

## Pigeonhole Episode 30

[bright ambient music]

### Introduction

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

CHERYL [narrating]: This is an encore presentation of a 2015 interview I did with actor AJ Murray and producer TJ James when the documentary [Becoming Bulletproof](#) was premiering and back when I used to do long-form interviews. This encore version is shortened down a ton. We're gonna hear only from AJ about his art and background and less about the film than in the original version of the interview that aired. Let's dive right in. [bright ambient music fades out]

### Inclusion in the arts, education and the documentary

CHERYL: You posted this amazing picture on Facebook just yesterday. And it had the Shakespeare quotation "All the world's a stage." And then there's a picture of you onstage under a ton of lights. And then there's a quotation by you, "All the world includes disabled actors. We demand inclusion on the stage, behind the scenes, production, creation, and decisions of what takes place on the world's stage."

AJ: Yes! That was a quote that I put up yesterday, and I just think that's so appropriate to me, my life as a performer. I want everyone with a disability—it doesn't matter what their disability is—to be included in the arts in every facet, whether it's a film or theater or in front of the camera, behind the camera, whether they're big studio execs or stage hands, just everywhere. I think the arts is so, so important. And I think that we should be included in every facet!

CHERYL: Yeah. Definitely.

For people who haven't seen this documentary, [Becoming Bulletproof](#), and haven't been to Zeno, how would you describe [Zeno Mountain Farm](#) in your own words?

AJ: Well, Zeno Mountain Farm is a place for people with and without disabilities to come together. Nobody pays to come to camp, and nobody is paid to work at camp. We're basically a group of very diverse people from all different backgrounds and ages. We're all adults, but it's all different ages. Basically, we're just a group of friends hanging out. The core of the mission is to support lifelong friendships between this community, so between people with and without disabilities. One of the things that we say also as well is that camp is a bubble because it's so much love, and it's so inclusive. And so, when it's time to exit and go back to the real world, it's really hard because you really see it is possible for everyone to come together of all different backgrounds, and in some cases, it's not all the time, have very different opinions. But you can come together around the projects in a very cohesive, positive way.

CHERYL: When you say that Zeno Mountain Farm is kind of like a bubble, it's happy. But it's also sad because the reality is that a lot of the rest of the world isn't like that: disabled people and non-disabled people are segregated. All the way back to special education, people with disabilities are segregated from the rest of the school. And for a lot of people, it stays that way through their entire life. And what's so—I'm gonna have to do it—what's so magical about the movie is that people with and without disabilities can have relationships that are not about just helping or curing or doing therapy and rehab. You can have real relationships. And I'm hoping that this film will sort of help that bubble expand.

AJ: I'm very familiar with that separation. I've sort of had the best of both worlds because there was a period in my schooling where I was in a Special Ed room. I got to go to other rooms. I had friends within Special Ed, and we were good friends and we did things together. But within the school, we didn't have any able-bodied friends. But there was a period, one year in elementary school, and then I got an opportunity in middle school. My middle school teacher really saw my potential to be what they used to call mainstreamed. And so, I got the opportunity to be mainstreamed and to go out into regular ed. And so, I got more friends. I had friends that were able-bodied. But one of the things that I realized, particularly when it came to extra-curricular activities, was that a lot of times when it came to theater or chorus or anything like that, I was the only person involved.

[chill ambient music break]

CHERYL: What did it feel like to be the only one?

AJ: I'll give you an example. When I was in high school, there was this very special thing once a year that the drama students statewide got to do, and it was called thespian conference. And it was over 2,600 students. And it was this huge conference where in the morning, we would go watch these fantastic plays all day, and then at night go across the street to the school and take all kinds of workshops. And one of the things that I noticed was I was the only person on wheels. And I had another friend of mine who was an amputee, but out of over 2,000 students, we were the only ones that were disabled there. And I'm passionate about acting, and it's what I wanna do for my vocation and my career. I was just like, you know, this is so much fun. There should be more people with disabilities involved.

And so, what I wanted to do was try to pilot a program and sorta get it off the ground where the Regular Ed drama clubs would act with their counterpart Special Ed programs. Because it involves a lot and because I didn't have transportation at the time, I wasn't able to get that off the ground. But at some point, I would love to go back and do that because even if your goal is not to do professional theater, it's just a lot of fun, and it teaches you a lot about public speaking, about not being shy. And it just gives you another outlet.

CHERYL: One of the things that is particularly amazing about the documentary is that it allows people to see that the lack of people with disabilities in the media is not because we can't perform and we can't operate a camera and we can't make decisions. It's because there's not enough opportunities to do it, and transportation is a huge barrier. If you can't get to the place where the play or the film is being done, you can't be in it. When you make the space for people with disabilities to participate, people with disabilities participate.

[chill ambient music break]

I'm reading a book right now on the history of the disability rights movement, and the book is called [Make Them Go Away](#). I mean, I'm having nightmares just reading this book. It's going all the way back to when the ADA passed, and just how everybody is fuss, fuss, fuss, fuss: Oh, it's gonna cost too much! And it hurts business! And we can't have the needs of people with disabilities overarch the needs of the regular people. I keep reading this, and I'm like, regular people? What?

AJ: Oh my gosh. We are regular!

CHERYL: Thank you.

AJ: Because this is our life. So, this is regular, you know? I have different challenges, but we all do! Everybody has different challenges. But whatever those challenges are, it's just their regular, you know?

CHERYL: Yep.

AJ: So, I don't look at myself as a disabled person as irregular, you know? I just look at myself as a person who happens to be in a wheelchair and who happens to need a lot of physical help. But that's not an issue, and that's not a problem!

CHERYL: That's right.

AJ: That's just something that I have to deal with. And I think we would grow leaps and bounds in the industry and in society if we just looked at disability—and this may be a really hard concept for a lot of people—but if we just looked at it as regular. We would move so far in this society if we just looked at it as normal and regular. We're just all together.

CHERYL: Yeah. I recently got trolled. Oh man, some people found my YouTube and were just misogynistic and ableist toward me. And they were so awful. And one of many insults they lobbed at me was how dare I suggest that society flex and adapt to allow disabled people to participate fully. It's us who have to adapt and get over it. And I'm like, why is it that certain people have to change? You cannot be accepted as you are? And other people can be accepted just as they are?

[chill ambient music break]

What was it like, AJ, to be the subject of a documentary film?

AJ: Well, it was very surreal and amazing and very exciting. At the same time, it was a little bit nerve-racking, in a good way, I suppose, only because when they said that they were doing a documentary, I knew the potential of what it could mean to a lot of people to show and display onscreen and explore what we do. I knew that that would mean a lot to a lot of people because it's such a rare and unique thing. But it made me nervous because I knew that I would be a voice for a lot of people.

CHERYL: Mm. Mmhmm. Do you like that role?

AJ: Yes, as it turns out, I like the role. We've gotten a lot of really, really good, positive response for the film. And people have come up to me and said, "Thank you for being so transparent and so honest and vulnerable at times." Like, this one couple came up to me. They were grandparents, and they said that their grandson had CP and that they were non-verbal. But because they saw the movie, and they saw me, saw my story, they kinda got a little bit of a sense of some things that he could be going through. That meant a lot to me. Another friend of mine who is, he's not non-verbal, but he has speech delay. So, he's a little bit difficult to understand. There's this part in the documentary where I talk about relationship and some of my frustration. And he was like, "I could totally relate." And he got a little emotional. And so, that made me feel so good that I was able to sort of—I don't wanna get too highfalutin about myself, but—I was able to play a little part in that. So, I'm very grateful for that.

CHERYL: I think what we didn't touch on earlier was what it means to grow up never seeing someone who looks like you onscreen and how devastating that is because the cool people are in movies, the beautiful people, the talented people. And if you don't see someone like you onscreen, you are receiving the message that you're not beautiful, you're not talented, you're not worth being onscreen. To me, it's so powerful to give people a place to see someone like themselves onscreen.

[chill ambient music break]

## Disability representation in the media

CHERYL: I would love to hear your perspective on how do people with disabilities usually come across in the movies or on TV?

AJ: I don't know if you would find this similarly. In the movies, we're either portrayed as very inspirational, aspirational, or a hero or an angel or something like that. Or on the complete opposite side of it, we're either kind of angry and bitter about being in a chair or bitter about being on a crutch or something. There's no middle ground. I don't know if you find that same experience, but it's either you're a heralded angel, or you're a bitter cripple.

CHERYL: [giggles] Right.

AJ: So, there's a whole lot of in between. And I'm not saying you can't be bitter or bad. You can be a bad guy, or you can be just like a regular blue-collar person. But there doesn't seem to be any middle either in film. Or on TV, see this "Very Special Episode!"

CHERYL: [laughs]

AJ: And it's like somebody dying for something, or either they're going through cancer or. I remember one time there was an episode of *Glee*, and—

CHERYL: Oh! Oh! Excuse me, sorry. I hate that show so much. All right. Continue please [laughs].

AJ: You know, Artie.

CHERYL: Ugh.

AJ: The character that plays him is able-bodied. But there was this one episode where there was a character who actually had a disability. He was in a bed, and it was a Very Special Episode. And he couldn't leave the room, and they came to the room and sang to him. Yeah, so like I said, we're either inspirational, aspirational, or we're really, really bitter and resentful.

CHERYL: Yeah, or pitiful. I just cannot. I will talk y'all's ear off about how much I hate that Kevin McHale got that role. But that episode where the real-life quadriplegic guy was in bed, and they came and sang to him, there was a wheelchair in that character's room. So, why on earth he was lying in bed with no shirt on, when he had a wheel—? Why was he lying in bed? Every time they came over, he was always just lying in bed looking sad. But they used him 'cause Rachel had laryngitis, which by the way, she did not do a good job portraying laryngitis.

AJ: [laughs]

CHERYL: But anyway, they went to this young man's house basically to teach Rachel a lesson: Hey, buck up! Don't feel sorry for yourself and your laryngitis! You could have it so much worse. You could be like this loser stuck in bed, and he can't play football anymore. And you know, they used a real-life quadriplegic guy, but I don't think that gets them off the hook for using him as a prop for her to feel better about herself. And like you said, that makes him so irregular. I just. That episode was so grotesque. [laughs] I can't even.

AJ: Let me tell you a story about *Glee*. Now, I know your feelings, and I have the same feelings about Kevin McHale, the Artie character. I had those exact same feelings. But because I'm a theater geek, and I'm really into musicals, I was a big fan of *Glee*.

CHERYL: [laughs] Yeah.

AJ: That's a separate thing. Actually, because I have a friend who was a part of camp, and actually his cousin played a character on *Glee*. So, because of camp, we were able to visit the set. Me and Jeremy were able to watch a scene being filmed, and I just thought it was so, it was kind of funny to me, I guess in a ironic way. Because every time he wasn't in a scene—Kevin McHale—he got up out of his wheelchair.

CHERYL: [laughs] Gawd.

AJ: And in my mind, I was like, you know, why don't you just stay in it? Because I have to! I'm not trying to be like a bitter cripple, but it was just so funny. I was right behind him, and he just got up and walked around. And he didn't have to be in the chair, you know?

CHERYL: Right.

AJ: But I've had issues with the show as well. There's this one particular episode where he goes into a fantasy sequence.

CHERYL: OH GAWD! Ugh [laughs]!

AJ: It's obvious it's a dream.

CHERYL: Oh.

AJ: But he gets up out of the chair and walks. And I really, really didn't like that. And I'm not trying to say that we're all monolithic or the same.

CHERYL: Right.

AJ: But it sort of implies that your dream, as a chair user, is to get up out of the chair and walk. There's two points about it: because he's able-bodied, they're able to write that in. If he wasn't able-bodied, there would never be able to write that scene in.

CHERYL: Right!

AJ: So, I was really, really shall I say, chafed about that.

CHERYL: Mmhmm. That one chapped my hide for sure. And I'm not even a chair user, and it chapped my hide.

[chill ambient music break]

How do people with disabilities come across through *Becoming Bulletproof*? Or what will audiences see about disability?

AJ: Hopefully, they see that disability is, it's just a part of everyday life, and it's OK, and it could be celebrated. As far as making a film or making art, great art can still be made, and disability can be incorporated. And also, like in the movie *Bulletproof* that *Becoming Bulletproof* is about, everyone that has a main role is disabled. The film shows that that's possible as well. I've heard that this makes casting agents and studios a little bit hesitant.

The other thing that the film shows very well is even though the majority of the cast is disabled, there are long hours involved: things changing and having to wait around on set and dealing with different challenges. I've heard that some of the excuses given for people with disabilities not being able to handle roles or be onscreen, well, they're concerned that they might have to pay for more insurance, or people with disabilities may get sick or have several health challenges or just might not be able to cut it, or the set isn't accessible.

I can tell you, on the set of *Bulletproof*, the average shooting days were 8-12 hours. It was a lot of hours, and there's a lot of hurry up and wait, and you have to say your lines over and over again. And sometimes it was physically grueling. But we still had a lot of fun, and we still were very professional, and we were able to get it done. So, you can't have the excuse that people with disabilities, they might be kinda tired or they won't be able to handle it.

CHERYL: Absolutely. And that happened in my community where a bunch of plays where all the characters had disabilities, they were put on, all these one-act plays. And the disability arts community here in Portland contacted them: Hey, what's up? Can any of us audition for your play? And they said no. They actually said—without meeting these performer friends of mine—they actually said, "People with disabilities can't handle the strenuous, rigorous schedule that we have and the demands that will be placed on actors." And then, oh.... So, they asked them though, "Well, you guys can come for intermission and sing *I Can See Clearly Now*." [chuckles]

I went to see these plays, and I was mortified. The physical effort that people put into pretending to have some kind of fake, bizarre, unrealistic disability? I was like, dude, my friends with CP coulda pulled off this character with 1/4 of the energy that you guys exerted pretending to have something CP-like. But aside from how much energy it takes, it is so discriminatory—and I don't think people mean to be malicious—but it is very discriminatory to hear the word "disability" and say, "Well, they can't. They won't be able to. There's no way."

AJ: I think two things: I think there's a lack of awareness. And this is why more media representation is important, because there's a lack of awareness. And then there's also a fear that—because let's keep it real: it's show business, and it's about time and money—and there's a fear, out of ignorance, that we won't be able to cut the mustard. But what *Bulletproof* shown is it's integrated with cast and crew, and some of us are working 8-12 hours, and we rose to the occasion. [chill ambient music plays through the next few lines] Speaking of long hours, I've been doing long hours forever. When I was in high school, and I did theater, I had class all day, and then I had to get ready for a show. I was at school from 7:30 to 9:30. And those are long hours, but I did it because I love it.

CHERYL [narrating]: Back in 2015, we talked more after this about the film's premiere. That isn't such hot news five years later, so we'll leave it here! But I'd encourage you to follow AJ [@AjaniAJMurray on Instagram](#) and check out his most recent collaboration with Thomas Reid over at Reid My Mind Radio called [Young Gifted Black & Disabled](#). And stay tuned. I'll just leave that there for 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: "[The Author Never Dies \(Instrumental\)](#)" by Nihilore. (Source: FreeMusicArchive.org. [Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License.](#))