

Pigeonhole Episode 25

[bright ambient music]

Introduction

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

CHERYL: Kathy Coleman was a disabled dancer, choreographer, community leader, and cat lover. She died over the weekend. This is a re-release of a 2014 interview I did with Kathy. Even though the audio's rough, I'm putting it out there again to honor and celebrate her life and work.

Well, hello Kathy. Thank you so much for joining me.

KATHY: Well, you're welcome! This is gonna be great.

What the Disability Art and Culture Project does

CHERYL: So, I would love it if you'd start out by telling us a little bit about what the Disability Art and Culture Project is.

KATHY: Well, the Disability Art and Culture Project is a non-profit arts organization. We do a variety of things. One is dance. So, we have a dance company called Inclusive Arts Vibe Dance Company. And that's ages middle school, so 12 years old to transition age, so people usually in their early 20s. We teach dance in the schools, and we do a festival every other year. Our dance company performs fairly regularly in the community and also does their own show on the year we don't do the festival. And then we do other programs. Like we've done reading groups and movie nights and things that are all about disability art and culture!

CHERYL: Who are the audiences who usually come to your events?

KATHY: You know, it's a mix. It's a lot of family and friends, people who know the performers or people who are interested in disability arts and disability culture and what that's about, and in general, anyone who wants to come. Usually, people have a connection to disability in some way, I would say, or is curious in some way. It's not just for disabled people or people who identify with having an impairment in any way. It's art, basically. So, it's the same that would go to any other art event.

CHERYL: Right, right. And it's not art therapy either.

KATHY: No, it's not about art therapy or recreation. You know, our focus with DACP is to support emerging and established artists. And that's partly why we do the school program and have the youth company so that people have a chance to learn to choreograph and learn dance skills and concepts. There isn't enough out there for arts for people with disabilities to really learn a craft or to participate in arts period, unless it's in a specific disability program or impairment-focused program. That's one of the reasons why we do what we do. Is we wanted to expand what it meant to be an artist if you have a disability. It doesn't have to be connected necessarily to your impairment or necessarily to somehow getting over your disability or learning social skills. But it can be about the art itself and the creativity itself.

CHERYL: Right. The gap that it fills in terms of arts training and professional arts experiences for people who are generally left out of all these creative arts experiences and opportunities to train and perform. I think because people just assume they can't or don't want to.

KATHY: Yeah, yeah. Or they don't see that art can be something that doesn't have to look one way, that art doesn't have to be able-bodied. There can be many ways of having art that's based on different minds and different bodies and be very interesting and fascinating and give a different picture of what creativity and what art is.

CHERYL: Now, I've talked to people with the goal of moving their bodies exactly the way, say, a professional ballet dancer moves their body, attempting to make disability dance look exactly like dance of non-disabled people.

KATHY: I approach dance differently. I mean, I think everybody as an artist has the right and can follow their own desire and path of what they wanna do. So, for people who wanna do that, that's great. For me, I wanna see what their organic, original movement and creativity is and watch them explore that and grow that so that they're doing something that reflects who they are and how they move instead of looking to look like someone else. That's what's fascinating to me as an audience member.

[upbeat electronica music break]

Kathy's background in the arts and starting DACP

KATHY: I grew up around music. So, my mom taught piano lessons and music in school. I actually did a lotta music as a child, partly 'cause everybody in my family did. We learned to play guitar. We all had to take piano lessons. And then I chose as an instrument to play the oboe. And that's what I did all through my junior high and high school and college. You know, I always loved to dance like, you know, on the dance floor, shakin' your booty and doing all that kinda stuff. Or—I'm gonna date myself—like in the '80s when we were doing the whole New Wave jumping up and down stuff. I actually do think that why dance is related to my impairment or how I first entered disability, which is as a cancer survivor or someone who had cancer 'cause I really wanted to explore my body. And I really wanted to connect with it in a way and learn about it differently. And so, that's when I started taking some dance classes.

And I actually joined a dance company for a while. At the time, I didn't identify as disabled. But I was interested in that whole piece of examining and looking at it, like really looking. Like we always had mirrors in our classes. But I also was more interested in some of the things we did: we did like poetry and dance. One of the dance teachers I worked with was really not a typical-bodied dancer. She was a larger woman and taller. You know, it's really hard to say what is large 'cause she wasn't at all large. But compared to a lotta dancers, she was. And I was really interested in her ideas about different bodies dancing, and that you didn't all have to look the same way was really powerful to me. And that they were open to anyone trying to dance and learning and taking technique. You didn't have to have ballet when you were three years old. It was more open about what kind of things could be done.

[bouncy electronica music break]

As a cancer survivor, sometimes you have late effects from your treatment, which is what happened to me. Somehow in that process, I couldn't walk anymore [giggles]. So, then, that's when I got into disability arts. You know, in Portland, there was a bunch of us dancing. A lot of us had studied with Alito Alessi who does DanceAbility. He does some amazing work worldwide with dance and disability. And we wanted more to happen more in Portland, but there wasn't always a place for us to dance. So, that's

kind of a big piece of why we started DACP. And there were other things starting at that time too. It was kinda just a brewing time with a bunch of people with disabilities saying, "I wanna do my artwork. And how do I do it, and where do I do it?" At that point, that's when Disability Art and Culture Project started. We really wanted to have a place to perform and to dance and to create our own work.

CHERYL: So, can you talk a little bit about how you use arts for social justice?

KATHY: Even in our mission with DACP, there's always this piece about how disability and art are all connected to how we make our way through the world, you know, with economic justice and racial justice and social justice and all the things that we experience day to day. And a big piece of what DACP wants to do is change the perception of how people value and perceive disability in general. And I feel like that art's a really powerful way to do that. Disability doesn't need to be seen as a problem or as something to overcome or as something that is a terrible thing, necessarily. I mean, there may be aspects of impairment that suck, right, that aren't fun to deal with. But overall, it doesn't mean we need to be treated differently as human beings. And that's what I feel like DACP brings through the arts and through the social justice lens for people to be seen just as human. We get comments from our performances about like, "Gosh, I didn't think people could memorize that much." Or "I never thought of dance that way before." Over the years, it's kind of changed. There's this shift. You see people talking more about the arts than actually about the impairment or the disability. And that's the shift we wanna see. We wanna have people be seen as whoever they are. So, if they're artists, if they're performers, then we want them to be seen as artists and performers, not just the focus on disability. I'm not talking about that thing where people say, "I don't even see your disability!"

CHERYL: [laughs]

KATHY: I didn't even notice it. 'Cause that's kinda ridiculous, you know? If you see me, you're gonna see a chair. You may not see a chair, depending on your impairment. But you know, it just doesn't make any sense.

CHERYL: No, it really doesn't. I get the feeling that it's supposed to come out as now that I've gotten to know you, I see you as potentially my equal. But what you're getting at is that's not always a compliment.

DACP is cross-disability

CHERYL: I know that DACP has always been dedicated to working with people across disabilities. So, for instance, you've involved me a lot, Bill Alton who has both brain injury and mental illness, and lots of other people with a range of impairments and a range of identities. When I'm just thinking about all these other programs, my question for you is why doesn't DACP focus really closely just on one kind of disability?

KATHY: At a personal level, I don't think I've ever really been impairment-identified, which sounds kinda funny. But from my perspective—and other people might not agree with this, but—I feel like a lotta people who have impairment identification, that happens a lotta times in treatment, in rehab where they first make those connections, or somehow in the medical world. And for me, I never had rehab. So, I never made an impairment connection like that. Some people, for instance, they get into an accident, they might live in a rehab facility for six months to a year. So, what I hear is that when people do that, there's a real strong impairment connection that is made. And that wasn't my way of becoming disabled. And my work with disability, from the beginning, was really focused in disability studies. All my exposure was cross-disability work.

CHERYL: OK.

KATHY: I was part of the National Disabled Students Union, when it was around, and that was cross-disability. So, that's part of it. And the other part of it, I really feel strongly about undoing this whole thing of a disability hierarchy, which happens in disabled communities along with non-disabled communities. And I know there are reasons why it happens, you know. There's reasons around ableism and privilege and survival that we create these hierarchies in our community. Sometimes it's scary if people lump us all together. But I also wanna empower people in the feeling that we're all equal. There's equity. That no disability is better than another kind of disability. I like to see communities of people coming together. You know, I don't wanna see us separated. So, I think we have more in common—again, that's opinion—than we have that's different. I mean, our impairments might be different, but our experiences in the world are often the same. Might be different situations, but we experience a lot of similar things around not belonging, not being accepted, oppression, ableism. I mean, those things we share. And I just think it's powerful when we can come together as a group and not separate from each other.

CHERYL: Mmhmm! I got much more heavily involved in disability arts in 2011. And I remember starting to come to you with my questions although you don't have a brain injury. But like, "Hey Kathy, somebody said something to me, and it just hurts to hear that. Am I being a fool?" And you really helped me understand a lot about those common experiences and the way that we internalize negative messages that we hear, and we might pass them on to other disabled people. But yeah, it was really valuable, is still very valuable for me to be in cross-disability settings where we can have those conversations and do activism and change attitudes in society. So, thank you, Kathy!

KATHY: [giggles] Well, you're welcome. You know, and there's nothing wrong with going to someone and asking about an impairment question. I wanna make that really clear, too. Learning from each other is totally valuable information.

CHERYL: Oh yeah. And I would be nowhere without those opportunities to talk to other people with my same impairment to support each other. Oh yes, yes.

[upbeat electronica music break]

Disability Pride Art and Culture Festival & Sex, Love, and Disability Fundraiser

CHERYL: So, right now, you are working really hard with your different planning committees to get the Disability Pride Art and Culture Festival and the Sex, Love, and Disability fundraisers going. So, let's talk about those events that are coming up early in 2014.

KATHY: So, the Disability Pride Art and Culture Festival, this will be our sixth one, which is pretty exciting. There's a variety of things that happen during the festival. We bring a disabled artist to Portland to work with us. We usually have a guest artist do an intensive. We're not just bringing someone to watch them perform. People have a chance to interact and to build community with other artists. One of the reasons why we started doing the guest artist thing is that we felt like that people didn't realize that disability art is international. Some people don't even know it exists! There's disabled artists all over, and there's festivals, performances, dance companies, and theater groups. It's all over it. It's not something like this unique, little, "special" thing that happens that some cute disabled person is doing in Portland, you know? And we wanted to show that to people by bringing someone in and giving people opportunities to work with people and network.

So, there is two nights of performance. We actually do a call for performers. And again, it can be emerging or established performers, because again, we want people to have that opportunity to show their work, even if it's something new or something they haven't done a lot of. 'Cause you need to have that as an artist. And then we do some different things. This year, we're gonna have a panel on what is revolutionary art and trying to talk about what does that mean as an artist if you feel like you work, what you do, your program, or your art, or your organization is about revolution and what that means. And it means a lot of different things to people. So, we like things both that people can participate in, but for those who aren't interested in performing or participating in something, you can come and watch and still get your disability art and culture fill.

So, anybody can participate. And because of who we are and what we do, we want to give opportunities for disabled performers. But we don't wanna be isolated or segregate people from each other. We want people to create and build community all together, for everybody.

CHERYL: And that's how I first met you and got involved with you and the various other people doing DanceAbility back in 2005. I was non-disabled at that point. Everyone was completely welcoming. And in the festival, there is quite a mix of people participating. It's really exciting.

So, to get ready for that festival, I know you've got the fundraiser coming up. So, talk a little bit about the Sex, Love, and Disability fundraiser.

KATHY: The Sex, Love, and Disability fundraiser is a fundraiser we do to celebrate disability and disabled people in all our beautifulness and sexiness and loveliness and [chuckles] oneness. It's a party. Basically, it's a party. It's a night of performance and film. And we have an auction with all sorts of nice, sexy, and lovely gifts that people can bid on, from dinners out to chocolates to self-care, and the whole gamut.

CHERYL: For this disability-oriented event, why do you focus on sex and love in the disability experience?

KATHY: We started focusing on that because there's a sense, somehow, that disabled people aren't sexual. They're assumed that disabled people don't have relationships, don't fall in love, and things like this. And we do because we're human. We fall in love, we have crushes, we get our hearts broken, we get in relationships, we break out of relationships, we get married, we have families, sometimes. You know, not everybody makes the same choices. But all those life experiences are things that we experience too. So, that's kinda the emphasis on that. It's like yeah! We are about love and sex and relationships and just being human, period, and all that goes with it.

There's also the other piece that sometimes people don't view people with disabilities as sexy. You know, I will come clean here that I don't know when I would've consider myself able-bodied, if I did. I didn't. I don't think I ever thought of people as disabled as sexy. And I think we're taught that we're not sexy. I think that that's an ableist kinda thing that we all grow up with and we're taught, that somehow people with disabilities are not sexy and attractive and gorgeous and awesome. And yet we are, right?

CHERYL: Yes, that's what we learn, and when you look at arts and media, TV, movies, print ads, you don't see disabled bodies sexualized.

KATHY: Mm-mm.

CHERYL: If you see pictures of disabled people, they're advertising something about disability as opposed to advertising sexy lingerie or advertising for dating sites or just being a character in a movie who is sexy. We are conditioned to think that disability is the opposite of sexy.

KATHY: Yeah, but it's a lie!

CHERYL: It's a total lie. [laughs]

KATHY: It is a lie! Absolutely.

CHERYL: There's some really cool things you have going on right now around the fundraiser for people to get involved. And one is contributing essays or poetry or other writing to the zine.

KATHY: The zine is pretty exciting. So if you are a writer, and you like to write about sex and love and disability, you are more than welcome to submit something. Contact us if you're interested. And check out our Facebook for these announcements too. Portland is gonna be the disability arts hub of the future.

Wrap-up

[upbeat theme music]

CHERYL: Every episode is transcribed. Links, guest info, and transcripts are all at 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

"[Raro Bueno](#)" by Chuzausen. (Source: freemusicarchive.org. Licensed under a [Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 International License](#).)