

Stories from the brainreels podcast transcript

May 3, 2013

Introduction

[music]

CHERYL: Welcome to Blog Talk Radio's "Stories from the brainreels." I'm your host, Cheryl Green, from StoryMinders coming to you live from Portland, Oregon, as I do every first Friday and some third Fridays at 1:00 pm Pacific Time to share stories, news, art, comedy, and discussion on brain injury and disability culture.

[music]

CHERYL: There was a slight mix-up in the timing of this show. So this is an edited version where I have cut out a silent portion in the middle and the short conversation that I had with a friend while waiting for my guest T. Alicka Hickman to show up. That's the only edit that you'll hear in this audio recording.

CHERYL: Hi, and thanks for listening to Stories from the brainreels. It is May 3, Friday. And my guest today is going to be T. Alicka Hickman. She is a hip-hop artist who was signed to Suave House Universal Records. And she had an album called "[Crippled Pretty](#)," which was released in 2009. "[Chemical Suicide: Death by Association](#)" is a book that she wrote after having her second brain aneurysm and her first stroke at 32 years old, when doctors told her to stop putting chemicals in her hair. She's a motivational speaker; a community activist; a Krip-Hop performer; poet; the founder of GiveBackBuyBlack.com, Alika Films, Alika Publishing, Alika Music Group, and half of the Black Purchase Power Group. Now, the funny thing is, I don't see T. Alicka here on the line just yet. I was planning to have her come right on the show right at the beginning. And she's not here just yet. But I can't blame her because she showed up on Wednesday for this show, and I wasn't here. Because I accidentally told her it was on Wednesday, when really it was on Friday. So she may be coming in for her call just a little bit late today. So I'll talk a little bit more about how I found out about T. Alicka Hickman. I found out about her through Leroy Moore, who is the founder of Krip-Hop Nation, which is an international movement of hip hop artist and other musicians. And it's really focused on disabled musicians and disability culture and disability pride. And they really do a lot of work, also, with the intersections of disability and race and economics. And it's a really amazing group. Leroy does a lot of interviews. And he's actually interviewed T. Alicka. And you can find some of those interviews in the San Francisco BayView Newspaper. There's also some interviews in [Poor Magazine](#). He does a column there. And so you can see some interviews with T. Alicka there as well. So. I didn't prepare a ton of stuff to talk about before she got here. So I'm gonna talk to T. Alicka about a documentary that she's making. And so in this little bit of time I have here before she gets here, I wanna read to you the press release. And then, I'll have her actually talk about the documentary herself when she gets here. And I have a short clip to play from it.

The 16th Strike

CHERYL: The documentary's called "[The 16th Strike](#)." And from the press release, it says, "This documentary is about the ailments that African-Americans have had to endure while living in America and also situations that have happened with us as a people, that we ourselves need to be held accountable for. Black men in jail: what is our solution? Eating the wrong foods: what is our solution? We currently spend more money than any other group of people in America. Yet statistically, we're considered the poorest people in America. What is our solution? Well, we proudly tackle these avoided

subjects and more in this film. The thoughts of change are sincerely expressed through song, poetry, and through voices that have been through the storms of all these different ailments that we have continuously faced as a people in America." So that's her writing about the documentary itself [giggles]. I'm sorry, but I'm looking for other things that I can read out to you before T. Alika gets here. And I might also just send her a quick message on Facebook and see if she's around. Hold on one second while I try to figure how to do that while I'm on the radio. When I first heard about her, I knew of her as a hip hop musician. But I didn't know, at first, that she was also a documentary filmmaker. And that's something that I sort of fell into recently, myself. Lemme just send her a message real quick. Here's live radio for you, live streaming radio.

Who Am I To Stop it film and blog, and upcoming radio show guests

CHERYL: So I was saying, she had taken on documentary filmmaking with "The 16th Strike." And that really intrigued me because of the fact that I recently started making a documentary about artists with brain injuries. And I'm really focused in locally on a handful of artists in Portland, Oregon, and a couple in Olympia, Washington. I'm really looking at just a few people at a time because we've only got about 90 minutes for this movie. So what I'm doing is I have a community blog at WhoAmIToStopIt.com, where a lot of different folks with brain injuries and disabilities share their art, share their storytelling and their perspectives on disability and on culture and on life. And in addition to that, I went ahead and started this radio show to bring on people to do the same thing. So I have T. Alika coming in today to talk about film, to talk about music and poetry and commerce and all sorts of things around disability culture and Black culture. In a few weeks, we have Lady MJ Warrior from the United Kingdom who is also a hip hop artist who's gonna be on. And after that, I have some folks lined up who really are less artists, but more doing things like activism and advocacy around transportation and around other things that are really part of the lived experience of disability that some people really might not notice from the outside, if they don't experience a disability or know someone else who experiences it. It can be really hard to see all these finer points that go on with folks who have disabilities. So I'm looking at my Facebook. And there's no message yet from T. Alika Hickman. I wish I had her phone number. That would've been good planning. That's something I never remember to do, is get people's phone number before I'm supposed to call them. Anyway. But there's still plenty of time for her to call in.

"Crippled Pretty"

CHERYL: What I would like to do is just play a little clip of a title track. Her album from 2009 was called "Crippled Pretty." And I don't think, the songs aren't all about disability. But I wanna play a short clip of the title track. And so lemme do that now. This is a piece of the song "Crippled Pretty."

[music]

Lyrics:

I've seen the sun, and I've seen the rain and

Life is beautiful.

I can't complain.

(Her world is crippled pretty.)

My life was saved and reborn again, man.

Life is beautiful.

I can't complain.

(My world is crippled pretty.)

Crazed mind, I was told to write this crazed rhyme.

I had a brain bleed, flash, rebirth for the second time.

Tried to take me, my voice, and my mobility.

But as you can see, I still stand stall.
(My world is crippled pretty.)
My mind, it was 50/50 if I live or die, if I ever walk, if I ever speak.
Lord knows I cried too many times in the hospital,
laying in my own piss, was fucking with my mental state
Seemed as if I lost my faith.
Not me in a wheelchair.
What about my career?
Life just wasn't being fair.
I just had a write-up in Ozone, a write-up in Grip Mag.
Now I lay in a wet bed]

CHERYL: So that was just a little clip while we're waiting for T. Alika to call in to this show and be the guest. I did cut the song off just because the lyrics are explicit, and this show is rated for everyone. But what she was talking about right as the clip cut off was, you know, I just got written up in these two big magazines, and now I'm stuck in this hospital bed, sitting in my own waste and having to use a bed pan. And I didn't want to cut that part of the story out, but I did have to cut the lyrics out because of the language that was used. But I think it's real important to not shy away from that kind of conversation about what happens when you have a disability that affects the way your body works, and in her case really affected her independence. And it sounds like, like many people in the hospital, staff wasn't there often enough to help her take care of basic needs and feel like she had basic dignity. And so she put that in the song. And it's a really nice juxtaposition against I just got written up in these magazines, I'm signed to this major label, and now look at me. I'm stuck in this bed, and I can't even use the toilet on my own. So I really like the lyrics--I like the lyrics in the whole song, but I like the lyrics there in that moment, just putting all that stuff right in your face about what her real lived experience was at the moment. And I wish she was here so she could talk about it a little bit more with you.

So there is a call-in number. And if anybody's out there listening and wants to call in and maybe pose a question that I can ask T. Alika when she shows up, you are welcome to do that. The number's 347-934-0715. If you wanna call in with a question or a comment, do that. Otherwise, you have to sit there and keep listening to me jibber-jabber on until T. Alika shows up, which is fine with me. I think I might be able to come up with other things to ramble on about.

But in the meantime, let me see if I can find some other things to tell you about her without losing the internet here. Oh, one second. I know it's no good on radio to have this much silence and this much rambling. And you probably don't wanna hear what I'm looking at on my computer. But I'm trying to find some good stuff to tell you about T. Alika before she can come here and describe these things herself. [Typing in the background.] So now I think I have three browsers up. So I should be able to find something here.

Rambling until Toni shows up for the interview

So there's the [official Toni Hickman fanpage on Facebook](#). And well, here's a cute story that has absolutely nothing to do with T. Alika Hickman, and that is that as I was getting ready for this show and doing a lot of reading about her and looking at pictures of her, I discovered that one of my dear friends from middle school and high school is actually the photographer who took the pictures of her. They're on her Facebook fanpage as well as her website, which is [tonihickman.com](#). That's tonihickman.com. So those pictures are by my friend, Eric Kayne. And that, like I said, has nothing to do with her but was a

wonderful little blast from the past, something for me to see. She is out in Houston, which is where he is. And I'm a native Texan myself, but I'm not there anymore. So it was nice to see Eric's name on there.

I'm looking through her page to find some stuff to talk to you about [chuckles]. But this wasn't something that I had completely planned for. Now, T. Alike Hickman does have a [YouTube page](#), and I believe it's actually under Toni Hickman. And when you're on her YouTube page, you can see things like the trailer and the teaser for her documentary "The 16th Strike." And you can also see she did some vlogging, some sort of web video diaries about her experiences having two aneurysms and a stroke by the age of 32. And she talks about a lot of just personal, candid things and sort of keeps you up to date with how she's doing, how she's feeling, and just being real open and honest about what life is like after you've had aneurysms and a stroke and brain surgery. Everybody's experience, of course, is unique and different and the way we face it, and talk about it is different. But one thing I really love about those video blogs is that she really doesn't, again, she doesn't shy away from talking about things that are really important to her. And I think those things are really important for other people to know about as well, especially in the case of a traumatic brain injury like mine and a stroke like T. Alike's, and aneurysms, you can't necessarily see that we're having a hard time inside. You can't necessarily see that maybe we think slower, move slower. It doesn't quite come through the way it might if you could see a physical disability on our bodies. And so I know it's easy for people to just sort of feel confused: Well, why do you say you're having a hard time? You look like you're fine. We hear that all the time, "But you look fine! But you look great!" And so when you watch these short pieces on your YouTube page, and she's just telling you, she's just coming right out and telling you, she's showing you her hand and the difficulties she has making a fist and opening the fist. But then, she also shows you what she's doing to strengthen her hand and get that movement going again. So you can really have that insider perspective and that look into her life and really just nothing to hide and nothing to run away from. Because she and I can't run away from the fact that we've had brain injuries. It doesn't mean it has to hold us back. And in fact, I don't think it holds T. Alike back much at all, if at all. But it is something important in our histories. It's something that we do want people to know about and to understand as much as they possibly can.

So that was a little more rambling from me. I'm gonna read you something that was on the Official Toni Hickman Facebook fanpage. This is from November 28th, 2012. And she wrote, "Whenever I feel overwhelmed, I try and focus on where I've come from and what I've accomplished in my business and personal life. Music and poetry, philosophy, creativity has always played a major role in my healing. So as you go about your day, please remember, the rain don't last forever." I really liked that quotation. It was from nearly a year ago, but I found it on there, and I just liked what she had to say about music and philosophy and creativity. All those things always being major in her healing. And I think that that's true for a lot of artists and other folks with different kinds of brain injuries, that there is a search for something to do for healing. And very often, it is art. It may be music, it may be painting. Some folks work with art therapists to explore and understand and sort of unleash stuff that's inside. And some people do art that is not at all with a therapist, and maybe it feels therapeutic or maybe it feels healing. But I have noticed in the research for my documentary film called "Who Am I To Stop It" that a lot of people are making art. And part of that is because when you're making art, it's creative. You get to make up the rules. You get to decide how things are going to look. You can be sort of flexible with how things come out and hopefully flexible with yourself about how satisfied or not you are with what you made. And things like poetry and rap and hip hop, they have all that freedom to tell whatever story you need to tell in whatever way you need to tell it. And so I like that she is talking about using art and creativity and music in that healing kind of way.

Some folks ask me sometimes if I'm using my filmmaking for healing. And I don't know. I sort of, I don't think of myself as in a healing phase anymore. Cuz when I start to do that--and this is just me; I'm not speaking for anyone else. But when I start to do that, I start to feel like, gosh, am I a patient? Is there something wrong with me? Now, I know I still have some impairments, and that's part of why I told T. Alikea Hickman the wrong day to show up, and I very well might've told her the wrong time. That might be why she's not here! But I don't wanna, I don't like to think of myself as an active patient in active need of rehab. So I've got things that are really hard for me, and I have to make some accommodations and adjustments and work jobs in a different way and do socializing in a different way and make films in a different way. But for me personally, again, not at all speaking for T. Alikea, but for me personally, I don't think of art currently as being a healing thing for me just because I don't know what else I have to heal or what else I could do about it.

So what else can I tell you about T. Alikea before she gets here? I'll give her a few more minutes, but I might go ahead and wrap the show early or at least just sorta close out for a while and come back maybe if she shows up. And then what I can do is go to the archive page. I'll take the whole show, I'll cut out the silent part in the middle, and put it back up there so folks can listen to it then. I might even cut out some of my rambling too. But I'll talk just for a couple more minutes. And then I'm gonna go ahead and put myself and mute and sorta wait out and see if she comes. And maybe any listeners out there can check back.

But another thing that is listed on the Official Toni Hickman Facebook fan page is about Black Poet's Night. And that is a regular event that she has going on. I think that she might've started it. I was gonna ask her about that. Can't remember exactly. But it's sponsored by Alikah Enterprise and GiveBackBuyBlack.com. And the Black Poet's Night is hosted in Black-owned businesses, and they do that to promote "spending our money in our own communities." The evening features African drumming, revolutionary poetry, African dance, a Black purchase discussion, all sorts of really great things that are really about building community, keeping community tight, really taking charge of economics and keeping Black commerce going and having more Black leadership in the arts and in business.

So with that, I have not heard from our guest, Miss T. Alikea Hickman. So what I'm gonna do to spare everybody is I'm gonna go ahead--like I said--I'm gonna put my microphone on mute and wait for a while. When she shows up, I'll bring her on, and we can talk for a while. And then once the show is archived, I will take it down, cut out the blank space, and zip it all together and put it up there for folks to listen to. So for now, I'm gonna take a little pause. You are welcome to still call. I'll still be here: 347-934-0715. And as soon as T. Alikea shows up, I will be back on the air. Thanks!

The Interview

TONI: Hello?

CHERYL: Hello!

TONI: Hello! I am so sorry!

CHERYL: [laughs] Here you are!

TONI: My brain. Please blame it on the brain. I am so sorry. I overbooked myself.

CHERYL: Not to worry.

TONI: I got to looking, and I'm like oh my god! Yeah.

CHERYL: [laughs] So my friend Kelly just called in, but I see she left. She noticed that the guest star of the show did show up. And so Kelly had called to say hey while I was just sitting around. But I am so glad to have you here now. Do you have time to talk?

TONI: Yeah, yeah. I can talk.

CHERYL: Oh, wonderful. So I'm really excited to have you here. I did a little blabbing at the beginning, and I played about a minute and a half from your song "Crippled Pretty." And just sorta talked about some of the things that you've done. But I'm so glad you're here now so that you can speak for yourself and describe the work that you do in your own words. So I gave a little bio about you and the work that you do and all the different organizations you run. I would love to hear from you, though, about the documentary "The 16th Strike" that you're working on.

"The 16th Strike"

TONI: Well, "The 16th Strike" actually came about because I was going to do a documentary on my book. And then I just started looking around at the situation that African Americans were in, and it just broke my heart. And I said, well, if I do a documentary, then it actually needs to cover everything that is ailing us as a people. And we need to come up with solutions so we can move past this. So that is why we created it. And it couldn't be anything short of divine. I mean, all of the people I needed to make it happen came to me, and it actually ended up being a powerful piece. And I can't wait to share it with the world.

CHERYL: And I know the movie is premiering in San Francisco in August, right?

TONI: Right, mmhmm.

CHERYL: Can you tell me a little bit about how that got set up?

TONI: Well, I am a part of the Krip-Hop Nation. I am a disabled hip hop artist. I used to be signed to Universal Records. And so me and Leroy Moore, who is the founder of Krip-Hop, are very cool. And he just does different things to really help what I'm doing cuz he believes in what I'm doing. And he saw that I was doing the documentary, and he just contacted them cuz he's an extraordinary journalist. And that's how that happened, and I guess they liked what they saw as well. And so San Francisco BayView is hosting the premiere along with Krip-Hop Nation in San Francisco.

CHERYL: Yeah, that's excellent. Yeah, I read the article, and I posted that on my film's Facebook page, the interview that Leroy did with you in that paper. I wanna real quick play, I have a minute of speaking that I pulled from the documentary. Is that OK if I play that real quick right now?

TONI: Yeah.

CHERYL: OK, cuz it sorta hits on what you were talking about, what's ailing the community right now. So lemme play this real quick.

[music, voices from "The 16th Strike" trailer]

MALE POET: Talking about purgatory,

But hell for the Black male is when your worst fear becomes your reality

FEMALE POET: For every Black neck hung

For every Black body cut, torn, tarred, feathered, shot down

PREACHER: Our community culture has become infected.

ACTIVIST: What we see in our community and in our society is a culture that has transmitted to the youth that a lack of knowledge is cool.

CLERIC: Still to this day, we claim the projects and not even realize what the word "project" means.

SPEAKER: The Emancipation Proclamation means we're free from the hands, never the mind.

FAMILY MEMBER: The things that we are allowing our children to be exposed to is what's shaping them.

OUTREACH WORKER: Most of the institution is designed to mentally destroy youth so you can keep coming back as a repeat offender.

CHERYL: So that's just a short clip that touches on some of the stuff you show in that film. I mean, who are the people are in this film who you interviewed or showed?

TONI: We have many different people. We have kids in there; my son is in there. We have an activist: he did 20 years in prison, and he came out and totally changed his life. He went to jail as a teenager, and they gave him four life sentences. And he never murdered anybody and didn't shoot the gun. So you know, he definitely came out and really started helping other young Black boys who were going through the system and are having the same issue. And so he's in it. We have a healer in it. We have people talking about GMOs. We have a fitness person in it. We have so many great figures in the community on the documentary. Like I said, I couldn't even ask for a better group of people to be in the same film, you know?

CHERYL: Mmhhh. That's wonderful. And you know, I think it's especially nice for you that there is those first two short clips were some poets, and I know you are a poet, and you're a songwriter and a hip hop artist. So that's gotta be real nice for you to have people sharing about this and talking about solutions in an artistic way too.

TONI: Yeah, and I mean because if you think about it, music has moved most of our revolutions in America. And that is what we're doing now, is just music and poetry. And that's how we plan on changing the mind-state of not only ourselves but how the world sees us.

CHERYL: Yeah, and when you say that music and poetry and those things they reflect our culture, but they also can help shape the culture.

TONI: Definitely, definitely. They have in the past, you know?

CHERYL: So for folks who want to watch the whole trailer that I played just a little excerpt from, they can find that on your site at tonihickman.com.

TONI: Yep.

CHERYL: They can find a lotta stuff, music, your book.

TONI: Right. And if you wanna order the documentary cuz the documentary is an hour and 55 minutes. And it is full of, it touches every subject that can touch not only African Americans but everybody. We just have been the butt, but we are also, as a whole, dealing with how these GMO foods are killing our society and killing our people. And so we all need this message. It's not for one group, but it is mainly to direct African Americans to uplift themselves.

CHERYL: That's right, yeah. And you do. You talk about food, you talk about beauty products, you talk about stuff that really is part of everyday life. And especially also in your book, "Chemical Suicide: Death by association" you talk about what's going on and how unhealthy we're becoming because of the products that we're using.

TONI: Correct.

CHERYL: So let me come back here cuz I did a lotta talking before you got here. So let me check my questions here, make sure I pick up where I had left off. Is there anything else you wanna say about the documentary before we start talking about music?

TONI: No, I think the documentary, we're good. I'm excited about it. We're going to Dallas June 27th, and we'll be in New Orleans July 13th. And I'm just really excited about it. So please go to tonihickman.com and support. What I'm doing, and what we're doing--cuz at the end of the day, it's not about me. It's about growth, and all of us can grow from what the Spirit has put on me to put out.

CHERYL: Yeah. Now if folks wanna see what that tour schedule is, can they find that online or on Facebook?

TONI: They can find it on Facebook, but they can actually find it on tonihickman.com under Schedule and Events.

CHERYL: Oh, there it is! I'm right there on your site, but I didn't see it. My eyes, my vision: I'm so bad with the internet. OK, yeah, so your speaking engagements are listed there and media coverage and tours for "Chemical Suicide" and for "The 16th Strike" are there at tonihickman.com/schedulesandevents up at the top. So that's wonderful.

Krip-Hop Nation and loving yourself after acquiring a disability

CHERYL: So you had mentioned your involvement with Krip-Hop Nation and Leroy Moore. And I just wanted to know, tell me what it's like for you to be involved with this big, international movement.

TONI: I think it's enlightening for me because I was a hip hop artist before I became disabled, and I was also like a model. I'm six feet tall. So I did a lot of things that I never really considered the subject of disability or even looking at it like that. Like, I never considered it. And so Leroy definitely opened my eyes up. But even more so, I so appreciate what he has done because we can be blinded by what the world can perceive us as, when really we are all crippled in some form because we are trying to fit into a society that makes us think we have to be perfect in order to fit in. And we have to be ourselves and stand out. So I love Leroy, I love Krip-Hop, and I am proud to be a part of Krip-Hop. Krip-Hop is a wonderful movement. And like I said, I'm very proud of Leroy and everything that he does.

CHERYL: Yeah, that's wonderful. You know, I was thinking when I was listening to the "Crippled Pretty" lyrics, it sounded to me like you were also referring to life before the aneurysms and before the stroke.

TONI: Yep.

CHERYL: And not just crippled as in the sense of physically disabled.

TONI: Oh yeah, no, no. I'm talking about how--and that's how I felt. I didn't wanna get out of the car after I came out of the hospital, I was sitting, my mom and my son in the stores because I was just ashamed. I was used to being the super-pretty fly model. I was used to walking with my strut in my

heels. And so when that happened, I just was ashamed. And one day--you know, I had braids in my hair. I took the braids out, and I wore my natural hair, and I looked in the mirror. And I was like I love you. I love you just the way you are with your limp, with your weakness, with your naturally kinky hair. I just love you. And from that day forth, I just started rocking my natural hair and stepping out, and you couldn't tell me nothing.

CHERYL: [laughs] That's fantastic. I know you do a lot of teaching and a lot of things around natural hair. Do you think--hmm. Lemme see how I can get this question together in my head. It's actually my nap time right now. I don't know why I put on a radio show during my nap time. But [giggles] you looked in the mirror, and you said, "Now wait a minute. I've got all these changes, but I love myself anyway." Do you think everybody gets to that point after they've acquired a disability?

TONI: And see mine is, like you said, acquired. I didn't always have it. But I hope so, but no I don't. I don't think. I think people can be depressed for the rest of their life just because they dwell on that one thing. But I know for me--and I tell people this all the time--it changed my life. And it actually changed my life in a positive way. So I don't regret having anything happen to me now because it awakened me to self. If this wouldn't have happened, I don't know if I would've been awakened.

CHERYL: Yeah. Yeah. Now, so just like you, I acquired my disability as an adult. And I know I have become really vocal about disability justice in the past couple years. I mean, I'm all over the place about that. And what I'm wondering is, for someone like you and someone like me, what is the best way for people who acquire their disabilities to partner with people who've been disabled their entire lives? How do we work together?

TONI: I know for me, honestly, Leroy came to me. And so that is how I have actually teamed up with them. But I don't know. I think if you put it out there that that's what you want to happen, then you'll start attracting it to you. But it definitely needs to happen. It gave me a soft spot in my heart for anybody that has had to deal with the struggle of I guess dealing with humanity and the judgment that we give. We can be very ugly people, you know? And it's very unfortunate.

CHERYL: Mmhmm. And we don't even realize we're doing that until maybe we're on the other side of it.

TONI: Exactly.

CHERYL: And you know, you felt ashamed about the disabilities you had, but that's because you had maybe only been shown that disability is a negative thing.

TONI: Exactly.

CHERYL: So but of course, it's also really scary and really hard to lose things in yourself and think what if I never walk again? What if I never do those things that I've been doing for decades? And so there's definitely a scary time in there. But I always wanna make sure that when I'm going around doing all this disability justice stuff that I remember that I've only been disabled for a couple of years. And I have no idea what it's like to live with a disability my whole life.

TONI: Exactly, exactly. And on the flip side of that, I believe that even the person who had been born disabled can grow. They can grow resentful or being angry at those that are not. And I've seen that. I haven't seen it often, but I've definitely seen it. And it's just the way life is. And so we all have to grow in spirit and get beyond the looks of, or the presentation of, what it's supposed to be that is put on us by society.

CHERYL: Right, right. Everything from the way your body should work to the way you should wear your hair, that's put on you.

TONI: Right.

Is there a Black disability culture

CHERYL: I recently saw--I'm sure it was on Facebook--I saw Leroy Moore writing and just asking folks is there a Black disability culture? So that's my question for you. There's a lotta talk about "the disability community" and "disability culture," but is there a Black disability culture?

TONI: Not that I know of. No.

CHERYL: That's what Leroy was saying too. So I mean, I guess I wonder, if there was Black disability culture, what would it be? What would be the pieces that would define it?

TONI: OK, if you want my honest opinion on it, this is from me becoming disabled: I don't know if such a thing would make sense. And when I say that, I'm saying because what I have seen is that people with, no matter if you're green, blue, or whatever, with disabilities, they still face the same discrimination that African Americans may face in America or something like they still face the same discrimination. Now, I have heard the stories about Blacks in wheelchairs and all of that stuff getting beaten by the cops. I have heard the stories, and it's sad. I've also seen a Caucasian man in Texas just get shot in a wheelchair for no reason. So I don't know. That's a touchy subject, you know?

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

TONI: It's touchy no matter how you attack it.

CHERYL: Absolutely, absolutely. And I think for anything in disability rights and in disability justice, we have to--my opinion is we have to--always remember who came before us and who started fighting for basic civil rights and basic humane, just to be respected and have a humane existence in our culture. And it's the civil rights that came, race-related civil rights, that came before the disability rights movement. Not long before, but before. And I wonder if you could talk a little bit maybe about just the intersection of race and disability and even economics.

TONI: Could you say that again?

CHERYL: Yeah, sometimes when somebody starts bringing up the word "intersection" I just lose it. But talking about is it different to be white and disabled versus being Black and disabled? Or to have no money and be disabled?

TONI: Oh yeah, I think it's a difference. It's a difference even if you're not disabled. You know, there is something called a "white advantage" that Caucasians or Europeans have in America versus every other race. And unfortunately, African Americans or Africans are considered the bottom of the totem pole, unfortunately. And so that exists whether you're disabled or not, in my view.

CHERYL: In my view too, yeah. I absolutely agree. And you know it's there when you bring it up to somebody, and they get defensive. Then you know for sure, oh, OK, there's your advantage coming out. You're getting defensive cuz I'm trying to talk about race, or I'm trying to talk about disadvantage. And the dialogue will shut down when someone who has a lot of advantage doesn't want you to point that out to them.

TONI: Yeah.

CHERYL: I say they, but I don't even know how much advantage or privilege I actually have at this very moment.

TONI: Right.

CHERYL: But it is a really important point, and I don't like to see people get defensive when it's brought up because we need to have these dialogues about it.

TONI: That's the only way we're gonna heal.

CHERYL: That's right. And it is about healing, right?

TONI: Oh yeah. It's not about fighting or being angry or anything. It is about healing. And that's the thing that needs to happen. I just came out of a meeting on this same subject. But in order for us to heal, we can't just say we're gonna heal as a nation and leave African Americans where they are. No. We have to start where the biggest problem is. And the biggest problem we face as humans on this earth is dealing with our status as Africans brought to America and how we were brought and how we were raped and how we were beaten and what psychological damage has been done to us. We have to deal with this, and if we don't deal with it, we will not have balance. We have to deal with the harshest thing that we have to face in our reality, and that is how we have treated Africans or African Americans--however we are referring to us at this time--in America.

CHERYL: I agree. And what's still going on. Racism is not gone by any means. And when people talk about the post-racial era, I don't even know what they're referring to.

TONI: Mhmm.

"Accidental Racist" song

CHERYL: I don't see it. Now, I had sent you some of these questions before so you could see what I was gonna ask you, but here's one that's coming to my mind right now. And you can answer this or not answer it. But I'm thinking about that Brad Paisley LL Cool J song right now.

TONI: I haven't heard it.

CHERYL: "Accidental Racist." Have you heard that song?

TONI: I heard about it. I haven't heard it.

CHERYL: Oh, OK. Do you have any opinion? Or what's your thought about the discussion around it?

TONI: From what I've heard about it, it ticked me off.

BOTH: [chuckle]

TONI: I was just like come on. I used to love you. How do you make a song like that? You can't be an accidental racist. We can't forgive somebody because we have been beaten and brutally beaten, and we'll just say we'll forget it if this is what it's about.

CHERYL: Mhmm.

TONI: We can't just do that. We have to deal with everything head on. OK, so if the song is about saying like "I forgive you," no. You forgive me for being the way that I've been. I have to listen to the song, but from the write-up that I saw on it, I was like oh no. I didn't get it. But I don't wanna judge it. I can't judge it until I hear it. So you're gonna make me listen to it this evening.

CHERYL: Oh, OK, OK [laughs]. And I haven't listened to the whole thing. I've listened to part of it, but I couldn't listen to the whole thing because I got so angry because Brad Paisley said, "I'm a white man. I wanna know what it's like for someone who's in the South who's not a white man." But then he keeps singing: "By the way, I hope you're not mad at me for this shirt that I'm wearing. By the way, please, I didn't mean it. I don't mean any harm." And so what I heard in that one part was he just said, "I wanna hear from you," but he never handed the microphone over. I mean, he did eventually, but he kept talking. And that was that white advantage that you were talking about.

TONI: Mmhmm.

CHERYL: To me, although it seems like he's trying to heal, he's being defensive, and don't be mad at me. I didn't mean to be born in a heritage of people who enslaved the people you come from. But that's not a dialogue.

TONI: Right, right. Right.

CHERYL: So I have been wanting to talk to an artist, a musician about that song and see how others feel. Cuz I've read about it and heard people criticize it. I haven't heard anything positive about it.

TONI: Me neither.

CHERYL: But you know, it's music. And music is the place where you can try to explore things and pull things apart and put them out there. At the same time, that was just a whole lotta privilege and advantage and yeah.

GiveBackBuyBlack.com and economic and community growth

CHERYL: So there's so many projects that you do, and I'm trying to look and see the things that I talked about before you came on and the things that I didn't. One thing I didn't talk about was the GiveBackBuyBlack.com. Do you wanna tell folks about how that works, what that is?

TONI: Well, first thing, they have to know the statistics about it because I had, I got kinda angry. I was just telling people, "Hey! Go shop and Black stores, and that's it." We have to understand what I mean. So I'm glad I have this dialogue going that I can explain that.

CHERYL: Yeah.

TONI: Are you aware of our current spending situation.

CHERYL: I know it's bad, but I don't know the statistics, no.

TONI: OK. We are currently statistically considered the poorest people in America. Yet we spend more money than every other group of people.

CHERYL: Huh.

TONI: The Asians spend less than us. Like I said, we spend more than everybody. Asians spend less than us, and their money stays in their communities roughly around 30 days. Everybody else, their money stays in their community; however, we are spending close to \$1.1 trillion, as a people, and our money only stays in our community 6-8 hours.

CHERYL: Oh.

TONI: And this is because when we spend, we don't support Black businesses. We don't grow our communities. When we get the money, we don't spend it with us; we spend it with everybody else. And therefore, we have not grown our communities, and this is why we deal with crime and all of these issues in our community. It's because we don't grow.

CHERYL: Mm, mmhmm.

TONI: And so yeah, that is the reason I started Give Back Buy Black. And it is an initiative to start the process of African Americans thinking about how they spend their dollar and supporting Black businesses and actually looking into building our own communities and different things that help us survive as a foundation in America. Because right now we have no foundation: we don't own property. We just own rents and jewelry.

CHERYL: Mmhmm. Now, the neighborhood that I live in--I'm in Portland, Oregon, which is not the most diverse city in the country.

TONI: Right.

CHERYL: And the part of town I live in is historically the African American side of town. It's pretty mixed now, but what I've been noticing in the past couple years, on the bus, going up and down the main street, is that the shops are closing. The shops and the restaurants that have been here for a long time are closing, and they're being replaced with really upscale restaurants. I look in, and everybody's white in there. Specialty shops, really expensive baby clothing stores and fancy toy stores and fancy cooking stores. And I'm seeing the commerce in the neighborhood totally shift.

TONI: Right.

CHERYL: And I think if you were gonna shop in your own neighborhood, well then, what Black business would you support? Because they're gone.

TONI: Yeah, and this is what has happened because even in the process of starting GiveBackBuyBlack.com, what we did find out is that we have businesses, but we don't have any businesses in Black neighborhoods. And so what we have to do is get out of our land of convenience because we have been conveniently crippled. Everything is right there. So why do we need to travel to go and support this store when Walgreens is right there on the corner or whatever? And so we need to support our own businesses and also look at restructuring our community where we can put these same businesses that we need into the Black community.

CHERYL: Definitely. That's wonderful. And if folks go to the website, GiveBackBuyBlack.com, there's videos on there, there's people talking about supporting Black-owned business, why buying Black is important. There's just lots of cities listed, lots of different places where you can buy all sorts of stuff. It's a really, a great site. And I hope people are using it? Are you getting a lot of traffic on that site?

TONI: Yeah, we definitely get people going to the site, and new people come in and advertise. We definitely are getting it, and the one thing I wanted to also say is it's not just for Blacks to go in and support Black businesses. It's for everybody to go in and support Black businesses because they also see the need that we need to build our community, you know?

CHERYL: That's right.

TONI: If we don't--We have already supported other people's businesses. We support everybody. We support Asians. We always support Asian stores, but you will never see an African American working behind an Asian restaurant or a counter. You will never see it because they hire their own.

CHERYL: Mmhmm. So we gotta get these businesses more business so they can hire more people and keep the money in the community.

TONI: Exactly.

CHERYL: Get the community stronger, yeah. When I first heard about you, I heard that you were a Krip Hop artist. And then I started looking. I'm like look at it. You're doing a bazillion things at once, but all of them come together. They all are sort of woven together in a really cool way. So I'm looking at my little list of questions here that I got all out of order.

Empowered and enlightened by disability experiences

CHERYL: One really interesting thing that's on the Homepage of your website, and you sorta already talked about this, was it says "inspired and able." And you say, "I do the impossible all the time. I can't speak for everyone with a disability, but for me, I have only been empowered because of it."

TONI: Right.

CHERYL: I think that that's what you were talking about earlier that you sort of woke up, that you were enlightened by this.

TONI: Yes, correct.

CHERYL: Were you this empowered to do things around commerce and business as well? Did that question even come out?

TONI: Well, I don't know. Everything I'm doing now, it was not--even when I was on a record label, on Universal Records or in between, doing my music, I've always done business. My mom got me into working for the Better Business Bureau and the Chamber of Commerce. So I've done business and dealt with businesses a while. But everything that I'm doing now, it just kinda came to me in spirit. It didn't come because it was something that I said, "Oh, I could make some money off of this or whatever." No, actually it's not the biggest thing that actually promotes money. It's just to promote awareness of how far we need to grow. But it just came to me. I've got everybody asking if you're doing all of this stuff, what happened? I'm just following spirit, you know? I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't do anything. I just try and be very obedient to spirit.

CHERYL: Mmhmm. Is that how you grew up, or even that has come more after the stroke?

TONI: I grew up a knucklehead, you know? I was a knucklehead.

CHERYL: What was that?

TONI: I was a knucklehead growing up.

CHERYL: OK [laughs]. Got it.

TONI: Yeah, I was a knucklehead, you know. Yeah. And my mom put me out of the house, when I was 15, 16 years old. So I definitely have lived and learned through life.

CHERYL: Yeah, absolutely. And you're doing a lot to share the things that you've learned with the community, especially when it comes to things like the book "Chemical Suicide" where you've learned so much about the dangers of these beauty products. And you want other people to know about this and sort of take charge of your own health.

TONI: Right, exactly. Exactly.

CHERYL: So anything else that you wanna share about your philosophy or your creativity or anything like that, that I didn't ask you about?

TONI: Well, I do motivational speaking a lot, and especially I'm speaking to people that are depressed or whatever. And they're just like, "Oh, I don't wanna do anything" or "I don't wanna do whatever." But we control our thinking, and so if we are constantly planting these thoughts of "I can't" or "I won't," you're just gonna constantly get exactly what you keep putting into the universe. We are capable of doing all things. If you really wanna be something great, just go be something great and make up your mind you're not gonna do anything less than that no matter what happens, you know? Cuz if we're only given one life, you have this opportunity right now to make this the best it can be.

CHERYL: That's right, yeah.

TONI: And don't settle for anything else. You should wanna be the best you can be.

CHERYL: And who are the groups that you do this kinda motivational speaking for formally?

TONI: I'm a speaker for the Heart Association, the [American Heart Association](#). I also do it in the community. I've traveled to universities, just different places. People will call me to come and speak and tell my story.

CHERYL: That's great. That's great. I like to see folks getting out and sharing their story. And when you've lived through a lot and learned a lot, you wanna have the chance to share it. So that's great, and I'm glad that you shared that part here cuz I was just, I was asking about the music and about the business and stuff. And it's nice to hear that other side of it to about making your life what you're gonna make it and taking charge of it.

TONI: Exactly.

Wrap up

CHERYL: Yeah, wonderful. Great. Well, I am so glad that you made it. I'm sorry you were double-booked. I'm sorry I told you the wrong day earlier. You showed up earlier this week [chuckles].

TONI: We both have brain injuries. I'll tell you, it's all right. It's all right.

CHERYL: That's right. I was so happy that you were patient with me, and I thought well, of course. Of course she would be patient with me. But I really, really appreciate you taking the time to come on this show and share these things that you shared. And it was really my honor and my pleasure to get to actually speak to you. I've read a lot about you and listened to your music and watched the videos. So it was great to actually speak to you. And I just wanna thank you again.

TONI: I wanna add one more thing for your listeners. Definitely, please go to ToniHickman.com and support what we're doing because it is a movement of change, and it's positive change. And so anything that you wanna get from the site--there's even a donation button--definitely feel free to do so.

CHERYL: Absolutely. Thank you. Yeah, and if folks are coming, your websites are listed on my blog, they're on my Facebook page, they're on my Facebook film page, and for folks who come later on to listen to this radio show at a later date, those URLs are there too. So please, everybody, do go visit those sites and support this amazing work that's going on and this amazing community building. So thank you again!

TONI: Thank you.

CHERYL: We're gonna check now. All right, bye-bye.

TONI: Bye.

CHERYL: I'm so grateful to T. Alike Hickman for coming to be on the show, especially when she was triple, quadruple-booked today. It was really generous of her and a great pleasure. And with that, I say thank you for listening. And we'll be back on May 17th at 1:00 pm Pacific time to talk to Lady MJ Warrior, another Krip-Hop artist.

Join us the 1st and 3rd Friday of the month at 1:00 pm and find us online at blogtalkradio.com/brainreels. This has been Cheryl Green of StoryMinders. Email me at info@storyminders.com if you've got topics you'd like to hear on an upcoming show.

[music]