

# Stories from the brainreels podcast transcript

April 3, 2015

## Introduction

Welcome to our 33rd episode. That's cool because it reminds me of the 33 records we listened to at home when I was a kid. Now here we are, totally digital. In fact, today's episode was recorded in three locations at once with one guest sitting next to me, and the other two calling in via Skype from two different countries. You'll notice the audio quality sounds a little different for all of us, which is part of how it goes when you interview by Skype. I'm grateful we could all be together by whatever means.

Some disability arts news, as always: A reminder that the Disability Art and Culture Project still has a Kickstarter going on through April 22nd. You can go to [Kickstarter.com](https://www.kickstarter.com) and search for [Inclusive Arts Vibe Dance Company](#). As I'm writing this, they're at 35% funded. Very cool. Kickstarter is all-or-nothing, so please jump in there to help them reach their \$5,000 goal to support their Spring performance. Inclusive Arts Vibe is a dance company of youth and young adults with and without disabilities. And it's not like the non-disabled dancers are there to help their disabled peers. It's really about collaboration and partnership. Disability Art and Culture Project also has disabled people at all levels of leadership in the organization. They do a wonderful job challenging the idea that disabled people require the help of the non-disabled community to dance or to run the organization. There are plenty of non-disabled people involved. They are there as allies and collaborators, which makes it a great place to be!

Also, the [Where Is Hope? documentary project](#) needs your support and energy on GoFundMe. This is a documentary about police brutality against disabled people of color. This film is being made by disabled Black and Brown people. So it's also coming from within the community being shown, also with folks with disabilities at all levels of leadership and creative collaboration.

I've supported both of these projects, and I hope you will too. You can lend your support financially by donating any amount you're comfortable with. If that isn't possible, visit their campaigns online and share the links with your networks. This provides invaluable support by helping them reach larger audiences.

If you like what you hear, please subscribe on iTunes or Stitcher Radio. And find typed, accessible transcripts at [WhoAmItoStopt.com](http://WhoAmItoStopt.com). With that, on to the interview with the folks from the Did I Stutter Project.

The [Did I Stutter Project](#) is the brainchild of three disability studies scholars, activists, and stutterers: Zach Richter, Erin Schick, and Josh St. Pierre. They created it to provide an alternative way of thinking about speech and communication disabilities. With the help of their friends and families, Zach, Erin, and Josh have made a commitment to empower stuttering voices everywhere, and to hear the diversity of sounds present in the human voice. I got these words off the [DidIStutter.org](http://DidIStutter.org) website. With the Did I Stutter Project you're starting conversations with other speech-disabled individuals to question your tendency to loath your stutters. You moderate a Did I Stutter Project Facebook group and tumblr, and work actively to challenge assumptions about speech-disability, and work to open a conversation about how much of the anxiety related to dysfluency is produced by oppressive social structures and values. You also are working on or working toward dysfluency-positive social media, internet communities, multi-person stuttering showcases, dysfluent readings of historical dialogues, poems, and speeches, as well as stuttering poetry and performance art, all created with the goal of challenging normalcy as it is assumed in speech and speech pathology. Readers who are dysfluent or ally are encouraged to join your

Facebook, Twitter, or tumblr community, to exchange ideas in the forum, to submit potential blog posts, to record their stutters or speech dysfluencies with pride, and to begin a conversation about speech discrimination. Now, I'm not a stutterer myself, but to me what you say there makes wonderful sense. I've been reading the blog and following your Facebook page. And you even published a blog post that I wrote. So I'm very excited, very honored to have you three on today to talk more about the Did I Stutter Project. Today, I am joined by these three dynamic folks, Josh, Zach, and Erin, the co-founders of the Did I Stutter Project. Thank you so much for joining me. And I would love if you would like to start by introducing yourselves.

## Meet the guests

JOSH: OK, so I'm Josh. I live in Edmonton, Alberta Canada. I'm --currently a PhD student in philosophy, and I like to write stuff and read stuff [giggles].

CHERYL: Hence starting something like the Did I Stutter Project and all that cuz you do a lot of blogging on that site. So there's a lot of writing stuff on there that you do.

JOSH: Yeah, that's true.

ZACH: My name is Zach Richter. Uh I am a grad student, uh currently, in Chicago. Um uh I am also a part-time uh debate coach. Um uh I uh I am looking forward to attending a PhD program starting next year. Um and uh my leisurely activities include --drawing and video games.

ERIN: My name is Erin Schick. Uh I live in Portland, Oregon. I am uh currently finishing a BA in Sociology. I will be done with that in four months, which is exciting, very exciting [laughs]! I'm going into a Masters of Social Work after that, um hoping to work in family services and youth advocacy. I am also a poet. I'm active in poetry slam communities, um which is how I got connected with Josh and Zach.

## How did the Did I Stutter Project get started and why now?

CHERYL: If you could tell me how the Did I Stutter Project got started and why did it get started now?

ZACH: Um well, uh uh Josh uh and myself met uh through uh disability scholars that we both knew. And uh uh those disability scholars were working with uh some very critical ways we-- some very critical ways of questioning uh the way uh people have to come to denote disability, you know. And so uh there's been you know uh these critical approaches, which are gaining a lot of influence right now in some parts of uh the Humanities. And uh Josh and I were both affected and uh encouraged by these developments. And we felt that that there wasn't a critical uh approach to uh speech disability in the community as of yet. And uh I knew this especially because my dad is a stutterer. And he brought me to the uh self-help kind of things uh when I was a kid.

JOSH: So first there like I think Zach posted something on Facebook, as he does. And then like in the comments, like him and I started like discussing like why there wasn't you know like any like community for for stutterers like about these kinda issues, like critical disability studies and disability rights stuff. So we started talking. I think we Skyped pretty shortly after that. And that was like in the fall of 2013, I think? And and we got really excited about about all these things we could do. And then it just kinda like stayed on the shelf until like the following spring, just cuz we didn't have time, you know. We we --really started getting things --

together. And we launched it I think I'll-- um last June, yeah. It's been going good um ss--since since then. And then, of course we're we're ex-ex- we're extremely excited when Erin j- --joined us. Yeah.

ERIN: I started blogging, I think, in like October or the end end of September.

JOSH: Mmhmm.

CHERYL: So there's two things. I'm gonna deviate from the questions, which I never do! And if my head just explodes, you can just use this to wipe--

ERIN: Yeah, I I I'm a First Responder. It's OK! [laughs]

CHERYL: Oh, great!

JOSH: [giggles]

CHERYL: I mean how lucky can you get? OK. Now I have to remember what I was gonna say. OK, there's two things. One is I would uh like for someone to sort of define the word "critical" the way you're using it cuz it's not a term that has come up on this podcast before. And the other one is if somebody wants to talk about your choice of identifying as stutterers and not people who stutter.

JOSH: Yeah.

ZACH: Um uh n-n- I'll start with the with the word "critical." Um uh I have I have I use the word um as part of continuing a n- a tradition of of uh uh approaches to uh uh modern g- modern uh era conceptions about the body and the self and uh and health and uh society. And uh so so cr-critical uh implies um n-n- an approach, which is not limited by the uh --preva-prevailing uh sets of assumptions in uh in in in in uh in n- in the social environment n-n-n-, as we know. So it it it it and it involves uh questioning, you know, the bases for for like what stuttering is and you know, uh wwwhat we're told about its its uh trajectory and meaning n-n-n-n- in society. And uh for me, I- I- our movement is critical because we noticed that uh uh most groups ii- in in n-n-n- most uh well, of stuff do-done related n- to stuttering was either done by uh uh medical personnel or by people who were interested in in uh self-help. So to to refuse both of those kind of uh requ-requirements and expectations for uh n- uh for stuttering, to to even question them, makes us uh critical.

JOSH: I'll just add, if it's OK, that um um that um there is like a lot of d-d-d-iscussion within the d-isability studies community of like what cr- critical evennn even mmmeans. It's kind of a fffluid term that I think i-i- can be helpful. But at times it's not always. So for for for example, like the --difference between c-c-critical and d-disabilities can --ssometimes be that like that that like --disability studies is just like -- talking about --disab--bility, while c-critical disability studies is like rreally trying like to like actively ch-actively --challenge ass-sss-assumptions about disability. But again, like o-on that distinction, I think like d- like doesn't always hold up.

### **Person-first language versus self-identification**

CHERYL: Sure, yeah. And and the word "stutterers," cuz I know,

ERIN: Yes.

CHERYL: I just know. I already can sense some of my listeners will be like, "Did Cheryl introduce them by calling them 'stutterers?' How rude."

JOSH and ERIN: [laugh]

ERIN: This is this is one of m-mmy favorite topics to talk about. I absolutely hate person-first language um and the the role that it has come to play in in discourse about disability and about people as well. One one thing that I particularly find uh find fascinating is that "person who stutters" is m-most commonly shortened to PWS, as an initialization for efficiency. And I I find the idea that like that it's more respectful to refer to me --by those three letters as opposed to anything else like my name, or [giggles] any terminology that I decide I want to identify with. I j- I just find that th-that in-interesting and trying trying to fight someone. And they're like, "No, no, no. You're a PWS."

JOSH: [chuckles]

ERIN: Which that that doesn't work. In uh in ss- general discourse about disability as well as in ssocial work fields, it's the it's the like academic and --clinical standard to use person-first language as part of anti-oppressive practices and anti-oppressive language. And I I really can't get behind the idea that it's anti-oppressive to actively remove from someone their ability to sself-identify um and to tell them how they should think about themselves. That doesn't make sense to me.

CHERYL: Nope. It's not making a lotta sense. One of the reasons people think it's more respectable to say "person with" is that well, wouldn't you want distance from it? It's a disability and a problem. Don't define yourself by your disability! Like, this rhetoric is--

ERIN: Mmhmm.

CHERYL: Talk about oppressive. The presumption is that it's bad; stuttering is bad. And and you're a person first. But to say, "I am a stutterer" is to claim it.

ERIN: Mmhmm.

ZACH: Uh n- I I got involved in Autistic disability politics previous to getting involved in uh um uh d-dysfluent politics. And uh so uh I g- I I gain a lot from uh some of the ideas in the in n- in the Autistic community about identify-first language uh being um uh necessary to uh express n- a disability n-n-n-n- in a way that doesn't n-n-n- belittle it. And uh Lydia Brown, uh n-n- who is who is an Autistic n-n-n-n-n- n- dis-disability blogger uh has written some amazing articles about identity-first um and how it is it is a a kind of a disrespect to uh have t-to have to uh separate the person from their uh --c-orporeal n-n-n-n- n-n- embodiment.

ERIN: N-no one seems concerned, um either with having us --remember that fluent people or non-disabled people are people first, or they are fluent or non-d- non-disabled. There's there's no no distinction there. And no one seems concerned with me defining myself by my hair color or by my allergies or any any other aspect of my being. It's it's just --the ones that we've sstigmatized and problematized that that it becomes an issue for me to be proud of or to i-identify with. I, somehow, years ago got myself very involved in the like disability and parenting blogosphere. I think it was wh- when I had mono and had nothing else to do besides the internet. And if you look at who who on the internet is mmmost emphatic about using person-first language, it's it's non-disabled people who th- think that they've understood the rules and like want to remind everyone else of how to follow the rules.

JOSH: Yeah.

ERIN: And it's a lot of times, it's parents, it's a-abled parents of disabled children who really just don't, they don't get it. And they're trying to speak to something that's not not their experience. And I think that itself is telling that that it's not the people we're talking about who who are being given the say in in th-the language we use.

CHERYL: Well, that's because you have a disability. You're not capable of defining yourself.

ERIN: [giggles] Of course.

CHERYL: That's, yes. That would be. I come from the acquired disability community, primarily, from my own experiences. But it's a community I identify with less than I might with other disability communities. The acquired disability community's often, much more medical-oriented and much more in love with person-first language.

ERIN: Mmhmm.

JOSH: I I I th- I think that whole idea of like like like acronyms and lik-ke p-putting --people in categories is like only sss-something you do w-with people who are mm- who are mm-mm are mmm- are are medic-c-c--calized and pa-p-p-pa-thologized. I was --thinking like what it would be like to start classifying people who d- who --don't stutter according to to acronyms. Like like, "Hi, I'm --John. I'm a PW--DS," or "I'm a person who only stutters on --on --Thursdays" or "I'm a person who only stutters...".

ALL: [laughs]

JOSH: Like and and of course, that seems so absurd. I'm like c-c-carving up, you know, llike identities in in that way when you're talking about ability. But like when it's about d- --disability, like that's preccisely what what like our sssociety d- --does with disability is like like it increasingly ch-ch-ch-chops up our i--dentities like into smaller and sssmaller and specific chunks, you know?

ERIN: Innn one of the the Portland NSA meetings, we're doing introductions. And people are giving various iterations of "I stutter" or "I have a stutter" or "I am a stutterer" or "I am a person who stutters." And we got to someone who --does not stutter. And they introduced introduced themselves as "I am a person who is not a person who stutters."

ERIN and JOSH: [chuckles]

ERIN: And like that was considered to be more appropriate and like politically correct or whatever than me saying "I stutter." Because I didn't introduce myself as a person first. And someone might forget that I'm a person if I don't say that every five words.

CHERYL: Wow.

JOSH: Oh my goodness.

ERIN: NSA is the National Security Agency, of course. [laughs] And also, the National [Stuttering Association](#).

CHERYL: Also. Side note.

ERIN: Lis-listeners can choose which of those they believe we're actually talking about.

ALL: [laugh]

JOSH: That's a fun game.

### **What does Did I Stutter? mean in your project's name, and how does that help you define disability?**

CHERYL: Let's talk about the name. I love the name: Did I Stutter Project because it seems like a really lovely use of irony where you turn this insult on its head and reclaim it. And I wanna point out to Portland listeners, I'm talking about real irony. I'm not referring to ironic mustache, or I'm riding an ironic single-speed bike. I hear that kind of misuse of the word "ironic" all the time in white hipster parts of Portland. And I'm talking about real irony, the the real irony that's got a political edge to it. So Did I Stutter? Go!

ZACH: Uh we thought it was important uh to make that a question um i-i-i-in order to uh pursue a questioning of what stuttering means and what it could mean. And uh I think that I think that uh leaving it open as a question uh a-as an as an actual, literal question instead of a kind of snap s-s-snappy response uh to someone, leaving it open a-a-as an actual, unanswered question is an important part of the o-of the n-n- of the work that we're trying to do.

CHERYL: Am I interpreting it right? Is it a play on that insult, "did I stutter?"

JOSH: Yeah, um it is. But I I I th- I think, it's --both like a re-c-c-claiming of the insult and like --turning it into an actual question a-at the same time. What is a --a stutter? Like you want to like to inss-in--ssult me by this. OK. Wwwwat do you think a stutter is, you know? Like what is it that m-m- that that makes how I'm t-talking a a stutter but how y- --yyou're talking quote-unquote n-normal speech? So I think it's iit's k-k-kind of --p-p-p-playful and cheeky.

CHERYL: Yeah.

ERIN: lit it's a a a normal thing to me that that is the name, um and I n- I forget what the joke is um when I, you know, I'm just thinking about it by myself. And then, I I start talking about it like, and I w- introduce it to t- uh poetry shows when I'm featuring at. And it's like "Oh yeah, and there's this thing called the --Did I Stu-stutter Project. It feels like every time that name comes up, we are actively challenging something and actually like rrestarting the conversation. And I like that that we have a name that that does that and not just like "The Stuttering Pride Project" or something that's, yeah, less exciting.

JOSH: Yeah.

### **Disability and impairment and the disability community**

CHERYL: The Did I Stutter Project has a very strong, solid tie to the critical disability community, as you were saying at the beginning. And at the same time, your message, or I'll say at least part of your message, is that stuttering is not an impairment. And probably some people would say that you have to identify as having a disability or an impairment to be in the disability community. So talk to me about your perspectives on this. Tell me more about your relationship to the disability community or to disability in general.

ERIN: First off, there's an important distinction between impairment and disability. It should be noted that I I am not a scholar of disability studies. I'm sure these two have a much more nuanced and

academic way of describing this. But the way that I understand it is an impairment is is a less socially constructed fact about a thing that you you cannot do or a thing you have difficulty doing. And disability is the way that that impairment interacts with tttthe environment that you are in and whether or not that environment is d- is designed for you. So because of chronic illness, I have an impairment in that I'm not able to stand for long periods of time. That's only a disability when I'm in a room without chairs. So sss- and it's it's entirely possible to be disabled without being impaired. Th-th-the ssstuttering doesn't it, other than cau-causes that cause like physical tension in the jaw, the the only real impairment is people who don't understand you and w- --want to communicate with you in a way that is respectful. And so it's it's d-d-disabling to be in a society tthat treats dysfluent v-voices as as broken or inferior. But there's there's no inherent im--pairment there.

JOSH: I I I think....Oh, sorry. It's just weird still having my th- having the echo of my voice.

CHERYL: Oh, sorry.

JOSH: Um it's almost like I'm wwearing a SpeechEasy again.

ERIN: [laughs]

CHERYL: Yeah it is. That actually, sorry. You're onto me now. This is the Delayed Auditory Feedback Podcast.

ERIN and JOSH: [laugh]

JOSH: Well, it hasn't been wworking cuz I've still been stuttering.

CHERYL: Oh my gawd. [laughs]

JOSH: [chuckles] So our like our d- --distancing frommm frommm from llanguage of impairment like isn't in any way like trying to d-istance ourselves from the d-isability commu-commmmmmunity. The whole imp-airment and disab-bility d-istinction i- like is a distinction that a lot of people have p- have a problem w--with. And they think that the the d-istinction d-doesn't always hold up that good i-in that like there's like all kinds of cross-over bet-between the two. S- and so I guess like it i- quickly gets really confusing like tr-trying to say like wwhat's an impairment and what's a disability. I I- I think impairment concedes too mu- too mu-mu- too m-m-mu m-m-much oftentimes to the whole m-edical d-iscourse. And so yeah, so d- --definitely we're tr- trying to stay i-in like resisting the impairment thing I-like like in that, we're trying to say like we are d-isabled. A- and nnn-- and that's a really important thing. But our disability isn't an impairment, if that i-if that's at all helpful.

CHERYL: Yeah.

ZACH: Just one one last note. Uh another part of our d-defining of stuttering iis arguing that it is not an impairment in function, that it is only an im- an impairment in a- in appearance. And therefore, nothing about the actual you know uh event of dysfluency actually uh uh is is is uh uh bad for the stutter um e-e-except for some some exceptional cases. And most of the experience of impairment is a result of how people are hearing uh the stutter. I think that stuttering is an impairment in the way that like having a h- that that that uh being scarred uh mi-m-might be an impair- an im- an impairment. It it's an impairment of of face or front, you know. But it's not an impairment of function. And that's a major argument that stutterers are trying to make.

JOSH: I think it's been important to us from the very start that the work we do doesn't try and like empower stutterers by d- --disempowering other people. Cuz that's sssomething that happens a ton in all kind of commmunities. I think ooo-ne of our dreams for Did I Stutter? is that over time, we're not just gonna be to be t-t-t-t-t to be --talking about stuttering but how speech c-c-ommunic-cation is is like this whole bigger discussion about inte-llectual and dev- and dev-elopm-m-m-developm-m-mental d-disabilities. And like these people like are oftentimes like excluded i- like in all kinds of ways because of of how they speak. Yeah, like how we think of speech like has a big has big importance like for all different kinds of --disa-b-ilities. So thanking p- people who are Aut-t-tistic and and like being much more explicit in the future about you know like these kinds of um r-r-relations between our --oppression as stutterers and like and other people too, you know? I think --that's really exciting. But it's gonna take some time, I think, for that c-converss- for that conversation ttto be possible. That's my t-t-take, at least.

CHERYL: Yeah, well, once my two listeners hear this podcast, the conversation will be going.

ERIN and CHERYL: [giggles]

ZACH: Uh dysfluency um is an issue for many, many kinds of different people. And uh that that arguing that is uh at least uh partially about the listener is a is a good approach for many of those people, you know. And and and it's just one that that redirects the question away from, you know, integration of the unruly voice to hey, how can we all communicate better? And I think that that's something that that we're uh trying to approach. And I think that, you know, with my time in the Autistic community, I've seen that well, you know, they developed [interaction badges](#) to help them socialize. But they started sharing it with o- n- with other communities. And now it's used by gaming conventions. And so uh that's kind of what we hope to do, which is to um you know, increase speech access for not only our own uh uh groups but for others as well.

CHERYL: Yeah, fantastic. And you said something about integration. I think the big thing, at least that I've experienced, around stuttering as a non-stutterer and as someone who has a degree in speech pathology, um is that it's about, it's not about integration, at least from the other side. It's about assimilation.

ERIN: Yeah.

CHERYL: And you said "the unruly voice." And um unruly just has a beautiful Maurice Sendak "Where the Wild Things Are" sound to it. But in the speech pathology world, it would definitely be um, disordered.

ZACH: [chuckles]

CHERYL: Needs to be fixed. And so I love that idea of the integration of the unruly voice. That is a great album name.

ERIN: [laughs]

CHERYL: OK.

ZACH: Yes. [laughs]

### **Why this transcript has typed-out stutters and dysfluencies in it**

CHERYL: When I told Josh that I regularly make transcripts of my podcasts so that folks can access them in written form, one of the things that he asked is that I transcribe not only the words you say but the

way you say them and really capture the rhythms and the pace of your speech. One could argue that an effective transcript would contain only the important information, that is, the content of what you're saying. Tell me why it's important that I transcribe the sounds of your speech and not just the words of it. What would happen if I were to just erase the stutters as I type?

JOSH: So yeah, this is sssomething that we started doing. It's actually my w- my w-w-ife Charis's idea, who does a a ton of --behind the scenes wwork for us.

ERIN: She does all the behind the scenes work [giggles].

JOSH: She's the one who tr-transcribes our stuff. And it was kind of her idea. And I- I think it's a beautiful thing that it's actually been rrr- been r-rreally powerful. Like ooo-o-ne of our cccentral mm-messages of Did I Stutter? is stuttering pride and that that like these rrr-r-hythms and paces of our voices are actually like a rreally important part of like who we are and like wwhat our vvoices are. And that if you get r-rid of them, so like if we try and assimilate our speech, then like an important part of who we are is ll- is l- is is l- is lost. And that's the same kinda deal like when it comes to tr-tr-tr-transcribing that. Like we actually think that our v- that like these paces and rhythms of our voices are so important, then we should try and --preserve them in wr- in wrriting too. Like there's been --quite a few peoplle like on tumblr and Facebook who have who have mmessaged us like saying how uh like how they haven't ever sseen their voices rrrr-epresented in that w-way and like how just like important and like emp-powering it was for them t-t-t um t-o see that.

ERIN: I I'm rreally glad and really excited that we do that we do --transcribe dysfluency the way we do. Um and prior to kind of seeing that and having it done with the [SstutterTalk podcasts](#), I was not a fan of transcribed dysfluency. And sure, I'm sure like a--a lot of that was my own like internalized oppression. But also that mmost of the time I'd seen it before, it it wasn't actually a a transcription of dysfluency. It was like people writing fan fic on tumblr. And I didn't know this much fan fiction existed in the world

JOSH: [laughs]

ERIN: at all and that s-so much of it is fluent people discussing how to write. A-apparently, every fan fic has a dysfluent character, except that they all are written not not well, not respectfully. But there's so much discussion of like how how does this character stutter and what how do you know how to write this? And so most of my experience with like seeing visual representation of stuttering in print form did-it didn't feel authentic. And it wasn't something that I identified with at all. And after kind of seeing what we've been doing with th--the St-st-st-sssstutterTalk Podcasts and seeing seeing it, I like I'm a fan. I I'm glad that we do it. Innn-- my poetry, in in poems that are specifically about dysfluency and that are performed dysfluently, I I don't usually do that, mostly because most of that poem is like on a Word doc on my laptop that no one ever sees. It's only performed. So why would it matter if like for myself that I write in dys-dysfluency? The the one time I that I didn't do that I wish I had is in th--e transcript I submmitted for "[Honest Speech](#)" to be used as captions. And it just didn't even occur to me at that point. I just submitted like the Word document from my laptop and was like, "Yeah. Here's captions." And that kind of gets to why like why it is imm-important um or like what what would be different if, in this case cuz it because it is transcribed fluently, when I point people to that video. Like when I was sshowing it to my --deaf s-studies professor. And I was like, "Hey, here's this video. Here's this project I do. It's really cool. And here's a video. And here's captions," you know. And then I realized like if if the point of a --transcript is to convey the same information, like this, --e-even if we're not talking about sstuttering, it's it's inauthentic to to not represent the sound in written form. But in this case in particular, if you just look at the --the captions of that poem and like aren't lip-reading enough to catch

that something else is going on in my mouth, you would have no idea wh-wh- --what that poem was about. And like that that that's a really key message there. And it it bugs me now that that's that that's up there, and that it's. And I could probably have it changed and whatever. But it just that that it's it's there. And it's like the the transcrip-transcript doesn't match the performance. And I think that's --th-th-th-th- that makes it an inne-ineffective uh representation of of the audio.

CHERYL: Well, if it's any consolation, if you were to re-transcribe that and give it back to that person, and they won't make it, I will make those damn captions.

ERIN: [laughs]

CHERYL: I caption I caption all my movies. And I make captions for other people. And it is worth it.

JOSH: Actually, Erin, I don't think I've ever told you this, but the fffirst time I heard "Honest Speech," I was so en- I was so like just t-taken by it that like I sssat down. And like I listened to it like like ss-s- like over and over again. Like and actually, I made a d-syffluent tr-transcript of it.

ERIN: [gasps]

JOSH: Yeah, yeah.

ERIN: I mean yeah, Button Button has like like 1000 videos. And it's run by three people. So it it might not happen happen immediately.

CHERYL: But if you get me the dysfluent transcript, and it looks right to you Erin, I can make Closed Captions pretty quickly and send them a new caption file. And then you say,

ERIN: Oh, that's exciting.

CHERYL: "just replace this."

ERIN: Yeah.

CHERYL: Cuz I have the software to make real Closed Captions.

ERIN: Cool. Let's let's do that! [laughing]

JOSH: That's awesome. Yes, it's true.

CHERYL: You guys.

ZACH: Sweet. That's great.

ERIN: That's really sweet though, Josh, that [laughs].

JOSH: Y-y-y-yeah well, like I don't think I've asked you this either, but uh like there's like sss- there's there's several parts in it which like I'm like totally intending to like u-u-se as like ccc-central parts in in my --d in my dissert-tation.

ERIN: [gasps]

JOSH: So that's kinda like why I that's kinda like why I s-started thinking about it. But then it just like, yeah it's a really cool thing.

ERIN: [laughs]

JOSH: Yeah.

CHERYL: Are you blushing?

ERIN: Yes! [giggling]

JOSH: I I I I'm sorry. I love your poem. I think it's extremely important.

### **"Honest Speech" by Erin Schick performed live at the National Poetry Slam in 2014; transcription by Josh St. Pierre and edits by Cheryl Green**

[cheers, applause, snapping throughout Erin's reading of the poem.]

The barn owl communicates with its mates and offspring using a complex system of hissing, screeching, squawking, and facial muscle manipulation

Survival is dependent on creating a voice so unique it can be recognized by loved ones in an instant

I argue the cause of my ssstutter is not neurologic

It's got to be something dd-eeper

Something dd-esperate to--be remembered

My mouth ssspit-shines syllables 'till they sss-parkle

'Till my voice is the only one like it

This is nnot a speech imm--pediment

My voice is an instrument, my ss-tutter its greatest symphony

My speech, com-pposed by god

I buy --tth-ree --ggrapefruit and I --sstutter

I --sstudy -ssociology and I ---sstutter

I like tzatz-tza-tz-tzatziki and I --sstutter

The staccato of repetition is an unpre--ddictable --pp-ercussion

The struggle for every syllable a reminder that I have not always had this voice

This --stage, a gift of spotlights

It seems there is a new kind of privilege here in being understood the first time

In breath, calm and measured, stripping speech of nuance  
In passing-as-fluent to spare someone else embarrassment  
For too long I have been afraid of my own name  
The word invented only to -d--esscribe me  
I have let it sit heavy in my ttthroat, a tool of b-betrayal  
I --introduce myself and I ssstutter  
I am a --poet and I --sstutter  
I call my --pparents and I --sstutter  
I love you and I stutter  
I love myssself and I ssstutter  
The ssuttering is the most honest part of me  
It is the only thing that never lies  
It is how I know I still have a voice  
I am still -being heard  
I am still here  
When I stutter I am sspeaking my own language fluently  
When I sound like this I know my loved ones can find me  
This is what I sssound like when I speak for myself  
This is what I sound like  
This is what I sound like  
[applause, loud cheers]

### **How the poem "Honest Speech" came about**

ERIN: Something happened last summer, where I wrote a poem in five minutes um while I was trying to not write a term paper and Googled something about owls and communication. It was like this this could be a metaphor. And then, somehow it went viral. And now Did I Stutter happened.

CHERYL: The first time I met Erin was in a tree house at [Mike Turner](#)'s house.

ERIN: Mmhmm, on a farm.

CHERYL: Earlier in the day, y'all had been doing some writing.

ERIN: Mmhmm, yeah, I was leading a writing workshop at this NSA meeting on a farm with goats [giggles] and a tree house. And so I had to finish it before then so I could like have it there. That's the day I met Cheryl.

CHERYL: Yeah. We were in the tree house. And people went around reading some things they'd written that day. And you said, "Well, I have this poem." And you just read it. And you're like, "Hmm." You may or may not have noticed that my jaw was on the floor of the tree house.

ERIN: [giggles]

CHERYL: I respect your blushing. But I'm glad that it's gone viral. Thumbs up.

ERIN: [giggles]

CHERYL: Thumbs up from two different time zones, with their thumbing up.

ERIN: Two different countries, even.

CHERYL: That's right.

JOSH: That's true.

ZACH: Yes.

JOSH: Oh, look. It's Canada --outside.

ALL: [laugh]

CHERYL: What? Oh you got me. You are in Canada, right?

JOSH: Yeah.

CHERYL: Yeah. OK, so no wonder you saw Canada when you looked out. OK. Whoa. [giggles] All right.

### **Using the narrative of overcoming stuttering to inspire people**

CHERYL: So I know this Occupational Therapist who works for the school district. And there was going to be this conference on school inclusion. And she had to find a really motivating speaker with a disability to give a keynote address. And just to make it clear to my listeners who might not be involved in schools: inclusion in the schools refers to how we can get disabled students engaged in classrooms with non-disabled students instead of just being segregated in Special Ed classrooms. So someone had pointed this OT, this Occupational Therapist, to this university president in their area who stutters. And she went to meet the president. And she told me that she was completely disturbed when she met him. She said it was awful. He wouldn't make eye contact. He seemed super nervous. And he was stuttering a ton. So she thought oh my gosh, how am I going to let this guy give a keynote speech? He can't even get through a meeting just with me. But someone had really told her she had to hire this guy. So she hired him. But she was super skeptical. So the event comes up, and he shows up. He didn't say hi or anything, just walks in, goes to the podium, gives his speech, and leaves without saying goodbye. But despite his non-professional uh behavior there, according to her, she was really impressed because he didn't stutter a single time during the speech that she could notice. So she was thrilled. And she felt yeah, I made a great choice. I hired the right guy cuz he is a great role model to students to show them how even with a

disability, you can become the president of a university and be very successful. [chuckles] So I told this OT that I felt it was ludicrous to praise someone for hiding his disability at an inclusion conference. I feel like what are you teaching kids if you say that the way to be included is to fake it or hide it or do what you have to do to pretend to be quote-unquote normal and otherwise you know act like you've overcome your disability? I got in a huge fight with this OT. That's part for the course with me. That was that was the end of that conversation. But my understanding of inclusion, not how it happens but in the ideal paper form, maybe, my understanding is that people will be included. People will be included as they are. And getting over your impairment or whatever, is not a pre-requisite to being included. But clearly, there are other people who think differently. I'd love your thoughts on that story or about inclusion in general.

ZACH: Uh well uh, I am part of the speech and debate community. Um and and I'm a I'm a debate coach, part-time, uh alongside being a grad student. And uh I've recognized that in a lot of uh speech v-venues uh, um there are mentally high standards uh for uh people to hide uh or high pressure for people to hide their uh um any kind of speech or communicative uh disability. And uh wh-when I first tried tr- uh tr- tried to uh join join uh n- uh the debate team in in college, I was told I couldn't because of uh because n-n-n- of my stutter. So uh I'm not surprised that that's a uh uh a thing that happened. And I think that what what what uh needs to be argued for is the recognition that um to be a disabled person is to have one's own culture and o-one's own uh uh c- a c- a c-c- a community-wwide sets of different things that are kind of OK or or expected. And you know, wh-when one is from the uh disability culture, uh the speech norms are decidedly different. And uh you know uh obvi-obvi- m- uh i- obviously it's it's a hard III- n- line to to walk because um you know, if if they if they uh if they really made a big deal about this guy being someone who stuttered in his speech, it would be tokenism too. So so uh there's you know, th-there's a there's a line to walk, where you allow it but you don't over-celebrate it. And uh uh obviously, uh like much of Special Ed, uh that school needs to work on that uh uh uh part of the theory.

CHERYL: [giggles] I like that you brought up the point about tokenism.

ERIN: Mmhmm.

CHERYL: You know, this this person was chosen specifically because he has a disability, and yet he achieved, you know.

ERIN: Was he was he ssspeaking a--bout stuttering or about disability? Or was he just talking about success and?

CHERYL: Well, I think you missed the point of the story, Erin.

ERIN: [laughs]

CHERYL: See, this Occupational Therapist didn't tell me the content of the speech. She only said it was good because he didn't stutter. That's the point of the story.

JOSH: Come on, Erin.

ERIN: So what what's the point of seeking someone out because they are disabled if you don't want them to talk about disability?

CHERYL: I mean I'm as lost as you are when you asked that.

## Why the Did I Stutter Project aligns with social justice movements, not just stuttering pride

CHERYL: I think this relates to the critical part of disability studies you were bring up earlier, Zach. Talk about why it's important for y'all to be engaged with social justice outside of things related to stuttering. And I'm thinking about things around queer justice, neurodiversity, feminism, other things, other areas you might be engaged with? Why not just focus on stuttering?

ERIN: Well, I I'm really big on i-intersectionality. F-for folks who are not familiar with that language, it's kind of the idea that I am not a woman today and queer tomorrow and dis- disabled on Sunday. I'm all of those things all of the time. And so mm-mmm experience in the world is influenced by all of those spheres in every interaction. Everyone, whether or not you uh have uh hhhave acknowledged it, whether you are privileged or or oppressed, all of these spectrums, have mmany identities that tthat influence your experience at all times. And so it I think it's important to recognize that all of those things are issues f- in every group that I am talking about --disability in --women's rights groups. I'm talking about disability in in queer groups. I'm talking about disability in in in arts groups. Um but I'm also talking about arts in disability groups and th-the wom- and --wwwomen's movements and feminism in in arts groups and in di-dis-disability groups. And so I think that being engaged in all of your identities and being visible and outspoken wi- about all of those in m-more widely in i-in in your involvement is, it's kind of important to t--o bring light to those things.

ZACH: Uh yeah, I think that uh both both both Josh and n-n-n- and myself uh have been very about recognizing uh the connection of uh s-s- uh the oppre- the the oppression of dysfluent people to other kinds of oppression and uh the ways in which uh you know uh historical changes and uh formations around identities and you know uh things like trade, uh n-n- have all been involved in shaping the uh the uh s-s-speech therapy uh n-n-n- industry uh n-n-n- uh uh n-n-n-n- uh n- as we know it. And so uh we we can't talk about stuttering oppression without talking about a lot of other things because it's made of out of a lot of n-n-n- other things.

JOSH: Yeah, for sure. It-it's I I think it's been rrr-eally ex-ccciting for us, if I can speak on be-half of of us for just a minute, it's been exccciting that like to be able to like kinda like start this thing from the ground up. And like p-people like to start out with the intention to be like as interssecti-tional as we can, I think. Like a lot of times what has happened with disability justice mm-m-movements that have started like a long time ago, is like when they started off, like they were like llike they were pretty like just f-focused on d-d-d-disa- on disa-bility f- for example, like. Or and this is like true in innn in lots of places like ssecond wave feminism too, like it was j-j-just focused on f-f--feminism by itself, not ll-like how that interacts with with with --rr-ace and and sss-sexxxx-uality and stuff like that. And and then over t-time, like they have to go back and tr-tr-try and rr-etrotfit like all these structures, which is is hard, you know? And so I think that we are trying to be --rradical like in like the g-good use of the of the word. And l-like and and we can do that from the start, I think. And o-o-of-of course like I I hesitate saying that we're so radical, um as like by far --the most p-privileged person on on our team, so.

ALL: [giggle]

JOSH: But I I think p-part of that is llike also an aawareness of privilege too that like we try and cult-t-t-ivate um and like and awareness of like where our p-p-p-p-privilege could be excluding cer-cer-certain kinds of people too. Yeah, sso we're trying, I think.

CHERYL: Yeah. So an an episode of the podcast called StutterTalk, Erin, you were telling a story about how when you started to tell people you identify as a stutterer, they're like, "Oh, no! I don't think you

stutter!" And they were sort of trying to console or reassure you. But I don't think you were sad or needed any reassurance.

ERIN: [giggles]

CHERYL: And I get that kinda stuff all the time. It's quite a compliment from people; they tell me I don't seem like I have a brain injury. I don't understand why that's a compliment. But I would love to hear your thoughts because that is a microaggression to reassure you when you just asserted something that's perfectly affirmative.

ERIN: Mmhmm. Tthankfully, I've not really experienced like I mean like very very harsh reactions to identifying as a stutterer. I've had very few experiences of like people actually laughing at me or being like being explicitly gross. But I get I get a llot of microaggressions. And I think part of that is that I --can sometimes very easily pass as fluent. So it's not a thing that's like in people's face as much. And they don't maybe don't understand what it means to me or that it is a thing that's always true about me even if it's not always visible. And I had a hhard time with it at one of my --previous jobs. They had us do these like personality tests that then were supposed to influence things about our work that, there was there was a lot of problems with the model. It was developed by the man who cr- created Wonder Woman, who is an in-incred-incredibly problematic person for a variety of reasons. This test, we had take two years in a row. One year, it ssaid I was a sociopath. I I scored a zero in the category of inspiring. [laughs]

CHERYL: Oh man, that's my goal.

ERIN: And the next year, I got like a negative 28 in interaction and communication. And it said that I was inhhherently tactless. And then, I kept bringing this up as a problem, one, cuz we had like six hour meetings to discuss our results. Everyone else's just said like "focus more on deadlines." Mine said, "yyy you are a problematic and dysfunctional human being."

ERIN: One of my issues with it, besides from the problem of categor-c-categorizing people and all kinds of things that are upsett-setting about that, is that all of the questions that measured the interaction/communication category were about your willingness to initiate small talk with strangers that wasn't part of your job.

CHERYL: [gasps] Oh.

ERIN: And I can communicate for my job. I do it all the time. I answer phones. I talk to people. I stutter. It's great. I nn- I do not have a problem with that. But if it's not for my job, I don't think it should matter hhow willing I am to talk to strangers. And I don't still don't think that is a --good measure of my communication strategies.

CHERYL: Mm-mm.

ERIN: And so, I kept bringing this up as like yeah, I think this m-mmodel's discriminatory, and I think that you know, it should be taken into account when we started talking about these results. And every time I brought that up, tthe response I would get from other people would be, "Oh, it's OK. I'm shy too. I scored low int- in interaction." And it took several years for me to kind of convince people that I wasn't shy, which should seem strange because I'm talking about this all the time. And I'm in your face. That's clea- clearly not who I am. But it it actually took being on the fffront page of Upworthy for a lot of people in that innn that office to kind of say like, "Oh! You're really not afraid of crowds. You're OK with

public speaking. That's that's not the problem." Because everyone else who scored low in interaction and communication they were shy. I kept saying this model scored me incorrectly because of its underlying assumptions. A- and that that's I think, an example of mmmicroaggressions that people don't really talk about all the time is, is that yes, people who s- people who identify as s-s-s-stutterers might be shy, and that is probably a result of of ableism as as a result of the the way that their voices are perceived. But we might not be [giggles]. You can't conflate the two. 1- 100,000 YouTube views to convince, and like shouting at people in meetings, to convince the higher ups that I w- I wasn't just just shy [giggles].

CHERYL: Oh my gosh. Y'all are pretty active on Facebook. Well, you're active on all these places. But I don't even know what a tumblr is. So OK.

ERIN: [giggles]

### **Addressing defensiveness from people who don't get the Did I Stutter Project and the project's goal of community building**

CHERYL: I have seen some of the conversations on Facebook that the Did I Stutter Project is participating in. And there are some speech therapists, maybe others who aren't speech therapists, who get very defensive and very angry when they read your posts. And one of the things I've noticed is that they argue with the words that you're typing into the Facebook. But they are not always trying to engage with the philosophies that are informing what you're typing. They try over and over to prove to you how wrong you are when you tell them your personal experiences and your personal philosophies and the philosophies of your community. And I I I should think that would be tough, to be told that your personal experience and your social critiques based on your personal experience are incorrect, even though they're yours. So for someone who's new to your perspectives around ableism, around capitalism. Which we didn't talk about today. But you know, the links between efficiency of speech and efficiency of production are pretty clear. So for someone who's new to your perspectives around ableism and speech and these things we've talked about, they can get defensive. How do you suggest that someone who feels defensive when they're listening to this or reading what you've written, how do you suggest they move past their defensiveness so that they can then take the time to listen to what you're saying, how you're saying it, and what's behind what you're saying?

ZACH: N-n-, one quick thing about us is that our main agenda isn't isn't anything but trying to build our own groups of of friendships and connections. And so we're not about trying to you know do anything confrontational to uh speech therapists. We're just about trying to uh have a gr- have have a a a community of people who who who uh as- who asks questions about a couple of things that speech therapy entails. And and so uh I I mean I think that I think that realizing that we're not a- that that our main agenda isn't isn't critique, but our main agenda is just uh uh community building, uh tr- n-n-n-n-n-n-n-n-, that could help a lot of people to to warm up to us.

CHERYL: I'm so glad you said that because the assumption, any time you hear disability, oh, it's educational! Oh, and people always ask me, "What do you want audiences to think about disability when they see your films?" Like, there's always the assumption that what I do and what you do is for the non-disability community to learn about you. You are the self-narrating zoo exhibit. And you're just there to educate. So I'm really glad that you said your agenda isn't about confrontation. It's not about education. So what is going on with these people who come in, then, and tell you that you're wrong?

JOSH: W-w- well there's p-p- there's probably a lot of things going on. It's a really weird thing, actually. So we've had a lot of people tell us, like as you said, that we just don't understand them, so like we don't understand SLP.

CHERYL: [giggles]

JOSH: And th-th-there is a llll-learning curve there for sure. And like we are getting b-b- we are getting better, I think, at a-at understanding SLP. But I don't think that is itself what the problem is. I think oftentimes, people assume they n- they knnnnow what our critique is, when they r-r- when they r-r- don't yet. And that, I think, can be a problem. So our cr-critique isn't actually about like specific p-p- practices of of SLP. It's about like what those practices, as a whole, are doing, you know? Yeah, and and so l l l l I think like we're just like speaking p-p-p-past each other a lot of times. And so like like y-y- like your qu-question of like how do you get like like how do you get past anger to b-be able to like engage, is a really hard question. And and like to be honest, I'm not sure what the what the answer is oftentimes. Cuz oftentimes it requires that people be w-illing enough to like h-h-hear us without getting judgme-mental. And here, I'll actually qu-qu-quote from Chhheryl. Um this is th- --the end of y- y-your b-b-blog post um you wrote f-f-f-for us. And and and I think it's great.

ERIN: [giggles]

JOSH: Ssso so so you said, um, "Anyone who truly --values stutterers and people with brain injuries must l- learn to temper --deffensiveness when --we step up and say 'no.' T-t- to call speech therapy- to call speech therapy ableist is not an attack on on an individual speech th-th- therapist's --value as people. Rr-r-ather, --wwe p-p-protest the ins-istence that only certain people must fff- must fix, cure, or correct an aspect of themselves in order to be ap-ppreciated as full m-m-members of sssocciety." And this is the part- particull- particulllly --relevant part, I think. "In the r- in the rellationship between c- --client and cliiinician, the c- --clin- the clin-ni-nician has m- more power. Speech th-th-therapists, p-please d-on't be hurt when the person with less power ---w-w-ants to --wants to vvvoice their rrreality and ass- and and assert their h-umaniy. After all, isn't that why people w-w-want to become speech th-therapists?"

CHERYL: [giggles]

JOSH: I think like --that point is like sssso good that, that like if if there's if like what we're saying, and this is a --radically different way of thinking about speech is actually gonna help people, why be defff-e-f-f-f-f- why be deff- why be deff- why be deffensive? And I know w-w-w why why people are defensive in these regards. Because a) like th-- like they're p-p- they p- they perhaps are they aren't con-co they aren't convinced that what we're saying is actually going to help --people, or b) they think that that what we're saying is actually gonna harm p-p-people because we're gonna because we're w-w-w-we're saying that they should stop going t- --to speech therapy. Which isn't, that isn't um necessarily what we're saying. And and then third, I think like they have a- a lot of stake in this, right? Like it's either their j-job so, or or --they've been --going to speech therapy for a ll- a llong long long long t-t-t-t-time. And so like wouldn't that seem that w-e're saying that everything they've done has been a complete w-w-w-waste of time, you know? There's there's just all these really c-c- --complicated things that c-c-c-come up. And so th-th- l l I don't really think there's an easy answer t-t-to it. But l-l- I think your inssight that i-f if if SLPs actually want to help p-people who have speech disabilities, then l-l- I really think they ssshould be on board uh with this.

CHERYL: Yeah, and I think that what you said combined with what Zach said, you guys are not on a campaign to, you know, change SLP.

ERIN: Because I analyze these things as a sociology student, the the difference between the way we exist on Facebook and the way we exist on tumblr is really, really interesting. So Facebook, most of the interactions with us are through the SstutterTalk group. And it's like comments on responses to our podcasts on SstutterTalk but also some things in our group. Across those two, most of the people responding are, a lot of them are speech therapists themselves. And the ones who aren't, they're older in age, generally than me, than our followers on tumblr. And uh- the ones who are speech therapists, they're like established in their fields. This is their job, like Josh mentioned. And they are kind of engaging like as representatives of SLP, as professionals. And we've gotten super popular on tumblr, which is cool. But the our followers there, the people who interact with us on tumblr are mostly much younger. They're mostly stutters or other people who are not speech therapists. It is really close to my heart that a lot of them are like teenage girls. And that's that's my favorite thing [laughs], that we get asks from teenage girls. We've not gotten a lot of critiquing responses. I think I associate much more with the way we are represented on tumblr than we are in the Facebook groups. And uh and so yeah, like Zach was pointing out, that we're trying to build a community. And if you just see the Facebook side of it, I wouldn't blame someone for thinking that what we are doing is attacking SLP or what we are doing is trying to engage specifically in a dialogue about SLP. And if someone just saw us on tumblr, they may not even know that we have direct engagement with SLP.

CHERYL: OK, that is really interesting, and I you know. They're clinicians. Sometimes they can't resist the impulse to try to correct you. But it is an impulse. And it is this desire that once you are marked as disabled or disordered, don't worry; I'll come teach you. I'm glad to hear, though, that the interactions on the tumblr have more of the community-building vibe.

JOSH: I think it's worth saying like there have been like really good discussions that have happened on our Facebook as well.

ERIN: Mmhmm.

CHERYL: Yeah, on your Facebook page, the discussions are very different from the ones that were happening on the StutterTalk podcast, where it may be a different group of listeners. Yeah.

### **Where to find Did I Stutter Project on the web**

CHERYL: So on that note, tell folks all the places that they can find you online.

ERIN: Our website is --DidIStutter.org. On Twitter, we are I\_Stutter. Uh and tumblr, we are

JOSH: D--DidIStutterProject.tumblr.com.

CHERYL: I wanna thank y'all so sincerely for coming on this show. And just to wrap up, if there's anything that's in store for the near future for the Did I Stutter Project or anything that y'all wanna advertise or talk up, go for it.

JOSH: Sso, oo-one thing, I guess is that we're applying to do a panel at --the NSA c-conference in Chicago. Sso we haven't been- we haven't been accepted yet. Well, in fact, I'm not quite done with the application yet.

ERIN and CHERYL: [laugh]

JOSH: It's almost done. It's almost done. But hopefffully, um we'll be doing a panel th--there, which would be a cool opportunity --t-t-to meet all kinds of people, I think. And what else?

CHERYL: Taking over the world?

ERIN: Yeah, I th- I think ttthat's next, right?

JOSH: I'm pretty sure.

ZACH: And blogging on the web.

ERIN: [giggles]

JOSH: I-I want to th--thank you so much for for having us. It was really fun.

ZACH: Yeah, thank you so much. Thank you.

CHERYL: Oh, absolutely. Y'all are welcome. Thank you. It was a lot of fun and a great pleasure to have all three of you. And I'm glad that somehow the technology figured itself out.

ERIN: Yeah. Yeah, thank you so much for having us. This has been great.