

Kelly Bron Johnson (00:00):

Welcome to episode five of intersections on the spectrum. The intersections on the spectrum podcast is the brainchild of Doug Blecher and Kelly Bron Johnson created to discuss intersectional issues within the autistic community and to give visibility to commonly marginalized, repressed, underrepresented, or erased identities and issues. We aim to introduce you to the people and stories you didn't know about, but needed to hear and hope that by seeing yourself represented in the community, allows you to feel seen

Doug Blecher (00:32):

Today's guest is Kayla Rodriguez. She is Puerto Rican, and she was diagnosed with Asperger's when she was a child, but prefers to identify as autistic. Kayla is originally from New York, but currently resides in Georgia. Kayla, thanks so much for making time for us today. Now we, we learned about you through a great article you wrote for this past year's Latinx heritage month, you wrote about being Puerto Rican and artistic and said that this isn't something you hear about every day. Why do you think that's the case?

Kayla Rodriguez (01:16):

Well, there's a couple reasons for that. Um, the first is like, you know, I said that because there's mainly, um, when I'm in, uh, autistic advocacy spaces, I usually see like white people and I don't really see a lot of people of color, including Latin X. Um, I think the first time, or the only time I saw Latin X people like in this in autism advocacy space was at a conference. I went to a couple of years ago and they were specifically Latin X people, you know, but it's mainly parents, you know, of Latinx autistics. So it was, it felt nice, you know, they don't add most of the time with autism advocacy it is predominantly a white dominated space. And I think it's that way because, um, not a lot of people of color are diagnosed as autistic or, you know, the diagnosis late, or they're not diagnosed at all because of lack of financial resources and a lack of understanding towards autism and other genders and races.

Kayla Rodriguez (02:25):

And, um, I think it's definitely one of them is like, its not like we don't exist. Um, I think these autism advocacy spaces should really do a better job of getting more people of color, uh, because you know, it's not just in white people, you know, it's not specifically just in white boys. It's autism is, can be a part of anybody. And so we really need to like include autistic people, black indigenous people of color, including Latin X people in these spaces. And we need to get them diagnosed better. And this is also a problem for like other genders too. Like, I know autistic women have a harder time getting diagnosed because most of the research for autism is towards boys.

Kelly Bron Johnson (03:16):

Oh, that makes sense. I mean, you highlighted a lot of the issues that have to do with class and race and, uh, you know, that, that prevents people from getting adequate healthcare in general.

Kayla Rodriguez (03:29):

Yeah. I think it needs to be more accessible, definitely getting diagnosed and that these autism advocacy spaces needs to include more people of color because sometimes I'm like, I'm the only person of color, or also maybe I know, especially a, almost all the time and the only latin X person, but in these spaces, but sometimes I've been the only person of color in these spaces as well. So they definitely need to do a better job with including more black indigenous people of color that are autistic.

Kelly Bron Johnson (04:05):

So even though you've only been to Puerto Rico a few times, you call it your home. So when did Puerto Rico start to feel like home for you?

Kayla Rodriguez (04:12):

Um, I think it was during hurricane Maria, um, back in, it was 2017, right. That's when it happened. So, um, because I had family in Puerto Rico and so when hurricane Maria happened, I was like, so concerned about how they were doing and my great grandmother actually died after the hurricane. Um, we, uh, I should, I don't know if she directly died because of the hurricane, but it could have been part of it because of lack of electricity that they face. But, um, I started to feel like home to me during that time, because it was the first, like I've only been there a couple of times. Right. So it's not like it's a familiar location for me, but I sense like with what my people were going through during that, like, I mean, obviously I'll never know the full magnitude because I wasn't there.

Kayla Rodriguez (05:09):

I don't live there, but I felt like, you know, how the administration at the time was ignoring Puerto Rico and how we were being treated. I felt it like, like they were feeling it, if that makes sense. Um, and you know, especially I have, you know, Familia, their family and I, so obviously there, I still have a connection to Puerto Rico because my family's there. Some of my family are there and yeah, I was just like, I felt hurt. You know, I felt hurt that I was, you know, my people were being treated like second class citizens and they weren't getting the help that they needed. They weren't like, I remember this time where I donated, like I at right after the hurricane, I went somewhere to go help donate supplies to Puerto Rico. And I felt so good doing it, you know, helping my people out.

Kayla Rodriguez (06:10):

And so it was, I think it wasn't till hurricane Maria that I started feeling like it was my home. I feel like it's not my only home now, but it's like one of two homes it's like this. And like United States, like the rest of the United States, like to see that as the us in general, I guess. But definitely it was, I think hurricane Maria was when I definitely felt like it was it was like a home.

Kelly Bron Johnson (06:35):

Oh, yeah, for sure. I mean, um, I'm born in Canada, but my father's, um, for Barbados. And when I go back to Barbados, I haven't been that many times, but it does feel like a second home. Like I do feel welcomed when I feel comfortable and I feel like it's a familiar place for me.

Kayla Rodriguez (06:51):

Yeah. And I feel that, I feel that too with Puerto Rico, like, even though I do not speak Spanish, I'm learning it.

Kayla Rodriguez (06:56):

I feel like, you know, my family and I'm working with like, people that look like me. Um, because if you don't know, like, you know, I am light-skinned, but I don't, I'm not Caucasian. You know, I'm describing for the people in the podcast here. Like, you know, I have dark hair on my arm that has black, black hair. I have, um, you know, I look Latin X and so, and I have to dark eyes. And so, yeah, it's just like, I'm at least some around people that like, look like me and like, you know, again, my family is there, so it helps.

Doug Blecher ([07:37](#)):

And, and just this morning I saw that, um, president Biden has freed up, um, I believe over a billion dollars in delayed Puerto Rico storm aid. So, you know, yeah. Some, I guess, hopeful news finally.

Kayla Rodriguez ([07:52](#)):

Yeah. I think that's good. I'm glad that he did that because you know, the last administration really didn't anything. If you remember the president there, you know, the last ministration, I won't say his name, but he threw paper towels at the crowd and that's just, it was really insulting to me when I saw that. So I'm glad that Biden really is finally putting money to help Puerto Rico. I mean, I, I think it's kind of a little late it's late definitely. And I think some of the damage can't be undone and I've been scared to go back to Puerto Rico because I haven't gone since before the hurricane. And I'm scared to go back because I don't want to see the Island that I call home. You know, the beautiful Island I call home, like some of it's in ruins and I'm scared to go back, but I do want to go back when this pandemic is over.

Doug Blecher ([08:44](#)):

In what ways do you see, do you see your Puerto Rican autistic identities intersect?

Kayla Rodriguez ([08:51](#)):

Well, the main way I see them intersect is because Puerto Rican's have always gone through some sort of hardship, whether it's being treated like, you know, being colonized and then being treated like second-class citizens. Like my mom was saying that we were Puerto Rican's, you know, we're being treated like second, second, second class citizens and And even before the hurricane, but then after the hurricane, there's proof that. So we were, we were always going through hardships and being autistic. I went through hardships as well, basically solely on my autistic identity. Cause I was bullied in school. I didn't have the support I needed. I still don't have the supports I need. Um, and experienced ableism and I see ableism. So both Puerto Rican's and autistics goes through hardships. And so that's how, and, and because of that autistics and Puerto Ricans have resilience and that's how I really see them intersect.

Kayla Rodriguez ([09:55](#)):

I mean, obviously I also see them in their, because they're both like diversity, you know, we're both, um, you know, autistic is mainly neuro-diverse well, while Puerto Rican's diverse in the sense of black indigenous people of color. So that's another way that they're both like, instead of, you know, considered different. But I think the main, the main thing for me is that because of my, because I'm both autistic and Puerto Rican, I know how to deal with hardships. And because of that, I've developed a big resilience sort of thing.

Kelly Bron Johnson ([10:31](#)):

Let's, let's keep talking about identity and how they intersect. So how would you, how would you just like describe yourself in one to two sentences when we're talking about these intersecting identities?

Kayla Rodriguez ([10:42](#)):

Well, um, I describe myself really as a Puerto Rican autistic lesbian. That's the main way I always say, like everything I write, most of the thing that time, I say I'm a Puerto Rican autistic lesbian, Aha but that's a really the best way to describe my identities.

Kayla Rodriguez ([11:00](#)):

You know, like I'm Puerto Rican, I'm autistic, I'm gay. So, um, I know it's less than one. It gets, it is one sentence. So you say one or two sentences.

Kelly Bron Johnson ([11:09](#)):

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Kayla Rodriguez ([11:09](#)):

ven for me, I'm just getting to know you. So, I mean, I think that's great. At least it gives us a, it gives us a starting point, right. To understand your perspective and where we're coming from and a little bit about your experiences. Sure. Yeah. And also, I would also add that I have mental illness, but, um, to add with that, but it doesn't define me the mental illness, but I do struggle with that too. So

Doug Blecher ([11:35](#)):

Kayla going back a few years, uh, after high school, you made connections with autistic self advocates and realized advocacy was, was your calling. Um, what are you most proud of with your advocacy work?

Kayla Rodriguez ([11:51](#)):

Well, I'm mainly proud of like two things. The first was being on the board of directors for the autistic women and non-binary network. I think that's a huge honor for me because I was vice president to chief ambassador of autistic self-advocacy Atlanta until last year, which is autistic self advocacy Atlanta ASA for short. It's basically, I don't know if he has heard of ASAN and you know, the authentic stuff I've seen at work, but that's an affiliate related affiliate group of ASAN, but that's like a local chapter that they weren't an organization of our national organization AWN is a national organization. So I'm not just like the affiliate, you know, the present vice president or chief ambassador, like I'm not just part of the local chapter affiliate group. I'm part of the national with AWN. And I think it's a big honor for me because obviously on the board, on the board, I'm the youngest person there.

Kayla Rodriguez ([12:50](#)):

It's just an honor for me to just be on the board. And just like, one of the highlights is like I'm only 24 and I'm on the board. The other thing is that I create, I co-created with Susan brusher of Emory university, like an autistic women's group. And I'm proud of that. It's like a small little small, but like a 10, like, you know, each meeting is like five to 10 people that women that come autistic women. And I'm just proud that I created that. Like, it's a little thing going, I want to expand it in the future. I mean, after COVID, but I think I'm very proud of those two accomplishments, especially the AWN one, because I think that's huge. I only got on the board like a few months ago and you know, I'm learning, I'm trying to do my best there.

Kelly Bron Johnson ([13:38](#)):

Um, I have question about, cause I, I served on a nonprofit national board here in Canada for, uh, just over three years. And for me it was a huge, huge learning curve. Right. I had to understand board politics and everything, um, with, with your position with AWN now, how do you feel like, are you, do you feel this is other people like you on the board or are you representing, um, are you like the only Puerto Rican there? Um, you know, that kind of thing, like, are you, are you alone or do you feel that you're well supported and they, you have other people who are like you on board.

Kayla Rodriguez ([14:11](#)):

It's kind of like, I do feel well supported, but I also feel like kind of alone, yeah. When I first, when I got on the board, there was really only like there was only three people on the board, including three women on the board including myself and two of the other two were white women.

Kayla Rodriguez ([14:29](#)):

So I was kind of like so awkward and someone who is a woman of color just left the board when I, when I got on. So I felt like for the last couple of meetings I've had, it's just like, I felt like, you know, as this, you know, two white women and me, I mean, I say they support me, don't get me wrong. They do. But it's, you know, it's also like I'm the only Latin X. I'm the only person of color, um, there, but things are getting better, hope thankfully. I just found it out this week that there's going to be two new board members coming. And I know one of the, I think both of them, one of them is Latin X, so, and the other one is a black woman. So I'm really excited about them. I'm supposed to them meet soon, like on zoom, of course, because AWN members, even before the pandemic, we were, we were meeting them zoom because AWN members are all over the country.

Kelly Bron Johnson ([15:28](#)):

I didn't, I don't want to, like, I didn't want to put you on the spot or anything. It's just that it's, it's kind of a, um, it's just really important to me that representation matters so much and I know how uncomfortable it can be when you are the token or you are the only one. And that, that was my experience. When I've been on boards, I was either the only autistic person or the only person of color it's awkward. And I just kind of want to it's it's not a slight against one particular organization, all nonprofit boards and many corporate boards have this problem. We have this problem where it's still dominated by white men mostly. And I think it's really important that people start to realize this and start to fix this because it's not a problem that's going to just fix itself by itself.

Kelly Bron Johnson ([16:17](#)):

It, you know, and we can't keep putting people in these token positions and not having other people like us around.

Kayla Rodriguez ([16:26](#)):

They really fit my, my, um, you know, my theme of empowering autistic women. And I'm actually one of my responsibilities on the board is doing a divergent, leading the committee on divergent, which is basically like a project that Jen has been working on for a few years about trying to just like go after, to go after white feminism. So I'm really excited it'd be working on that. I think I'm going to start working. I'm going to start working on it this year. Definitely. But I mainly, I felt, yeah, as much as I felt a little uncomfortable to be the only like woman of color on the board at the time. And again, that's changing really soon soon I'm happy about that. I mainly felt like I wasn't feeling like I was a token. I just felt like I'm comfortable. Um, I mainly felt like a token when I'm in my autism advocacy groups and I'm the only autistic. Like I'm not the only autistic to say I'm the only, like the only Latin X person there or speaking at a panel or in a group, you know? And that's when I felt like a token.

Doug Blecher ([17:29](#)):

Now, Kayla moving forward with, um, intersections on the spectrum. What, what stories do you think it would be important for us to highlight? Or what stories do you want to hear?

Kayla Rodriguez ([17:42](#)):

Uh, I think basically I think when you're, you know, having more Latin X autistic voices would great more black indigenous people of color voices would be great more LGBT, I guess I'm assuming you already do that, but I guess basically what you guys are already doing. You know, I think this is a very important podcast because it's highlighting those voices because those voices that aren't heard, because most of the voices of autistic and for autism representation are white men. So I'm glad you guys are doing something like this. That's great.

Kelly Bron Johnson ([18:19](#)):

I mean, that's, that is our mission though, to make sure that we're trying to reach as many people as possible and to have as many voices, uh, you know, if, if we can introduce you to somebody you've never heard of before, that would be amazing. Like that's kind of my goal, you know, to amplify everybody's voices.

Kayla Rodriguez ([18:35](#)):

Yeah. I think that's basically, I think what you guys are doing, you're as good as good. So keep at it.

Doug Blecher ([18:42](#)):

Thanks Kayla. We are definitely gonna keep at it. And um, thanks so much for joining us today. We really enjoyed our time talking with you.

Kayla Rodriguez ([18:51](#)):

Thank you so much. Yeah. Thank you. And make sure you guys, uh, support ACN and AWN I thank you guys for having me. I think this is a really wonderful podcast and I think it's really important what you guys are doing.