

Stories from the brainreels interview transcript

September 1, 2014

Introduction

[music]

CHERYL: Welcome to Stories from the brainreels. I'm your host, Cheryl Green, from StoryMinders up in sunny Portland, Oregon. This is a monthly podcast about brain injury and disability with a focus on art, culture, and disability pride. Contact me at info@storyminders.com with questions or topics and guests you want to hear on an upcoming show.

[music]

CHERYL: Some announcements for today: I'm so excited to have Jennifer Pepin and Chris Foster as my guests today. In just a few days, they'll be celebrating the one year anniversary of [J. Pepin Art Gallery](#) in the Pearl District where Jennifer is the owner and Chris is the curator. If you're in the Portland area, please come visit this gorgeous gallery. Their First Thursday reception is from 5:30 to 8:30 pm on September 4th, 2014. It's free. And they're located at 319 NW 9th Avenue, which is very close to the #77 bus line and the Portland Streetcar. The show will be up through the whole month. Jennifer herself will be the featured artist, which is so fitting since she started this gallery. Very cool stuff.

In other, very, very different news, I have a really great honor of giving a presentation on September 12th through [Videoce.tv online](#). Basically, they'll be filming a 3-hour presentation I give, and then people can pay and download to watch it to get their continuing education credits. It's for speech-language pathologists and occupational therapists and the like. It's exciting because I haven't given a presentation this long in years! I'll post details about it on my blog if you want to follow up with information on time, place, and registration. I'll be talking about the importance of rehabilitation clinicians finding out what their patients really want to work on and how to get their practice in everyday, naturalistic environments. Myself, I found it much more motivating, stimulating, and useful to practice skills right in the real world instead of the clinic room. It's really my privilege to get to present what I learned from connecting my education as a speech-language pathologist, my status as a cognitive rehab dropout, and my work in disability arts and justice all tied together with the published research to make a case. I hope that the case I make is that it's time to move on from a reliance on worksheets and do work with people with traumatic brain injury that is meaningful, speaks to our identities, and can affirm our experiences.

Please check out this podcast on [iTunes](#) or [Stitcher](#) where you can subscribe and get all the latest episodes. That said, for some time, the "latest" episodes will be older ones I recorded in the past two years and am uploading to the podcast-iverse bit by bit. There will be one more new recording in October when I talk to [Cinema Touching Disability Film Festival](#) Coordinator William Greer. The next few months after that will all be blasts from the past until we're all caught up. You can find episodes through the [WhoAmIToStopIt.com](#) blog, iTunes, and Stitcher.

With that, I turn it over to my interview with Jennifer and Chris. Forgive the echo-y nature of the recording. We were in their Pearl District gallery with its high ceiling and cement floor. Plus, I'm not a champ at monitoring three microphones at the same time as running the interview. So bear with me.

The Interview

CHERYL: Well, thank you very much for being on the podcast today. I appreciate it.

CHRIS: Thank you.

JENNIFER: Yes, thank you.

CHERYL: I would love for you to first just introduce yourselves.

JENNIFER: Hello, I'm Jennifer Pepin. And I am the owner of J. Pepin Art Gallery. I began painting about eight years ago. And it was great therapy for me in regards to having bipolar. And I began going to a support group a couple years ago and was really overwhelmed by the creativity in the room and saddened by the stigma that exists around mental illness. So I decided to open J. Pepin Art Gallery in hopes of sharing that beauty that can come from it and hopefully reframe the perception of mental illness. I do acrylic on canvas. And it's primarily abstract, though a lot of pieces do end up resembling some landscape and are certainly inspired by nature and cityscapes.

CHRIS: I'm Chris Foster. I am an artist here at J. Pepin Art Gallery and curator. My background: I've basically helped Jen kind of furnish this vision and dream to open up a gallery that features people that have a mental illness and really support it. And it's been a really huge part in my growth also, as an artist and as a person as well. So it's been really great.

CHERYL: I just wanna read a few lines off your website, which is [JPepinArtGallery.com](#). On your website, you say, "J. Pepin Art Gallery features contemporary artists who are reframing the perception of mental illness. Along with their works, each artist shares their creative journey and how having a mental illness plays a role." So I would love if either of you would wanna talk a little bit about what you mean by reframing the perception of mental illness.

Reframing the perception of mental illness

JENNIFER: I think, unfortunately, there's still a lot of misperceptions around what it means to have a mental illness in regards to the ability to lead a productive and successful life. I think that the minute people hear they have a mental illness, it almost diminishes the qualifications, for some reason, in people's minds. So my hope is to show all this talent that exists. And all of our artists do lead productive lives. And I would like people to focus on that element, focus on the beauty of it. You know, we may not have the Van Gogh pieces we do if he hadn't had a mental illness. And in light of the most recent suicide of Robin Williams, I hope that that dialogue is starting to exist around that. I mean he was a very successful person who we all thought had everything in the world you would want. And yet, he still suffered from depression. But we saw him as Robin Williams, and the depression came second. And that's what I would like to show here too. People walk in, and they see the artist first and then oh, they happen to have a mental illness.

CHERYL: Can you give me an example of the misperceptions people have that you are working to reframe?

JENNIFER: I have people come into the gallery and actually look at me and say, "You're bipolar? How could you be bipolar?" And so I sometimes am curious because I have clothes on, and I'm sitting behind a desk, and I own a business. So I feel like they have this perception that because I'm bipolar, I would be in a hospital or on the street or not be able to function within society. So my hope is instead of people viewing it that way, reframe it in a positive way, like in the creativity that can come with it and the success that can come with it.

CHRIS: Yeah, and the beauty. The beauty in the work, it stands alone, really. When people come in and see the quality of the gallery and the artwork and what the artists are doing, the stigma or the idea of a mental illness or having a disability goes out the door. First thing they see is wow, this is beautiful. This is something that I would wanna see in any gallery anywhere in the Pearl, anywhere in the country. And it's pretty amazing to see how the artists are really telling their story and how that goes along with it. And I think it touches a lot of people.

CHERYL: Yeah, they have an entry point into saying this is beauty, this is talent, this is wonderful.

CHRIS: And then they discover that the person has a mental illness. And they want to talk about their story and how it plays a role in their creativity with what they're doing. And in some capacity, it touches people that have had family members that have a mental illness or that have a mental illness themselves. But what I think is interesting is how it does break down a little bit of barrier. You could have somebody who's really taken by a piece of art in here or the

beauty or just what the gallery represents. And immediately, their misconception of mental illness goes right out the door.

CHERYL: And it sounds like their expectations go up.

CHRIS: Yeah.

CHERYL: Oh, people with a mental illness can contribute, which was always true. But they didn't realize it.

CHRIS: Right, because of the stigma. And it's amazing because people think as soon as you have a mental illness or put a label on it like bipolar or schizophrenic or ADHD, whatever it is, you have a weakness. It's the same thing with like cancer or anything else: you have a weakness. There's something wrong with you.

CHERYL: Uh-huh.

CHRIS: So you get that side of the coin too, where people come in, "Well, aren't all artists crazy?" And we find that it's not that way at all. It's an interesting discovery because having this concept kinda puts a different box in finding artists that are out there. And it kinda gives us a unique way of moving forward in a market sense. We're not just open to all the artists that are out there. The artists that we want, have to tell their story and really how it plays a role in it.

CHERYL: Do people ever come in and say, "I have a mental illness, or someone I know does, and I didn't know that our community could make such beautiful art"? Do people come in and discover that they should raise their own expectations of themselves or others?

CHRIS: Sure. I mean, that happens, definitely. It's very individualized, which is always a very cool thing to see happen. Each person reacts differently to it. And definitely, that has been the case.

CHERYL: That's a huge positive. Anybody who can sort of have an affirmative sense of themselves and see themselves as oh, I can be productive and be exactly who I am, rather than I have to fight and medicate myself or do things the way everybody else does them to be accepted.

Art at J. Pepin is art, not "special" art

CHERYL: And I'll tell you, you cannot distinguish the art in this gallery from the other galleries around here.

CHRIS: No.

JENNIFER: Sure, and that's been one of the biggest compliments is actually we've had people come in and say, "This is some of the best art we've seen all day." For us to be able to compete

in the Pearl District, the gallery district, and be successful with that, to us, that's breaking down the stigma.

CHERYL: Absolutely. It's not like, oh look! There's a really special gallery over there. I wonder what they have.

JENNIFER: Right. Which is why on the door it says, "A gallery for like-minded artists." It doesn't say, "A gallery for the mentally ill." Because again, the minute you put a label on it, there's all of a sudden all these ideas--

CHRIS: The default just yeah, it's this weird kind of concept that people have. It's unbelievable. But that's what I think is so cool and unique about the gallery is that people really discover it rather than, "Oh, let's go check out the mentally ill gallery!" It's more of a discovery on their art walk than anything else. And to get that reaction is very interesting. More times than not, it's very touching for people. I mean people are moved when they come in.

CHERYL: Yeah.

JENNIFER: Well, and to go back to what you said about are people who have a mental illness inspired by it, and do they feel that they can elevate their--That's definitely some of the interactions with people who have mental illness. But as well as with family members have said to me, "Wow, you provide me so much hope. I was in the hospital. I didn't know if I could survive in society. And seeing you here being able to own your own business." And then also one of the most touching moments I've had is that a father had actually just had to have his son hospitalized. And he didn't know about the concept. And he came in. And he started reading some of the statements. And so I explained. And he got very emotional. But he said to me, "Thank you. Because I'd given up on my son. So now I can see that there is still hope. You've given me my hope back." So.

CHERYL: Yeah. And isn't it interesting it's the art world where this happens. And it happens in my community too around TBI. When artists make something, people say, "Oh! Sorry! I thought you were all kind of brain-dead." And I've had people say to me, "Are you sure you had a brain injury? Because you're so talented." I'm sure you have heard exactly the same line: "How could you be so talented and have this impairment or this disability?" But hope. You don't get it in the medical world. It's like symptom, treatment, symptom, treatment. Or symptom, quit complaining about your symptoms; you're making them up. I mean, there's a whole bunch of ways it goes. But you come into the art world, and all the sudden people see oh, there's more that we can do with life. It's not just about experiencing a symptom and getting a treatment for it.

CHRIS: That's right.

CHERYL: There's other parts to life.

CHRIS: Absolutely. That opens up a big thing right there with people that are creating their art. And in a way, it's therapeutic for them in a way that medication can't be. And that's what's so amazing about art. And that's what's inspiring about art. I mean, it's amazing to see what happens and how each person reacts to it.

CHERYL: Yeah.

Some J. Pepin Art Gallery artists

CHERYL: So tell me about some of the artists who have shown in this gallery.

CHRIS: Well, when we started this gallery, I discovered artists that were actually local to Portland that were already starting to kinda come out with their diagnosis of being either schizophrenic or bipolar. But also like one artist we had who's already kind of an advocate in that world and was a really talented artist and already showing her work, getting her work published, and everything else. Her name was Meghan Caughey. And it was really great to have her to be a part of the gallery from day one. Her work is really powerful. And there's nothing like it. I mean it, I love it.

And then we had, I discovered a really great encaustic artist who does it really unique. Encaustic is a wax-based medium that's fortified with a resin. And you work with it hot. And there's a lot of different things you can do with it. And she is also an illustrator. She also does a lot of really detailed, beautiful drawings. And she incorporates them in her encaustic work. And their like stories. They're like these little unfinished stories that are kind of ethereal and mythological. But they mean a lot to her. And there's a lot of emotion in it. I got her aboard. Her name was Alexandra Peterson. And she does some very, very great work. And it's very special and unique. And we've had her from day one and kind of just had an ongoing relationship with her. And we've had a lot of artists that kind of approach us as we started to get some momentum going. And it's been really interesting to work with them and see them develop.

We've an had artist in here, Evan Orlando, who does these interesting carved masonite pieces with oil. She's gone through so many different phases. It reminds me of myself as an artist because I've gone through so many different phases. I never stick with the same thing. But to see the progress is really great. And to watch her success has been fantastic, just really, really inspiring. A new artist we've discovered, Kris Haas, she kinda discovered us in a way. And we discovered her. We actually went to her studio and checked out some of her pieces and picked out a few. And it's just been really powerful.

CHERYL: Yeah. Can we tell the Kris Haas story?

CHRIS: Sure.

CHERYL: Because anyone who listens to my podcast knows I talk about my documentary film all the time. And my focus is on looking at the stigma, and especially the internalized stigma that the artists in the movie have. Cuz you see them talk about nobody would want me because I look like this. Nobody would want me because I act like this. It's so hard to hear those stories cuz you know that's that internalized stigma. I feel like my film has a lot in common with what you're doing here with the gallery. So with Kris, in July Kris was going to First Thursday for the first time in years. Cuz she's very isolated. She's very much at home all the time. And the world is too over-stimulating for her. With the documentary crew there, she sorta got motivated to get out of the house and give it a shot. So I was calling all these galleries in this area asking for permission to film Kris as she walks through the galleries. And I talked to someone at a gallery. And then they called me right back and said, "You know, you gotta check out this J. Pepin Art Gallery because they're doing work just like what you're doing!" She thought I'd be interested in the work.

I went to your website. My mind was completely blown reading about your history and your story and what you do. But I wasn't going to tell Kris about your gallery because then, as the documentary filmmaker, I'd be intervening in her story. And so, I didn't tell her that I had met you on the phone. I didn't tell her about this place. We had a list of her galleries. We get outta the car. And she just stopped right across the street and started staring at your gallery. And I didn't know this is where you were. And I looked up and saw the sign. I could not breathe. And Kris is like, "There. I wanna go there!"

As a filmmaker, and as a friend, it was the most exciting thing that probably happened the whole two years of filming cuz I wanted Kris to find this place. But it never crossed my mind she might find it on camera [giggles]. And she found you. And then I of course had to run in and say, "Hi. It's me. I'm filming. Will you sign this release form?" I wanted Kris to find this place because I know that she experiences mental illness in addition to the traumatic brain injury. And there's overlap anyway, but I know that she has first-hand personal experience with it. She just felt like she was right at home when she came in here.

CHRIS: Mmhmm. That's great.

JENNIFER: Because even upon walking in, you still hadn't told her the concept. So like a lot of our customers, it wasn't until she started reading the statements and went wait a minute. Why is this person telling me about their mental health? Wait a minute. This person's doing it too. I see a theme. And then she came over to me. And then we started talking about it.

CHERYL: Yeah. We went to other galleries. And the whole time, she was like, "I just wanna go back to J. Pepin." Even though the other galleries were the ones that were drawing her out of her apartment for the first time in years, she just kept wanting to come back here.

JENNIFER: That's great.

CHRIS: That's great. Now her art's on the wall.

CHERYL: One month later.

CHRIS: Yeah.

CHERYL: Yeah.

CHRIS: And she's very talented.

CHERYL: She's very talented.

JENNIFER: We got a really positive reaction to those.

CHERYL: Oh good. Good.

The gallery's first anniversary

CHERYL: So this month, September, is your gallery's one year anniversary. Happy birthday!

JENNIFER: Thank you!

CHERYL: So tell me, do you have anything special planned to celebrate at First Thursday.

CHRIS: We do. Jen is going to be making some of her homemade chocolate chip cookies. [laughs]

CHERYL: We talked about your chocolate cookies.

CHRIS: And a lot of them! And we're going to be serving champagne. And we're going to be featuring our artists that helped us basically springboard the whole concept. And I think it'll be great.

CHERYL: And a lotta your work will be featured this month, Jennifer?

JENNIFER: Yes. Generally, what we do is we feature one artist. So they kinda have the front of the house. And then we always have a few other artists in the back. So for the anniversary, I will be featuring my newest work. So I'm very excited and anxious. [laughs] So yeah, in celebration, I'll be featuring my own work. And then as Chris said, chocolate chip cookies. [laughs]

CHERYL: But seriously, last time I was here, we talked about your cookies. I mean, I don't talk about cookies with everybody. But it came up. I would love for people to come to that. So tell me the details, the address and the hours of that event.

JENNIFER: So our reception is from 5:30 to 8:30 pm. And we're located at 319 NW 9th Avenue in the Pearl District. For more information, our website is JPepinArtGallery.com. And our phone number is 503-274-9614.

CHERYL: Great. The gallery is open during the week and on First Thursday. But it's not just for patrons who have mental illness. It's for everybody to come, right?

JENNIFER: Correct. And we do occasionally get asked if there's a fee. And it's not. We run like any other retail gallery. So we're not a museum. We're open 11:00 to 5:30 Tuesday through Saturday and noon to 4:00 on Sundays. And open to the public.

What do you look for in curating work for the gallery?

CHERYL: What it is that you're looking for as a curator?

CHRIS: For me, it's really about something that is definitely unique, like certain mediums that people use and how they use it. I think that's really important. But really, we are a gallery in the Pearl District. So there is a certain quality to the art that I'm looking for, a certain caliber of artist and somebody who takes it a little bit more than seriously, that it is integrated in their life. Like that's what they do. And you see it in their work.

CHERYL: Yeah, you really do.

CHRIS: Yeah.

CHERYL: There's no hobbyists here.

CHRIS: No.

CHERYL: No.

CHRIS: And it's not something they just took a couple classes and said this feels good for me to put paint on a canvas or whatever. These people, they dedicate a lot of time and a lot of their soul and passion to what it is. It's their expression. And I think that's really what I'm looking for, is that unique expression.

CHERYL: What is the experience you want people to have when they walk in the door of your gallery?

JENNIFER: Well, I think we want people to first and foremost see the art, and they want to experience the beauty of the art. And then, when they read the bios, and they start to notice a theme, and they are moved by that in a different level. And they kinda see the background behind the art.

CHRIS: Definitely, and then the discovery of the person and how really their individualized diagnosis plays a role in their creativity.

CHERYL: As an asset, wouldn't you say?

CHRIS: Absolutely. It adds more to it in a way that personalizes it a little bit with the artist. Because most bios that you read when you go into galleries and things like that. And it's not that personal, a thing like that. There's sometimes a personal journey of a back story of how they got there and how they're working on their current series or whatever. But mostly it's kind of like a resume: this person did this, and they studied here and everything else. And these stories are really personal. And it gets into the process of how they create. And I think that's really cool.

The artists' experience of showing at J. Pepin

CHERYL: What experience do you want your artists to have when they show here?

JENNIFER: Well, I think that one of the things is that we've created a safe zone and a community of a particular type of artists. I've had artists say, "I wasn't comfortable approaching another gallery." And so that we've provided an environment where they do feel comfortable and that actually it's a launching pad for them. It is people who may not have had the opportunity to share their art elsewhere or may not have gotten the exposure in a gallery district like the Pearl District. That they are getting that, and they are growing from that.

CHERYL: You gave an example of someone saying, "I couldn't approach anyone else." Why are they not approaching other galleries?

JENNIFER: Well, I think that it's funny how the stigma sometimes not only exists with external perceptions but with our own perception. And that insecurity that exists of that so many people don't take me seriously because I have a mental illness. Hmm. Should I be taking myself seriously?

CHRIS: Yeah.

CHERYL: Yeah.

CHRIS: Definitely. I agree with that. I notice that feeling like well, I'm already been labeled as something that is inferior. Or I'm already struggling with the normal society and everything else.

So what makes me think that I have any talent or I can go into any gallery here? You know, I also think it's intimidating because each gallery in the Pearl District is very individualized. There's not one and the same. They're all very different, whether it be a collective or something very specific. Their shows are always different. What their focus is, is kind of a different part of the art world, which I think is cool. I love that it gives our artists a backbone. It gives them confidence to grow, to feel like they have a venue, a launching pad, somewhere to show their work and tell their story. It makes a difference in their individual growth as a person, which I think is great. I love that experience. I mean, that's how it's been for me too. It's been a real adventure to see how I've grown individually as an artist. So it really has inspired me. You know, Jen has inspired me. She's been a huge support in my growth as an artist. It's still very surreal to me that I sell my work. It's a mind-boggling thing to me. And it's amazing to see when people are moved by it.

CHERYL: Yeah.

CHRIS: I mean, that is amazing.

CHERYL: Yeah.

CHRIS: And I've watched people come in here and are moved by the art in here. And it's like nothing I've ever experienced in any other career I've ever done.

CHERYL: That's so fantastic.

CHRIS: Yeah.

CHERYL: And you know, we started out talking about reframing the perception of mental illness and breaking down the stigma. And we were kind of talking about other people who have stereotypes and prejudice against someone with mental illness. But now we've come around to also people with mental illness breaking down the stigma inside themselves too.

CHRIS: That's right. And that's the experience I think we want to have with each artist that's here. And then, again, very personalized in their own way. But it does make a difference. I've seen it happen. I see how each artist has grown since they've been here and how it's affected them to have their art here and be successful.

CHERYL: Oh, absolutely. You have to do it in community.

Sharing your story and finding community

CHERYL: So you've created this space where people can come in and start chipping away at their own internalized oppression at the same time that your patrons are coming away and chipping away at their sort of oppressive, prejudiced attitudes. It's very unique and so needed

because this emphasis on medical, medical, medical, you're broken, you're broken, I'm broken. We're just broken people.

CHRIS: Right, and everybody wants to keep it a secret. Everybody doesn't want to talk about it. Nobody wants to say, "I'm bipolar or schizophrenic or have a brain disorder." I mean, nobody wants to say, "I have a brain disorder." Not one single person.

CHERYL: You haven't met enough people with TBI. It's like in my community, that's the favorite past time. "I have a brain injury. Do you?" Not to be contradictory, but that's the big thing. In the TBI community, people love talking about it.

CHRIS: Huh.

JENNIFER: I guess I love to say it about myself. I say it a lot. And people will kinda look at me like, "I can't believe you're admitting that." But it is, I guess for me, accepting it has been very freeing for me. And also, for me, that is what will help break down the stigma, is if I'm not afraid to say it, and if I'm OK with it. And if I, "Hey! Look at me! I'm bipolar!" No. I don't want that to be the first thing that people see, certainly. I want them to see a successful business woman, an artist--

CHERYL: Named Jennifer.

JENNIFER: --named Jennifer. [both laugh] But then I do want to say, "You know what? I've overcome all the hurdles that I have. But I've also overcome your oppression and your stigma you've placed on me."

CHERYL: Yeah, so you could be a model for them. You can say, "Hey, I'm bipolar. And I do this. And I have a dog, and I'm engaged, and all these things. And here's where I come from." Then, you're a model to other people to not be scared. But I totally see what you're saying, Chris, that people do not wanna admit it. And if somebody does admit it, you hear this gasp in the room, like "huh! You? Oh, ew."

CHRIS: Mmhmm. Right. Unfortunately, I see that a lot where people automatically just kinda put their head down. They're just like. Because they've had a bad experience with somebody that might've been labeled bipolar or something else or had a mental illness. And you know, they immediately associate it with that.

JENNIFER: Well, and I think that's an interesting point too, is that everybody is different. Everybody's unique. And yet, you get lumped into this group of people of a mental illness.

CHRIS: I think that's what's cool about the gallery is that you're trying to show the beauty side of it all, rather than the negative side. Because that's what people associate with more often than not. They don't associate oh, I had a really great experience with that.

CHERYL: Right. And so you give people a really great experience with artists with mental illness.

CHRIS: Right. So now, when people experience that, and they go out there, and then they hear somebody talk about a mental illness, they can immediately associate it with a great experience they had in the gallery or purchasing art or whatever.

NAMI's Everyone Has Mental Health campaign

JENNIFER: And we're part of a campaign through NAMI called "[Everyone Has Mental Health](#)." And one of the things we talked about was the barriers to getting help. And one of them was you're not sick enough! And I've actually had somebody react: "Well, these people can't be that sick."

CHERYL: They mean it as a compliment, but that's very degrading. And it still shows that one-sided stereotype. I see mentally ill people as people at home in their pajamas, and they haven't bathed in months, and they're totally depressed. So it's negative. So they see this affirmative stuff. And they think, "That doesn't fit. It can't possibly." It's not a compliment.

JENNIFER: Right, and it also diminishes what we have gone through in here. That's the other thing is although I want to show how successful we've all become and been. And yet, I do want to remind people that's also overcoming a lot of obstacles and a lot of health issues. It takes a lot of time to find the right medications that work. Mania and depression are very destructive and create a lot of havoc on people's lives, on the relationships they've had, on their jobs, all of that. So I guess obviously, the point of the gallery is to show the beauty, to show the success and all of that, but it's partially also look at what you can overcome.

CHERYL: Yeah. Oh wonderful.

Favorite interaction in the gallery

CHERYL: What's a favorite interaction either of you have had in this gallery.

CHRIS: Ooh, well, I mean there's been a lot of different ones.

CHERYL: Top 100 favorite. No, just kidding.

CHRIS: OK. I'm going to speak about one that is the top 100 for me. And it was watching a girl come in here on First Thursday and looking at a piece and staring at it, staring at it, and just walking away. Coming back, staring at it, staring at it. And then literally start to cry three times. Interrupted three times and cried three times while looking at a piece. She was so moved by it.

CHERYL: Wow.

CHRIS: And wouldn't stop. I mean, she came back and stared at the piece for a good, I don't know, 45 minutes, something like that. I mean, it was wild. I'd never seen anything like it. And the way she talked about it, and emailed the next day and said how moved she was and how it touched her, and how she thought it was very brave. And the first thing she said was, "Have you ever heard anybody say they just want to jump inside this painting?" And then, I was like, "Well, that's a huge compliment." And then she said, "This really reminds me of my best day and my worst day that I've ever had." I mean, she was debating on whether she wanted to take this piece home with her and forfeit some of her medical school money or not. It was amazing to watch how someone's art, someone's expression can do that to another person who's a complete stranger.

CHERYL: Yeah. And she's a medical student?

CHRIS: Yeah.

CHERYL: How interesting.

JENNIFER: Well, and what I thought was most interesting was that when she emailed Chris the next day--and this is one of Chris's pieces--when she emailed him the next day, she said, "I haven't been able to talk about my bipolar." So the whole conversation and what we witnessed that night, she never once mentioned. But in hindsight, that is wonderful that he was able to touch her in that way and then that, going back to what you said about people who have a mental illness having a little hope and courage by seeing this gallery.

CHERYL: Yeah. So I know my eyes were watering earlier cuz they were burning. But now they're watering because I'm so moved that this person is in medical school, which is like the ultimate place for you gotta sit there with your school books and pathologize yourself. And don't let anybody know, cuz they're gonna pathologize you. And how are you gonna be a good doctor if you're sick? All that stuff is probably on her shoulders.

CHRIS: Yeah.

CHERYL: And for her to come in here.

CHRIS: It definitely did something to her.

CHERYL: It's such a dehumanizing course of study.

CHRIS: Right.

CHERYL: I mean, you cut open dead bodies and pull out the pieces. It's very dehumanizing. Do you have a favorite interaction story you wanna tell?

JENNIFER: I think when I spoke in the beginning about a father. And this gentleman was very tall, very stoic, like you would never have imagined that he would break down like that. And so to see him so moved by it and even more so that I was able to provide him hope when he was in such a dark place about his child. And you know, I can only fathom what it's like for parents.

CHERYL: Yeah, yeah. That's beautiful.

Donating proceeds to charitable organizations

CHERYL: So you donate a portion of your proceeds to organizations that are also focused on creating awareness and ending the stigma of mental illness. Tell me about some of the organizations you work with.

JENNIFER: When we opened, we had discovered an organization founded by Glenn Close, whose sister is bipolar, called [Bring Change 2 Mind](#). And their whole mission is to end stigma and create awareness. And they do that by having people tell their stories and traveling and Glenn Close and her sister telling their story. As we've developed, we started to discover a lot of organizations locally. So we've been trying to develop relationships with them. One that is a national organization but has a local chapter is NAMI, National Alliance of Mental Illness. And I'm really excited to say that in October, which is Mental Health Awareness Month, we're going to be actually partnering with them and doing an event. So we look forward to that, and stay tuned for more information on that. There are more and more organizations that are doing wonderful work around creating awareness and providing assistance to those living with mental illness.

The gallery's future plans

CHERYL: So what are your hopes from the gallery in the next five to ten years?

JENNIFER: Because it was generated in a support group filled with poets, musicians, painters, my original vision was to create a venue for all of that. So I would love to see an opportunity to do poetry readings, to do recitals. So my hope is to expand beyond just visual arts. And then big dream, long-term dream would be to have multiple locations across the country. But my hope is also that they wouldn't be necessary, like that stigma will have broken down, and there won't be reason.

CHERYL: That's a great point.

JENNIFER: And I think that we've discussed that we'll morph as necessary because there's always going to be some sort of cause and some sort of issue that needs to be addressed so.

CHRIS: I do feel like it's going to grow in its own form. And we kind of already are in a way. But first and foremost, it's a gallery in the Pearl District.

JENNIFER: Well, and I guess I've had a lot of people--and it goes back to the perception: "Are you guys actually successful? Are you actually selling?" And I do think, there's an element purely because a gallery business is very difficult. And then on top of it, we have the cause. But yes, we do sell. And that's, I think, one of my favorite things is to write a commission check.

CHERYL: Oh yes.

JENNIFER: To hand that over to an artist, to be able to say they sold something.

CHERYL: Yeah.

JENNIFER: If somebody wants to show their art here, we do have an application process. Primarily, the application is based on just providing information about your art and your background. And then the crux of it is how does having a mental illness play a role in your art. And we ask for that along with 5 to 10 images of current art that you would want us to consider for display. We will review that. And then, if it's a good fit, we would move forward with the artist. We do work a few months out, generally. And we'll usually start with a couple pieces and then maybe go from there.

CHERYL: Do people ever say, "My mental illness plays nothing but a horrible role in my art?"

CHRIS: I've never heard that. I've never heard anybody say it plays a horrible role in their art. You know, living with a mental illness is very difficult. It's a daily struggle, constantly. And I think people that live with mental illness, whether they accept it fully or not they do, no matter how hard they work on it and what they do, I think there's a breaking point. But that's in all of us no matter what it is. When you are struggling with a mental illness, there's a lot of things that can happen and a lot of surprises. I think the real key to it is trying to identify those triggers before they start to manifest.

CHERYL: Yeah.

JENNIFER: I think the negative element that will play a role--and I know Alexandra, I think, mentions it--is that you do become hyper-analytic and critical. And even this morning, producing new artwork for the show in September, if I'm not feeling well, if I'm not doing well, and I'm starting to have some depression, I want to throw all my art out. So that is a challenge with mental illness is to not let it affect your perception of your art negatively.

CHERYL: Oh yeah, yeah.

CHRIS: I think that's what makes it unique. I know that in my personal experience as an artist that has a mental illness, I feel like I'm always changing and always growing and never doing anything the same, as an artist.

CHERYL: Yeah.

CHRIS: So I can understand what she was saying about being super hyper-critical, wanting to throw it out. But I guess that it's the journey, it's the discovery in dealing with those life changes as they come. The changes, I think, is what's the most difficult, what's the biggest struggle. Because everybody goes through changes. But people that have a mental illness and how it affects them, it can be a lot different. It can be catastrophic. Those changes that, they're normal changes in life can be catastrophic or feel catastrophic when they're not.

CHERYL: Right.

CHRIS: But they do feel that way. And they are very real to the person that's suffering from it.

Wrap up

CHERYL: It's been a huge goal of mine in the past couple years to do more cross-disability work, stepping outside of just the brain injury community where I sort of was in the bubble. I was in kind of a brain injury world bubble. And I've been expanding. This year, I've been reaching out a lot to people in the mental illness community.

CHRIS: That's great.

CHERYL: Yeah. Cuz there's so much overlap! It's startling. I mean, listening to you two talk, I'm like, "Yep, yep, yep. I've heard that. I've felt that. I know somebody else who went through that."

CHRIS: Oh, I think there's definitely similarities for sure.

CHERYL: Yeah.

JENNIFER: Because of the stigma.

CHERYL: The stigma. And then also even in the workings of the brain and the way you experience your life and experience your day. It's been so wonderful to talk to you.

[music]

CHERYL: Thanks for joining me for another episode of Stories from the brainreels. Find more handy info on brain injury and disability art and culture on my disability arts blog, WhoAmIToStopIt.com.

[music]