Pigeonhole Episode 32 (encore)

[bright ambient music]

Introduction

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

[mellow lounge music]

BITTIN: I was lucky 'cause 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.

[mellow lounge music fades out]

CHERYL NARRATING: That's Bittin Foster Duggan in a blast from the past, from the old streaming radio days. Back in 2014, I had the great privilege of interviewing Bittin, and I'm excited for you to meet her in this re-released shorter version of the 2014 interview.

Bittin was in a car wreck that left her in a coma for five days when she was a young adult. That's the recovery she was talking about. She went on to develop group art workshops called <u>Growing Through It</u>, exploring so many ways that art can build both community and self-empowerment. I'll let her take it away. Now, for some old-school landline recording goodness!

CHERYL: Yeah. 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. And I guess that was a first step of self-empowerment 'cause I had to choose what those supplies would be. And 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 can't do it the way I used to do it, so I'm just not gonna do anything.

But then I went back to college, and I took an Independent Study with a painting instructor. 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 I guess I probably matured or I'd healed some from that first. 'Cause when I did that first painting, god, I

was maybe only a few months out of the injury. And then I went back to college about five months later. But I was still like pretty foggy, now that I look back. [giggles]

And so, it's been 25 years! There's a certain degree of myself that I haven't known how severely I'm injured because the part that recognizes that's injured. So, recently, I've just felt this deep, deep sadness when I can kind of feel that loss, that that part that recognizes, it's not fully accessible to me. And I compensate, almost that it's like no, you didn't really have a severe brain injury.

CHERYL: Yeah. [laughs]

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

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. And I didn't know not to keep trying, 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, as like, did that feel right? And then I would try this or that in my healing.

[mellow lounge music break]

Joking about "dain bamage"

BITTIN: At a certain point, I started drawing trees. Took a ceramics class, and no one knew I had a brain injury. And 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. They were all laughing about it and stuff 'cause he'd probably hit his head biking. And so, one of our other students was a psychology major, and 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 see, "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 where we forget and can't do things. And over time, they'll redirect a new way and hook to another neuron. And so, then we can get those cells, but it's just like a different pathway.

And it was such an empowering image. So, I went home, and I committed to doing drawings of trees every night. 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 I really think that, by drawing those trees, it gave my eyes visual images that then gave my brain positive images to heal. 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. No, nothing at all. I was so discouraged by my neurologist. He was just like so cold and just non-personal. 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.

CHERYL: 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."

BITTIN: [chuckles]

CHERYL: 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."

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. Well, and this is like 25 years ago. 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.

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: 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 just loved me so much 'cause 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!

BITTIN: Yeah. [laughs]

[mellow lounge music break]

"Growing Through It" workshops

BITTIN: The second art piece that I facilitated in Boulder, Colorado, I 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?" It's like this constant mirror of reflections that we give to each other. And then, it just kinda was a name, and it kinda spoke. People, were, "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. 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. 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 Master's degree to get myself some confidence and education about working with anybody. 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. 'Cause 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 or 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. And 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: 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.

My mother says, "Oh, Bittin, you've always been like that." It's kind of like 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, god, 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. And I mean, I genuinely care, and I listen.

And I hear them. And I love that I go to Al Anon 'cause I don't try to fix them, and I don't try to change them. [chuckles]

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

BITTIN: 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 are the people on the street. And so, that's kind of a real edge 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 selfesteem. 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: I think that the name of your business—potentially another reason that name was so attractive to you was—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. But you're so-

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. 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 god. 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.

[mellow lounge music break]

What Growing Through It workshops look like

CHERYL: So, if you could tell me what a Growing Through It art workshop actually looks like, that would be great.

BITTIN: It's incredibly flexible, depending upon who the people are and where we are. We kinda go through these steps. The first step is to 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, 'cause 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.

So, it's all led by them, giving them an opportunity to have some leadership and some initiation and supporting them for that. So, sitting 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? They relate to the words that other people say. And so, it kind of builds that collaborative connection that they have in the shared experience. Maybe someone says a word that someone feels but couldn't articulate, and it gives them like oh, an opening. And 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 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. 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.

I remember someone said, "Well, a person crouching down with their arms wrapped around their body" or something. And so, I'll say, "Well, can you show that to me so I can draw it?" 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. There's a lot of power in that, embodying that emotion.

And 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. Like, I've got stick people here. Like people, "Well, I can't draw. I can't do that." And 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." 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. I think that's the magic of art, and that's the need for engaging in creative activities in healing: We have a need to express our truth without judgment and without criticism.

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: Yeah!

BITTIN: And each workshop is different. They create it 'cause I don't know everything.

CHERYL: Right.

BITTIN: And 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: 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?" And I think safety is one that does not get addressed nearly enough, and I'm really glad you said that.

BITTIN: Right, right. Let me keep telling you the process.

CHERYL: Oh, yes!

BITTIN: 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. Usually people are, they're OK with how it is 'cause 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. 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. 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. So, the people write their individual stories. Then we'll photocopy the stories, and I'll keep the originals. And with the photocopies of the stories, then we'll go back to the canvas, the frame. And 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 'cause it's their art piece. I'll re-sketch the composition onto the canvas, this piece of Masonite, this hardboard. And 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 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. You could take your hand over it. It's like a bas relief, and you can feel these different shapes. People kind of, in this process, they kind of face this piece of "[gasps] I don't wanna cover up anyone else's story!"

CHERYL: Oh!

BITTIN: Or "I don't want my story to be covered up!"

CHERYL: [laughs]

BITTIN :We're so human! [laughs]

CHERYL: Yeah!

BITTIN: 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. 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 it's the words that you're meant to kind of connect with are showing.

It's fun to see people respond to that. 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 cocreates this collaborative art piece that has meaningful symbols to the people in it. And then the next step, which is a process still, is OK, now, let's write the story about your art piece. And 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.

[mellow lounge music break]

Writing their story at the end

BITTIN: 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 so, then each person gets to take a book with them, so they have this book, this process book about their shared experience. And 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.

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. It's amazing because it's like the education piece.

CHERYL: Yeah, uh-huh!

BITTIN: 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: Mmhmm. Absolutely!

BITTIN: 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. 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! [laughs] I think you're doing some really exceptional, beautiful work. 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.

[mellow lounge music break]

Anyone can lead these workshops

CHERYL: Is there anything else?

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 it. 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," and 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. [chuckles]

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. 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 in 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 in sharing themselves, which is a great honor for me to get to witness them and hold that space for them.

And then 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 as 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. 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: Right, right. And we keep growing! [both laugh]

My mother, she made me do stuff. She wouldn't do it for me. That was helpful 'cause, 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.

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 'cause 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. [mellow lounge music plays till the end]

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: Well, I just can't thank you enough. It's just such a pleasure.

Wrap-up [upbeat theme music] CHERYL: Every episode is transcribed. Links, guest info, and transcripts are all at <u>WhoAmIToStopIt.com</u>, 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: Crinoline Dreams by Kevin MacLeod. Link:

https://incompetech.filmmusic.io/song/3560-crinoline-dreams. License: https://filmmusic.io/standard-license.