

Stories from the brainreels transcript

June 6, 2014

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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.

Introduction

This is an older episode. And I no longer have my call-in show on the Brain Injury Radio Network. But this is the original introduction that went with this episode of my podcast.

I just want to remind folks that I have a call-in show on the Brain Injury Radio Network the first Tuesday of every month, 5:00 - 6:30 pm Pacific Time. They air streaming radio shows seven nights a week. The show I do is called "The Art of Brain Injury," and it's a call in show. Check it out and give me a call on the show! www.blogtalkradio.com/braininjuryradio. Listen any night. The shows are peer-hosted and always super engaging.

For today's episode, I had the great privilege of interviewing Bittin Duggan recently for the show. First a little bit about her.

Bittin Foster Duggan, MA, originator and facilitator of the Growing Through It art workshops, is a nationally exhibited artist who currently lives and works in Coos Bay, Oregon with her growing family. Bittin has traveled the world sharing her soul and artwork. She facilitates Growing Through It art workshops to support individual healing and personal growth.

Before Bittin founded Growing Through It, she worked as the Adult Programs Director at VSA arts of Washington, and she initiated and managed the Seattle Center Artists Studio, a free and accessible public art studio.

Bittin earned a Master's Degree in Whole Systems Design at Antioch University Seattle, completing her degree work in 1999, ten years after an auto wreck that left her in a coma for five days.

I had a lot of questions for her about how art can help someone regain a whole sense of self. Because we do know that some arts practices can help with cognitive skills, fine or gross motor skills, and other separated out skills that we often target in rehab. But how do you come to feel like whole, complete person after a TBI has taken away important parts of yourself?

We talk through part of her journey both as an artist and as someone recovering from a severe TBI. And we also discuss her [Growing Through It](#) workshops. Listening to or reading the description of the

workshops is a real treat. Bittin has designed them to focus on collaboration in a group and self-empowerment at the same time. Through art. I don't know if it gets any better. Well, what would be better is if you're in the Portland area and want to join me in bringing Bittin up for a workshop here, please be in touch with me at info@storyminders.com. We just need to get a group together, get some logistics in place, and she'll be here.

Now, the interview.

Interview with Bittin Foster Duggan

BITTIN: I was lucky cuz I was an art student before. So I already had access to the skill of drawing and painting and perceiving as a visual artist. So that was really, really helpful for me on my recovery. Like a lot of people, they have no artistic skills before their injury, and then this opening happens for them. They feel it, but they don't know what to do with it. And that's part of where I've been a great support for people because I can do it. And then when I go to people and say, "Hey, we've got this process, this experience. You wanna try it?" And that part of their creative self that knows to be expressed, they're like, "Yeah, we'll try!" And then they get to tap into that a little bit more and be recognized a little bit more for owning that part of their creative self.

CHERYL: Yeah. And I know that when you first started doing art after your coma, it didn't look like what you did before.

BITTIN: Yeah. [laughs] My mom took me to the store and had me buy the supplies which, and I guess that was a first step of self-empowerment cuz I had to choose what the supplies would be. So she sort of forced me to do it because she knew that that's what I needed. And then, when I did that first painting, yeah, and I was just so discouraged that I couldn't articulate my paintbrush the way I used to be able to. I just gave up for months. I didn't even try to paint again because I couldn't do it. My belief was like I'm not, I can't do it the way I used to do it. So I'm just not gonna do anything.

CHERYL: Yeah.

BITTIN: But then I went back to college, and I took an Independent Study with a painting instructor, and I started that in January. So that kind of allowed me a sort of more safe space to paint and explore kind of what was going on. And he had actually had a brain injury, he had told me.

CHERYL: Oh!

BITTIN: Yeah. And so he could kind of really relate, and it was very encouraging. And then I would go to my friends' house. I used to babysit a lot. And this very supportive family who still just loves me and loved me after the accident and just really held space for me, they let me paint in their studio. And so I would go up there and paint. And I guess I probably matured or healed some from that first. Cuz when I did that first painting, gawd, I was maybe only a few months out of the injury. And then I went back to college about five months later. I'd healed a little, a bit more for sure. But I was still like pretty foggy, now that I look back. [giggles] And I'll just go here. So it's amazing, Cheryl, because I just discovered

formally for the first time in this book about schizophrenia, there's a certain part in our right hemisphere, maybe in even our right frontal lobe, but our right hemisphere that controls our ability to know that we're injured. That part of my brain got injured.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

BITTIN: So it's been 25 years! And so there's a certain degree of myself that I haven't known how severely I'm injured because this part that recognizes that is injured. And it throws a really profound twist. So recently, I've just felt this deep, deep sadness when I can kind of feel like that loss, that that part that recognizes, it's not fully accessible to me. And I compensate. It's an interesting distinction because I compensate really well for having had a severe brain injury. Almost it's like no, you didn't really have a severe brain injury.

CHERYL: Yeah.

BITTIN: Like, you're fine, which is a great piece of denial--

CHERYL: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

BITTIN: --that my family kinda lived in too. And it was like encouraging too. Like, oh, it's not that bad! Go back to school. It's not that bad. Keep going. But then the part of me that knows how bad I was injured was injured. So I didn't know. Because I didn't know, I didn't know not to keep trying.

CHERYL: Oh!

BITTIN: I didn't know to not, to keep persevering and keep almost like running into a brick wall again and again and again. Although, I wasn't running into a brick wall. I was--Well, I did, a number of times. [both laugh] But I just kept like trying this modality of healing and then working with this. And then someone would say that, and then I would say yes or no, like did that feel right. And then I would try this or that in my healing. Yeah, so it's been a precarious journey.

CHERYL: Yeah! When you did that first painting, and it was so discouraging, you said you sort of stepped away from it for a few months. And I was wondering, did you fear this is how I'm gonna be the rest of my life? I'm always gonna make paintings that are not up to par? But now, I'm wondering, did you even realize? Did you even think about whether it might be--

BITTIN: I didn't even realize.

CHERYL: Yeah.

BITTIN: I couldn't think about that because I couldn't plan for the future. The planning abilities of my brain were very traumatized. So yeah, I couldn't plan that.

CHERYL: So you just said, "I'm not gonna paint cuz this is what it looks like. So I'm just not going to do it."

BITTIN: Right, right. And then I've got all my paintings come up on my screensaver here. And I just saw the one I did in my friend's studio.

CHERYL: Oh!

Joking about "dain bamage"

BITTIN: Yeah. At a certain point, I started drawing trees. It'd be really helpful for me to do a timeline of it now that I'm more conscious. Took a ceramics class, and the story is to share with you is no one had known I had a brain injury. They were kinda making fun. There was a biker, a bicyclist. And he was joking about "dain bamage." And I didn't understand what dain bamage was.

CHERYL: Oh.

BITTIN: But then maybe there was enough of a reference, I was like oh, brain damage. And they were all laughing about it and stuff cuz he'd probably hit his head biking.

CHERYL: Sure.

BITTIN: And so one of those other students was a psychology major. I must've shared with her. No, I asked her without telling my experience. I asked her about it, and she gave me this tree analogy where she put her fingers up against from each other and put her fingers there and had them touch each other, the pinky to the pinky and all. And said this is how our neurons communicate. And with brain damage, like the middle three fingers are damaged and deteriorate. So there's no way for the communication from the one nerve to get to the other place, the other nerves. And that's why we forget and can't do things. Over time, they'll redirect a new way and hook to another neuron. And so then we can get cells, but it's just like a different pathway.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

BITTIN: And she explained that to me, and it was such an empowering image. And I knew I had to work to get better. I knew that from my family. So I went home, and I committed to doing drawings of trees every night after school. And so I have I don't know how many months, but months and months and maybe even over a year--I'm not too sure--of these different tree drawings. And they're all just pen and ink. And yeah, and I really think by drawing those trees, it gave my eyes visual images that then gave my brain positive images to heal.

CHERYL: It's curious to me, though, that it took a casual conversation with somebody who was in your art class to get that information.

BITTIN: [laughs]

CHERYL: Did the doctors not tell you that that's sort of how it works?

BITTIN: No. I mean, the allopathic system--the traditional medical system--is great for what they can do with the medication and the swelling and all that stuff. But it's so limited to talking to us as human beings with a whole life experience with alternative possibilities, like with how everything's interconnected and the feedback loops are-- I mean, we're just so diverse. No, nothing at all. I was so discouraged by my neurologist. He was just like so cold and just non-personal.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

BITTIN: I mean, that's part of why so many people settle for just surviving, because they don't have that support to thrive and become all who they can be. And a lotta people still do. I mean, after being in a coma for three months, I mean, maybe that's all you can do is just be happy and have a great life. And give back. I don't know. I mean, we've all got our own path. It's just the traditional system sets people up to just maintain and lament that they're never gonna be how they used to be, kinda of an extra crass attitude [laughs].

CHERYL: Yeah, I completely agree. What you just said was my personal experience as well. I mean, I know I said "it's curious that you got this from a fellow student." It's not really that curious. I mean, it was my experience too. And I think that in the medical world they'll say, well we don't wanna say too much because we really don't know. Everyone's an individual, and you'll heal in your own way. So we don't wanna just say a bunch of things because you know, you may not turn out that way. But I don't fully buy that as the reason. I think it really is what you said, that we're not seen as full human beings. We're not seen as people who could thrive, and so we should be exploring things that will make us thrive. It really is about getting by. My doctor would say to me all the time, "Well, I've thrown everything at you that medicine has to offer. I don't know what else to do for you." Rehab has its place. I will never say rehab should go away. But I will say that rehab should also always have lots of talk and lots of access to those other things that are interesting or that have something to do with your identity and your interests, like say an art class. So there's always gotta be a balance. I think some people talk about rehab as being the absolute highest, and the thing that can give people the most of their life back. And for some it may be true, and for others, it's about exploring your identity in your own way as opposed to with the worksheets and the exercises and the day planners.

BITTIN: That's not their language, which is so unfortunate that that's the model for our country. And I was lucky I got to go to a private rehab in Ohio. I was having a lot of struggles, and my family was. And so we had a family meeting, and the psychologist said, "Bittin's gonna have to learn to become the person that her brain injury made her to be."

CHERYL: Oh, wow.

BITTIN: And it was like oh my gosh! I get to learn to become this person! I don't have to try to be who I used to be. And so for me as a visual artist with a supportive family, I held on that. Like, OK, who am I? And I got to explore it.

CHERYL: It's really impressive!

BITTIN: And this is like 25 years ago. That was their thing, and I don't know that I've ever heard anybody else--meeting a thousand other people with brain injuries, I don't know that anyone else has gotten that message. Maybe my friend who also went to that rehab before I did with a much more serious brain injury than mine. He's got a phenomenal attitude, and he's got a great, supportive family. That rehab place, that psychologist, she had it. Small, little town in Ohio that held that key.

CHERYL: Wow. Uh-huh. And how amazing to think that so early on you could get that message that it's your opportunity to create and generate and grow and learn.

BITTIN: Right.

CHERYL: What great goals. And you can do this, this is your opportunity. Rather than like you said before, well, you lost a lot. You lost a lot of who you used to be. That's terrible.

BITTIN: I don't know how much you're gonna get back of who you used to be. So we'll just--

CHERYL: Oh well!

BITTIN: --get you so you're good enough.

CHERYL: Yep. Go apply for Disability and you know.

BITTIN: Right. [laughs]

CHERYL: Have a good life, I guess!

BITTIN: Right. But then doing that dissatisfied water-color painting was around all the same time, so. It's been a quite an up and down journey for decades.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

BITTIN: You know different focuses over the different decades of healing, different subtleties of it. Before, I had done Rolfing, and I was going to psychologists and doing some emotional work and things, and I was just pretty set on exploring my relationship with my family and my issues with my parents and stuff just because, I don't know. I guess that's just the way that some people are. So I was kinda that way before. So I kind of continued to do that after the injury.

CHERYL: Yeah. And you also were allowed to because of your supportive family. That makes a big difference, to have the family support and have people you can keep coming back to who will try new things with you.

BITTIN: Yeah, yeah. And I had a really great support network in Colorado with families who would just love me so much cuz I'd love their children, and they just provided such great space for me.

CHERYL: Oh, that's wonderful. I mean, it sounds like you are just constantly in some way continuing to grow through it, which is the name of your business! [both laugh]

Naming the workshops "Growing Through It"

BITTIN: Which is so ironic, it's hilarious. [laughs] The second art piece that we facilitated, that I facilitated in Boulder, Colorado didn't have a name for this workshop. And I did it with my home support group. They titled their art piece " Growing Through It." And I said, "Oh my gosh, that's an incredible name. Can

I use that for the name of my business?" And so out of that, it's like this constant mirror of reflections that we give to each other.

CHERYL: Uh-huh.

BITTIN: And I think probably because of my brain trauma and who I was before or whatever, like I'm so open to respond to what's in my environment, especially in that creative process. And they were my friends to. So it was like that's the name. That's the name of my business: Growing Through It. And then, it just kinda was a name, and it kinda spoke. People, were like, "Well, what do you mean growing through it? What is?" Well, grow through whatever you need to. What's it? Well, what do you need "it" to be?

CHERYL: Right!

BITTIN: Kind of an open conversation, but initially it was just people with brain injuries. That was my expertise and experience. And then professionals from the outside would see people with injuries go through the process and think oh my gosh, I want my people with developmental disabilities to go through this. And so they would hire me to work with them, and I had no like experience with working with people like that. But they hired me to do it, so I'm like ok, I'll trust. I have this amazing trust in the universe after my injury. I mean, that's a whole other thing. So I would do these workshops oh my gosh, with these kids who've been through trauma. That was an incredible workshop to do. And for them to tell their stories. And there were a lot of support staff there to support me because I didn't have the capacity to manage that. And they knew that. So they really held the space for their kids. And then, that's what inspired me to go to Antioch University up in Seattle because I knew this was my life work and my passion, but I knew I wasn't confident working with people who didn't have brain injuries. So I went to get my Masters degree to get myself some confidence and education about working with anybody. That's the process I went through to I guess better just better understand myself and better explore what the workshop is and who I am. It was just an amazing experience to do that. So my Master's thesis was the PossABILITIES Art Exhibition, which was also at the Seattle Center. Cuz I was working at VSA Arts, which was in the Seattle Center. So I had this great PossABILITIES Art Exhibit. And it was a resource area for resources for rehab and recovery, safety. And then anybody could express themselves in any media. So there were people performing onstage and singing and telling stories. Whatever they wanted to do, they could do to express their truth. And artwork was hung and things like that. The theme of the PossABILITIES Art Exhibit was people who are touched by brain trauma, which is pretty much everybody.

CHERYL: Mmhmm. [both laugh]

BITTIN: So that kinda was kind of a celebration or an initiation of just how we're all so interconnected, and it doesn't really matter what the label is because we're still humans who need to express ourselves. And however that looks, it's wonderful.

CHERYL: I'm thinking about how when you have a disability or someone perceives that you have a disability, so often you're actually excluded from that idea that we're all interconnected. There are

different ways that different groups of people get excluded from that, and disability is one of them. And so I think it's so wonderful that the way you're talking about no, everybody has something to express. And we can come together and acknowledge our interconnectedness and our shared desire to express. And let me present all these different ways of expression, and you pick the one that works best for you. Rather than saying, well, these people can, and these people can't.

BITTIN: Right, right. It was a great way to graduate [laughs]

CHERYL: Yes! Absolutely. And to do a thesis project that wasn't just you, that explored that connectedness.

BITTIN: Oh, I never thought of it that way [laughs].

CHERYL: Oh! That's just fascinating. I mean and especially in the brain injury community, we are very, very well-known for how self-centered we are. Some of us are, some of us aren't. Some people who've never had a brain injury are very self-centered, but especially in the medical world and the rehab world, it's a characteristic we hear about a lot. It's just so wonderful, one more example of how that shouldn't be universally applied as a rule: well, you have a brain injury. So you just don't have any empathy or any time for anybody else. You made this entire project that so much openness to other people. That's really exciting.

BITTIN: Right. My mother says, "Oh, Bittin, you've always been like that." So there's a certain thread that's continued since I've been a young person, cuz it happened when I was 21. Just to follow that thread. My older sister--so I have two older sisters and an older brother. And my older sister had written some insights about my life of her memories of what had happened in our childhood. And she had reminded me--and actually, I read this maybe three weeks ago--that there was a little girl named Jill. We might be born on the same day. And that she had a developmental disability. She lived right down the street from us. And we could kind of play together, or we were in relationship. And I think that really inspired or caused me or some part of me remembered. I don't know. I just have a sensitivity towards others who are different.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

BITTIN: And I think that really impacted me much more than I ever knew. Cuz in high school, like I would sign up for the underdog. I had my mean phase when I was younger. I think that really affected me, that early childhood experience. And so it's kind of now I'm an advocate for people who are disenfranchised and who have mental illness and disabilities and addictions and things. Because they're so misunderstood by the mainstream culture and the system. And that just touches me so deeply because I've been there, and I've gotten to grow through it because of my family and our resources and my spirit. It's amazing how I've been growing into really connecting with these people, these friends who are on the street and homeless. And I can recognize they've had brain trauma, and sometimes they can and sometimes they can't. I mean I genuinely care, and I listen. And I hear them. And I love that I go to Al Anon cuz I don't try to fix them, and I don't try to change them. But I just witness them and hold a space for them. And they kinda answer their own questions and know what they need to do to take care of

themselves to a degree. I mean it's such a horrible thing to be homeless and not have support. Devastating. But that's kind of like how Growing Through It's been growing. It's not just working with people in rehab facilities and stuff like that. But here in Coos County, who's homeless and the people on the street. And so that's kind of a real edge of growth for Growing Through It. It's kind of like the roots of Growing Through It providing this baseline support of presence for people to grow themselves out of homelessness, or into more self-awareness or more self-esteem. It's a fascinating place to be that I am in my life right now. It's quite an edge, but I feel very meant to be able to do this right now.

CHERYL: Wow. That is fascinating. I don't think I knew those last details that you just said. Again, what is so neat about this is that some people outside of disability might say, "Oh, she's doing well despite her brain injury."

BITTIN: Right.

CHERYL: Whereas I don't think that you would say it that way. And I think that the name of your business--potentially another reason that name was so attractive to you is--you're actually growing through it. You're actually doing these things through your brain injury. You are integrating the experiences that you had before and during and since. And you do these things through it and with and because of it, not despite it. It sounds like it's really set you on this path and given you this insight.

BITTIN: That is so-- I've never seen it or heard it that way.

CHERYL: Oh! I feel like I'm just repeating you! So that's really interesting! [both laugh]

BITTIN: And that's what happens. I mean it's a big part of me growing myself is in relationship with others.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

How Bittin has grown and learned

BITTIN: And it wasn't until I'd gone through like 10 years of art workshops, when I worked with the first 500 people, I realized, oh my gawd. Look how much I've grown and learned because of these people.

CHERYL: Oh.

BITTIN: And I didn't even know I was doing it. When I share my truth, someone else like you and other people, as I've been traveling around the country, will ask a question or say something that will help me think about something differently that I can't generate on my own. I'm so interdependent [laughs] on other people, with other people because my brain doesn't have the capacity to think everything out itself.

CHERYL: Right, right. It really makes all the difference to talk things out. So if you could tell me what a Growing Through It workshop actually looks like, that would be great.

BITTIN: Well, it looks really different depending upon who's working on it, which is really cool. It's incredibly flexible, depending upon who the people are and where we are. We kinda go through these steps. The first step is decide upon a common theme that the group's gonna work on. So it's pretty easy theme: living with a brain injury. I'm working with people in recovery, right now, from addictions. And so their basic theme is recovery, cuz that's their focus. The cool thing about Growing Through It is that "it" can be anything that you're living with. [laughs] I just love that.

CHERYL: Yeah.

BITTIN: So it's all led by them. And so it's giving them an opportunity to have some leadership and some initiation and supporting them for that. So we sit in a circle, we brainstorm words, qualities, images, ideas, feelings, thoughts about that theme, living with a brain injury. And then I write them up on a piece of paper where everybody can see the other words. And so it's just getting all the words out. Ideally, there's no story connected with it but just what are the words? What are your feelings? And get them out. They relate to the words that other people say. And so it kind of builds that collaborative connection that they have and the shared experience. Maybe someone says a word that someone feels but couldn't articulate, and it gives them like oh, an opening. Usually the person who's really quiet like by the 3/4 of the way, I'll say, "Is there anything that comes up for you?" And they'll come up with a word that speaks to so many people's experiences. And that's just really incredible to witness. Then we go ahead. We've got all these words written down. Then we just start doing some sketches. And they coach me of different symbols that represent the words about their experience, like a tear drop or a smiley face or a heart or a tree or a freighter, different symbols that are representative to each person that represents their experience. There's no judgment, there's no criticism. It's just acceptance and seeing them. And if there's an artist there, of course they can draw something. And I always love for someone to draw something for the group. And sometimes, like I remember someone said, "well, a person crouching down with their arms wrapped around their body" or something. So I'll say, "Can you show that to me so I can draw it?" Cuz I can draw what I can see really well, or well enough. And so the person will kind of give me that body gesture, or they'll give me an expression. I like doing that. I'd love to get more of that involved where they get people's bodies involved with the feeling of it. And I just I can't plan that so formally. There's a lot of power in that, embodying that emotion, that face. So through the process we kinda come up with a shared composition. Sometimes people will draw their own individual composition, and then we'll take images from that and put it in the group composition. I find with people with brain injury, they're more likely just to go ahead and throw an image out to me, and I'll draw it up. Where people who are in recovery from addiction need to draw their own drawing. It might be a control thing? I don't know. It may be because they had artistic skills before, too.

CHERYL: Right. I think it's pretty common when you acquired a disability, and you lost some skills and other people did things for you, you can kinda get used to that and feel like oh, well my role is just to tell you what I want, and you'll do it for me. I mean that could possibly sometimes be playing into it too.

BITTIN: Yeah, I think you're right. For sure. Completely. And they're not empowered to be like yeah, I can do it.

CHERYL: Right.

BITTIN: But a few are. It's like they help where they can. And they'll see what I'm drawing. It's like I'm not like I've got stick people here. Like people, "Well, I can't draw. I can't do that." I say, "Well, that's why I'm here because I am an artist, and I am trained. This isn't about you making great art. This is about you expressing your truth." When we express our truth--there's not even a because. But that's the intention. And that speaks to a person's heart enough that they're like yes, I want this. And that's been how it's been for the past 20 years when we've done it. And now that I keep maturing and growing, I realize that in expressing our truth through words and images, individually and in community, is how we heal.

CHERYL: Yeah.

BITTIN: And the healing is, I guess, the responsibility we get to take for ourselves is to heal. The doctors can fix whatever they can fix, the broken whatever. But they can't get us to heal. We have to-- Oh, I like this! We have to, we get to heal ourselves in community and in relationship with other people. Oh, that's so cool.

CHERYL: Yeah. Yeah! And you know, it can be really scary and vulnerable to make something, make a piece of art, especially if you think oh, I can't draw, I can't paint, I'm not good at that. And then to be asked go ahead and contribute anyway. That can feel really scary. So it's very cool that you can say well, you don't have to draw it. Tell me what it is, and I'll try to represent it visually for you. So that it's a nice step where you can still be empowered and successful at it. But you can take some of the pressure off by drawing it for them. But then they still get to see their idea onstage, so to speak, which has got to be very exciting.

BITTIN: Yeah, it really is. It's so fun to watch. It's interesting, and I hear it in the way you spoke it. There's a truth, there's an internal truth that we each have. And that's the truth that I focus on cuz I wanna know your truth. And often, people will kind of get outside of themselves. We do; we're humans. And it's interesting because it's like the "I," the individual wants to see their truth represented, the possibility. And yet we're in a group. So their individual truth is symbolized on an art composition in relationship with other symbols from other people. And so people start to potentially at some level feel how collaborative and connected they are with other people. We can't do it alone.

CHERYL: That's right.

BITTIN: We have to be in relationship. I think that's the magic of art, and that's the need for engaging in creative activities in healing because we have a need to express our truth without judgment, without criticism.

CHERYL: Right.

BITTIN: And a lot of art modalities can support a person to do that.

CHERYL: Yes.

Why people love the workshop so much

BITTIN: I think that's part of why people love this workshop so much, because they can recognize that kind of basic human need that gets allowed by such a simple little like we're gonna make an art piece! It can be much deeper for a person.

CHERYL: We're not often in the position where we're considered contributors. We receive therapy, we receive benefits, we receive help. And it's so phenomenal to turn around and say this art piece isn't gonna be complete. Everybody who's here has the opportunity to contribute something to this art piece or else it's not going to happen. So it's relying on you. You have something that can go into this. It's really nice!

BITTIN: Yeah, yeah. It's amazing. And it's incredible that it even emerged, that it happens. It was such a growth of my own recovery that this is even happening cuz I got to focus on my recovery. Yeah, it wasn't any kind of analytical design. But it was a need to heal and express myself that I have to allow this opportunity for other people. It's like planting these little seeds for people to cultivate on their own, in their own way, in their own time. And they need to in their process of becoming who they are. So it's really it's just exciting. And it just keeps growing and changing.

CHERYL: Yeah!

BITTIN: And each workshop is different. They create it cuz I don't know everything. It's so great to give people that opportunity to own something and take responsibility for it. It's just an amazing human experience. And so many people lose that opportunity when they're in the victim role. So it's a really a great aspect that comes out of the process.

CHERYL: You were talking about that these workshops--yes, you're creating art but--it's about each person coming out with their individual truth and contributing that. I'm just wondering more on a practical level, when you have somebody who says, "I can't do that. I can't paint," or "I used to paint really well, and now it's terrible. So I'm not--I just can't." That person is expressing their truth, whether it's the most productive or not is a question. But that is the truth for them in that moment. What do you say or show that person who's saying that?

BITTIN: Just to tell them, to remind them, this isn't about you being a great artist. This is about expressing your truth. And to tell them the story of where I lost my abilities to paint and draw. And I paint differently now. I'll never be able to paint like I used to or draw. Well, maybe I could draw like I used to. Nah, not really. But to share my story, that my art's changed as a result of this. And then just to invite them to engage very gently in the process. And when we focus on the process, they'll feel safe focusing on the process and not the product. Each person's a little bit different. So it's just really responding to that individual and really focusing on the process.

CHERYL: I'm really glad you used the word "safe" because I know that our population often is called "non-compliant" [laughs].

BITTIN: Right.

CHERYL: And that's a tough word for me to swallow. And I think that it's not often enough that when somebody sees something that appears non-compliant, I don't know that people are able or willing or have the time or idea to stop and say, "What exactly is causing this resistance?" Well, sometimes it's gosh, your rehab exercise is really boring, and I don't want to do it. Sometimes it's a case of it's not safe for me to go there. You know, you're asking me to attempt such and such. That doesn't feel safe for me. We are very, very vulnerable when someone asks us even something like here's this fake calendar. Go ahead and add these appointments to your day planner to practice doing your day planner. Well, that's not easy. And I'm really kind of scared that I'm gonna mess up in front of you. I don't want to learn it, and I'm embarrassed to have to learn it, and I'm gonna mess up. And so all of that kind of boils up into, "No." Well, she's non-compliant! But really, it's all these other things underlying it. And I think safety is one that does not get addressed nearly enough, and I'm really glad you said that.

BITTIN: Yeah. And the system, the rehab, like the traditional models. They don't consider the humanness of the need to be said. It's not in the criteria of dealing with this actual human being who's had this severe trauma.

CHERYL: Yeah!

BITTIN: They don't understand and act compassionately towards a person who's non-compliant.

CHERYL: Right. And they really can't. I mean, there is no insurance code for "created a safe space for the client." There's no insurance code for that. It's not part of the system, and so people are trained to not go there. And it's about you know what, the most productive thing we can do is set that emotion aside, and let's get back to work! [laughs]

BITTIN: Right, right, right. Oh my gosh. Let me keep telling you the process because it just keeps getting better.

CHERYL: Yeah! OK.

BITTIN: [giggles] And so we end up with this composition with the images in relationship with the other images. And it's by consensus that we decide what the final composition is. And there's been a few times it's been challenging, but usually people are OK with how it is because it represents some part of them that they can relate to. And then we go individually, and they have all the words that we brainstormed. And then individually, they write about their personal experience in relationship to the words. So one of the words is hope, family, fear, loss, trauma, coma. And they'll write about whatever ones they feel inclined to write about. It's a very self-selective, self-chosen thing. And it's another opportunity that they can own their story more as a story or as their experience, own their experience by writing about it. They can do it however they want. They write just one word, a few letters, or they write every single word in a story. And it's wherever their creativity is around writing. And they write their story. And before we've started this, most everyone's agreed that we can republish the stories as an educational tool for others and we can put it on the art piece. And it's gonna be in the book that goes

next to the art piece. So they people write their individual stories. Then we'll photocopy the stories, and I'll keep the originals. With the photocopies of the stories, then we'll go back to the canvas, the frame. They actually build the canvas with 1 x 2s and a piece of masonite. I'll show them how to build a canvas. So those who want to, will build the canvas cuz it's their art piece. It's their empowerment to make their art piece. So that's a step of the process. So they'll do that. I'll re-sketch the composition onto the canvas, this piece of masonite, this hardboard. Then they'll get newspaper or found objects or whatever to build three-dimensionally and usually tape it on at this point. And so they'll tape it on so we've got it depth, and that's part of challenging sort of the flatness of perception.

CHERYL: Yeah!

BITTIN: And so symbolically you've got this three-dimensional surface. And then we'll take these copies of the writings and cut all the white edges off of it so it's just the writing's now become a texture for the art piece. And then we'll put a shellac on it, a gloss medium, and attach the writings to cover the whole surface of the art piece. And they kinda cover each other up here or there, and they go over the depth of it. So you could take your hand over it. It's like a bas relief, and you can feel these different shapes. So and it's really interesting. People kind of, in this process, they kind of face this piece of "Ah!! I don't wanna cover up anyone else's story!"

CHERYL: Oh!

BITTIN: Or "I don't want my story to be covered up!" We're so human! And it's really interesting because many people will come to this, and then I'll remind them well, that's why we have multiple copies. And it's just a story. It's not who you are, but it's just a story. And then also to trust that whatever's showing is meant to be showing, and that comes out more with the painting piece too. So it really invites people to let go of their attachment to their story. People deal with it all different ways. And so we get the whole piece covered with their stories. And then we'll go back in, and we'll paint it with acrylic paint. We'll water it down a lot so it's very transparent because you want the stories to come through. And yet, when they end up painting thick, then you can't read the stories and the words underneath the thick paint because that's what the composition needs, is to have thicker paint here or there. And so it's really interesting how the washes go over the stories, and you can read certain things. It's the words that you're meant to kind of connect with are showing. And it's fun to see people respond to that and see it for themselves because that's like a key for them to maybe reaffirm whatever their beliefs are: that everything's gonna be OK, that everything's interconnected, that there's a higher purpose, that yes they can do this. It's amazing how that works. And so then we have this art piece with all these stories and this painting and things. Our current group is putting stained glass pieces on it. We're building these twigs, these branches coming out of a stump. Each branch is representing each person's individual recovery. Like the group co-creates this collaborative art piece that has meaningful symbols to the people in it. So we end up with this amazing art piece. And then the next step, which is a process still, is OK, now let's write the story about your art piece. In this whole process, I kind of float in and out to support them to get it done. So we look at the art piece, and we tell the story. And it's amazing to give people an opportunity to tell their individual story in context of a group of people through these symbols that are in relationship to each other.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

BITTIN: And it's amazing. [laughs]

CHERYL: That is so cool! I mean! This is. You. Yeah. I did not get all this from reading the website and looking at the pictures, this whole process. It is just it's like it never-ends. It's this multi-layer thing that--

BITTIN: It's really phenomenal.

CHERYL: Yes! Just the creativity of ok, now we've made this thing. Now a new story is gonna emerge from this piece of art. Oh, that's really cool.

Writing their story at the end

BITTIN: Uh-huh. And I'll tell them we'll write this story at the end, but we're all focused on the process. They're not really thinking about it. So then they write this usually pretty empowering story about their journey of recovery or their journey of living with a brain injury. And they get to own it in this way they've never gotten to. And they get to tell it in a bigger context that they never could have by themselves. So then I go back home, and then I create a book that documents the whole process they've gone through. It has the pictures of the whole process they went through. It has all their stories. It has the brainstorm list and the sketches and things. And it shows everything. And so then each person gets to take a book with them so they have this book, this process book about their shared experience. And then the physical art piece stays in a facility or in a school or in an organization or wherever to be a public display for life with brain injury with a title page next to it that kinda gives a brief synopsis and who was part of it. I mean, this is all by consent too. Some people, I can't put their names on. And then there's a book that goes with the art piece, so if someone's looking at it like, "Oh, that's interesting. Oh, look. There're words. Oh, huh." And then they pick up the book. "Oh, wow. Look at this book. Oh my gosh." And if they take the time to read the stories of living with a brain injury, it's amazing because it's like the education piece. And they're taking the time to understand someone else's reality, which then might give them more compassion and understanding to people who are different.

CHERYL: Uh-huh!

BITTIN: And ideally, bring more understanding and peace in the world! [laughs]

CHERYL: Absolutely. How do people find you and sign up to take your workshops?

BITTIN: Well, again, that's very individual. I've got a group of people up in Portland who wanna do it. But basically at this point, I have to travel to go do the workshops. It's the expense and everything. If I got a job up in Portland, or if we arrange something I would go up there for a long weekend or something and do a workshop. So if you can get a group of people together to do it, I'll come up. Truly. Because that's how it works. It's very grassroots, it's very word of mouth. Most of them have happened because I've gone to a support group and said, "Hey, this is me. This is what I'm doing. You wanna do it?" And they say, "Yeah!" And it's just been very self-generating. At this point, that's how it works because of my family and all.

CHERYL: Right. Mmhmm.

BITTIN: Seattle Children's Hospital wants me to come up and work with them. Yeah, which would be incredible. Yeah, so it's different, and it's balancing between my purpose and vision to serve humanity in this amazing way and also my purpose and need to be a mother and a wife and part of my family. So it's like really big lessons in balancing between myself--healing and focusing on myself and taking care of myself and my family--and then the community. And then the world.

CHERYL: Yeah! I think you're doing some really exceptional, beautiful work around what you were saying earlier of you make this big piece, and you make this book, and the stories are available in different ways. And so the more people can hear about these stories and meet these people, the more likely they'll have compassion and respect. And not be scared of us and not wanna be distant from us. And it takes that, sometimes those gentle steps to say, "No, come on over. This is a good person. Let's all meet." We can't have inclusion and integration until both sides want it. And so when you provide these stories in this way, in this empowering way, and you provide it in an accessible way for other people to come and look at it and read the stories, you're opening the door so much more to that possibility of compassion and inclusion. And so I'm really grateful for the work you're doing! I'm really excited to hear about it.

BITTIN: Oh, thanks. It's a great gift that I've been given from this whole experience. It's such a trip to live my life. [laughs]

CHERYL: Yeah!

BITTIN: Incredible.

CHERYL: Is there anything else?

Anyone can lead these workshops

BITTIN: Sure. I think there's two more things. One is, one of the things that I will do with the support of others is to have a manual, a pdf manual available online that people can lead themselves through the workshop. Because you can replicate. And so if someone was incredibly inspired to do it, they could do the manual. They could go through this process book by themselves and make themselves an art piece going through it. It'd be different than doing it with me, but it'd still be a tool that someone could use to grow themselves if they felt some like "Oh yeah, let's do this" just to give it some value and to have that on a sliding scale so it's accessible to everybody. Not just well, you have to be able to afford rehab, or else we're not gonna give you rehab!

CHERYL: Uh-huh. [giggles]

BITTIN: And so having it accessible to everybody is really important to me. And I would love to train people how to do what I do. In one sense, it's very simple. In another sense, it takes practice. We're doing our 67th workshop right now, or maybe our 68th. I think it's our 67th workshop right now. It's a practice. When someone feels the calling to do something like this, it's really good work for anyone who

wants to grow through something and learn and grow. And then the other one is when I do my own artwork, it's very process-oriented, usually. And it gives me images and symbols that I can use to reflect on my personal experience. So I learn a lot that way about my personal inner journey and my own healing and where I am in my life. And I'm really grateful for that gift as an artist. And anyone can do that: squiggle some lines on a piece of paper and see what kind of gestures come out and develop it. And there's this symbol that our unconscious can use to guide us to kind of live more in our truth. And that's something that I've been doing for a long time. And then in the workshop, I learn so much about myself and also humanity and other people by people being so open and honest in the workshop process. And so I'm open to keep learning from people as they're being vulnerable and sharing themselves, which is a great honor for me to get to witness them and hold that space for them. And that's a real amazing gift. Yeah, an honor. It's incredible. And then in teaching the kids. I've spent some time teaching kids art classes. And that's just another level of teaching and just kinda seeing where they are and supporting them, and just working with them individually if they're doing like a class project or something, an individual class project, and kinda see where they're having their own relationship with "I can't/I can" and stuff and really being able to focus on the students who had lower self-esteem and let their experience in art class be one tool, one way for them to build their self-esteem a little bit. I probably learned that through the art workshop. I did a lotta art workshops first, and then I taught kids. And that was kind of a real sort of subtle, important focus of how I taught. And that was a real gift too because gosh, kids are so sensitive. Yeah, it's incredible to see a kid with low self-esteem and low self-worth. And I really empathize with them.

CHERYL: Yeah. What a gift for them to not be judged but to have somebody sympathize and empathize and sort of walk with you instead of say, "Oh, come on. It's not that bad. You can't do it." That's not very helpful. It's much more helpful to have that person walk with you, yeah.

BITTIN: Yeah. The little seeds we get to plant.

CHERYL: Right, right. Yes. And we're in Oregon. So it's always going to rain, and they'll get plenty of water. And then they'll grow!

BITTIN: And we keep growing! [both laugh] I guess something that's helped me is to trust the process. It's been a big one in really becoming the person who my brain injury made me to be. And another really important piece is to educate ourselves. Educate the person--me with the brain injury--to educate myself about all the different types of brain injury and where I'm affected from my brain injury. And for my family, to educate themselves so we can see a bigger picture of brain trauma and then put our individual experiences in context of all the different brain injuries and things. Cuz that education piece is really important. My mother, she made me do stuff. She wouldn't do it for me. And that was helpful cuz, oh gosh, I have seen family members who do everything for their kid so they don't have to suffer anymore or be in pain. And I guess family members need to deal with that themselves and get the support that you need to deal with your losses.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

BITTIN: Because it's really it's your piece of it to deal with, with how you're dealing with that loss and the change of the person who you love and not try to make them be like they used to be or even, not even to use that languaging of the past. It's just moving into the future and the present. We're all amazing, brilliant lights of God's love. We're all amazing people, and a lot of us, after this has happened to us, we realize this happened for a reason. Don't understand the reason, but it happened for a reason. So how can I make the most out of who I am now? And it's a very subtle, tricky place. We'd be a lot healthier if people had better boundaries and learned about boundaries.

CHERYL: I'm so glad you said that because I really think that a lot of family members and friends and close people don't get credit for the fact that they are experiencing your brain injury as well, from their perspective. It is having an impact on their lives. And I think a lot of people, "No, no, no. It's not about me. It's all about you." But because it does involve them--

BITTIN: Yeah, for people to take responsibility for their own experience and let the person with the brain injury become who they're becoming.

CHERYL: Right.

BITTIN: And let go of that old person cuz they're never gonna be that person we used to be.

CHERYL: That's right, yeah.

BITTIN: And I think that's so hard for family members. I'm pretty much like who I was. When I say that, my siblings can see that I'm still Bittin. But they don't really know who I am cuz I have the same body. But someone who has a more severe injury, like celebrating who we're becoming. It's so important for the whole family to get support and people to focus on themselves.

CHERYL: Yep.

BITTIN: And there's lots of supports. There's lots of places to educate ourselves and grow ourselves. And so everybody can keep pushing themselves to grow and not settle for just the status quo.

CHERYL: Yeah, yeah. No need for that. No need at all. Yeah.

CHERYL: Well, I just can't thank you enough. It's just such a pleasure. It was really wonderful to have you on the show. I'm very grateful that you took the time to talk to me today and to share all this stuff, yeah.

BITTIN: Thank you so much. It's a great honor for me to get to talk with you and learn.

Closing

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.

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