfortable openly identifying as being neurodivergent, and aligning ourselves with other folks who think the same way.

(00:17:04):

We're being reminded, man, that our group is, we're small, but we're mighty. But we're still having to teach so many other folks about how to use anti-ableist vernacular and words and language. And so when I was doing my own design research, and doing my own workshop-based research in how to tell my story, how to have really insightful conversations with students, with the community about disability joy, things were constantly being thrown in my face that were just triggering. And so one of the things that is often triggering for the autistic community, is April the 2nd, World Autism Day. And oh my God, and how crazy that just the month of April can be, for so many autistic folks that are like, "Here we go again with the puzzle piece." And I know that some folks within the autistic community, they still feel that symbol resonates with them.

(00:18:04):

And then there's the neurodiversity movement that prefer the infinity symbol, and just how amazing and how uniting that symbol can be. And I definitely prefer the infinity symbol as well. But obviously, folks are celebrating World Autism Day, or Autism Awareness Month, or Autism Acceptance Month, in so many different ways and different dynamics that they want to present to the community, whether you're an ally, a co-conspirator, or someone who's autistic. So you can always tell when non-autistic people are in charge of these autism-based, so-called amplificatory campaigns. And so I was so angry, I think this was World Autism Day in 2021 or 2022, when Lego, and we all love Lego, right? When they did their World Autism Day campaign, and they're like, "All right, we're going to release a whole bunch of mini-figs that are astronauts, that are teachers, that are," I don't even remember half of the visuals and the mini-figs that they presented because the campaign wasn't up for that long.

(00:19:17):

Because the image that was rotating on social media, and I'm sure you saw this, was a mini-fig that was dressed up as an astronaut, and they're in space. And the ad says, "I'm an autistic," no, "I'm autistic and an astronaut." And then at the bottom it says, at the bottom of the ad, the bottom of the mini-fig, it says, "Don't lose dreams, lose labels. World Autism Day." And again, perpetuating that stigma that the word autism is a label. Oh, my God, come on, who was a part of that campaign? Was there any autistic people in the focus group, in the boardroom for that conversation? One of the most ablest pieces of media that I've ever seen from a beloved space that we all adore. It's almost every autistic person I know loves Lego. Like my son, we watch Lego Masters and we're building, and it's like a cool sensory-based, fun activity where there's no wrong way to build something.

(00:20:24):

And I'm like, so they got so much heat for that, and so much pushback, and so that ad was not on. But the thing that's so insane about the ad, is that it says at the top, on top of the mini-fig, it says, "I'm Autistic, an astronaut," but they cross out the word autistic. So in other words, we're erasing your identity. We're erasing who you are as an autistic person, because you should not have to identify with this label, just be an astronaut. That's it. There's no glory in being an autistic astronaut. So in other words, let's erase that label. Let's erase that identity. And so of course, the autism community, we were offended. We were just heartbroken. And they were like, "Oh, we got it wrong. We're so sorry. We'll do better." They took the ad down. I don't even know. I had completely disconnected from the conversation because it was so triggering and overwhelming that I don't even know if they put up a replacement ad, or another ad that brought the word autistic back into prominence.

(00:21:36):

But the fact that people and corporations, and multi-billion dollar spaces are still viewing autism, disability, and neurodivergence, as this label, right? When literally, it's an actual diagnosed cognitive disability, a cognitive difference. When policy is written around it, folks are getting medical accommodations. And I'm like, "Why are they viewing it as this label that's rooted in so much ableism?" And I was like, "Yeah." I'm like, "This is what we have to continue to redesign, what we have to continue to erase from our mind, what we have to continue to just eradicate." It's like, "No, let's eradicate ableism." Let's completely flip it, and shift the conversation, shift the narrative, so that we can just amplify anti-ableist practices, anti-ableist art, creating more anti-ableist spaces of joy, of love, that are specifically curated by disabled folks and neurodivergent folks. So ultimately, and that really helps to inform the mothering as an act of resistance framework.

(00:22:51):

It's essentially creating the world that we don't see, and that the world seems to not want to see you. They don't want to hold space for it, or they want to tell our stories for us. They want to tell our stories on behalf of us. And we saw that with Sia and with what happened with music, and I was a huge fan of Sia. I had seen her in concert three times. I love all her music, and the fact that, again, that stigma was perpetuated with hiring a non-autistic actor to play an autistic person. And I still, to this day, have refused to watch it. And I know that a lot of autistic people, they watched it so that they could provide their own commentary. I'm familiar enough with Sia's music and her overall vibe, to know what was happening in the actual film, without having watched it, to know what direction she took. And the fact that, yeah, let's just hire someone to play this caricature of an autistic person.

(00:23:59):

And the fact that they, oh, she consulted autism-based organizations, and again, perpetuated the stigma of, oh, this would've been too much of a stretch for an actual autistic person to play this role, and to embody musicality, and the movements in the performances. And I'm like, "Wow." I'm like, "But it would've been so much more beautiful and so much more authentic, and so much more uplifting to the actual autistic community." So yeah, it's whether it's media, whether it's design, whether it's products that help to perpetuate the ableist stigma of what autistic people can't do, what disabled people can't do, those are the things that I'm constantly trying to shift.

(00:24:47):

And using things like design, calls to action, language justice. To me, language justice, not only does it embody making sure that there's ASL interpreters, that there's Latino people who have access to multi and bilingual tools to read about disability resources. But I also feel like disability justice has to incorporate anti-ableist language as well, being able to hold space for the words that disabled people use to uplift themselves, so that we are open and free to say the words disabled, so that we're not dancing around the conversation by saying, "Oh, we're just differently abled." And we are going to constantly shift away from infusing the word disability into the way that we describe ourselves. And I still have conversations with a lot of families that aren't comfortable, they're not comfortable with that word. And it's taken them a really long time to infuse the word disability into their conversation, and so that it really helps to define their existence. Yeah.

Keith Casebonne (00:26:03):

Well, a lot of that talk about labels and words and stigmas related to them, we just recently talked about the word disability in a previous episode and how really in the end, it's the meaning of the word. The dis- prefix is more different but equal, it's never been a less than. Some people who want to fight against the word disability, have that connotation that it means less than, and it actually never has. But also you refer to autism and neurodivergence. One of the ways I love to think about neurodivergence is that that's a word that could apply to everybody to some degree, because we all think a little bit different than somebody else. How many times do we, disability aside, you think about, well, I think about this way differently than my partner does, and have just major disagreements and don't see things the same way.

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And so I think it opens it up so that others can maybe better understand that it's just a difference. It's nothing, again, like putting labels on it and saying that someone is autistic and you don't want to use that word because it's a label. And it's like, "No, let's all embrace how we all have our uniqueness and our differences that make us all special in our own ways." But going back to what you were saying about the way you were growing up, and that independence and awareness led to that creative streak and fresh outlook of life that brought you to the place where you are today as an artist and an advocate and an educator, I wanted to hear a little bit more about the ways that you practice disability advocacy and promote accessibility through your work, whether that's in a digital design, or an actual physical space, or any other modes where you might do that.

Jen White-Johnson (00:27:49):

Yeah, and again, thank you for holding space for that. Not often are disabled or neurodivergent educators, we're not really in the spaces where we can openly talk about, like you were saying, those differences, and realizing that this is a really beautiful spectrum of disabled thinking and neurodivergent thinking that we can all appreciate, and all celebrate our various ways of existing within different spaces. And after reading and researching and seeing so much data, especially of the lack of representation within disabled communities, and especially Black kids and kids of color, like with children's literature and how it's currently at 20%, and disabled representation within kids lit is at 4%, and it's just horrible. And that white representation and animal representation are anywhere between 30 and 40% of who's being represented as main characters within kids lit. And so it's wild, because we can't even walk into a Barnes and Noble, or into any bookstore, and see equitable and adequate representation.

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And we can often count on one hand, oh, who are autistic, fully openly autistic characters that are Black, and that are the main character of the story and that are being amplified. Or how many neurodivergent professors or teachers, are actually open, and fully disclosing themselves in the classroom because they can afford, and because they can feel comfortable enough to do that, to feel supported, and not to feel judged or stigmatized. And so in addition to various activist protest art that I can create, and whether it's used on social media, whether it's used as poster prints in the classroom, whether it's used at rallies that amplify disability joy, and whether we're out there marching, or rolling in our wheelchairs, side by side. I knew that I had to continue to create some sort of manifesto, some sort of bold statement that really helped to encapsulate all of these smaller designs, all of these smaller calls to action that I wanted to share, and that I was inspired to create by so many conversations with my Black disabled advocates, and fellow co-conspirators and comrades.

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And so in 2022, I created the Anti-Ableist Art Educators Manifesto, and it's a free manifesto that is on my website, and that can be downloaded, and it's also included in Spanish. And it has just nine principles. And the first principle just really calls us to show up. The second principle calls us to eradicate ableism. The third is uplift acceptance. The fourth is to create with, and not for. The fifth is our differences should embolden us. The sixth principle is disability is not a bad word. The seventh principle is value all bodies and minds. And the eighth principle declares that allyship is sacrifice. And the ninth principle simply says, "Our art is our survival." Because this manifesto is really guided to educators that are teaching art. And art is an ultimate act of liberation, right? It's supposed to be this really beautiful space where we are free to express ourselves using color, using digital design, using products, using games, using animation, using so many different beautiful mediums to express our joys, sculpture, performance, poetry.

(00:31:57):

And if those spaces themselves, are filled with so many ableist tropes and ableist stereotypes, or if they're basically erasing disabled art history and disabled Black history from the conversation, then wow, then so many people are going to be impacted. And so I felt like it was just important that, yeah, if I'm going to continue to be present within these community educational spaces, that a manifesto will allow for me to usher in an opportunity to have conversations to uplift so many other disabled advocates that have paved the way for me, and that continue to just show up, and be really unapologetic when it comes to their joys and the way that they're educating the disability community.

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So whether it's Sins Invalid, whether it's Krip-Hop Nation, whether it's the Disability Justice Culture Club, whether it's Disability Visibility and all the fun stuff that Alice does, and the voices that Alice continues to uplift, those are all artists that are using their words and the way that they communicate with the world, to continue to remind us that we have to practice and we have to be anti-ableists, period. And we have to co-create in solidarity with each other, so that cross-disability solidarity, which is one of the principles of disability justice. And so all of that helps to inform the work and the design that I'm doing, to really manifest, "Hey, this is what it looks like when a disabled artist is given the tools to create something that is meaningful," and something that, yes, is defined by their disability, is defined by how they exist every single day, not in despite of their disabilities.

Maddie Crowley (00:34:09):

Hey everyone, this is Maddie from You First, and I wanted to tell you about a program that's going on right now through Disability Rights Florida. We're collaborating with other disability service providers and local health departments, to organize free accessible flu and COVID-19 vaccine clinics across the state. We have many scheduled through the end of April. So to find out more about the dates and locations of the various clinics, visit DisabilityRightsFlorida.org, forward-slash clinics. If you need help arranging transportation, scheduling appointments, or have any other issues related to vaccine access, we are here for you. You can call us toll free at (800)722-8142, or telecommunication for the deaf, 800-346 -4127. So be sure to visit DisabilityRightsFlorida.org, forward-slash clinics for more information.

(00:35:11):

Yeah, I really appreciate hearing about your work throughout this whole conversation, as a professor and someone just a creator of art and how you challenge that. I think a lot of... I'm not personally an art student. I like art. I didn't go to school for art though, but I know a lot of people in my life went to school for music, went to school for design, drawing, et cetera. And I am so fool-heartedly, like I think music, art, anything like that, is the hardest majors that exist at an institution. I really do. The rigorous course load, the amount of projects you have to create, all of that is so intense in a way that giving credit to all practicing majors and things like that. But I don't think people realize how rigorous art really can be, especially if you're a student, whether that's an undergrad, masters, PhD, whatever it might be.

(00:36:19):

And I know you've touched on it a little bit throughout the conversation, but I'd love to hear more about you as a professor, and how you work through the power dynamics between professor and student, how you challenge the expectations, especially of upper education, the amount of hours and time that people have to do for art projects and design projects, and how you hold space for students. What things do you find valuable, whether that's what you share in a syllabus, what you share about yourself, how do you create space for students? I would love to hear about your practice with that.

Jen White-Johnson (00:37:01):

Yes. Yeah, I love that question. And definitely, I think it came from, again, what I faced when I was an undergrad and in grad school, not having an ADHD diagnosis, not even knowing that Black women could be autistic, and not knowing that. And all of it was very much shadowed under anxiety, general anxiety disorder. But a lot of my ADHD allowed for me to hyper-focus, and it allowed for me to really embrace conversations about social design and about collective care. And so when I became an educator, I was like, "Wow, these are things about me that I actually love, and that I'm realizing that I can't just turn off, and things that are making me feel a little different than just the average educator, where every student is just a number." And then it was beautiful because my first opportunity to teach in depth and full-time, was at a historically Black college and university, HBCU, so Bowie State University in Maryland.

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And so I was able to begin teaching there right outside of grad school, after having been a TA, and in grad school for two years, and being able to just utilize my joys and my way of being able to hold space for transparency, and just a really engaged way of being able to hold space for my students and their needs. And realizing that, "Yeah, art can be fun." Art doesn't have to be this heavy, oppressive space like you were saying, because there's so much rigor and so much of... There's so much competitiveness, in terms of comparing yourself to other artists, and am I good enough and am I going to be a professional working artist one day if I'm not doing this and exhibiting in all these different spaces? And realizing that students can express themselves in so many beautiful, unique ways when it comes to their art and design.

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And I was like, "Wow." And being a professor on an HBCU campus, because the campuses are a lot smaller, and the relationships that we have with our students are very maternal. And yeah, it's just a different, like I said, I'm at an HBCU this weekend, just meeting with students, and instantly I'm able to just feel like we all see each other. And the fact that even within this panel that I was a part of last night for the Anthology of Blackness, the State of Black Design, and the essay that I contributed, specifically, amplifies my own neurodivergent teaching practices and how I hold space for disclosing my disability and neurodivergence on the first day of classes. And how I was not comfortable doing that until I was in my late-30s, and how I didn't realize how important it was for me personally. This isn't a common practice of all design faculty, or design teachers within the K through 12 system.

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This isn't a common practice because often we don't have that support. We don't have the proper accommodations to feel like we can be taken seriously or supported by the higher-ups in other design faculty. And essentially, we often seek that solidarity in our own students. And that's where I felt like I had the most solidarity, because the students responded very much to my transparency, and me on day one being like, "Hey, everyone." Especially when we were teaching virtually, and we were in the early days of the pandemic and really realizing we had to take off all of our masks, all of those access barriers, to be our true disabled and authentic selves. And so that's when I really felt comfortable disclosing, and realizing, "Hey, students, I'm here for you. We're all collectively experiencing the trauma and the heaviness of this pandemic, and so let's just continue to show up in the best way that we can, and I'll continue to be as flexible and as accommodating as I can."

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So whether that was switching up the different modalities of how I had students submit responses to podcasts that they would listen to, or the research that they were doing. And I'm like, "Okay, does this research have to be a 20-page paper with all these footnotes and citations?" Or can the response to this specific research topic be like a poem or a zine, or a performance piece, or a really beautiful reflective journal writing? So it was beautiful being able to finally see professors and other disabled folks, lead the conversation. And Critical Design Lab was really monumental for me, in terms of the statement that they released on behalf of disabled and neurodivergent educators from across the United States. They created this really beautiful solidarity statement that really held space for teaching in the times of COVID, and what that access conversation needs to become for you and your students.

(00:42:44):

And for me, it was in addition to the different modalities of accepting work and teaching, it was really being, just deciding to be open about my own neurodivergence, and how encouraging it was to see it being embraced by the students. Because they knew from day one that we were the same. There wasn't an aspect of any type of hierarchical, I'm the professor, you're the student. This semester is going to be defined in rigor, and I'm going to scare you into your A. Literally, I tossed grades out of my classroom. I got a chance to teach my dream class at the University of Minnesota, in the Twin Cities, and it was all online, and it was a disability design justice class. And for the first time, all of my students were disabled or neurodivergent. And we were able to openly talk about our own positionality on how we viewed our own disability, versus how society views our disability, and how we want to be able to use design to talk about the different design environments that we want to build, that are curated by us, for us.

(00:43:59):

And so, yeah, it's like just being in those celebratory spaces, where everything we do is informed by disability joy, and not necessarily, "Oh, okay, well, because of the ADA, we have to make sure that we're all complying to the accommodations that you need." And then when the semester gets started, half of those accommodations are thrown out of the door because so many professors are so focused in on their students getting that A and filling that quota of how many students you can ream through the system that are successful. But at the same time, they're not always feeling, wow, like that they're showing up to class as their true authentic selves. That in essence, can make their work and make their projects and make their artistic experience, even more beautiful because they're talking about... And like I said, it's just a lot of people don't really see that as a legitimate way of teaching, and a scholarly way of being able to hold space for true scholarship.

(00:45:07):

And so I've been really trying to write a lot about that, and hold space for a lot about, this is what happens when you're able to usher your students into really beautiful conversations about disability history, about studying the different spaces in which disabled bodies, where, as I had mentioned earlier, being institutionalized, being seen, like we were saying, as less than, as of less value. And the fact that there is policy that is rooted in the fact that it's still legal to pay disabled folks sub-minimum wages, and because of their inequitable access to skills development and opportunities to being able to have design training and being able to... So any space where I can take my disabled students into. Any opportunity where a semester can be a really beautiful just semester, or where we can just workshop and just create different artistic-based experiences on conversations about access, about joy. I don't know. I feel like so much magic can happen, and definitely, it continues to be a work in progress.

Keith Casebonne (00:46:24):

Thanks so much for sharing about that. I wish more of my college professors were like you, for sure. But that's wonderful, and it's so good to hear that fresh outlook on educating. Also, a real quick apology to the listeners, I realized I neglected to give my own visual description earlier, so real quickly, I will do that. Again, I'm Keith, co-host of the podcast. I'm a white male with brown hair and a graying beard. I'm wearing a gray shirt in my office with a sort of beige wall in the background, and a single piece of art.

(00:46:54):

Now I want to turn it to the subject of zines. I, real quick, need to share a story about zines. I'm going to age myself here, but in the late 80s, early 90s, I was a teenager and young adult, and I was very active in the alternative music scene in New Orleans. And in New Orleans, it's not really about that kind of music. It's about jazz and blues and that sort of thing. And it's beautiful, and we love it, and it's rich in history, but the stuff we were doing just didn't really get promoted, it wasn't talked about.

(00:47:23):

And so a bunch of us decided to put together zines. We made our own zines. And back then, of course, we didn't really have computers and the graphic technology we have today. So we were cutting out pictures and hand lettering, and literally making collages, and then putting them on a photocopier. And so we had these black and white, ugly, horribly unreadable things, but we expressed ourselves, and it's how we got that information out there. And it was that means of independence, and again, expression, that maybe the mainstream media wasn't providing. And feeling as if that's going to relate into your philosophy of zines, and why you... First of all, talk to us a little bit about what are zines? Why do you use zines? What space does that foster? And a little bit about the zine workshops that you host.

Jen White-Johnson (00:48:20):

Yeah, no, that's so cool. And I'm glad that you have... I would love to see the zines. Those are the best zines, the ones that are dirty and gritty, and photocopied and collaged. That's the epitome of zine culture, and that's what they should be.

Keith Casebonne (00:48:39):

I'd have to dig through some boxes to find those. But yeah, it's been a long time myself, but yeah.

Jen White-Johnson (00:48:44):

Yeah. And just quickly to define them, like you said, they're non-commercial, small circulation, like little mini-magazines, which are self-produced by anyone. So whether you're an activist, an artist, a band, whether you're a storyteller or a poet or journalist, or just someone that loves to write comics. And the cool thing is that they're produced by us, and they're independent, and they can be independently published as well. And I almost view them as the mixtape, where you're like, you can sell them from the back of your trunk, and you can distribute them yourself. A lot of zine-sters are able to distribute zines, ultimately, online through their website, or a shop, or they will have the opportunity to distribute zines through zine festivals, or zine fairs, or art book fairs. And so those are the coolest spaces where you can meet other zine-sters, and I've been in a few various zine festivals.

(00:49:47):

And again, just being able to just celebrate, like you were saying, the ultimate act of self-expression that's not necessarily being controlled or managed by a huge editorial publication that's full of advertisements that don't align with our values and what we want to promote, and what we want to hold space for. And so I love that it's, again, it can be independently done. And in addition to self-publishing, you can also link up with a small-time independent publisher too. I have a small independent publisher that I work with called Homie House Press, that are led by two amazing friends, and I love them so much. And they're working between Baltimore and Italy, and they do design consultations. They handle mass production in printing, especially for art books, and especially since a lot of the zines that I do, are really colorful and they contain a lot of photography.

(00:50:50):

And then the zines that I make mostly on my own, are, like you were saying, the collage-based, cut and paste zines that amplify disabled activists, past and present. I'll pop in the principles of disability justice, and I create a whole toolkit that I have, and that I love being able to prepare all of these educational tools, essentially. And I started just creating them, just on my own. And so when I would get invited by, for example, Georgetown's Disability Studies Department, or maybe Georgetown University's Disability Cultural Initiative Collective, that the disabled students have put together, or whether it's Bonnard College's Disability-Based Student Center, or NYT School of the Arts, Disability Artist Coalition. So it's all of these really beautiful spaces that are like, "Hey, we want to be able to have programming for our disabled students, so that they can come and create art or just listen to how you make it." And I'm like, "Sure, I would love to come and talk about my art and my creative practice, but I would also love if we can all, collectively, make something together, to really celebrate what all of this means for us."

(00:52:10):

And so with the toolkits that I create, as I said, they incorporate disabled advocates, past and present. Whether it's Bradley Lomax, who was a part of the Black Panthers and who was advocating in the Bay Area, alongside folks like Judy Heumann, and so many beautiful disabled voices that were lobbying, like the early days of the Rehabilitation Act and before the ADA had been passed. And so a lot of people, they don't know that the Black Panthers were feeding and providing solidarity to so many white disabled activists at that time, within the disability rights historical journey. Then being able to pop folks in, like Fannie Lou Hamer and Lois Curtis and Anita Cameron, and like I said, past and present Black disabled advocates.

(00:53:01):

And then I'll hold space for my favorites that are still alive, obviously, like Alice Wong and Mia Mingus, and all these really beautiful folks who have literally paved the way, in terms of holding space for conversations on disability joy and justice. And so I'll have students during these workshops, cut out and paste the pictures of all of these advocates, and then they'll also cut and paste out the 10 Principles of Disability Justice. And I have textures and colored paper, and all these really beautiful, just items that we can... Where we legit illustrate a whole book on disability justice joy. And essentially, we know not that many zines like that, are being distributed and published. And at the end of the workshop, the students are encouraged to make photocopies of these, and even share them with the disabled advocates that are still present and alive and active, and they're allowed to distribute them to their own channels and their own communities.

(00:54:10):

And so I've been able to adapt the zine toolkits, so that the purpose is so that we continue to know that zine making is a really beautiful practice, and that it can emphasize creative storytelling and self-advocacy. And that photography and paper and craft materials, in itself, are this really beautiful form of just making. So whether it's political conversations, political prose, there's so many beautiful opportunities to incorporate quotes and data, and little snippets of articles, so many. And then there's always obviously room for the student, or for the community member to just write in their own. I had a student who literally only used maybe a few different of the visuals from the toolkit that I had provided, but the rest of it was their own doodles and their own journaling and poetry about their ADHD. And that was just phenomenal, being able to see students, again, use this democratic way of creating, to embody it, to share their own stories.

(00:55:21):

And so yeah, the goal is to create a whole book that shines a light on zine making culture, maybe from the disability perspective, and how it's a tool that really works well with limited materials. And like we were saying, not all disabled people have access to equitable internet, equitable design software for free, where they can create all of these really beautiful digital-based ruminations and things that can be created a little bit swiftly, especially through speech-to-text or motion-based design. And some disabled people are still catching up with their access to technology. And so sometimes working with physical materials to cut and paste, can be easier, or vice versa. But definitely, with the workshops that I do, we utilize digital and hands-on based activities, and it's awesome. The students get a chance to navigate, again, that zines can be super, super democratic, in terms of expressing exactly what they want to say.

(00:56:29):

One of my autistic students created an entire zine based on the whole autistic trope of happy hands, and how, "Well, you're autistic if you're stimming and wiggling, and if your body moves," and how there's the stigma of, "Oh, well use your happy hands." And I'm like, "What does that even mean when you're speaking to an autistic person?" And Ellie, that Ellie who created this really beautiful poster design and zine to accompany it, Ellie was like, "Look." And she created this really beautiful illustration that says, "These are not happy hands." And it's around the poster design, there are these really beautiful, vibrant, orange, bold hands that are twisted, and doing all of these really beautiful poses. And again, Ellie entitles it These are Not Happy Hands.

(00:57:19):

Neurodivergent and mentally ill folks are 16 times as likely to be victims of police violence, as able minded folks. And just being able to take what that happy hands means for Ellie, and being able to infuse that into design, and that data and that research, but being able to create this really beautiful, visual response and visual reaction. And then, in addition to the poster, Ellie created a zine. And that's essentially what I did with all of my students that semester. And I was just a visiting guest lecturer at the University of Minnesota in Spring 2022, as a part of their Design Justice Initiative. And it was just really beautiful to just say, "Hey, all right, we're just going to talk about triggering data, and we're going to break it down and we're going to deconstruct it. And that's how we're going to approach this whole conversation on disability studies and disability culture." We're going to again, reimagine and create as much anti-ableist design responses as we can.

(00:58:24):

And the students were just, oof, they took control over the narrative, and it was just so beautiful to witness and see that. And just knowing that zine making and design continues to hold space for all of that, again, that independent, radical thought, is ultimately why I'm the most comfortable using that as a prime space to practice agency and advocacy. And plus, I can design it in so many different ways that I want to. So whether, like what we were saying, collaging, photocopying, printing on different colored paper, different textured paper, whether it's stapled, whether it's folded, whether it's bound, whether it's threaded, whether they're huge, whether they're tiny. I love that.

(00:59:11):

And we were saying, yeah, I think you had mentioned jazz. And that's what I tell the students, and I'm like, "Think about this like jazz. You're totally improvising the way and the space that you're creating." There's no wrong or right way. All the melodies, they work. All of the melodies and the rhythms and the beats, however you hear that beat, however you hear that melody, create that melody, and ultimately, it always ends up being so cool and beautiful, with the way that they collage and the way that they create.

(00:59:44):

But I'm glad that the zine making continues to exist outside academia, and I'm able to collaborate with Black Feminist Future Collective, and I led the zine making workshop with Black Feminist Future at the conference that they had in Baltimore last summer. And again, being able to amplify Black disabled history with so many beautiful women and fems, and non-binary folks. And then being able to collaborate with the Black Futures Newsstand that works within the Bay Area, and then also within Harlem, and being able to, again, facilitate the conversation on Black disabled acceptance and joy within, again, celebratory spaces that celebrate Black future, but that want to make sure that Black disabled futures are also a part of the conversation as well. So yeah, so many beautiful spaces where I've been able to tie in these dope workshops, has been so much fun.

Maddie Crowley (01:00:42):

Thank you for telling us all about zines. I've been saying zines all this time, but I guess they are mini-magazines, so I guess-

Jen White-Johnson (01:00:48):

Yes, zines.

Maddie Crowley (01:00:55):

Oh, man. But yeah, I want to see if you have any upcoming ones. I don't know. I'd love to attend one, or just get to witness people creating. I love just watching people do their art, whether they're physically doing it, virtually doing it. I think it's so cool.

(01:01:12):

And just even sitting and talking to you about this, I don't do creative stuff full-time or whatever, but I grew up doing theater and music and art, and this conversation itself is like, why don't we just do more of that? Why don't we center that more? Yeah, so I'm just appreciative of just hearing your thoughts and everything that you do, because it's inspiring, even for folks that don't do this full-time, or can't do this full-time.

(01:01:44):

You talked a little bit about your work as a professor, your work doing teach-ins, running these workshops, et cetera, and challenging gallery artists, holding that as the pedestal of what you can achieve as an artist. If you could talk to other creators, other artists, and if you could tell them a couple things about disability and accessibility. I know you've given so many resources, and you've already done so much work with this, but is there a message that you'd want to send to them, or advice that you would give them to start pursuing work in alignment with yours?

Jen White-Johnson (01:02:27):

And thank you for that question. And I'm glad that you brought up gallery spaces, because I feel like, again, it's always very much rooted in a logistical conversation in terms of, "Okay, well, how can we make sure that disabled folks can access this art space?" And making sure that, again, logistically, disabled people can move and navigate, and access the work through so many different mediums, whether it's through audio description, whether it's through visual descriptions. And I feel like, but yet disabled people themselves, aren't behind the actual curation, and aren't often the artists that are being featured within these exhibition spaces. And so I just want to give a shout out to all of my fellow disabled artists and creators that are, again, continuing to make themselves visible, and make themselves open to being sought after, and wanting to be a part of that curatorial conversation and no longer just a footnote, or maybe someone who's consulted to make the show, or the actual exhibition space better.

(01:03:42):

And it was great because I've been, in addition to zine making, the great thing about being a graphic artist is that you're able to create pieces, specifically, so that they can possibly be showcased in various ways. So whether it's through a public art-based experience, or whether it's through a mural design, or a wheat pasting project, or you're wheat pasting calls to action through poster design, or whether you're designing poster prints or photo murals to exist within actual exhibition spaces alongside so many other disabled artists. And last fall, I was able to curate a show called Disrupt and Resist, and essentially, it's a love letter to the disability community on what showing up for each other can be, and what it can look like. I feel, again, it's often very much this logistical conversation, which is important, but we often don't get a chance to celebrate the actual benefits, or the actual radical art and joy that is created by the disabled community.

(01:04:53):

I feel like that is often missing, and we don't get a chance to really see that featured a lot, because we're not often being heralded within museum and exhibition spaces. Or our disability isn't often centered, and we're not often creating artwork that really holds space for that specific conversation. And so first of all, being a part of the exhibition was one thing, but then being able to co-curate the exhibition, and to choose the artists, and make sure that a lot of folks within the disability community, I was bringing their names up and centering them, and being able to highlight them, to make sure that they were also featured in this exhibition. And it took place at George Mason University, a part of Mason Exhibitions, and it's a small gallery that's in Arlington, Virginia. And then it was so well received by the community and the campus, that they extended the exhibition to take place at the Gillespie Gallery of Art, on the actual George Mason campus in Fairfax.

(01:06:06):

So there was the small gallery that's an extension gallery, that exists within a community, metro-based area in Northern Virginia. And then it was brought onto the campus, just so that it can continue to be accessible to students and educators in the community. And that show is actually up, has been up since January the 22nd, and it's coming down on March the first. And again, it has a really beautiful collection of performance artists, like Indira Allegra and Robert Andy Coombs, who's an amazing wheelchair user and photographer, and Andy Slater, who's a blind artist, and works so amazing with sound design and multimedia, and music and poetry. And then of course, Finnegan Shannon, who uses textile design and alt text, and who creates a series of benches and cushions, specifically designed for exhibition spaces that call out how inaccessible museum spaces are. And Alex Veloso, who's a trans disabled artist and sculptor. So many beautiful, oh my goodness, so many beautiful artists that are, again, continuing to speak volumes, that encompass so many different beautiful narratives.

(01:07:34):

So whether it's poetry, whether it's playing with various ways that Braille can be seen and sensed, to the community, whether it's actual sculptural-based work that allows for you to print Braille in unique and creative ways. Whether it's like Rebirth Garments is also featured in the show, so Sky Cubacub, who's a non-binary, queer, disabled, amazing, beautiful human, who is able to use fashion to adorn the bodies of so many different disabled folks who are amputees, or who are trans disabled folks who are just looking for fashion that really helps to amplify their queer bodies. And where you can't necessarily find that kind of fashion within any department store, or the mainstream fashion isn't always designing for disabled bodies.

(01:08:30):

And so being able to, and I didn't name all of the artists, because I know we're on time. But it's like I want to be able to make sure that folks have access. And the website, like I said, it's a physical exhibition, but the website in itself, is a really beautiful archive of where you can see all the work, and it's described really beautifully with various image descriptions, and there's links to videos that can be watched, and where you can access the art. And it's just, oh, it's just one of my favorite things that I've been able to witness and to be a part of, and not only be a featured artist, but to note that I had a hand in actually curating and choosing the artists, and it's definitely something that I want to dive into even more.

(01:09:16):

And I'll be doing a zine workshop with the students, and I'll be creating a toolkit that amplifies all of the artists and the themes that a lot of their work embodies and celebrates. And being able to, again, walk students through, "Hey, how can we create tribute-based zines that are dedicated to all of the narratives and the stories that are presented in this exhibition?" And it's like a teaching strategy, or like a method where they can, again, do their own self-documentation and their own art making experience that helps them understand the materials, the artwork that is in the actual exhibition. And it is beautiful how, again, how zine making can hold space for that, how it's an educational, liberatory, radical practice of being able to learn information, but also create that information. To make, and to create for everyone.

(01:10:13):

Yeah, so like I said, I'm not only shouting out my fellow disabled artists during this conversation, but I'm also letting them know that, "Hey, I'm creating spaces so that we can actually show our work and be celebrated," and exhibit our work in spaces so that it can be seen by everyone.

Keith Casebonne (01:10:32):

That's wonderful. There's so much going on in this space, and so many collaborations and opportunities. It's really incredible, and thanks so much for sharing all that with us. Was there anything else you want to add, promote, upcoming or current things that our listeners could see, get involved with, and maybe experience some of the stuff that you've been discussing with us today?

Jen White-Johnson (01:10:52):

Definitely check out a current exhibition that I am a part of, but that I also co-curated at Mason Exhibitions, which is located in Fairfax, Virginia. It's a part of George Mason University, and the exhibition is called Disrupt and Resist, a Love letter to the Disability Community on What's Showing Up for Each Other Can Be. So definitely check that out at masonexhibitions.org, and I'm sure that the link will be provided in the transcripts.

(01:11:22):

Definitely continue to follow my journey at jenwhitejohnson.com, where I'm always posting collaborative experiences and opportunities, and zine designs that I'm working on. And I'm always sharing images and collaborations that I'm working on with different campuses. I'll be headed to the University of Illinois in Chicago in April, to do a zine workshop with the Latinx literature students, and it's just going to be a really beautiful space where I'm going to continue to just, again, uplift and talk about disability joy. I'll be doing a talk with the Michigan Civil Rights Collective, and again, being able to talk a bit about disability history and the Art Educators Manifesto. So yeah, there's so many different ways that you can continue to keep in touch and follow along and listen, or hear all of the ways that I'm continuing to co-conspire, co-collaborate, co-curate with so many different disabled voices. So yes, thank y'all so much.

Maddie Crowley (01:12:33):

It was such a great conversation, and again, such a wonderful opportunity to get to meet you. And thank you for sharing all of your knowledge and resources and love to the two of us, but also to everybody listening, and I hope you have a great rest of your day.

Jen White-Johnson (01:12:49):

Thank you.

Keith Casebonne (01:12:51):

Thanks so much again to Jen for being on today's episode. We had such a great time chatting with her.

Maddie Crowley (01:12:57):

Yeah, and to learn more about Jen, to follow her and keep up with their work, check out the show notes.

Keith Casebonne (01:13:03):

Yeah. Also, make sure you take a moment to subscribe to the podcast wherever you're listening, so you'll get notifications when new episodes drop. We are on all the podcast platforms, and you can also listen or read the transcript of each episode on our website at disabilityrightsflorida.org forward-slash podcast.

Maddie Crowley (01:13:20):

Thank you for listening, and as always, please feel free to email any feedback, questions, or ideas about the show, to podcast at disabilityrightsflorida.org. See you in two weeks.

Announcer (01:13:31):

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