Kelly Bron Johnson (00:00):

Welcome to episode 11 of the intersections on the spectrum podcast. 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 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 (00:31):

Today. We are joined by Liana Rodriguez, Liana, thanks so much for joining us.

Liana Rodriguez (00:38):

Thank you, Doug and Kelly for inviting me.

Doug Blecher (00:42):

Want to start out by learning a little bit about, all of your identities. Clearly none of us are one identity. Um, we're all, we all have so many different identities. So for you, how would you identify yourself?

Liana Rodriguez (00:59):

Just kind of start first with that. I am an autistic and neurodivergent person. I have experienced generalized anxiety, panic attacks, and depression at certain times in my life. I'm also managing an autoimmune condition beyond that. Uh, I also identify, pretty well in the gender identity, LGBTQ community. I recently came out a few years ago and, uh, basically I'm an enby and trans feminine individual. I am a mixed person of color born and raised in Montreal Canada with a diverse cultural identity, linked to Trinidad Tabago where a blend of ancestral roots converged from around the globe that reaches as far as Portugal, Nigeria, the United Kingdom, China and Venezuela.

Kelly Bron Johnson (02:09):

Very cool. Thank you. So since he comes from a mixed and diverse cultural heritage, how do you see that? Like how has that shaped you into the person you are today?

Liana Rodriguez (02:22):

I grew up with the understanding that being able to recognize cultural diversity amongst my family's heritage guided me to be more open to each person's uniqueness as a human being. I did encounter some obstacles in my ability to connect socially with some people, whether it's in the community or at school and a cultural, depending on the cultural demographic. So it says race or ethnicity. As I struggled to discover and shaped my personal identity while I was going through that experience. I have some members of my family who were very clear that they represent as black or acknowledge that there is a significant link to a certain dysphoria, like from the Caribbean or West Indies Africa, or even the Portuguese islands of Madeira. And being able to realize that my body composition shares many DNA links to my ancestors from a afar helps me in being accepting of a cultural mix.

Liana Rodriguez (03:40):

And that's especially in situations where I am questioned about where am I from or which culture I represent or in this case race as well within the community.

Kelly Bron Johnson (03:53):

Oh, I relate to that so much of, you know, as being those microaggressions that we get to build people asking you, what are you, you know, I've grown up like that, getting those kinds of questions. Um, but having that perspective and saying, you know, I don't have to fit in a box. I can represent all of these, you know, and these parts that are, that are beneficial from all the good parts of your culture. Right.

Liana Rodriguez (04:17):

So, yeah, definitely.

Kelly Bron Johnson (04:21):

I relate to that.

Doug Blecher (04:23):

So, you know, I've interviewed so many people who were diagnosed, uh, as adults. At this point. It's almost like I'm shocked if anyone isn't diagnosed as an adult. Um, so for you Liana, um, being, uh, later diagnosed, how has that been helpful to you?

Liana Rodriguez (04:50):

I would have to say that, uh, personally, this was definitely, uh, an impact that really kind of brought shock waves around my entire family.. I experienced my mixed feelings. The moment I received an official autism spectrum diagnosis from a psychiatrist after two evaluation sessions, when I was 29 years old, on one hand, I felt certain and relieved that the diagnosis would help guide me toward a personal journey of becoming my best authentic self, knowing what aspects associated to autism that I express dating back to my childhood. On the other hand, though, this same diagnosis was a turning point in what was otherwise a difficult process for me and my immediate family to digest after almost 25 years of searching for clarity as to what characteristics I emulated over the years were being observed by health professionals who thought that I had autistic like, uh, traits or was pervasive or neurodevelopmental.

Liana Rodriguez (06:17):

In hindsight, finally it took me several years, more years after the diagnosis for some family relatives says to accept me for who I am. And we tried to find the best optimal way toward mutual understanding.

Kelly Bron Johnson (06:33):

What you touch on though is a big issue in assessment, racialized people I usually missed for, for proper diagnosis. Um, you know, I, I believe that, the part of the reason I wasn't diagnosed, uh, as a child was also because of racial issues and the fact that I'm female presenting, but also I think that the race plays a big part in it. You know, that there's a bias, there's definitely a bias into research and diagnostics for sure. I want to go into some of your special interests, um, because we see them as a positive for us and beneficial for us in our, and our happiness in our life.

Kelly Bron Johnson (07:12):

So as a child who started the hyper-focus on mapping streets, so what was it about mapping streets that captured your attention.

Liana Rodriguez (07:20):

Actually I'd have to say that I began to have fascination about the landscape of city streets and especially public transportation at age five when I was shuttled to a children's hospital for art therapy program on a van. I grew up, uh, where my family in, uh, North East part of Montreal, but Earl of Montreal more. And, I actually had to be transported all the way to this hospital near downtown Montreal. And it turned out that the journey on to in this van created a different sense of vision for me. Uh, it was, it was definitely different than how I was adapting in at home. So as I go through this, I was actually able to begin connecting to, what kind of things I was seeing on, on the city streets or the buses.

Liana Rodriguez (08:30):

And also realizing later on, as I, as I grew up as a child, how integrating those senses into art, actually it became not just a skill, but also something to, to cherish as I would later on develop beyond that art therapy process, uh, going to that hospital was, was actually at a time where I was being first evaluated for certain social communicative difficulties, common mannerisms and hyper focusing, what was their term? And then as pervasive developmental disorder, even though some autistic like traits were noted. And that was back in an era when the expansion of what would later become the autism spectrum was this, in this case, the stigma of autism then was still up there in regards to, how much it weighed on families, having an autistic child back then to sum up the special interests.

Liana Rodriguez (09:48):

I'd like to say that as a result of the traveling between the two communities later on in a station wagon, with a number of young children or teenagers or otherwise neurodivergent to potentially, I came to the realization that I had a skill of memorizing maps, and then I started drawing them a lot. And then because of the experience I was spending or analyzing and memorizing how to get around Montreal, I then ended up, uh, being dubbed as a navigator for some of these some drivers of those station wagons shuttle, or later on, on a school bus when I started interegrating to a regular stream school. And as I had the ability to figure out over time, how to dodge the traffic jams in the city and from there which would be around the early nineties, I became very helpful to my parents when we land on long distance drives to visit family relatives in order to reduce the stress of getting lost and stuff, or being stuck in traffic reports.

Kelly Bron Johnson (11:14):

So that's super cool, but you're not the first, you know, the first autistic person that I know that has optimized routes and things like that. Fantastic.

Doug Blecher (11:25):

I'm so impressed by that because I have no sense of direction whatsoever.

Liana Rodriguez (11:32):

No, um, I couldn't even figure it out myself actually, when I was, I was young and I realized later on that it would become a very key tool in my ability going through academia and also in my creative artwork as I then got further getting to draw segments of public transit routes, or even relating to civic planning, um, of communities. Some imaginary some later on would become like ideas of how do we want to improve our, uh, city or, or, or our traffic network. And then, how I had to come across it later on when I eventually got to a high school level I had a challenge though, where being very involved and this somewhat affected how much time I devoted to my day sometimes when I have a unique idea to

improve something or impact my social connections, where my former academic advisors, like in university or perspective players. And sometimes I actually have to like try and focus as, as, best as I can when they small talk and the communication, uh, in general, as an example. And sometimes I might just carry on with a lot of transit talk. So I had it, it took me a long time. So I had to like, you know, how do I read dab everything about communication? And that's the way people are even was diagnosed officially on the autism spectrum. Also all this facts talk to like all gathering facts, like the transit network, in addition to that.

Doug Blecher (13:29):

So this eventually led to you getting a bachelor's degree in urban planning and you even created, you created a really cool website aimed at recognizing civic heritage and the history of the public transit bus in Montreal as an essential mode of transportation. What, what do you think you would have missed if you didn't have the opportunity growing up, riding the bus?

Liana Rodriguez (14:00):

Uh, that's a very good question. I took a lot of deep thought about this. I reflecting to my young adulthood. I have to say that I almost reached an impasse on my academic journey when I was about to complete a college diploma in creative arts. I was not yet diagnosed on the spectrum and was experiencing symptoms associated with anxiety and depression. I ended up applying to only one multidisciplinary program that was urban studies, uh, which later offered an urban planning specialization. When I did get in, I was really motivated to specifically study public transit. My early experience being transported on those schools shuttles led me to a moment just prior to finishing primary school at age 13, as an example, where I had to actually try to get the school on time because I missed the school bus in my area. And I had to convince one of my parents that, that I really need to try and use the public transit network, because some times there was this whole, um, concern about, uh, how safe I'd be able to go around on the bus, especially really, I needed to learn this before high school.

Liana Rodriguez (15:26):

Uh, so then they led me to the chance and it turns out that I actually arrived at my primary school five minutes before the bell and I didn't live in, I didn't live in walking distance to the primary school. Primary school was like a mere five or six kilometers away. As for the program. I have to realize that when it came to, uh, trying to get through university, I actually noticed that faculty was trying to, you know, understand where I'm coming from. However, you know, there's this whole balance where they'd like me to learn some other things. Some, some professors may suggest then just transportation and that's of course that's when the multi-disciplinary, uh, program. However, I basically still persisted to want to focus more on transportation. And, uh, in some cases actually succeeded and not just on my own, but also with the struggle of working in groups too, when that element does work into the whole, uh, body of trying to, to, you know, give an example, planning a community, uh, as for the aspect about the bus history project.

Liana Rodriguez (17:00):

Uh, in this case, I find that the ride on the bus can be creatively scenic and relaxing, pending the crowded conditions. And the time of day, unlike usually get to point a to point B concept of travel. And as for civic, heritage of public transit by bus, I realize over time from the small talk discussions, as I mentioned earlier, uh, that, uh, sometimes the topic gets less fanfare unless it's like about historic bus models, model types, or complaining about a particular bus route or experience onboard. So what I did

notice that provided potential for a topic, uh, where discussions and memories of all the commission bus routes for active bus routes in Montreal that provided a flare importance in a particular community. Once the bus lines rooting history is mapped and discussed something I felt can be shared digitally as an oral history.

Liana Rodriguez (18:06):

This is where I recognize how essential public transit, uh, bus bus networks, um, is to the history of public transportation.

Kelly Bron Johnson (18:17):

You mentioned something that I latched onto in my brain. That's, uh, you know, those are the benefits of taking the bus. Let's say instead of the Metro, the Montreal, Metro only stays underground and there's not much to see. So, um, I used to have panic attacks, uh, in the Metro, um, whereas I don't get them on buses. And I think part of it is that there's a bit more openness. I feel, um, I don't feel as trapped and, uh, being able to have a different scenery helps, uh, the stop me from going into having a panic attack. So I think it's definitely a benefit of bus over Metro, for sure. And, uh, yeah, so I wanted to, this is my, uh, one of my special interests.

Kelly Bron Johnson (19:03):

Part of my work is a, both, you know, inclusive, mostly inclusive workplaces, but it's important to me that we have, uh, inclusive cities, ideally. Um, you know, I'm, I'm a big proponent for universal design. So for thinking about urban planning, this is where your expertise comes in. I think, uh, are there ways that you see cities can do better about designing themselves so that they are more inclusive to autistic and all disabled people? I'd love to hear your thoughts on that.

Liana Rodriguez (19:32):

I find this as a very good question, a really interesting one. Uh, I have to say that I realize over time that, uh, more needs to be done at the local level to adapt the built living environments and municipalities, uh, to be inclusive to everyone. In my opinion, in particular would be any area of visibility and autism. Uh, the obstacles to make this go forward aggressively is asserting political will within a city and above at a regional provincial and federal levels by way of rewriting policies that apply to the building code, urban design of indoor and outdoor public and private spaces and communities universal accessibility and transport, recreational facilities, educational institutions, and commercial services, and to public security from my personal experience as an autistic person, I recognize that there is progress building here where I live in Montreal area, uh, breaking down.

Liana Rodriguez (20:44):

Let's just say trying to break down barriers toward included, as some examples include creating sensory friendly and universally accessible recreational equipment or spaces in some hardwood parts. Then there's also providing sensitivity education at the public security level to guide a peace officer to safely manage a situation involving an autistic person and or a person who has a disability. And then finally, uh, it's really important to apply a participatory collaboration approach between community leaders, citizens, and a municipality to create an initiative to develop an action plan indicating what needs to be applied or redesigned in community, urban planning, and which sites have potential for inclusive access.

Kelly Bron Johnson (21:48):

Can we get a mic drop for this, this, we can't drop our mics here, but, but yeah, I mean so much, so much in there that I think you've covered it all in, uh, especially, you know, when we're talking about peace officers, um, you know, we're not in a country that I don't feel like they're all for in the benefit of peace, uh, right now, you know, I feel this a lot of, uh, police brutality and a lot of, uh, a lot of issues surrounding that.

Kelly Bron Johnson (22:14):

So, um, I just, I just love your points, but again, that's my, this is my passion and my special interest, I guess, but, uh, no, I you've made so many good points there.

Doug Blecher (22:23):

Liana, one thing that I was thinking about when you were talking is, you know, like spaces that weren't maybe designed with a lot of universal design in mind, you know, so there are already spaces that exist. What are, do you have some suggestions on things that can be done to make these spaces more sensory, friendly, or inclusive, um, for all people?

Liana Rodriguez (22:52):

That is a very interesting question. Uh, and I think it's a really challenging one. In fact, I can probably speak to personal experience from what I've experienced, not just in Montreal, but also an utter communities in North America that I visited. And I realized that to really try to answer your question. I, I have to say that to actually get there really there's, it's going to take a while. I have a feeling like there's a lot, a lot of communication from the upper levels of government, not just municipality and even, uh, privately owned, uh, facilities of, um, we'll need to do something, how to, uh, make sensory, like sensory access, uh, experience of an autistic person. For example, a little more at ease. I actually realized that, uh, in my workplace experience for example, where sometimes the, uh, challenges could vary between the level of noise.

Liana Rodriguez (24:18):

Uh, I have to try to balance out to say basically acoustics here, uh, to the lighting and the type of lighting use and the brightness. Uh, so those are some examples where it could be have some, uh, better adaptation along the way. And then there's another area regarding how to best communicate with an autistic person, depending on the different environment. So say outside, in like a Metro station, it's going to be very difficult and I think perhaps a good way at making an autistic person or anyone else uh, that, uh, have a bit of an intersectionality challenge, um, among that. Um, I feel that, uh, there's a need for assertiveness, not just in the person of being themselves, but also with the person that we communicate with without having to have a situation that becomes unsafe for, for everybody

Doug Blecher (25:37):

Before we, uh, end our conversation. You know, me and Kelly are, you know, within, uh, with this podcast are trying to share stories, um, from people that unfortunately these stories are not shared enough. So kind of moving forward. What, what type of stories would you, would you like to hear on our podcast?

Liana Rodriguez (26:00):

Okay. Um, I'd like to say that as a, as an autistic adult involved in neurodiverse self advocacy, um, I do like to hear more stories from individuals who have lived experience of intersectionality that overlap

with their authentic, personal identity, and shared her thoughts and antidotes for inspiring people everywhere. In that sense, I really feel that, uh, this initiative that, uh, both, both of you have actually provided to, uh, the audience of this podcast is really, is really amazing to share. And, uh, I feel that, uh, bringing out this platform, uh, really, um, shows, uh, quite an advancement in best understanding of who we are as people in a, in a society that seems to be more inclusive and diverse.

Kelly Bron Johnson (27:07):

Thank you.

Doug Blecher (27:11):

Thank, thank you so much, Lianna. Um, thanks so much for joining us and, um, sharing your story today.

Speaker 1 (27:18):

Thank you very much as well.