

Kelly Bron Johnson (00:00):

Welcome to the sixth episode of intersections on the spectrum. The intersections on the spectrum podcast is the brainchild that 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):

Our guest today is Kaylee Marguerite Waylon. Kaley is the nonprofit communications and digital strategy consultant and the treasurer of the autistic self advocacy network. Thanks so much for joining us today. Kaylee.

Kayley Whalen (00:50):

Thanks so much for having me.

Doug Blecher (00:52):

Now for this podcast, we really want to learn about other cultures, particularly in regards to experiences of transgender and autistic folks. Along those lines, you were, uh, miss USA in the miss international queen 2020 representing the United States at the world's most prestigious transgender pageant in Thailand. What have you observed about the experiences of transgender folks in Thailand?

Kayley Whalen (01:24):

Yeah, so I was part of that beauty pageant and I never thought I'd be entering a beauty pageant in my, you know, being a feminist pretty much my entire life. I had a kind of down, uh, you know, attitude towards them, but this was a chance to interact with and get to know the lives and stories of 23 transgender women representing 23 different countries who saw themselves as leaders in their communities in different ways. And it was really an exciting opportunity to get to know, not just Thai people, but, um, you know, I would say I really got to know, uh, um, Ms. Vietnam, [inaudible] I really got to know Ms. China, uh, Lacy. I really got to know Ms. France, who actually, uh, is from the French Island. Uh, that's a product of colonialism and, uh, off the coast of Madagascar. Uh, and I really got to know, um, you and GFE, uh, who was, uh, Ms. Mongolians. So, you know, I got to experience and learn about other transgender, uh, people in different cultures, but also this, this pageant was a culmination of a year of traveling in Southeast Asia, where I'd also collected stories and learned about trans folks, uh, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Singapore, and the Philippines.

Kelly Bron Johnson (03:00):

No, that's super, super cool. Very interesting. So now we talk a bit about traveling. Uh, we know that traveling while autistic can be, can pose its own challenge challenges, um, and traveling world trends can also be another challenge. So how do you feel about travel and do you feel safe and accommodated while traveling?

Kayley Whalen (03:26):

And I want to return to the pageant and a bit to talk about my experiences there because that was very kind of flavored with being a neurodivergent. And I would, I use the term autistic for myself, but I also

liked the term neurodivergent because it also recognized as the ways in which I'm, you know, have a different, uh, neurology than folks, uh, that also may include, uh, bipolar, which is the diagnosis I've had for most of my life only, more recently identifying as autistic, but certainly, uh, being neurodivergent, um, that combination of bipolar and autistic and, you know, other ways in which my mind might be a typical kept me from a lot of my life feeling like I had the mental health and support needs met so that I could leave the country, where I knew I had a therapist and psychiatrist and where I had my support network and Washington DC of other LGBT folks who were disabled.

Kayley Whalen (04:31):

And I have to admit, I picked countries to travel in where transgender was not a big deal, um, where I specifically focused on countries that had large, invisible and tolerated, uh, not accepted, but tolerated, um, you know, transgender populations. And so I'd say kind of managing my mental health day to day and like learning my own limits for how many new people I meet, how many social interactions I'd have, how many networking events and parties I'd go to. You know, I learned from a year on the road, how valuable having my own free time and living on my own was because previously I'd lived in a group home with, uh, three other, not, not like a group home group home, but like a shared house or, you know, a shared house with three other, uh, housemates in Washington, DC with the astronomically high rent. I had no way to live independently, you know, in my own studio, um, or something.

Kayley Whalen (05:35):

So being on the road led me to kind of value and understand how much healthier and safer and supportive I feel when I give myself time to just be alone for very long stretches. Uh, sometimes, you know, stay in a row stretch of not interacting with another human, but like feels great for me. But she is when I was thrown into the Miss International Queen pageant, it had a, if you think of pageants, Oh, it's all glam and glitz and fun. And it was 15 days of some of the hardest work I've done in my entire life, because I was asked to be on, including on camera and like engaging socially with people from 6:30am in the morning to 10:30 PM at night. And on a few occasions, my day started at 4:00 AM and ended at 10, 10:30 at night. And that pushed me past limits that were healthy for me.

Kayley Whalen (06:36):

And that led to meltdowns. And the only thing that, that saved me from just complete burnout, uh, from that event was I actually had friends who went with me to a Thai hospital to get me a doctor's note. I got a doctor's note saying I was bipolar and saying that I needed rest and that the schedule was possibly too demanding and that I would need to skip certain events because of my, my medical needs. Again, at the time I didn't really have, uh, I actually still have an autistic diagnosis, but, um, bipolar, you know, was one way to kind of get doctors and pageant staff to understand that, you know, I have real, uh, real disabilities that needed to be taken seriously.

Kelly Bron Johnson (07:23):

Well, I know for example, a lot of, uh, autistic people get diagnosed with bipolar, either erroneously or co-morbidity, I don't really know, but, uh, I've seen that happen quite a lot. And also, I don't know if, you know, there was a research study that was done a few years ago and, uh, they found that 70% of autistic people are, are part of the LGBTQ community. And so the overlap is, is huge. And I think if we're just gonna, you know, we're talking about intersectionality a bit before we started recording, I feel it's really important for me, like to always kind of, uh, bring up that statistic because I want to kind of normalize this and say, you know, the majority of us are partnered this community. Um, and if we're not, then our

friends surely are because if we're hanging around with other autistic or neurodivergent people, this is most likely the case. So I just wanted to kind of bring that in there to it, to kind of have that piece that plays together almost like, uh, these are brains that go together well or, or very often, you know, as a kind of brain that, that works together.

Kayley Whalen ([08:37](#)):

Yeah. I mean, there's been lots of studies over the years about how, um, autistic folks are more likely to be, um, LGBT and also, uh, neurodivergent folks in general are more likely to be LGBT, including folks who, uh, you know, experience, uh, schizophrenia and bipolar, uh, are two such examples. So it's certainly, you know, some of the figures bandied around are, you know, the six to seven times more likely to be, uh, uh, transgender or non-binary, if you're autistic and then slightly lower elevated levels of, uh, being more likely to be transgender with other neurodivergent conditions. But nevertheless, you know, a significant statistically significant, uh, you know, a difference. So yeah, I mean, it's definitely a huge part of the community. And I did a research paper recently to actually analyze the experiences of people in the goth subculture who were not diverted. And, um, I think a lot of neurodivergent folks find, find, you know, solace there because it's like more okay to be mad. And I use like mad, like mad pride, like, you know, we're all mad here. You know, we all love Alice in Wonderland, but like, you know, there's sort of pride and acceptance of both neuro diversity and gender. And when I sent out like a survey and asking for people to interview for this 73% of the people who responded were transgender or gender non binary, and like only, and like 78% were queer or lesbian gay, bisexual.

Kelly Bron Johnson ([10:29](#)):

So I answered that survey. I answered that.

Kayley Whalen ([10:34](#)):

Thank you. That was a really fun research project, but it's certainly been my experience. And I, I, my bridge to kind of doing work with the autistic community and neuro divergent community was, uh, working at the national LGBTQ task force. And in 2016 one a transgender autistic person, uh, I believe they identified as a transgender man, um, was, uh, murdered by police, uh, responding to like a 911 call. You know, we launched, uh, a autistic trans pride campaign in partnership with the autistic self-advocacy network and the national center for transgender equality. And that was kind of a really pivotal moment in my activist career. Cause even though I wasn't out as autistic, that led me to engaging and getting to know a lot more autistic trans folks and started to attend autistic self-advocacy network events, including the disability, day of morning and the, uh, autistic self-advocacy network gala.

Kayley Whalen ([11:36](#)):

And, um, and for years I was that like ally to the autistic community, he showed up at every event and have like more autistic friends, but not until finally one of my friends, you actually interviewed on this podcast, Lydiz XZ Brown would, we were having a conversation about like, Lydia was like, I was on this podcast, but I have a really hard time. I can't focus on podcasts. I need to read it. And I said, Lydia, I'm the exact opposite. I have so much an easier time to listen to podcasts, but you know, I've really hard time sitting through reading something and Lydia said, Oh yeah, my, my, my partner, you know, has that exact same kind of autistic trait. And I'm like, Lydia, I'm not autistic. And Lydia's like, what are you talking about? Flamingly autistic. And I was like, no, I'm not. And then, uh, it kinda spiraled from there through like, am I to, yeah, yeah, I think I am.

Doug Blecher ([12:33](#)):

Yep. Now Kaylee, you're a board member of trans United whose mission is to build the collective capacity of the trans community. One of the really, um, I guess I would say unique objectives of trans United is working with communities on the ground in historically underserved areas like the, the American South. What changes, um, has there been able to make in this area of the country that definitely is not typically thought to be very supportive of the LGBTQ plus community.?

Kayley Whalen ([13:10](#)):

So I was part of, uh, the launch of trans United fund in 2016. And to be honest, my involvement with the trans United, uh, and trans United fund, which is the C4 and the breakthrough pac, which is the pac. So it's kind of three different organizations rolled under one umbrella of trans United. You know, we did support Latinx, uh, kind of non undocumented immigrants in, uh, South Florida, you know, and it, we're kind of helping build a capacity for, uh, kind of serving the, uh, trans women of color, uh, specifically, but not exclusively, but primarily, uh, Latinx and immigrant folks. Um, and that, I remember I was sitting next to another, uh, person from trans United at the Philadelphia trans health conference, huge, huge, huge conference, I think around 4,000 people now, now every year. And I was sitting at a table with other folks with trans United, and I was like that morning supposed to give a training on how they could better use digital tools to like fundraise and grow their group of supporters.

Kayley Whalen ([14:35](#)):

And this included, you know, trans women of color working in the South and I was ready to do this training, but the day that day I woke up to the news of the pulse massacre. So like everyone was in the hotel lobby, but instead of doing this training, like people were making calls and like being like, did my friend die or did they survive? And that just completely changed, you know, everything, you know, like, you know, I'm talking about members of the trans Latina coalition, you know, calling, you know, folks in the Latinx community being like, what happened? Are you okay? And I think one of the things that trans United, which is the C3, which is more focused on building that capacity of nonprofits, you know, one of the things trans United is were we're a board of primarily trans people of color that never had happened before, uh, for such a broad kind of trans agenda as trans United, you know, was working on, you know, and we really live there, uh, to provide interdependence, to provide, you know, uh, not just support on advocacy tools or money, but like, you know, emotional support as we're all leaders in the transgender movement.

Kayley Whalen ([16:03](#)):

And we're often working alone or have our own kind of siloed organizations and trans United is exactly as the name says, it's, it's building kind of a United, uh, movement, um, for, you know, based on the experiences of the most marginalized folks in the trans community. And, you know, I, I am a member of trans Latina coalition and I really loved doing that with them. And at the same time, it's great having an organization where it's not just Latina, uh, but also, you know, folks with other marginalized, uh, trans identities as well.

Kelly Bron Johnson ([16:40](#)):

I was wondering if you could share a bit about your blog and some of the other activism work you're doing, it sounds like you're doing a lot! Like, it's almost like there's a lot of, you know, different activist advocacy that you're doing, but if you could share a bit about your blog, if you'd like to talk about that.

Kayley Whalen ([16:57](#)):

Yeah. So, I mean, I came out as trans very publicly at my college in like 2006. And since then I've dipped my toe into all sorts of different advocacy. And or recently I've become very focused on disability justice. And in 2018 I became an independent consultant. And one of the biggest reasons I switched to being an independent consultant was I wanted to travel and I wanted to work on, you know, international solidarity of the trans community. And I've always had a very strong interest in the trans community in Thailand. So I spent about five months learning the Thai language before I even flew to Thailand. And so I could interview, uh, transgender folks in Thai, um, and get to know them. And I've been studying Vietnamese for a year and a half. You know, I'd also spent about, I spent about six months in Thailand, about five months in Vietnam, and then about a month in the Philippines.

Kayley Whalen ([18:05](#)):

And then like a month between like Singapore and Cambodia. And I got to know every single place I went to. I reached out to meet some transgender advocate, you know, and interview them for my blog. And I have interviews that I still want to write up. But one of my favorite folks that I got to talk to was, uh, Mai Như Thiên Ân, whose, uh, founder of FTM Vietnam, which was a massive, massive transgender organization that at this point has expanded beyond, uh, serving trans men to building solidarity with the entire transgender community, but they have over 5,000 members and they're probably one of the largest, uh, uh, organizations for transgender men, uh, in the world that I've ever seen. And they're super active and they hold events all the time. Uh, there's actually a P flag chapter in Vietnam. And so they hold a lot of events with parents and P flag, the kind of get parents to accept their trans and LGBT children.

Kayley Whalen ([19:16](#)):

And one of the reasons that I really appreciated, uh, working with my friend An, uh, on, is, um, someone who is open about, uh, mental health and mental illness in a way that's kind of really hard to be out about in Vietnamese society, which really has kind of an attitude. And this is, this is An's words and not mine. Um, but you know, what he told me is basically the attitude is if you're not attempting suicide, then you're fine. Like, you know, uh, just deal with it. Don't talk about it. You can lose face, uh, in a society that's very obsessed with keeping an appearance of kind of having it all together and not rocking the boat like talking about, you know, being, uh, depressed or bipolar, or I don't actually know much about an autistic self-advocacy community there, but it's just very hard to talk about. And I did a very long profile article, um, on both, uh, An and his organization. And, you know, there's a section there on mental health and how groups like, um, FTM Vietnam, and some other organizations are working to kind of talk about mental health in the LGBT community. So the URL for the blog is just trans world view.com. You know, just one word transworldview. It's reflecting both my worldview as a trans person, but also, you know, the views of trans folks around the world

Doug Blecher ([21:04](#)):

What about in terms of disability and the transgender community, um, where, where do you think we are at this point, um, in terms of disabled trans folks being embraced or by the trans community, or do we still have a lot more work to do?

Kayley Whalen ([21:25](#)):

I find, I have been able to feel so much healthier and so much more supported basing my work these days in the disability justice community and distancing myself a bit from some of the toxicity in the

quote unquote trans community. I think there's a lot to be said about kind of a 10 principles of disability justice and, you know, um, I, one of my clients is Sins invalid and the Patty Berne is very well known for kind of being a pioneer of defining what the system stability justice look like. And so when I'm talking about toxicity and attrition or movement, I think it's awesome, kind of a nonprofit and advocacy as a whole, because disability justice says we're whole people, we're more than what we can produce. You know, this isn't about making it on your own. This is about building community where we depend on each other and call upon each other, you know, to, you know, understand that, that we all have challenges were facing, and that we can't hold people to these standards of like you have to work till you drop.

Kayley Whalen ([22:48](#)):

And I think in the trans movement, a lot of work that comes from anger and a lot of work there comes from this very intense feeling of marginalization and trauma that trans folks experience and not that disabled folks don't experience trauma, certainly they do. Um, uh, but I think there's a more thorough examination of kind of how to cope with, as a movement, trauma and anger in kind of a disability realm because of the focus on interdependence and sustainability, then in the trans movement where people realize there's a lot of trauma there and talk about it, but there's often this kind of, you know, if you're not working till you're dead, uh, you know, if you're not working until you have a meltdown, if you're not pushing yourself, you're not doing enough. And also I think the disability justice community has a bit more of kind of an understanding that like, we need each other to be forgiving and kind of call people in and educate them rather than always kind of just saying you're out.

Kayley Whalen ([24:16](#)):

Cause you said one thing and disagree with. And, you know, I think that's really hard as people who are disabled as neurodivergent like, we have different ways of communicating and my way of communicating and understanding the world is often very analytical is often saying like, let's take, you know, several steps back and kind of examine this deeper. And if someone says to me, well, you're not with us, what's wrong with you. You should just accept this. And this is what we're fighting for. And I'm very much, uh, someone who needs to kind of deeply examine the reasons why. And I think sometimes in a trans movement where there's the sense of, you know, urgency, and it was very hard to keep pace with and feel like I was being fully included because of the way my mind is neuro very neuro divergent. And I had instances where I was pushed way too hard.

Kayley Whalen ([25:26](#)):

Actually, this is more an aspect of working at major nonprofits where I was pushed way too hard by my employers. And it led to meltdowns and I had to fight really hard for accessibility needs to be met and accommodations needs to be met. And then no surprise when my, you know, one of my, and this is common for a lot of autistic folks too, is I have really bad like GI issues. And, and like food is like a very big trigger of like anxiety and also just physical pain, which leads to mental pain and anguish and like basic things like, you know, like I get extremely bad reactions to gluten and dairy. Like those seem pretty basic when I, when I submit accessibility needs. And then I got disciplined because I apparently said something rude about the fact that, you know, I had ordered a gluten free breakfast and someone generously donated like bagels and croissants and pastries, and everyone said, Oh, we'll just do this for breakfast.

Kayley Whalen ([26:35](#)):

And I'm like, well, there's literally nothing here I can eat. And then they screwed up my lunch order. And I said, I literally have nothing to eat for lunch. And then I got into an argument and then I was disciplined and suspended from work for acting out and for having a meltdown and for being unfair to coworkers or being mean to coworkers, like literally if you don't feed someone for an entire day. And then you tell them that like, they need to be more accommodating. Like that's, that's not disability justice, that's not LGBT justice. That's like pretty abusive behavior. And that's one of the reasons I'm also very, you know, adamant about kind of labor organizing. And I was, you know, a leader of the union of the national LGBTQ task force. FCIU 1199. And one of the things that constantly came up in non-profit spaces was, you know, um, lack of ability like working on a campaign trail and canvassing, and this idea that everything is rush, rush, rush, rush, rush, and everyone just has to eat pizza and work till they drop, you know, in a campaign office.

Kayley Whalen ([27:49](#)):

Like it's not a healthy, it's not healthy. And that's why there's so much burnout. And this is just a common issue across kind of progressive and, you know, progressive nonprofit spaces I'd say leftist as well. Although I do think, you know, having a, a critique of capitalism, including, you know, anticapitalist discourses such as anarchists and socialists and communists discourses on the far left are a little bit better at understanding like that capitalism is not validating our unique bodies and disabilities. Uh, but there are certain people, uh, there are certainly people who've sort of so slept this who have a lot of ableism as well so.

Kelly Bron Johnson ([28:42](#)):

I really want to just take a minute to, um, thank you for bringing up sins invalid. And if you don't mind, I'm just going to name, drop the book. Um, skin is skin, tooth and bones, a disability justice primer, which is, uh, amazing. And if people have not read that, that is really a great place to start when we talk about disability justice. So I really appreciate you for tying that all in. Um, and I also want to give you a chance to speak a bit about your special interests you said, um, and talk about changelings and how all of that kind of plays in together.

Kayley Whalen ([29:18](#)):

Yes. Thanks for giving me this opportunity. Cause I, can't not talk about changelings for those who don't know, um, throughout thousands of years of, you know, human history, there's been various animus traditions, including beliefs in say or fairy folks, uh, largely in the British Isles, although there are sort of animus police and other countries with similar myths, but, um, one of the most common myths and folklore of understanding, uh, why certain children were born disabled was this concept of a changeling. And this idea of a change lane was that someone's actual child had been kidnapped by Fe, which aren't just like, you know, Tinkerbell fairies, but could be like goblins or dark fairies or, you know, kind of evil, mischievous, uh, spirits and replaced by like a goblin or a dark theory. And it seems kind of far-fetched to say that this is still really important today, but like these beliefs continued and still continue.

Kayley Whalen ([30:23](#)):

I've talked to autistic folks whose parents literally think they were changeling, but you know, it's kind of morphed into this discourse of autistic organizations like autism speaks, which has this message. Uh, one of the founders literally said like I founded autism speaks to because my child was abducted by, by autism. And this idea that like, someone's true self has been abducted by autism and that we need to like beat and abuse and torture. The autism out of somebody is actually like somewhat of a Relic of this

change, like mythology, because one of the ways to deal with your child being a changeling was to beat them once a switch or to set them over a boiling pot of water or to throw them in the fire or to just physically torture and abuse them till either this fairy that had possessed them leaved, uh, or that the fairy that your child had been switched, that your actual childhood, they kidnapped for fairies, you know, would come back because the fairies would, would be like, Oh, you're portraying the changeling.

Kayley Whalen ([31:35](#)):

We need to rescue them. Here's your actual child back. So it was used to justify child abuse and torture and suicide, suicide, uh, murder of, um, autistic and developmentally disabled and, or generic, you know, kind of disabled children. And the reason it's a special interest of mine is because like these myths sound horrible and they, they are for the most part. Um, but in kind of the way that neuro divergent writers and, uh, certain musicians and, uh, fantasy writers and stuff, and kind of, re-imagined the myth of the changeling as like a kind of a positive myth about disabled folks that actually like, you know, you can think about that change. And so a lot of, uh, artists, people are drawn to kind of a metaphor of like, I'm an alien in like, you know, uh, a culture that I don't get, like the famous anthropologist on Mars example, you know, a changing myth is, is similar.

Kayley Whalen ([32:46](#)):

Like I'm actually from a different realm or like I'm actually from, you know, kind of a different reality than this one. And my neuro divergence, you know, means I interact with sense and, um, understand, uh, rules differently than other folks. And, you know, I'm a secular humanist. In other words, an atheist with a set of humanist ethical values. I don't literally believe in fairies. I do know some autistic people who, who identify with changelings who literally believe in fairies, but I'm more interested in kind of a metaphor and the aspect of myth and storytelling that can kind of remake these myths into positive interpretations of kind of the struggle of an autistic person to figure out why they're different and to learn about their origins and learn about the people that they actually originate from, um, which is often a journey of autistic folks and neuro divergent folks when they first find autistic community and, um, this kind of, uh, coming to terms with I'm different, but I'm whole, and I'm my own person.

Kayley Whalen ([33:59](#)):

And it's just, I wrote a 60 page paper on this. It's going to be cut down. It's going to be in an anthology, um, by, uh, two disability studies scholars, that's hopefully published by the end of 2021. Um, and I actually, uh, explored changelings in music and in some kind of art and role-playing games, one of the ways changing myths have been told and retold and kind of more positive, uh, aspects, um, is through like goth music, um, uh, songs like, uh, Susan, the band shattered time, or the band Gazzelle Twin, a song, uh, changeling, or, um, the atmospheric, uh, shoegaze black metal band. Alcest kind of has these narratives of like a changeling as a child who, who leaves the home and discovers who they really are and comes to term what their connection with nature and that they're not, you know, a demon or a goblin or evil, but this is just who they are.

Kayley Whalen ([35:10](#)):

And that, you know, we can kind of find acceptance. And, uh, the one poet that I really am drawn to and have been kind of obsessed with since I've discovered them in like 2006 is Charlotte mew and Charlotte wrote a poem in 1918 called the changeling about how they didn't relate to other children and that the sensory overload from the nursery riot, didn't allow them to kind of get along and that they were punished for being mischievous and, and, you know, their behavior being kind of abnormal. And, uh, the

writer had a family history of mental illness and had mental illness struggles along with being gender nonconforming or possibly gender non binary. So, you know, this is kind of, uh, people have been using, changelings myths to talk about neurodivergence for a long time and kind of retaking it. So I know it's a long tangent, um, but I really enjoy kind of exploring mythology and ritual. And, uh, a lot of people just don't realize how much of a subconscious effect these myths still have on us today rather than being some distant past

Doug Blecher ([36:29](#)):

Well, Kaylee, I always enjoy, um, listening to anyone talk about their special interests, and that was particularly interesting. So I, you know, really thank you for your time today and just learning, um, from you. Thanks. Thanks so much.

Kayley Whalen ([36:44](#)):

Yeah. Can I, um, if you have a moment, um, I never really got to talk about the pageant if they want me to dive a little deeper into that, or do you not have time?

Doug Blecher ([36:54](#)):

Sure. Go ahead.

Kayley Whalen ([36:55](#)):

Okay. Yeah. So speaking about the miss international queen 2020 pageant, one of the things that I found was I had these very high expectations of myself, of like, I'm going to spend this time during the pageant, getting to know all these girls from all over the world, there's going to be solidarity that, you know, I'm gonna connect and, you know, learn their stories, interview them. And instead, what I constantly found was despite cultural barriers and language barriers, I speak very good Thai, for example. Uh, but the two Thai speaking, uh, transgender women there, I just couldn't relate to at all and, um, make conversation and getting along with them very difficult.

Kayley Whalen ([37:50](#)):

But the girls, uh, women I did get along with, you know, I don't know a word of Mongolian, I don't know any Chinese, uh, I'm actually pretty proficient at Vietnamese these days, but I wasn't at the time, but the people I bonded with, you know, they may not have used the term, but like, they were a bit of a misfits. They were a bit of the girls who would like interacted socially differently. And like I bonded with them despite having language barriers and cultural barriers that kind of were less important than maybe neuro diversity or neurodivergence that like, you know, Ms. Mongolia was like the intimidating goth girl who like sat in the corner and no one wanted to talk to cause they gave you a stare that looked like death and like heavy, heavy black eyeliner and dark dresses, you know, but she became my best friend, one of my best friends.

Kayley Whalen ([38:43](#)):

Um, cause I kind of gave her a chance and got to know her. And we were both like, you know, the goth misfit girls. And she spoke like barely a word of English, but we really bonded, including both of us were really valued, like quiet time and alone time. And like she was someone, um, this is also a, uh, you know, um, of Steven universe reference, but we could be like independent together or like alone together, just the two of us sitting silently together. And then Ms. China, you know, she was a fashion model, you know, she was super glamorous. And like, I was like, I can't relate to this girl, like, but she ended up

being one of the most insightful analytical folks there. And she also didn't have great English, but that didn't matter as much. Um, but what did matter was she was someone who was obsessed with big bang theory.

Kayley Whalen ([39:41](#)):

She was obsessed with Sheldon. She was obsessed with, you know, kind of neuro divergence and mental health and understanding that gender is a spectrum and that there's all sorts of different ways that people can be and transgender. And, you know, if I dismissed her, it's just this one dimensional fashion model who was constantly obsessing over her appearance. You know, I can not, this is someone who experienced neuro divergence and who experienced anxiety and, you know, working in a highly competitive field as a model, you know? Yeah. She had a lot of anxiety about her appearance, but, um, we connected on, on a much deeper level because I think of kind of the shared uh neurodivergence and I, I got used to her comparing me to Sheldon, just realize, you know, I, I let her convince her otherwise, but, uh, it was, it was pretty funny.

Doug Blecher ([40:35](#)):

I don't see the connection with you and Sheldon,

Kelly Bron Johnson ([40:41](#)):

But I find that's the thing that we talk about a lot too on this podcast has come up a few times. We haven't had that many episodes, but one thing that has come up repeatedly is the sense of community, uh, about finding your people. Um, cause that's really, really important. I'm glad you added that in.