Kelly Bron Johnson (00:00):

Welcome to this episode 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 give visibility to commonly marginalized or oppressed 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 help that by seeing yourself represented in the community, allows you to feel seen.

Doug Blecher (00:30):

And our guest today is TC Wiseman. Uh, TC has a master's degree in leadership and training and a doctoral degree in leadership in a post-secondary context inspired by her late autism diagnosis at 48 years old, TC's research focuses on how higher education leaders can enhance services and outcomes for autistic students in higher learnings. TC, thanks for joining us today.

TC Waisman (01:02):

How are you? Great, great. Thanks for having me.

Doug Blecher (01:06):

W we haven't yet, uh, talked with anyone on this podcast that is an indigenous Pasifika. So we wanted to learn how maybe a little bit how that identity identity affects you as someone on the spectrum.

TC Waisman (01:23):

Yeah, thanks for that. Um, so we pronounce it indigenous Pasifikaa and, um, and Pasifika, it sort of encompasses all of the major islands in the South Pacific major and minor islands in the South Pacific. And we are, we consider ourselves to be one people connected by water. Uh, whereas previously we were told that sort of, we were different islands in different nations, uh, disconnected by water. So this is, uh, this is sort of a newish concept, indigenous Pasifika. Um, so yeah, just wanted to put that out there. Um, and you know, like a lot of people, I think probably listening to this podcast and just in general, um, I can promote very complex multi-ethnic multi-racial identity stratosphere. So I'm indigenous Pasifika, which means that my family lineage comes from several Island nations in the South Pacific. And I was born in Fiji, um, and just dis 23 of me actually, and the results just came back.

TC Waisman (02:17):

Um, and it shows that my bloodline takes me back to the very first people in the South Pacific 50,000 years ago. Um, wow. If that science can be believed at this point. Um, so that's really exciting. Um, uh, my dad is Nepalese and Northern Indian as well, so I am Brown and black and late diagnosed, autistic, all the fun stuff. Um, and so, yeah, so my complex identit affects my perception of self because, um, I find that I tend to identify in pieces. Like for example, I identify as autistic in certain circumstances or black in certain circumstances or indigenous or Brown, but rarely do I get to sort of identify all the gifts of the differences that I have in my bloodline. And so, um, when I'm identifying as being on a spectrum, I still feel like I have to choose spectrum plus, and it's, uh, it's, it becomes too much, um, you know, to be all of it at the same time.

TC Waisman (03:12):

I don't know if that makes sense. Does that make sense?

Kelly Bron Johnson (03:15):

I think I kind of relate to that. That's, you know, I'm a mixed heritage as well. And I know that when I grow up, I kind of felt like I had to kind of keep a balance. Like I had to almost be fair in my representation and be like, well, I'm exactly half quebecois I'm exactly half Caribbean. Right. And it was, uh, you know, now I think I've, uh, I've been able to fully embrace the different identities and not in a way that feels like I am, uh, I'm discounting another one.

TC Waisman (03:47):

Exactly. Yeah. And I'm just coming in terms of that. I mean, I'm turning 52 in a month and, uh, you know, for the most, for most of my life, I've actually not, um, you know, sort of accepted myself as being Brown and black. I've just because I'm visually, I'm seen on the street as black. That's how I identify and I'm, I'm black, so not indigenous, not Brown it's. So, you know, this whole thing ending late, diagnosed autistic at 48 on top of that, uh, you know, I'm learning how to be at 52. I wish I'd known this at 12, so I could have had a lifetime, um, of, of trying to understand myself, but, you know, this is exciting stuff.

Kelly Bron Johnson (04:27):

Well, it's constant growth, right? Yeah. So you have a doctorate in education. So I would imagine you are an expert in the intersection of autism and higher education. Where do you think we are? Not just in making sure that autistic people get the support, they need to be successful in higher education, but also those on the spectrum for people of color or part of the LGBTQ plus community.

TC Waisman (04:52):

Okay. This is a great question. Don't get me started. I'm going to be on here for a couple of minutes to jump in if you want to stop me. Um, so yeah, my doctoral research, uh, I live in Vancouver, but I did this through the university of Calgary and it was focused on autism and higher education. So in particular, my research focused on, um, how higher education leaders, faculty members, and professional staff can enhance outcomes for autistic students in higher ed.

TC Waisman (05:17):

And what I found was that, uh, the couple of things I found one is that there's a gap in the way autistic students, uh, who are my participants in my research were treated and how those were physical disabilities were treated. And that's not to say that autistic folks can't also have physical disabilities, many of us do. Um, and those of us who are autistic and have physical disabilities reported that it was much easier to get accommodations issuesfor the physical disability. No questions asked, boom. Yep. You need that. That's fine. Um, but when autistic students are asking for accommodations, there was, there was, there seemed to be, uh, an unwritten hierarchy of acceptance, um, you know, so physical disability or neurological, uh, differences, that kind of thing. Um, so you know, that was an interesting find that I wasn't really, uh, that wasn't the focus of my research.

TC Waisman (06:05):

So that was an interesting thing to come across. And also, there's not a lot of accountability for ensuring accommodations are being given consistently to autistic students. So you may get one prof willing to give you an accommodation and the very next class, the next prof thinks you're just complaining or asking for too much, and you don't deserve it because you look normal. So, you know, I mean, all of us have gone through this in some form or fashion, if you've tried any course as an adult. Um, so by the time an autistic student goes through the accountability channel and the accessibility office or disability

office, whatever it's called it at that higher education institution, the semester can be half over. We could have lost our executive functioning ability to cope. We might not be able to self-advocate at that point, things might escalate. We might end up quitting the course or the program altogether. So, you know, there are lots of barriers. And what ended up happening in my research finding is that I realized that there needs to be a three tier plan of action to stop me if I'm going too far already.

Kelly Bron Johnson (07:04):

No, no, go ahead.

TC Waisman (07:08):

I'm just worked up, you need to have a three-year plan of action in higher education. So we need to educate the heck out of educators, out of staff and leaders and fellow students. Everyone on campus needs to be educated about autism, to remove the stigma associated with our community. And that needs to happen all year long, not just on our fun infantilizing autistic awareness campaign week, you know, um, that, that kind of, I mean, I'm not going to swear, but I'm going to say that that's BS. We don't, we need, we need to have consistent all year education so that it normalizes, uh, you know, then the, your diversity on campus. Um, second, we need our leaders, our deans, our provosts to support autistic students through the policies, but not just for the policies for the actions. We need our leaders to support accountability relationships between accessibility, counselors, and profs.

TC Waisman (08:00):

Because I don't know if you know, but a lot of accessibility counselors, when you go and see them as an autistic student, they don't talk to your professors. They never meet and talk about the student's needs. And not saying all of them, I'm saying the majority of them. So a counselor will send an email to the prof and they'll just cross their fingers and hope that you get the accommodation. And the only way they know that there's a problem is that the autistic c student then comes back to the office to say, something's wrong. Well, that's great, except for we're autistic. So this puts the burden on us again, you know, and this is exactly playing into our executive functioning issues or social issues or anxiety related issues. So, you know, this, it can't sit on our shoulders and it's not fair.

TC Waisman (08:42):

It wouldn't sit on our shoulders. If we, um, you know, if we had another kind of a disability that's more prominent. Um, and third last in my findings, you know, we have to have an accountability structure that is bigger than just the student professor and makes us ability office. We need a structure that's timely and carry some weight. Uh, right now it's an autistic student has an issue with the combinations. The only option they have is to escalate and go to a, uh, human rights complaint. So it's a zero or a hundred, there's nothing in between. So you need a protocol. Can you believe that? I mean, the, so, so how many of us are going to be able to do that on a daily? How many of us are, we're trying to get to classes we're trying to get on the bus. We have sensory issues.

TC Waisman (09:24):

We're trying to make it through, you know, smells and sounds and all of that. And then you're telling us that we have to fight for our very right to have equitable education. So we need a,we need a program in place. We need a protocol. Um, you know, where, where, uh, I guess it's a, it's a mediation panel is what I called it in my research need a mediation panel that can be struck very quickly with an autistic expert on the panel and by autistic expert I mean, somebody who is autistic, um, you know, the program

director for the program, you're in HR, uh, and, um, the legal somebody representing the legal team, and we need them to meet immediately and talk about the accommodations process and get this done within 24 to 48 hours. Um, and then in the, you know, this is pre escalation into human rights.

TC Waisman (10:11):

So this is the gap standing in the gap between students not getting accommodations, professors not moving, um, and then going to the human rights because let's face it. Well, university is crazy enough to want to go through a human rights complaint, but, you know, the media attention alone will be costly. It'll take students who are interested in a university right out of the running. They won't go to that university. So would it be cheaper and more humane, uh, you know, to support the students to begin with? Yeah. So, okay. Thanks for, thanks for coming to my Ted talk.

Kelly Bron Johnson (10:42):

So not that great. No, but something you said too, it mirrors, uh, I'd say the issues in larger society where there's always this, uh, idea that disabled people are faking it. Yeah, exactly. That we're trying to cheat the system. And we see that mirrored, like, especially, I'd say, and the Canadian government, um, yeah.

Kelly Bron Johnson (11:08):

Um, you know, just, just people trying to, um, get the disability tax credit and, you know, people might be, they might have lost a limb and there, the government is asking them to prove that the limb hasn't grown back after a few years, you know, things like that. And they have to go back and go to the process again. And it's always a very onerous thing, like as if we're trying to cheat the system and get more than we deserve when it's like, well, you know what, this person lost their legs, so why don't we let them, like, why don't we blame them? Yeah. Like, why do we have to like, think that they're lying? And that's a physical thing, you know?

TC Waisman (11:46):

I mean, I laugh, but it's, I'm laughing because it's so ridiculous. Yeah. I mean, don't even get me started on universal basic income or universal medical, or, you know, like, you know, if we, if we just there's this whole other belief system that, you know, people are lazy or they're trying to cheat the system, as you said, you know, and I really come from the school of thought that there is no such thing.

TC Waisman (12:09):

It's, it's, it's, whenever you look at somebody who you might think is lazy, somebody who's just not living up to what you think that they should be living up to often, this is, uh, an issue with the system that's around them. It's a disabling environment, you know, there's misunderstandings about what their needs are. They might not even know what their needs are. So when we come from a place in the system by system, I mean, governmental system, um, family systems, uh, university systems, when we come from a place of, of giving people the, um, you know, sort of the shifty eye, as soon as they walk in the door, like, do you want something from me? Well, then that's how you're going to see, you know, as opposed to being compassionate and trauma informed and human, you know, reaching out with your human feelings rather than, than your, uh, you know, what you've learned as a neo-conservative or neoliberal perspective, which is saying like, you know, uh, you it's, this, you're not earning your it's meritocracy.

TC Waisman (13:04):

You're not earning your way. Therefore you're lazy, you know, without looking at somebody with a full, compassionate eye and saying perhaps everything around them, that, that, that is holding them back is disabling. So I just have a real problem with this. And as a doctor, it's a really big deal for me.

Kelly Bron Johnson (13:20):

Yeah. Well, there's also the problem of this idea that if I give something to this person, then I'm going to lose out personally. Not how it works. Like it's just not, Oh yeah. Oh, okay. This is deep. There's a lot, there's a lot going on. That's the point. That's why we have these discussions on it, all these layers of, of issues and stigma that pile up

Doug Blecher (13:44):

TC, uh, uh, something that I think about a lot is universal design and how it's helpful to every human. So I'm really, I'm really fascinated to learn about something that you're currently doing research on, which is autism and universal design with faculty and 14 other collaborating research researchers at universities, uh, around the world. What's been the goal of doing this research.

TC Waisman (14:12):

Yeah. This is a great research. I'm, co-leading this research with Dr. Kristen Gillespie Lynch. Um, she's a phenomenal, uh, autism researcher and somebody that I really look up to. So it's a great honor to work with her. Um, our research focuses on how autism and universal design training for faculty might improve faculty's knowledge about autism and and their attitudes towards autistic individuals. And hopefully learning about universal design will assist them to understand how they can use UD principles to help all students learn. So not, you know, obviously it's to help autistic students, but by helping autistic students and giving them, , you know, I don't like to use the word combinations. It's really innovations by getting, uh, by creating innovations around autistic students. Those innovations will work for everybody or the majority of people as well. Of course, you know, some people will need, uh, uh, particular they'll have particular needs as well, but you'd use a really strong framework for that.

TC Waisman (15:06):

And, you know, and just a little bit about UD, it's an educational framework. It's based on, on research. It came from the, uh, from the idea of universal design and architecture back in the sixties, when in the U S when they decided, you know, a lot of people came back from the Vietnam war. And all of a sudden we had a lot of young people who were disabled and the realization was that we had no ramps. We had, uh, you know, no access to elevators. There weren't even curb cuts. You know, those little curb cuts on the end of the sidewalk. So you could go down and then into the street, um, there weren't even those on street corners. So the, there was a, uh, a law passed in the sixties in the States and said, okay, if you design any building, you've got to design it with accessibility in mind.

TC Waisman (15:50):

Well, then architects realize that you can design for accessibility, but it can also be really beautiful and functional. So universal design became a thing in architecture, and then it sort of went out from there and now we have it in education. So the premise of it is if you design for accessibility to begin with before anything else, then it can be beautiful and it can be functional for everybody rather than trying to design for a small percentage of people and then redesign after it doesn't make any sense. It doesn't make any sense when you're doing buildings or landscapes. It makes no sense in education as well. So it's about having flexible teaching tools, flexible assessment methods, um, making sure students feel

connected to the, to the work that they're doing and the learning that they're getting engaging with the materials in a meaningful way. And so that's the kind of thing that we're doing in this research, and we're, we're at the data collection stage, which is exciting.

TC Waisman (16:41):

And we'll be analyzing, I think, starting next week and fretting that up. So we're very excited. And the 14 other collaborators are at universities around the world are our participants. We have almost 90 participants who are all faculty members at universities around the world as well. So we're really interested in the kind of data that we're going to get back. They've taken the training, they've assessed it. We've, we've, you know, we've sent them questionnaires after, you know, immediately after and a month after. So we'll see how the training has affected their, um, perspective on autism and their perspective on universal design.

Doug Blecher (17:14):

I love what you said. Um, and I hadn't, I hadn't heard this before innovations rather than accommodations.

TC Waisman (17:20):

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, accommodations, if I have no, I, no truck with the word. It's fine. It's great. But when you look at it in a, in an appreciative inquiry way, and you think about the fact that those of us who require accommodations, instead of it being, you know, as Kelly said earlier, like this is, you know, you're doing something wrong and you're cheating the system. If you look at it from an architectural perspective that, Hey, this is a new innovation, Oh, guess what if we build a curb cut into the sidewalk, uh, the majority of people who use it are not people in wheelchairs they're people with strollers or, uh, people with, uh, you know, rolling bags and people who are moving things in and out of buildings. So these, these become innovations that you can't live without. And, you know, we know through research that the curb cut effect of print, it's called the curb cut effect that the majority of the population will actually choose to use that curb cut.

TC Waisman (18:09):

They'll choose to use the elevator. They'll choose to use the ramp rather than the stairs. Um, so, you know, these are really not just accommodations for a few people. These are innovations for the future of our society,

Kelly Bron Johnson (18:20):

Right. And that's, that's exactly the same thing. I advocate for them in the workplace. Um, these, these kinds of things that make your life easier and then make everybody's lives easier. Like I always kind of saying, well, why would you want to make your life harder? There's, you know, there's nothing wrong with using, like pushing the button to open your door automatically. There's absolutely nothing wrong with that. I know it comes back to that again, when people say, well, its lazy. It's like, no, it's not lazy.

TC Waisman (18:45):

No, I don't miss my 19 setter. I don't miss my 1972 Dodge dart where I had to wind down the window with my hand 15 times.

TC Waisman (18:57):

And also when you said this earlier, you know, it's like when people feel they come from a deficit perspective and they say, you know, well, if I give you that I'm not going to have enough, or it's not as if those of us who are disabled, who were saying, well, you can't use the curb. No, no, no. That's just not right. It's not blocked off or anything. I mean, there's not black, we're not, we're just trying to innovate and you're welcome.

Kelly Bron Johnson (19:16):

Wow. So when we're talking about that, um, how are the, how are intersection intersectional identities of autistic people take into account with, uh, the work you're doing.

New Speaker (19:28):

In this research in particular Um, so we're not specifically looking at autistic individuals identities, um, because it's really about faculty and whether or not this kind of training would, will affect them and change their, their ideas of stigma.

TC Waisman (19:43):

Um, but what is interesting is that the 14 collaborator collaborators are myself and Dr. Kristen Gillespie Lynch, a large number of us are autistic researchers. So we are autistic. So we created the participant. It's a very participatory, this research. We created the, you know, the training itself, we've got, we've, we've had input all along the way and into data analysis and of course, into the writeup. So it's completely autistic informed. And, you know, as you know where there's autistic folks, there are LGBTQ folks and black folks and folks with disabilities at a rate of intersectionalities. So, you know, it's though we're not specifically studying this, uh, you know, autistic people or intersectional identities, we bring our whole selves to the design and in the implementation of the research.

TC Waisman (20:29):

That's amazing.

Doug Blecher (20:31):

Now you recently started the autism training Academy, which offers micro training on autism and autism related subjects in the field of education, healthcare, and government. Why was it important to yo start this Academy?

TC Waisman (20:49):

Yeah, so as part of the research that I did, what I found out was that, um, really, there's a kind of a, and I'm going to be very blunt. There's kind of a, um, a block when it comes to people wanting to be educated about autism, especially people who consider themselves in professional networks, doctors, lawyers, uh, faculty members, things like that. Um, you know, they are experts in their field and that's wonderful. Um, you can be an expert in your field and you can be having a gap in your knowledge. And when it comes to, you know, what I would like to say is correct data about autistic people are, are either for us by us trainings. Um, they're, it's, it's, uh, it's sort of sporadic, it's few and far between, and we're not connected in any, in any real way. And so I decided that we needed to start an Academy, um, an autism training Academy.

TC Waisman (21:38):

That's, evidence-based, uh, you know, that has consistency, it's asynchronous. You can take it online anytime. Um, and it's for, so there's, you know, there's three different tiers there currently it's education for those in healthcare, those in education and those in government sectors. Um, so, you know, my daughter, who's 24 years old, just got diagnosed as autistic last month and she's in law. And so this becomes a very big challenge for her. How much does she, you know, how much does she actually, um, disclose, uh, law a very tough field when it comes to, uh, you know, competition, um, and how safe will she be? So the, this is why I started the Academy. Uh, to be very frank I was pissed that the people who were, who were dealing with us, who are professionals, you know, involved in our lives in a very real way as healthcare professionals, as educators don't know enough about autism, of what they know often is misinformation, um, and misguided.

TC Waisman (22:40):

So, you know, uh, this is, I, I thought we need to start an Academy. We need this, we need to be able to give, allow the experts to have their dignity, but also to be trained in a way that is vetted by us.

Kelly Bron Johnson (22:53):

I was going to say that your daughter is, is, you know, she's in good company. There's Lydia XD Brown, there's Shane Neumeier there's, um, Haley I'm forgetting her last name.

Doug Blecher (23:04):

Haley Moss.

Kelly Bron Johnson (23:04):

There we go. Um, yeah, so there's tons of amazing autistic lawyers out there, um, that she can emulate or at least learn from. And, and, uh, yeah, they've paid the path, luckily. So yeah, we need more, we need more.

TC Waisman (23:18):

thank you for that.

Kelly Bron Johnson (23:20):

Uh, so how can people learn more about the training Academy?

TC Waisman (23:24):

Um, yeah, so we've just started, and right now we have a beta website app at the moment.

TC Waisman (23:28):

It's very beta. So, you know, there's not much information, but it's, uh, www.autismtraining.academy, not com but.academy. So autism training dot Academy, uh, we're still in the early stages and we're having a soft launch in the next month. We're going to slowly add courses, uh, onto ther, it's micro training. So it's, every course is an hour or less. The free courses are 15 minutes or less. Um, and they're all written by autistic researchers or autistic experts in our fields, uh, or subject matter fields, uh, or, uh, experts who we've vetted. So, you know, the people from our community and vetted. Um, so yeah, again, it's very exciting. We're offering courses. The first courses are for faculty. Um, and then there's an introduction to autism for the general public that one's going to be the free one. And then we're moving

into those for first responders and for about sensory, um, issues, and then about the intersection between autism and ADHD. So it's, again, these are courses about autism and the intersections with autism,

Doug Blecher (24:28):

Uh, TC moving, moving forward. We're just kind of in the early stages of intersections on the spectrum, what, what issues, um, you know, topics do you feel like we should be talking about that don't get nearly enough attention.

TC Waisman (24:44):

Thanks for asking this question, because honestly, nobody really ever asks this question, um, about intersectional intersectionality. Um, so I know that our intersectionsl community is going through difficult times at the moment. I'd love to hear what's happening with my autistic community members who are aging and racialized. I don't know what's happening out there. What are they feeling about what's happening right now, politically and socially at this time? It's, it's tough times. Um, I'd also really like to know about autistic individuals who are from different cultures that move to North America. I'd like to know what they're going through, not just about the pandemic, but what are you going through if you're autistic in, from a different culture? What does that look like coming into this culture? I, I don't, I don't have an idea of that. And I'd love to know, um, you know, basically I want to hear how our autistic community is doing and how they're finding resilience or, or not finding resilience and how they're connecting with our community at large.

Kelly Bron Johnson (25:37):

Well, we're going to try and find, find, try and find these people, get them on.

TC Waisman (25:41):

I'll put it out there for you.

Doug Blecher (25:43):

Please do all super important discussions to be had. Well, well, TC, thanks so much for joining us, making time for us early in the morning, uh, really enjoyed the conversation.

TC Waisman (25:58):

Oh, thank you. Both. You guys are excellent. I was so nervous coming on and you just made me feel so comfortable and before I knew it it's over. So you guys are fun and a great team. So thank you so much for listening to my rant.