

## Stories from the brainreels transcript

June 1, 2017

### Introduction

[theme music]

CHERYL: Today I'm talking to Vilissa Thompson who's the [Digital Manager for Rooted in Rights](#), in Washington State, the place that produces my absolute favorite disability rights video content and more. That job is only one piece of her career pie. I'm going to turn it over to Vilissa to tell you more.

Music today, Blue.Sessions.

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### Interview

VILISSA: Well, my name is Vilissa Thompson, and I am from Winnsboro, South Carolina. I am a Social Worker, consultant, writer, advocate, speaker who has created the platform [Ramp Your Voice!](#) It'll be four years old in July. It's a space where I blog and talk about my experiences as a Black disabled woman and share my educational and personal backgrounds [in a way that's intersectional](#). When I started blogging five years ago, it really wasn't visible.

I am a, as I said, disabled person. I have a brittle bone condition called Osteogenesis Imperfecta. And I'm also Hard of Hearing; I wear hearing aids. I'm also a wheelchair user and a Little woman. Those are my disabilities. I'm proudly disabled. I am politically disabled. As I really am deeply involved within the disability rights movement with the work that I do with Ramp Your Voice! and the services that I provide and the advocacy that I do relentlessly and unapologetically every day. I'm also 31 years old. I'm a millennial, and this is who I am.

CHERYL: I am so glad that you said "relentlessly and unapologetically." So I'm white, and I see people--friends or not friends, just online or in real life--constantly saying, "I like your message, but if you could just say it more politely and really put it in a way that I can hear it...." And I just I mean, I don't think that that's a fair demand to make on top of everything else.

VILISSA: Mmhmm.

CHERYL: So thank you for being relentless and unapologetic.

VILISSA: [laughs] You know, that type of message, [I see it more so done towards women](#). Society wants women to be quiet, to be docile, to be easily controlled. So when particularly women, and if you add that other intersections as being of color, being disabled, we are fierce in our message. The reaction to that is trying to silence or try to dismiss what you're trying to say and the way that you're hoping to achieve. So for me, it is very frustrating. Also, it's a disrespectful approach to give advocates or just give to anybody who's just speaking fearlessly about the issues that matter to them and trying to really control the message out there. We really don't need that type of censorship with everything that's going on around us each day. So when I see that happening, not just to myself but to other, particularly other women or other marginalized voices, it just really shows the resistance to hearing the truth and to really accepting people's ability to advocate and support and to vocalize what matters to them.

[Getting published in non-disabled spaces](#)

CHERYL: You, in addition to your blog and your other online work, you're getting published, featured, and interviewed discussing disability from an intersectional lens in all sorts of non-disability spaces and disability: [Huffington Post](#), [NY Times](#), [Buzzfeed](#), [Bitch Media](#), [Upworthy](#), [Black Girl Nerds](#), [No Totally!](#), [Just Add Color](#), [Accessible Media Inc.](#), [Daily Dot](#), [Daily Beast](#), and [The Atlantic](#). That's probably just a partial list, but it is a beautiful list.

VILISSA: [chuckles]

CHERYL: Do you ever find from some of these non-disability specific media outlets that they hesitate to publish your work, or they struggle with your intersectional disability lens?

VILISSA: What I find is that a lot of those outlets that you mentioned are looking for disabled voices because disability is not an identity that is widely discussed. [And if it is, it's usually not by us as disabled people](#). Usually, those who have a, I call it, eye-witness understanding such as parents, teachers, caregivers. So I really find it impressive and fortunate that these particularly non-disabled outlets really seek out diverse disabled voices. I don't mind being a disabled voice in a space that doesn't talk about disability every day.

What I've encountered is that these hosts, these writers, these podcasters who have these platforms, they really want to ensure that if they're going to have a discussion about disability, it comes from that authentic place, and they really respect the voices that they are able to get on their platforms. So

I really feel that they focus on disability and getting actually disabled people to discuss our plight in a way that doesn't typically get attention shows that intersectionality and inclusion is a priority for those particular platforms. So I really enjoy being on non-disabled platforms to either share about my work, share my story, talk about any particular issues such as education or politics. I really enjoy doing that because it allows the audiences to learn about a perspective they normally would not hear about. And also, depends on the topic, empowering myself and other disabled people who may be listeners or readers to their mediums to really have a new understanding on a very underrepresented identity.

CHERYL: I am so glad to hear that it's such a positive experience. I think from my question, you can probably tell what a cynical kind of a grumpy person I am.

VILISSA: [chuckles] I think that there is always room for certain spaces to not be a positive experience, but luckily for me, I have not had that experience. What I've found is that some of the writers or podcasters or interviewers, they either have to know about disability on a general sense, or they may not much at all, but they're open to learning. I've been able to find some very open-minded, very positive-thinking, and pretty great and rad people to really interact with.

But I do know that not every platform presents disability, even if you have the best voices in the movement, in a way that is empowering or is appropriate. So I know that I've been very selective as to what platforms I do give my voice to or allow my work to be on, to make sure that it's not manipulated in a way that's harmful to the movement or misrepresents what I stand for.

[#DisabilityTooWhite](#)

CHERYL: People don't always tend to recognize that [most of the disabled voices out there are from white people](#). People of color and Black people are, I think, quite deliberately silenced, and I'm gonna link to [some specific examples](#) [chuckles] [from Twitter](#) and Storify.

VILISSA: [laughs]

CHERYL: You started this campaign [#DisabilityTooWhite](#) in May of 2016. This is your Hashtagversary. Talk me through what led you to create and launch that campaign.

VILISSA: Well, it was kinda funny. Our mutual friend, Alice Wong, had posted an article from XO Jane that discussed disability and beauty, and it featured disabled women. But they featured white disabled women. And

usually when I see articles about beauty and disability, it is usually from white disabled woman. So Alice and a few other advocates were talking about the article, how it's the same-old, same-old, and I joined in on the conversation on Twitter. While I was tweeting, the hashtag just kind of came to my mind. It synthesized what we all were talking about, disability being too white, just one monolithic view that is inaccurate. So I started using the hashtag in my tweets, and it just took from there. Other people started using it. It just kind of created this firestorm in the way that had over 13,000 tweets in less than 24 hours. And it just took a life of its own to really bust the door wide open for this conversation to be had publicly.

This issue has been the elephant in the room for the community for so long. When you look at disability history, you look at the images that you find online, look at the stories that you see, there are typically white disabled people. And if they are of color, they're usually showing us in lights to where we look very impoverished or just very frail and not really being as vibrant as some white disabled people, when their stories are being told.

We don't have diverse leadership. We don't support the voices and work of disabled people of color as we should. Our history lays out the experiences and lives of white leadership and not those of color. So our movement has been, for far too long, projecting this one image of disability that ignores and, like you said deliberately at times, the contributions, the experiences, the disparities that affect disabled people of color.

So I feel that this hashtag has allowed that conversation to be had, and people really gravitated towards that and really share their stories in ways that I don't believe they would have without such a prominent hashtag like that. So that's what really made me proud of it, that people really told their truths and the realities of what we're going through in this community as people of color. And the racism, the erasure, the exclusion, the lack of representation, the invisibility: all of that impacts how we view ourselves as people, how we view ourselves in this society. And really not having a safe space to exist in is really hard when you have multiple identities, and the one space where you should feel the most comfortable, you are estranged from.

So this hashtag and this movement has really lit a fire for so many. And their voices and their work and their contributions are grossly dismissed and sometimes even appropriated for others' gains and not getting the credit that they need. So for me, seeing that kinda call-out culture in a rightful way to address the issue has been so good to see. 'Cause I know that's what motivated me to create Ramp Your Voice! four years ago with the lack of visibility of Black disabled women. I'm proud to know many Black disabled women four years later, but we still need to increase those numbers of

visibility for Black disabled women and other women of color and other disabled people of color in the movement.

I've met some great people since I've been online consistently, probably about five years now. But particularly in the past year and a half, just been able to connect with a lot of people and make some great partnerships and just interactions. [So it's been great to use that medium to really meet like-minded people and have a nice network and friendships.](#)

CHERYL: I'm super grateful for the internet and social media.

VILISSA: I know people have their own opinions about it, but to me, that's the main perk is getting to know folks through it.

CHERYL: Yeah, I hear people say, "Oh, if you spend your time online, that's not real friendships; that's not real connection." I just really disagree.

VILISSA: Oh, yeah, definitely. 'Cause I know for some people, their online relationships are their most close-knit interactions. For some people, the friends they make online are the only friends they have. So social media has really in some ways been life-changing for certain people. I think online friendships can be just as deep, if not deeper, than in real life, or people that you know in your everyday.

CHERYL: Yeah, that's been my experience too.

You wrote on RampYourVoice.com about how the hashtag #DisabilityTooWhite actually grew beyond social media, and people are putting it in their work offline.

VILISSA: I have an advocate friend who does work in Pittsburgh. His name is Dustin Gibson. I know he always tells me about when he goes to workshops, there's a saying that "Hashtags are the new protest signs." He always brings up the different hashtags that the community uses, such as my hashtag, [#CripTheVote](#), [#DisabilitySolidarity](#), [#CripTax](#), and so on, so forth, and how these hashtags really speak on the issues that exist in our community or in the broader society.

So to really see people take my hashtag into these spaces that may be all white or may be disabled but all white or predominantly white, or non-disabled spaces and really discuss why this hashtag and the other hashtags are impactful to the movement, that's really a humbling thing. I really like the fact that people are taking it and putting it to their work and just talking about racism or ableism and connecting how disabled people want their stories to be heard and respected, to use that as one of the examples given has been great to hear.

In April, I went to the National Association of Black Social Workers conference that happened in Maryland, and I talked about the hashtag there. I related it to how Black Social Workers can become better supporters to Black disabled people, and the target population I used for that presentation was Black disabled women. So being able to talk about what goes on in the disabled community to a group of people that understand disability from a very medical model standpoint or what they learned in their programs, and to humanize it and to give a different take on it that's more appropriate to how the community wants them to understand disability.

CHERYL: Mm. Well, I'm really excited that you are celebrating your Hashtagversarry with us! [chuckling] That's really awesome!

VILISSA: [chuckles] Thank you, thank you. I'm very excited too.

[music break]

[#BlackDisabledGirlMagic](#)

CHERYL: You listed some other Hashtags a moment ago, but you also have this series on Ramp Your Voice! that's [#BlackDisabledGirlMagic](#). Because of your first-hand life experiences, you can create this platform for other Black disabled women to speak and write so honestly and so openly that really deserves a lot of praise and recognition for that space that you're creating.

VILISSA: I did it for Women's History Month. I wanted to do something different for that month, and I felt that that series was the most appropriate thing to do. And it was so enriching. Those five women gave so much of themselves in their interviews. You have women of different ages, disabilities, location-wise, different backgrounds. And to have them tell their story about who they are and how they came to be in their particular words, and the challenges of being triple jeopardy minority and the words of encouragement they have to give to other Black disabled women. Just having them give so much of themselves for that series was just amazing, and it really gets me excited to do more of that.

And then for Black History Month, I covered some disability leaders at the beginning of the Independent Living Movement that don't really get the recognition that they deserve. These are mainly people who have passed away over the years. But to really shine a light on the contributions that they've given to the Independent Living Movement and the collective disability rights movement is something that I really enjoyed doing.

Giving space to those stories to be told is very important to the work that I do. I guess in some ways, I guess I am a storyteller, giving people space or telling the stories of lives lived. But it's really one of the most rewarding

things that I do on the blog in my work is giving that platform to those voices. 'Cause I always tell people that this work is bigger than myself. So when I do interviews like #DisabledBlackGirlMagic, it really reminds me of that. This work means so much, not just to me, but to so many others.

[White disabled people learning to be accomplices and co-conspirators](#)

CHERYL: Mm, yes, definitely. You're working on a new project, which we won't go into to because it's in the planning phases. It's a new project, again very directly bringing up intersectionality in the disability community. So this is a bit of a departure from celebrating #BlackDisabledGirlMagic--

VILISSA: [laughs]

CHERYL: --which is you talk about the need for disabled Whites to be equipped in addressing and fighting against racism--and this is language from your blog--using their privileges, and being better accomplices and co-conspirators and allies to disabled people of color. I generally find white people getting very comfortable with the term "ally," especially if we get to give it to ourselves!

VILISSA: [laughs]

CHERYL: But I don't really hear white people using terms like "accomplice" or "co-conspirator" the way that I have heard other [people of color and Indigenous people use those terms](#). So I would love for you to talk a little bit about the difference.

VILISSA: Well for me, I've gravitated towards using "accomplices" and "co-conspirators" because "ally" has become, to me, a loaded word. A lot of people don't know what it is. A lot of people don't know how to be it. And a lot of people don't know how to use the privileges that they should be using to be allies for the cause. I feel that, as somebody who's multiple-marginalized but also have certain privileges, I don't give myself the word "ally." That's not a title that I need to give myself. It's not a title I should look to receive from other oppressed groups who I need to work alongside to fight whatever -isms or phobias that is harming them and collectively harming and doing us all an injustice. So I really feel that if you're going to do the work that's needed to get rid of white supremacy, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, just do the work! You don't need a title. Why do you need a title? Why are you making it about you? You know? So that's why I feel like a lot of people are making it about them when they call themselves ally. You're losing sight of what you need to be doing. You need to be using your privileges. You need to be using your voice, giving space, creating space, sometimes moving out the way so that people can have space. Nobody needs to give you a cookie.



CHERYL: [laughs]

VILISSA: And I tell people all the time, some whites who come up to me and be like, "Oh, I do so and so." I'm like, "[Well, I'm not gonna give you a cookie for doing x, y, z. That's what you supposed to do.](#)"

CHERYL: [chuckles] Right, right.

VILISSA: "So what do you want from me?" [laughs] You know?

CHERYL: Right!

VILISSA: I appreciate you doing x, y, z, but I'm gonna give you a gold star for that. Just do the work. With some whites, I feel like they care more about their accolades instead of what needs to be done. This work is hard. This work is dangerous. And if you're not serious about it, you can put people in real danger, and not just online with being harmful, but also in real life. I really wish that, in this case, whites would just--and disabled whites--would just do what's needed so that we won't need hashtags like #DisabilityTooWhite 10, 20, 30 years from now. So that we won't let officials who have backgrounds that are oppressive and put them in positions where they can have power to oppress further. So just really do what's needed so that we are all liberated and free and experience this world in the means and the ways that we all should have opportunity to.

So for whites, stop looking for praise for doing what you should be doing. It's really frustrating when you find people who care more about that title and not about earning the respect of people of color. I know there's white disabled advocates who I genuinely respect, who I know have my back. And it's because they've earned it, and they put in the work, and they're not looking for a thumb's up. They just do what's needed. For me, that's the type of people that I need by my side, who when the time is right can stand forward and use their privileges to open doors and give opportunities and to speak up and to confront people who are being harmful, and at times, know when to step back and let us shine, let us speak about our experience and not speak over us and not speak for us and to know how to listen. I think that's a key thing that a lot of "allies" forget, is that being an ally is more about listening than talking. You listen to what is needed, and then you go do what is needed.

Particularly in the times that we live in, if you call yourself an ally, be the ally because we need that now more than ever. But don't expect me or other people of color to praise you for doing what you should be doing. We live in a world and live in a society that favors your existence over mine's and other people that may look like me.



CHERYL: Yeah. You mentioned earning the respect of people of color. In this whole race to get the biggest plate of cookies, I see white people saying, "Hey, person of color, you need to respect me because I just got uncomfortable for a little bit." Hmm! The cookie thing. The cookie thing.

VILISSA: [laughs] I know, it's like you're uncomfortable for that moment, but we're uncomfortable every second. OK, yeah, it made you uncomfortable to hear how you may be part of the problem or made you uncomfortable to see somebody getting disrespected, but we live that every day. We live the possibility of being harmed and disrespected every day. Just because we exist, not because we've done something. Just for being alive and moving about this racist society.

I think that whites can afford to be uncomfortable, and you should be uncomfortable. We all should be uncomfortable with knowing that there are groups of people who are being disadvantaged and targeted every day. That should make us all uncomfortable, just that mere fact alone.

CHERYL: Yeah, and if you're not uncomfortable, you're not paying attention.

VILISSA: Yes.

CHERYL: Or you're not connecting to the humanity of people of color.

VILISSA: Mmhmm.

[mellow music break]

[Issues in organizational diversity](#)

CHERYL: So this is very much related to the ally thing. I see a lot of people who might identify as right wing who are like, "Yeah! I don't like people of color. This is my country."

VILISSA: [laughs]

CHERYL: You see what they're saying 'cause they just come right out and say it. Then you come over on the left, where I'm sitting. Everybody's all unity message and nice, and "I don't see color. I don't see disability. You're too smart to be disabled" and all of these things that are part of the erasure and the silencing. So I've been talking to some people recently at a--not surprisingly--white-led, non-disabled-led disability organization. I don't even have to say the name because most of them are white and non-disabled-led.

VILISSA: [laughs]

CHERYL: [chuckles] Right?

VILISSA: Right. We'd be here all night trying to figure out exactly which one [laughs].

CHERYL: Right! So this particular organization, they have been talking about, "We need to serve a more diverse base. We are mostly serving only white people. We need to diversity." But what I don't hear them saying is, "We need to have more diverse leadership. One of us needs to get off the payroll."

VILISSA: Mmhmm, mmhmm.

CHERYL: "We need an advisory board." Actually, shouldn't have an advisory board. You should be paying people. But I don't hear this piece about diverse leadership. So you wanna stay white, non-disabled-led and diversify your base.

VILISSA: [laughs] Yeah.

CHERYL: This is like, some people are still super confused about the conflict here. So can you enlighten us?

VILISSA: Well, first off, when the right wing talk about "my country," they need to realize that this is not anybody's country. It's made of Indigenous people. So that's something I need to say upfront before I get into this. So there is no such thing as "my land" if you are a white person in America. This is not your land [laughs].

CHERYL: [chuckles]

VILISSA: But it always boggles my mind when that rhetoric is said. It's like, no, you obviously don't know history. You obviously was not paying attention in History class to understand how this country was built. But that type of mentality though, of this is my land, can translate into this is my organization, and this is how I want my organization to look like. And I want my organization to look like me, but I also know about this new buzzword called "diversity." I wanna be diverse but not really diverse.

CHERYL: [chuckles]

VILISSA: The leadership is white and sometimes white and male, heterosexual, cisgender, upper middle class. So you have classism and things of that nature. [sighs] You cannot say you wanna be diverse but not giving any opportunities to allow disabled people to lead these, allowed disabled people of color or just people of color in general, to lead these organizations, to be a part of every level of organization from the Executive Director to the Board of Directors to the advisory boards to the staff to the

volunteers and then to your client base. So it's needing to reshape the work culture and really the organizational culture that currently exists to be truly diverse. You have white leadership that wants to tokenize certain voices, and that's a problem that I know that a lot of advocates have in being tokenized by these organizations, both disabled and non-disabled, as being that, "Oh! We got three people of color! Oh, we're diverse now. Yay!" And no, you're not diverse.

BOTH: [chuckle]

VILISSA: You're tokenizing people to come into a space to where you wanted them to talk about what you feel is appropriate and not what needs to be discussed. So you're still controlling the message. You're still controlling how diverse you truly become. 'Cause you're feeling threatened about oh, we allow too many in, then that's gonna disrupt what we're doing or cause competition. And it's not that way at all. It's giving space, providing space, sometimes removing yourself so that space can be established for underrepresented voices, opinions to be heard and for people to really see themselves. 'Cause with a lot of these organization, particularly in the non-profit sector, you have individuals going out into communities where nobody on the staff looks like the community. And that includes race, that includes disability, and other identifiers. So how can you truly say you wanna target a particular base if you don't have people that look like that base? How are you gonna really hone in on the issues and disparities and provide the appropriate resources and supports that they need that's aligned with your mission if you don't know intimately from a authoritative knowledge standpoint of what those challenges are that need to be assisted with?

So really, when I hear a lot of organizations that said, "Oh, we wanna be diverse," I roll my eyes. Because most of the time they're really not trying to be diverse. They just wanna get, in their own way, a organizational cookie of looking diverse. But really nothing within the organization is changing. You're not giving opportunities, you're not creating space, you're not giving space. You're not really doing the work that's needed to be an intersectional organization to where you are really targeting a base that you want to assist with. But also, within your organization, changing the dynamic of the culture that has existed for so long that is truly not working for you anymore. So it's really frustrating when you have organizations like what you were talking about that says one thing but halfway do another.

It's a phase. It's a trend. As with any trend, it fades out at some point. And I really feel that the whole diversity trend is greatly disadvantaging those of us who are already at the margins to not really get within the spaces that we need to be in. So I really am very upset with organizations who are not truly adamant and truly genuine about creating that diversity that is needed.

Because when you're not diverse, you're doing yourself a disservice, and you're doing the persons or communities that you serve or are in a greater disservice as well.

CHERYL: I think that first step is getting people to see that contradiction, and like you said before, get used to getting uncomfortable. Yeah, so it's a many-stepped process, but you are laying out some of the steps. So fellow white listeners, listen to this episode again.

BOTH: [chuckle]

VILISSA: A lot of these organizations, [they're not willing to hear what needs to be done](#) because basically, when you're told you're part of the problem, that's a very harsh image to have of yourself. So there is a very firm resistance to having that mirror held up to you because they're basically telling that you're part of the problem. Even though you have "good intentions," you are the problem that needs to be fixed. So I think that a lot of that resistance comes into realizing that the way you've been functioning has been dysfunctional this whole time, and you're going to have to make changes. It goes back to being uncomfortable and not really wanting to deal with those type of emotions and the changes that are needed. People get set in their ways. Organizations get set in their routine of how they do things, and how to shake things up dramatically can be unsettling for many within a organization.

[Black Disabled Woman Syllabus](#)

CHERYL: Yeah. I do wanna talk about another piece of really empowering work that you're doing: your [Black Disabled Woman Syllabus](#). I am so excited. I see it being shared on Twitter over and over and over. Talk about your process in putting together the Black Disabled Woman Syllabus.

VILISSA: OK, well that was a reaction to always receiving emails or inbox messages from white disabled people wanting to know why do the experiences of disabled people of color matter or Black disabled women matter. And I am not the type to do labor for free, particularly when the information is out there for you to access for free. Especially, we have for those who are able to access the internet, we have Google [chuckles] that we can use to search for things.

CHERYL: [laughing] Mmhmm.

VILISSA: And it just really blew my mind at how--I hate to use the word lazy, but--how lazy some white people are in educating themselves of why intersectionality and intersected identities need to be learned about, or people who are multiple marginalized need to give space to share their

experiences. So it's really created out of frustration of being bombarded with questions all the time in the work that I do. And so I felt like why not create this resource? I'm a Social Worker. Part of Social Work is providing resources to clients, communities. So it was kinda me putting on my Social Worker hat and developing this tool that compiles information for people to read on their own and to educate themselves.

I believe in self-education. Education doesn't always have to take place in the classroom. I know some of the most brilliant people that I know didn't finish school, and I know some of the things I've learned about that has made me a better advocate and I did not learn in undergrad or grad school. So I believe self-education and accessing information online is the future. For me, I wanted to create something that is a living document. I add to it every so often with great articles, information that pertains to the Black disabled experience in general, and then breaking it down to Black disabled woman and what it's like to be a Black woman and what it's like to be a Black woman with a disability.

I am very proud of the fact that it has been widely shared, as you stated, and used in academia spaces and just by anyone who really wants to understand a perspective from the words of those people who have those identities.

You know, you pick a couple readings, and then you go from there. As somebody who has multiple identities, marginalized identities, it's not my job to educate you on my experiences. I know I take it upon myself to be educated on experiences that are outside of my own and to not solely rely on hand-holding of those individuals with other identities that I'm unfamiliar with. That's just something I've always been doing naturally. But particularly as an advocate, I take it upon myself to do that educating so that I won't have to force anybody else to do that labor that they should not have to be asked to do.

CHERYL: Mmhmm. And I would imagine it's also really validating and exciting for say, another Black disabled woman to find your syllabus and see herself or theirselves in those articles. So yeah. And then I like to share them too. So I'll share the individual articles or posts after I've read them.

VILISSA: Yeah, and I love that too. I love that there's a syllabus that's particularly for my identity. When I find Black disabled women who find the syllabus, and they read articles written about either their disabilities or just being a Black disabled woman, that's empowering. That's a very validating understanding that you're not alone. I think that sometimes we don't see ourselves widely in the media or in the community. We feel very isolated. We feel very othered. So coming across things like the syllabus or coming

across a series, the #BlackDisabledGirlMagic, you read these stories and perspectives that you can relate to. It really shows you that you matter. You matter to the point to where your identity has a place. Your identity is real. You have a community of other Black disabled people and then Black disabled women whom you have this connection to. And I think that for many of us, we do not see ourselves to really feel that type of connection. So to really have this way to connect with each other by reading these stories and books and seeing video and so on and so forth, just really shows people that they have value. That is something that is priceless for somebody to experience, whether they're a teenager, whether they're a young adult, whether they're a older person. To realize that you have value in this world that tells you otherwise is so important to receive.

CHERYL: Yeah, yeah. You are doing labor, but at least you're not doing it individually for every single email that says, "Why does this matter?" So thank goodness.

VILISSA: Yeah! [laughs] I don't mind doing this type of labor to where it's widely received, and people can get what they need from it.

[Who else should we follow online?](#)

CHERYL: Yeah. Are there any people you especially wanna name you want us to know about and find online and follow too?

VILISSA: Oh, yes! I'm a part of [The Harriet Tubman Collective](#), which is a group of Black disabled advocates. We formed together, it'll be a year this summer, and we come from different backgrounds, different ages, different disability types. We discuss disabled experience from this intersectional lens. I know we've put out two statements that target either racism or [the ignorance surrounding Black disability identity within the Black community](#). We do some great work individually and when we come together and write about statements that we feel that we need to address when something's come about in the community or in other social justice spaces. So I'm very proud to be a part of that.

Within that group we have advocates such as [Heather Watkins](#), who is one woman that I featured for the #BlackDisabledGirlMagic series, along with [Keri Gray](#) who was also featured for that series. We have [TL Lewis](#) who does incredible work with their [organization called HEARD](#) that focuses on the experience of Deaf, Hard-of-Hearing individuals when it comes to the legal aspect and talking about prisons and mass incarceration and police brutality. Their work is just phenomenal and so needed, particularly now in the times where police brutality and imprisonment are topics that we need to be discussing. There's also, the gentleman I mentioned, [Dustin Gibson](#), who

does a lot of community involvement work in Pittsburgh. It's just so many of us that's really doing great things.

And outside of the collective, there's [Keah Brown](#), who's a journalist and a writer who was also featured in that particular series. There's of course Alice Wong with the [Disability Visibility Project](#) as well as #CripTheVote. She does great work. One of my favorite people that I've really gotten to know is [Lydia Brown](#) who's a lawyer, and they do great work when it comes to the bringing awareness about the plight of Autistic individuals. There's great work being done out there from so many people in this community, and those are just a small handful that I've mentioned. But they just really amaze me, and I'm so fortunate to have their support and to know them and to call them friends and fellow advocates.

We have a great number of folks that's doing incredible work out there, whether they're just mainly online, whether they're on Twitter tweeting, doing threads, or they're out in the community, whether they're putting their very bodies on the line for justice and freedom and liberation. Whether they're working with young adults, particularly those coming on our heels as millennials in this movement. Whether they're working to reshape these organizations that are overdue to be put on notice. They're just doing this dynamic work and really reshaping the movement to where it should be. So I am very proud to be a part of the movement in this moment, to know so many dynamic voices who are just amazing and who I respect deeply and who I support 100%. Those are just some great people that I've been very blessed to know.

CHERYL: For anyone who's listening instead of reading the transcript, all of those names will be linked in the transcript. So check out the transcript!

BOTH: [chuckle]

Wrap-up

CHERYL: Would you please tell us again where people can find you online?

VILISSA: Of course the website, which is [RampYourVoice.com](#). You can find me on Facebook [@RampYourVoice](#). I have a Facebook page for that and also a public page with my name, Vilissa Thompson. You can find me on Twitter [@VilissaThompson](#) and then [@RampYourVoice](#). I'm mostly on Twitter mainly, [chuckles] on my personal page where you'll see me interacting with other advocates, interacting with other Black women who are trailblazers in their own work, and really talking about the issues that matter to me and also having a little fun too, being a little nerdy here and there, really talking about some of the things that I'm interested in on a personal level. But you'll definitely get to see my personality and my passions if you follow me online.



I can also be reached by email at [Vilissa@rampyourvoice.com](mailto:Vilissa@rampyourvoice.com). You can reach me there to just tell me what your thoughts about this interview or wanting to know more about the services that I provide, which are speaking, presenting, and consulting, and also writing. I cover topics such as intersectionality, obviously intersectionality, discussing politics, education, being a triple jeopardy minority, as a Social Worker talking about social work and disability, and just a whole other host of topics that I have become an expert in and am willing to share with interested organizations, individuals, and spaces that want to learn about the disabled experience from a very intersectional lens. So that's kinda what I do, and been doing it for four years and don't see myself stopping anytime soon. I love what I do. This is definitely my life's passion, and I'm glad to be doing work that brings me joy.

CHERYL: Mm. And doing it relentlessly.

BOTH: [chuckle]

VILISSA: Yes, yes.

I'm very passionate about this work. I'm very protective of this work because I know that it is greatly needed, and I'm very blessed to have the ability to do it in a way that enriches the lives of the people. To me, that's the greatest responsibility we can have is when we impact other people, and we leave this lasting effect that changes lives in ways that we see and in ways that we don't see. So I'm just very fortunate to be able to really discuss what makes, as my grad teacher would say, what makes my heart sing, which I think has really driven me to really create a space and a career and an advocacy path that aligns with my purpose and who I am as a person.

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 and transcripts of all the podcast episodes [WhoAmIToStopIt.com](http://WhoAmIToStopIt.com).

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