

## Pigeonhole Episode 16

[bright ambient music]

### Introduction

CHORUS OF VOICES: Pigeonholed, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole.

[mellow ambient electronica plays through the intro]

CHERYL: Today's episode is excerpted from a panel about independent living, housing justice, and specifically the affordable, accessible housing crisis for Portland area people with disabilities. It was recorded at a fundraising event and film screening for Real Choice Initiative in September, 2018.

The panel had four people and went for about 35 minutes. It was edited for time and clarity for the podcast. The excerpts are from three of the panelists, Marih Alyn-Claire, Kiersi Coleman, and Allen Hines. The live event was ASL interpreted by Andrew Tolman.

### Introduction to the panel and getting involved in housing justice

MARIH: Hi, I'm Marih Alyn-Claire. I am very much at the center of housing and housing justice for all people, and I personally experience housing instability, to say the least. And so, I'm very happy to be here.

ALLEN: So, I've lived in Portland for eight years. I've moved five times because of the lack of affordable housing in Portland. It's really hard to find somewhere that is both affordable and accessible in this city, and I've been priced out multiple times. And that is why I formed the Real Choice Initiative to advocate for more accessible and affordable housing in Portland.

KIERSI: Hi, everyone. My name is Kiersi Coleman, and I am a disability advocate. I'm very passionate about housing because I used to live in an adult foster care home, and it was pretty horrible. Now, I'm in an independent living situation, and it's a little bit better. Yeah, and I just do a lot of intersectional work around housing and intersectional work for people of color. That's why I'm here.

[mellow music break]

MARIH: One of the reasons I became a housing advocate, it wasn't by choice. And I had become disabled with a brain injury, and I could no longer work. So, I moved into a building that was really a senior building, and it was open for people with other disabilities. And we got a notice that after New Years that we had 90 days to either cough up an additional \$1500 a month for rent, or you had to move. And we had the whole place full of very ill people. One gentleman, who was in his 30s, he was on dialysis. And then we had one lady who was 101 years old.

The way the HUD rules were written back then said you could sell it anytime, and you didn't have to offer it to the City like they have to do it now. So, they were well within their rights put on a sale and kick y'all out. And so, myself and a Hispanic neighbor of mine, we got together. She didn't have great English, and my brain wasn't working very well. But we said, "That's not gonna stop us." [audience member chuckles] And so, we went over to Northwest Pilot Project and talked with Susan Emmons. At that time, there weren't but two basic places you could go, and it was very small. I mean, you're talking 300 square feet, right?

So, Susan Emmons gave me her housing book, and I went through the entire book and combed every building, called every management company and everybody that was listed and got a actual count on the housing stock and found out that they had very little. So, we called a meeting with the owners, the management company, the manager, and all of 50-some tenants in the building. And we got 90 days to turn into a year and a half.

That's when they brought in housing vouchers; they were brand new at the time. And people didn't wanna fill out all that paperwork. You know that government paperwork, you know. You need a college degree in government paperwork to fill that out. [audience laughs] And so, here I am with a brain injury, could barely figure out. I've got sticky notes everywhere trying to remember what I did five minutes ago. And so, we got what we call now Home Forward, [audience member says, "boo"] all of their staff to come down here and actually do the paperwork.

What I find is that people at the lowest income, people who are disabled, people who are seniors, get kinda pushed over. They don't expect us to stand up for ourselves. They don't expect us to fight back. I've been to the homeless camps. I've listened to when Pat had the Brain Injury Help Center downtown. So, we have all these injustices where they're charging one group of renters one amount of rent increase and another etc. And fair housing, you have to take landlords to task one by one, like we have a lot of money to do court stuff and hire lawyers.

We are in a very vulnerable class, and renters, collectively have not been connected. We don't know how much your rent is and my rent is, and how much was your rent increase? Like, lately I found out I'm getting a 10% rent increase, and my neighbor's getting a 3% rent increase, right? So, when I took this to fair housing lately, fair housing's saying, "Uh-uh. Nope. Illegal," right? But this is happening all over town, and seniors and people with disabilities and low-wage earners are just crying. I have interviewed 80-year old ladies who used to be a homeowner who retired, the husband died, etc., and they moved into an apartment. And now, they are about months away from becoming homeless. And the Mayor said to us that, he said this is going to be a city where all income levels could be able to afford housing, and it wasn't just gonna be for all rich people. So, we have to hold him to that. So, that means that we have to unify as a collective and that we have to have a collective goal, a collective voice, a collective mission, and a collective movement.

As long as we have no-cause eviction and that there's no prohibition on rent increases, and that stays on these state books, then we are going to struggle and struggle and struggle and then get bounced all over the place. So, when we talked to the Governor last week, we sat down with her with the Community Alliance of Tenants. And even the Governor said that she was willing to discuss having people at the lower-income levels be put on a rent increase freeze so that we're not going to ask people at the bottom income levels to try to keep up in a system that they can't possibly keep up with. It's impossible, OK?

[mellow music plays through next paragraph]

We have to show up. We have to lend our voice. We've gotta write letters. We gotta make phone calls. We gotta do emails. We have to do messaging. And we gotta mean business. And when we do it like that, then we can move those powers that be to do the right thing. And also voting. We have to know what the issues are, like the measures like 102. It's only gonna lend like 12,000 new places to live. So, we need 59,000 right now, OK? So, we're a little short. So, that waiting until they finally build enough, we can't wait that long.

ALLEN: We want to make sure that people with disabilities don't end up in institutions or group homes or nursing homes. We've been there. We won't go back. But what we're seeing is that because there is such a shortage of affordable housing that is accessible, it is prompting some state workers to refer people with disabilities to group homes and other institutional settings. So, it's basically forcing us in a decisive way to move back into institutional settings. We can't go back. We won't go back.

[applause]

There's still a lot of work we need to do to: is to recognize that there is a housing crisis that's in Portland and a lot of Oregon, really. But it's hard for a lot of people to find appropriate housing for their income. The vast, vast majority of units are not built for us as disabled people. So, what we are advocating for and what I hope that you will join us in advocating for, is more affordable, accessible housing.

AUDIENCE MEMBERS: Yay. Yeah.

[applause]

KIERSI: I did a lot of self-advocating to get myself out of the adult foster care home, but I always encourage people currently in my building to make their own decisions about where they want to live. And I always invite them to the Real Housing Initiative meetings. But I did a lot of the work myself to move out of the adult foster care home and into the independent living place that I live now because my caseworker just didn't help me do it. And a lot of times, you'll hear that they can't make those decisions for you. That's what they told me, and I wish I would've gotten more help finding where I wanted to live. But I got most of my help from Independent Living Resources, but I think a lot of things that I was doing, my caseworker could've been doing. So, I was going to the library, making copies. I was calling every place that I could. And it was really hard for me 'cause I didn't know the systems that were in place and how you would qualify. So, I would just hope that I could find something, and then I heard about where I live now. I did a lot of work, and I got a lot of pushback from where I used to live. It was kind of a like a nightmare.

[peaceful music break]

MARIH: I'd like to talk about solutions and possibilities. Are people aware of the Rental Services Commission under the Portland Housing Bureau? They passed their relocation ordinance here lately. The Mayor is in charge of the issues within the Rental Services Commission. Commissioner Eudaly is the one brought to bear the location ordinance where landlords have to pay. If they raise your rent over 10%, then they have to pay you to move if you decide that you can't afford the 10%. Not that when you're low-income, where are you gonna move, right? If you can't afford that, what does that mean? That's really for people that make \$60,000 a year, etc.

I'm on the Lents Housing Team. I'm on the Metropolitan Alliance for Common Good Team. I'm on the CAT: Community Alliance of Tenants. And so, what I wanna say one solution is join these organizations. The Portland Tenants United is another organization. By being associated with these organizations, one, you find out what's going on. Two, you have a larger voice. And three, by having a disability voice, a collective of people, for example, why can't we have—within the Portland Housing Bureau or Rental Services Commission—is have a office in there that just specializes in placing people with disabilities?

OK, but it's not gonna happen unless we bring it up. Unless we go down there in front of the City Council and testify and demand and come with a list of needs, come with a list of possibilities,

suggestions. And we can make appointments with Commissioner Eudaly for example and with the Mayor. They're right now working on a draft for changing the way we do rental applications. They are trying to make changes to make it easier for people with the credit situation. 'Cause by the time you're disabled, your credit is ruined for a lot of us. The other thing: if people have criminal histories, that that's a barrier for people to get into housing. But the bottom line is once we get into housing, even low-income housing, if they keep cranking up the rents, then it ends up not being affordable in a very short order.

I think that if you can start thinking about what possibilities could help us, what do we need, and make a list of possibilities, really make that a point of the group, of your organization. And come together on a regular basis and then join up, connect, call, write these other organizations. And then that way, you get heard, and you have ideas that they didn't come up with. We say that housing is a human right, but how come I've gotta qualify for housing, right? Why can't people that just want to stay somewhere who can't afford to pay rent, they have to be all over the city from place to place? And it's actually against the law to fall asleep somewhere. I mean really. The earth was here before we all got here.

AUDIENCE: [laughter]

MARIH: It's gonna be here after we leave, OK? So, I mean let's get sensible here. They need grassroots thinking, grassroots ideas. And it's only gonna change when we make the change.

### Panel wrap-up

[peaceful music plays under this paragraph]

ALLEN: So, as the Real Choice Initiative, we to try to develop an inventory of accessible housing in the Portland area. And we focused on the state's big non-profit property managers. And by federal law, they're supposed to maintain a list of their accessible units. Turns out that only one of the companies is doing that. I wanna reiterate that it's a violation of the federal law that has been in effect since 1973. The City of Portland is in violation of federal law. They know this. That is part of the reason there is a proposal by City Council to make a housing inventory, but the proposal is going to take several years for them to create. And meanwhile, we are still being forced out of Portland into East County or further out. And we can't tolerate that. We need housing now.

### Wrap-up

[upbeat theme music]

CHERYL: Every episode is transcribed. Links, guest info, and transcripts are all at [www.whoamitostopit.com](http://www.whoamitostopit.com), my disability arts blog. I'm Cheryl, and...

TWO VOICES: this is Pigeonhole.

CHERYL: Pigeonhole: Don't sit where society puts you.

### Music in the episode

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