

PODCAST Episode 181

Fri, May 10, 2024 8:34AM 52:24

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

mental health, disability, art, feel, absolutely, create, community, talk, experience, exhibit, amazing, social media, great, project, point, vancouver, disabled individuals, voices, advocacy, nonprofit

SPEAKERS

Ryan Fleury, Rabiah Dhaliwal, Steve Barclay, Rob Mineault

R Rob Mineault 00:10
Hey and welcome to another episode of AT Banter.

S Steve Barclay 00:30
Banter, banter.

R Rob Mineault 00:32
Hey is of course the podcast where we talk with advocates and members of the disability community to educate and inspire better conversation about disability. Hey, my name is Rob Mineault. And joining me today, Mr. Rynochos himself, Mr. Ryan Fleury. I want to be Rob Mineault. Oh, man, you can't. But however you do have nachos named after you. Yeah, I've been thinking about this all week by putting way too much thought in about nachos.

R Ryan Fleury 01:09
Cook Book coming soon.

R Rob Mineault 01:10
That's right. And hey, look who else it is. Mr. Steve Barclay.

S Steve Barclay 01:16
Yeah, I'm here. Yeah.

R Rob Mineault 01:19
And thrilled to be here.

S Steve Barclay 01:21
The enthusiasm, I am bubbling with the enthusiasm.

R Ryan Fleury 01:25
Well, you should be after the game last night. while I was getting this. I bailed on the second period.

R Rob Mineault 01:39
So things are going well, in that sense?

S Steve Barclay 01:43
They went very well.

R Rob Mineault 01:46
Excellent. I'm very happy for all those Canucks fans that have been in a bit of a drought for what has it been? 10 years? 12?

S Steve Barclay 01:52
Yeah. Something like that. Yeah.

R Rob Mineault 01:54
Well, good. Well, that's you know, it's the excitement here in Vancouver is palpable then. Is there another game like Friday night?

S Steve Barclay 02:03
Friday.

- R** Rob Mineault 02:04
Yeah, it's gonna be a zoo out there. It's going to be nice and a lot of hockey going on. So make sure to stay out of the downtown core this weekend.
- S** Steve Barclay 02:14
Yep. Sunday too.
- R** Ryan Fleury 02:16
Oh, they're playing Edmonton. Yeah.
- R** Rob Mineault 02:22
Oh, that's really interesting. You know, it's funny because you know how much of a hockey noob I am but ...
- S** Steve Barclay 02:31
I was impressed when you said Canucks fan.
- R** Rob Mineault 02:34
... but the funny thing about it is I got a hockey jersey at a thrift store and it's actually an Edmonton Oilers Jersey so that can be fun. Maybe I should maybe I should go downtown on the weekend wearing my Oilers Jersey.
- S** Steve Barclay 03:02
There's probably quicker ways to get beat up but you do you.
- R** Rob Mineault 03:07
I probably won't. I really don't have a dog in the race and I'm happy that people are having fun and whatever.
- S** Steve Barclay 03:15
I'm just thrilled they won the first game of the series because all of the press beforehand was basically writing off the Canucks. Like the way the sports writers were making it sound, the Canucks shouldn't even show up to play. Like they should just go golf.

R

Rob Mineault 03:34

There you go. Well maybe this will be a rags to riches story it'll be it'll be a story out of the Mighty Ducks and they will do the Flying V and make the last minute winning goal to win the cup. There you go. Send them an email, Steve let them know they should do that. Yeah email the coaches. It worked for Emilio. Yep. All right, enough of that. See, that's the other thing I like about hockey season it's very easy to get you guys riled up and talking about something. I just have to bring up hockey. So yeah, the podcast is on easy mode for the next however long these playoffs last.

R

Ryan Fleury 04:26

Two months

R

Rob Mineault 04:30

There you go. Anyways, Hey, Ryan.

R

Ryan Fleury 04:36

Yeah, Rob. What the heck are we doing today? Today we're talking with a guest who is doing incredible work and I highly suggest our audience go and follow the work that she is involved in. She is the founder and director of the Voices for Hope Foundation. Welcome to the show, Rabiah Dhaliwal.

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 04:56

Hey guys. I'm so happy to be here today.

R

Ryan Fleury 04:58

I'm so glad you could be here. Well, I was doing some research and looking at some of the stuff you're doing, and was like, how do I introduce her? Where do I start?

R

Rob Mineault 05:12

Yeah, I have to I will give Ryan a pass on that. I did the same thing and was like, she has done so much. And there's so many things going on, where to even start? So why don't we start by maybe just give us a little bit of background just about yourself. And then we'll we'll start to talk about all the different work that you've been doing.

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 05:39

Absolutely. Yeah. So I'm Rabiah. I'm 24 years old, and I'm a mental health activist, a researcher and I run my own nonprofit, the Voices for Hope Foundation. I'm really involved in work that caters to advocating for individuals with disabilities and with mental health issues due to my own experiences I had growing up. I recently just graduated from University of British Columbia with my Bachelors of Science. And right now, yeah, I'm working as a researcher as well at BC Children's. So yeah, lots of different things going on. And it's always hard for me to also decide what to start with on how to introduce myself too.

R

Rob Mineault 06:21

Okay, so why don't we start with talking about Voices for Hope Foundation? Because I'm really curious because, you know, 24, that's incredibly young to a founding a nonprofit. So I'm kind of curious to sort of hear about the origins of it. What prompted you to sort of to put in the incredible amount of work that it takes to spin something like that up?

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 06:50

Absolutely. Yeah. So the Voices for Hope Foundation, we started in 2020 when I was 20 years old, during the pandemic, right when it was beginning. And I've had my own experiences growing up with mental health issues, dealing with things like anxiety and depression. And as someone who has South Asian, a lot of discussions around mental health are very taboo topic in my culture, because a lot of people from my culture, especially once living here, they came here as immigrants, including my parents. So there's the big survivalist mentality, you know, you just push through things, you don't talk about the things that are bothering you. And I think for me, and so many people in my generation, it's gotten to the point where we said, enough is enough, especially when it came during the pandemic, where so many people were struggling with things like mental health and where disabled individuals who are already dealing with so much their problems were only exacerbated by a global pandemic. And so with a really amazing student, I decided to found the Voices for Hope Foundation. And so a lot of the work that we do is focused on education, advocacy, and increasing access, and especially around elevating the voices of marginalized communities, including Black, Indigenous and People of Color, and LGBTQ+ Community, as well as the disabled community, in order to foster hope and mental well being. We share stories of individuals that have dealt with mental health struggles with other struggles in their life, we do projects and campaigns. And I just felt like there was a gap, at least in my community, I grew up in Surrey. It's a big South Asian community. And, you know, it's just a super diverse area. But discussions around mental health were really lacking. And I felt like it was something that was needed. And we really want to fill that gap in. And that's kind of how the organization came to be.

R

Rob Mineault 08:41

It is really such an important topic for a variety of different reasons. I mean, I think that in say, the past 10 years, I think that we have made slow progress in terms of helping reduce some of the stigma around mental health, I feel like people are a little bit more open to talking about it, especially since the pandemic, because like you said, it really illuminated a lot and really

exacerbated a lot of issues that people were having. And it did get the conversations going. But I also feel like that may be happening but I don't know that as a society in terms of, of developing social programs for it. I don't know that we're doing a heck of a lot about all of this. So it sounds like you're sort of have two prongs. There's sort of the education to reduce the stigma and then there's a sort of another prong where you're trying to sort of raise awareness about the the inequity of services that's going on?

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 09:48

Yeah, absolutely. So before I started Voices For Hope I actually had the opportunity to speak at the House of Commons in 2019. So about a year before the pandemic on increasing mental health parity and introducing some then called the Mental Health Parity Act. And advocating for that was something that kind of jumped started all this work because in Canada, physical health services aren't funded, they're funded greater than mental health services are. And so there's a big disparity in that. And so that's where my advocacy work sort of started. And so with Voices For Hope, we've had opportunities to speak at the International Women's Day March on the lack of mental health care services for women in particular, especially women from marginalized backgrounds. And so increasing awareness of service is a huge part of what we do. And we try to fill those gaps in small ways. Like we're a very grassroots organization, we're run completely by students and youth. And we've had the opportunity, for example, during the pandemic, we did a frontline health care workers project, because we kind of had to shift our focus very quickly. We're like, what is the need right now? And so we did a project around creating 200 care packages for frontline health care workers, because we knew that this was a time where they were facing so much burnout and stress and trauma, when it came to their mental health. And we've done other projects like that now, as well. We recently did a project where we donated wellness supplies and art supplies to the outhouse community and Wally to promote mental well being. And so it's a huge part of what we do.

R

Rob Mineault 11:23

Mental health and physical health should be treated exactly the same and I feel like we're still a long way from from thinking about it in those terms as sort of a general society. Do you kind of see that? Is it? Is it getting better? Is it a generational thing, or sort of the younger generation is a little bit more in tune with the idea that mental health is something that you need to take care of just like your physical health? How are you seeing people react to the movement?

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 11:56

Yeah, that's a great question. I definitely think it's getting better, though. slow progress. Progress, like you were saying, I think it is a generational thing. I like to call, you know, people that speak out on these taboo topics, cycle breakers. I really believe that my generation are kind of breaking these generational cycles and curses. And we're in a privileged position to do so, you know, we're in the age of social media, and which has its own pros and cons. But I think a really big part of it is the power of community building. I see so many young people openly sharing their journeys with mental health in order to reach others. And that's kind of how I started, I started sharing my own journey, and had so many like minded people reaching out to me and it just I think it makes me feel less alone. So I definitely see a change. Yeah, you're

right. It's not treated like physical health are seen as so separated, but they are so connected. And just like we go for a yearly checkups, you know, to the dentist, or, you know, to our family doctors, for physical health, it's, it should be the same thing going for your mental health. You know, I think a lot of people conflate mental health and mental illness. So that's another point of confusion for a lot of people because well, we might not all have mental illness, we all have mental health at the end of the day, and that's something that needs to be taken care of.

R

Rob Mineault 13:16

1,000%. And there should be there should be services. I mean, everybody I think could benefit from a mental health checkup, even if it's just once a month. It's the same thing as going to like a walk in clinic view, you know, you sprained your ankle, you know, you're able to go into a walk in clinic and get somebody and see it, the same thing it should be if you're in some sort of an emotional crisis, with whatever's happens to be going on with you that month. I mean, you should have access to some sort of a service that's not going to set you back, say \$150 an hour. There's a lot of people out there that certainly could benefit from from counseling or therapy that just are completely locked out of that, because they don't have the extra 150, 300, \$450 a month to actually go and get some counseling or some therapy.

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 14:12

Absolutely. Yeah, I completely agree. It's, and that's what I think isn't talked about enough as well when we talk about mental health services. We're almost talking about it from an equality standpoint, we're not considering equity. You know, not everyone starts off on the same footing. People have cultural stigmas, they have financial barriers that come into play when accessing these services. And that's why I don't think it's just like one sort of blanket solution for everyone. And that definitely makes the issue more complicated, but we need to look at it that way because we're all different. We all come from different backgrounds, different life experiences, and I think that's what's also still creating that gap is we're not considering it from that perspective. We're just looking for a blanket solution that's supposed to fit everyone and that just doesn't make sense in a world with over seven billion people that think.

R

Rob Mineault 15:03

I can sympathize it's a complicated problem. And it's not something that, that, you know, the government and you know, you can't just wave a magic wand and instantly create a bunch of social services that's going to fit everybody's need. But I think that the important part is to get the conversations going and get the governments to recognize that this is a really big problem, and that we need some sort of solutions to address it. Now that you are in the advocacy world, and you know, engaging with politicians and stuff, do you feel like they're on board?

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 15:46

Yeah, I think I've had the opportunity to talk to many politicians from different political parties, and different, you know, people in the advocacy space, and I think it's yeah, the problem is the issue is so complicated. Like, I remember when I spoke at the House of Commons, you know, I

had so many people come up to me and say that, wow, like, we're so glad you're addressing this. But at the same time, like, it's so complicated, especially when it comes to mental health, because there's provincial jurisdictions and federal, and the lines get really blurry, and you're almost being ping pong around. Like, I remember getting suggested you should go talk to the Province of BC about this, because we can't do anything but then, you know, they're saying the same thing. And so it's not easy. But I did see people that, you know, like, for me, what tells me that I'm on the right path, is just regular people coming up to me, not politicians, not anyone else, just that, you know, that I made their voices feel heard. And so, honestly, I hope that it changes, but it's definitely slow progress, because I just think it's such a bureaucratic issue with so many bureaucratic barriers. But I know I'm on the right path. And there's so many more people like me that are doing this work that are trying to bring it to the forefront. And I think that's all we can keep doing well, at the same time taking care of our own mental health. It's a marathon, not a sprint?

R

Rob Mineault 17:07

Yeah. Do you kind of feel like those two prongs are really tied together? So we have to reduce the stigma and educate people about mental health in order to make the conversations happen in order to sort of facilitate systemic change?

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 17:25

Yeah, absolutely. I think, you know, giving people the encouragement, a safe space to voice their feelings is the first step, right. That's the only way. Like, it was very scary for me speaking on a national platform about my own mental health. I'm someone that is not immune to those stigmas and was also very afraid. And so I think it is the first step in creating systemic change. But at the same time, I think there is a point where, you know, like, we've had the conversations, and enough is enough, now we need to see that systemic change in action. And that's the responsibility of our lawmakers, our policymakers, you know, to lead that change. So I think we can get caught up in performative discussion sometimes. So it's a fine line to tread.

R

Rob Mineault 18:09

Right. Well, you know, and it's funny, you mentioned social media. And I really, I mean, this is, again, this is where I get a little bit frustrated with a rate of change. Because here we have, yes, we're reducing stigma, but you know, yet there's still, we're still lacking in terms of real solutions for the people on the ground that are that are suffering and that need mental health services that don't have access to it. But then we also have something like, say, social media, where we've done the studies, we know, the negative effects of a lot of social media platforms. But yet nobody seems to be doing anything about it. It really comes down to individuals that have to sort of deal with and manage any sort of negative connotations of social media platforms. And it can be very, very difficult for a lot of people. You know, we know that suicide rates have gone up for certain people who, who really get lost within social media. I mean, yes, it has a lot of positives, but it also has all these negatives. But you know, again, like there, there doesn't seem to be any action in anybody sort of stepping in and trying to sort of mitigate some of the, the negative parts of social media because I really do feel like that it that does lend that is part of the the problem of why we're seeing an uptick in mental health issues.

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 19:32

Yeah, absolutely. It's so complicated, right? Like, like, especially for me, like I'm part of Gen Z. And so I grew up for the most part of my life, not knowing what it's like to even live without social media. And I 100% agree that in how often has played a negative role even in my life when it comes to my mental health and actually making those issues worse. But I think the best that we can do is again, inquiry some amount of safe spaces online. And that's why, for example, in with my Foundation, we make it our mission to share people's stories, on social media, and hopefully that reaches one person who maybe is stuck in the endless doom scrolling and you know, negativity and can provide a different perspective. But I agree that it almost doesn't seem like a lot of the time that there's a lot of attention paid to the negative side of social media, and it is on individuals. And when you're a kid, you don't necessarily know how to manage that very well.

R

Rob Mineault 20:31

Right. Yeah, I think it really comes down to the platforms themselves, I think that they're a big part of this problem, because I think that on the face, you know, social media has so many positives. It can, it can create communities in very short order and very easily. People can connect easier than ever before in history, yet, the way that these platforms operate, and the algorithms, and it's all the sort of the inner workings of it, that, you know, that basically create these, these dopamine slot machines, that I feel like, that's really the problem. It's not the platforms themselves and what they do, it's just that the way that they're running, it's totally possible that legislation like we can we can, somebody can step in and say, look, you have to run these platforms in a certain way so that they're not going to actually be damaging to people's mental health.

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 21:31

Absolutely, yeah. And I know, there has been some work around that, like I know, like on things like Instagram or Tik Tok, there are certain keywords when you search them, like, you know, relating to like mental health and suicide, you know, there are warnings in place, but I almost think, yeah, it's definitely not enough. And there needs to be more from a policy standpoint, and like more initiatives that, you know, just helping you navigate social media, because yeah, algorithms can be super dangerous, you know? I took a computer science class, it's like garbage in garbage out, right? Like, you're just stuck in that constant cycle based on what you search. And all the times when you're dealing with mental health issues in your youth, you're not searching and looking at the right things, and you're all stuck in that endless going, just going down this endless rabbit hole.

R

Rob Mineault 22:21

Yeah, that's, that's exactly right. I can't even imagine, you know, what it would be like growing up as a kid, as a teen, and just completely dialed into social media. It's really we're really seeing nearly the effects now. And it's just, you know, again, it's, I think that this just underlies

that the sheer importance that we really need to get mental health services spun up as some options for people so that they can sort of deal with it.

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 22:55

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. And I think, in a way, like, indirectly, that's kind of what inspired the work that I did with the Touchscapes Art Exhibit as well, like, you know, technology. Again, it's just been at the forefront of my own life for so long. And I've always had an interest with blending it with the things that I do with the things I'm passionate about. And I think that yeah, there's in a way, like, there's a lot of positives when it comes to technology, but like you're saying, there needs to definitely be more. More safeguards in place for kids. Yeah, absolutely.

R

Rob Mineault 23:32

So you brought up Touchscape, it's kind of how you came on our radar. We're mainly a Disability advocacy podcast, but I really feel like, you know, mental health really does tie in very closely with, with the disability community as well. And you know, in some cases, there are definitely mental illnesses that would qualify as, as an invisible disability. So really, they're they're very, they're very closely knit communities. Could you tell us a little bit about the Touchscapes Exhibit and how you guys got involved with it?

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 24:06

Sure. Yeah. So maybe I'll start from the beginning. So during my time at UBC, I became involved in advocating for students with disabilities. And as part of this advocacy, some of the gaps that we were seeing were that disabled students didn't have a safe place just to decompress and regulate. And so I was part of the effort to create the first ever sensory room at UBC suggests a safe space for students with disabilities to recharge, you know, to take care of their needs, catering towards both physical disabilities and mental disabilities. And that was my first sort of introduction to sensory technology and blending that in a way that can help people. And so when I graduated, I knew that I wanted to do something more. I've always been interested in art on my own. If I had been an artist, and so I remember searching for project ideas to do. And, you know, I was just typing keywords like art and sensory technology. And I came across some articles about exhibits being held in Europe for people with disabilities, specifically visual impairments in different mediums that weren't visual. And I did more research and realize that something like this hasn't happened in Western Canada before. And that's kind of what jump started this whole process. And so eventually, over a year of work, what came to be was Touchscapes. So it's an art exhibit, the first of its kind in Western Canada, for the visually impaired and for individuals with other sensory needs. So what we're doing with Touchscapes is using 3d printed technology to recreate replicas of prominent historical art pieces and transforming them into tactile art so visitors can explore them through touch. So what kind of art pieces have you done? Yeah, so we have done some really amazing classical art pieces that we're displaying right now. For example, Georgia O'Keefe's Flower Abstraction, Pablo Picasso, Weeping Woman, Rene Marguerite, the Son of Man, so really famous historical art pieces that weren't accessible to everyone in a visual form before we're putting into a more universal form. And then we also have some original art pieces from a local Vancouver artists named Lily By. And so we wanted to really kind of bridge that gap that we're seeing between

technology and art and disability and create an experience that just allow for deeper connection with art. And also at the same time educating people who maybe take things like sight for granted.

R

Rob Mineault 26:51

And this is a great example of universal design through an Art lens. Everybody can really benefit from it. If somebody who's sighted could very well get just as much out of it, because you're engaged, you're able to engage with the art using a bunch of your different senses.

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 27:09

Absolutely, yeah. And universal design was a huge concept that we considered in designing the exhibit, you know, we were a big point for us was considering what senses to appeal to. You know, we considered things like adding audio, and smell, but we truly felt like tactile, our touch was the least subjective and the most universal, because especially when it comes to art. After a certain point, you're adding your own subjectivity to it. Like for example, if you add things like audio and smell, you know, you really have to go based off your own interpretation, especially for using classical art pieces for which we don't have the artists with us. So we really thought that touch would be the most universal that everyone can enjoy. And it was a very eye opening experience for me as well, being a visual artists all of my life.

R

Rob Mineault 27:56

So now, you said that this has been in the works for about a year. Is that right?

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 28:00

Yeah, about a year. It was definitely a process of finding the right partners and the correct the funding. And at the end, it really came together and was an amazing collaborative effort between my Foundation, the Voices for Hope Foundation, as well as the New Art Foundation of Vancouver - they are a grassroots foundation that do a lot to bring new art experiences to the forefront in Vancouver. And we were also supported by Canada's Walk of Fame and some really other amazing sponsors. And, yeah, I would definitely say that's one of the most difficult parts of a project like this, getting the right people on board who see your vision, especially when it's something so close to my heart. You know, you definitely want to be paired with the right people when bringing something like this to life.

R

Rob Mineault 28:47

Now, you said that is the first time in Western Canada that there has been anything like this. Did you sort of take this template from some other exhibit somewhere else? What was kind of the inspiration behind it?

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Rabiah Dhaliwal 29:00

Yeah, we did some research. And I believe, like, for example, the Louvre like in Paris, like they have had some kind of similar exhibits for individuals with visual impairments. And something like this has also happened in Ontario before. So we definitely took inspiration from the way they went about things other than just adding our own twist. For example, with, you know, having artwork from local Vancouver artists as well. And then we wanted to make sure that we were not just educating people about the art, but also educating general visitors that maybe don't have disabilities about why something like this is important. So we had some really amazing guest speakers during our two Opening Receptions that talked about things like the importance of universal design for learning. We had an amazing Paralympic athlete who is completely blind, who spoke about her experience and not feeling like she was good enough growing up to be involved in things like art. And so, education was a huge part of our exhibit, because we realized that we don't need to educate disabled individuals on the issues they already have. You know, we want to make sure the general public also knows why this is an issue so they can spread the word to other people as well. Because, you know, if you're disabled, you know, the issues you have, but you're almost feels like you're screaming from the rooftops about it, and no one's hearing you. At least that's been my experience growing up. So, so education was a huge part of the exhibit as well.

R

Rob Mineault 30:35

Yeah, well, it absolutely is for the general public who just automatically will think, well, you know, art, obviously, it's a visual medium, somebody who's visually impaired can't enjoy it. It's so important for exhibits like this, for them to go to and to realize that, yeah, you know, what, though, with a little bit of adaptation, with doing things a little bit of a different way, that's absolutely not the case.

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 30:59

Yeah, definitely. And we want to be the first to do it in Western Canada, but we don't want to be the last. We want to encourage other art galleries, you know, to see what we've done and take it on in their own ways as well and create art in ways that isn't visual, because it doesn't always have to be visual, right? And it was just so amazing for me, seeing people interact with the art, you know, and you notice things differently in a tactile form than maybe you would visually, and, you know, people with disabilities have their own unique experiences. And we all do. And so when it comes to art, you're able to find new meaning in different mediums. And that was the most exciting part for me, like just seeing people finally get our vision, no pun intended. And just, you know, it was just, it was just so amazing. Like, we just had our two opening receptions. And we had people that were completely sighted and those who had visual impairments, and everyone interacting with the art in their own ways. And, you know, we played, we played games with people as well, you know, trying to get them to guess which art piece it was by closing their eyes. And it was just a really amazing experience to see it come together.

R

Rob Mineault 32:09

I'm sure, especially after a year of really hard work. Now, so I should I should pause here to say

that the exhibition has been open since I think April 28, right?

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Rabiah Dhaliwal 32:29

Yeah. So April 20, was our we did a special group reception to give disabled individuals first priority at seeing the exhibit. And so since then, we've been open on Saturdays and Sundays and we're open from 12 to 5pm on Saturdays and Sundays until June 1.

R

Rob Mineault 32:49

Right. So how does it feel for you, though, after a year of all the planning to actually be there on those opening weeks? I mean, that must have just been exhilarating.

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 33:02

Absolutely, it was such a blur. We had our public opening just this past Saturday on May 4. And, again, for me, it was just seeing everyone come together and finally understand what we were trying to do. Because sometimes it takes people a while to catch up when you're doing something different. And so many people enjoyed hearing, guest speakers, you know, and their experiences. And I think it tied everything together. The guest speakers were definitely my favorite part of the program. And for me, it just felt like this is something I've definitely poured my heart and soul into for over a year. And it's yeah, it's just feels like it felt really exhilarating. Like, I still can't find the words like it makes me emotional thinking about it. Yeah, just talking to people who said, wow, like, I'm completely blown away, like I thought I can never like, you know, access art, like because art, again, it's art exhibits in museums, they can be snobby, sometimes, you know, like, we always see signs, like, you know, don't touch the art. And our whole point was to be rule breakers, you know, and we're this time, we're telling people to touch the art, and we're giving you a completely different experience. And I think it, it was, it was more comfortable for people in that way, you know, that you're able to interact, and it was just a funner experience. And I found it funner than, you know, a traditional museum setting as well.

R

Rob Mineault 34:31

Totally. And you know, and there's a place for it. And like I said, it's it's something for everybody. I mean, that's the magic of universal design. And that's what, you know, the the education component that you really want to drive forward this idea of universal design. It's in the name, like it's good for everybody. It gives access to everybody. It's not just for people who are visually impaired and so building things in a different way, it's just really shifting your perspective and changing the way that we look at things and do things. That's all we really need to do to really build out, you know, a really, truly accessible society.

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 35:07

Absolutely. And I think for me, like going back, you know, to my background in science, and you know, medicine, I often think about like the medical model versus the social model of

know, medicine, I often think about, like, the medical model versus the social model of disability, and how oftentimes we think of disability as some sort of deficiency or abnormality. And if you're disabled, you feel like this, you're not built to survive in this world. But the reality is so different, where the world around you is not built with you and your needs in mind, you know, and disability isn't something to be cured or fix. It's not an impairment, but it's just a different way of being. Just like, so many other things like your age, your gender, your race, you know, and so on and it's about time, like, we change that narrative. And I think projects like ours are starting that and, you know, just pushing ourselves to do better. And on this project, I really reflected on my own relationship, in the ways that I'm able to engage or perhaps not engage with the world. And you know, and I think those are important questions to ask ourselves throughout our lives, because, you know, I think I read a statistic, it's like, at any point in your life, like, we're only temporarily abled, and at any point in our life, you can become disabled.

R

Rob Mineault 36:22

Yeah, I mean, we talked about that all the time on the show. The disability community is one of the only communities that anybody really can enter it at any point, and probably will, even if it's just temporary. You break your leg, you know, what, guess what you're, you're using assistive technology to get around on a crutch, you're using a mobility aid, essentially, even if it's temporary. So you know, we're all headed there, at one point and another. So it's really, it's really ridiculous when you when you take a step back and think about it and go, we're really dumb to create this society that is inaccessible to this community that probably we're all headed to anyways.

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 37:01

Absolutely. I really couldn't have said it better myself. And yeah, and that was a big point for our exhibit was like, again, removing just the borders around exclusivity. And yeah, I don't know why people struggle with the concept. It's funny, because, you know, I remember also hearing like, in school, like, you know, if you wear glasses, like that is technically a disability, right? But we don't see certain things that way. And we like to separate ourselves, but just like you said, we're all heading there. And so it would be so much easier for all on the same page. And you know, we just create a society that is universally benefits everyone and caters to our diverse needs.

R

Rob Mineault 37:41

Yeah. Yeah. It's a really interesting question. And one that I have to wonder if if anybody's really like, sort of dove into the notion of why disability really makes people uncomfortable. A lot of times, that they're uncomfortable to talk about it. And part of me thinks that part of the reason for that is just that people don't want to think about being you know, being blind or being visually impaired or having mobility issues, even though that might be happening, they just, they're uncomfortable with that thought.

S

Steve Barclay 38:16

Well, you hear it all the time for people, right? They say things like, oh my god, I could never be blind. That would be awful. And, you know, sometimes they say it around blind people, which is really annoying. But yeah, it's fear, right? It's just fear. You know, they they don't, they don't want to experience it, I guess. And they, they don't know how to deal with it if they had to. Yeah, so they're afraid of it.

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 38:47

Definitely. Yeah, I completely agree. I think I think another point is that, I don't know at least this has been my experience. Oftentimes, people yeah, there's the fear and to kind of get around the idea of disability in conversation on disability almost seems like euphemism and some euphemistic language. You know, like using different words for disability, you know, like differently abled and special needs and oftentimes, at least in my experience it's often best to ask people. Because, again, everyone's going to be different but and that's one thing I really liked about our exhibit, we brought together individuals from the disabled community, we brought together non disabled individuals and you know, it allowed people and it forced people in the same room to have those conversations and to almost address that awkwardness and that fear that they feel oftentimes and seeing that disabled people are just like any other people right and that we can wait like you said, we're all headed towards eventually.

S

Steve Barclay 39:47

That's right. Key word being people, not disabled.

R

Rob Mineault 39:50

Yeah, that's right. And you know, in in some ways to you mean, you ask anybody in the in the disability community and I'm sure that you know, at the forefront of what they really want is they want people to understand and to learn. They want to educate people, that's much more of a priority to them than the language that is used around it. And again, I think you said it beautifully. You have to ask the question. The more important thing to most people in the community it's just going to be that you're talking to them in the first place, and you're willing to learn because that's really what we need.

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 40:26

Absolutely. Yeah, I think, I don't think a lot of times people tend to come from like, a bad place when they're there. It's fear, right? Like you're saying, like, questions, because they don't want to feel like they're nitpicking, or, you know, bothering a person with these questions or offending someone. But again, in my experience, it's almost like, people are always thankful you made the effort to ask, because you're seeing them as a whole person, you're seeing them for all of them. I heard this great saying, like, you can, you know, you can see me for all the other things they do, you can see me for my job before, you know, who I am, like a mother or a father or whatever, like, but if you don't see me for my whole experience for my disability, then you're not really seeing me, you know, you can't separate the two. And I think that's like a really beautiful thing that I wish more people have realized.

R

Rob Mineault 41:13

Yeah, this is why exhibits like this, like touch escapes, is so important, because you know, it's getting out there in the public. It's bringing people together, and being able to interact. We need dozens more of these, not to not to throw any more work your way, but make 12 more of these, damn it.

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 41:34

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. I mean, we hope to have future iterations of the exhibit in different ways. And to make it bigger, take it to different provinces. And so that's the bigger vision that we eventually do see, but I think this is just such a great starting point. And, again, it encourages other art galleries, other artists to think for a minute to again, question their relationship with an ableist world, you know, and try to make art differently. Art that's available to everyone, you know, then I think we did our job, right.

R

Rob Mineault 42:09

Yeah.

S

Steve Barclay 42:10

Are you familiar with Carmen Papilla?

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 42:13

Yeah, he's a visually impaired artist, right? Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I've definitely heard of I think I've heard of some of the work that he does. So amazing.

S

Steve Barclay 42:25

Yeah. When you started talking about this, he came to mind immediately as somebody who would be a really great collaborator with you.

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 42:33

Yeah. It's funny, you mentioned that we are hoping eventually to create a documentary around the process of this creating this exhibition, you know, and then maybe having interviews with individuals like visually impaired artists from the community. And just as another piece of that education piece, educating the general public about why this is important. Yeah, yeah. So that's really funny you mentioned that.

R

Rob Mineault 42:57

I'm curious to know about the organization, how big is the team?

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 43:01

Yeah, I mean, so we have two directors, myself, and my co director, Gunreet. And then we have around 20 volunteers, that help us with all things from marketing to project management and our campaigns. And these are all student volunteers as well. And so when I say it's very much a youth led initiative, it very much is and we're super proud of that, you know, to be defying those age expectations and creating, you know, a nonprofit. Yeah, it's, it's definitely not easy, but we're so proud. Absolutely.

R

Rob Mineault 43:35

And I mean, these are the types of nonprofits that we need more of. We all we all have sort of involvement with different nonprofits here and there, there is a real need for youth and for for young blood to come in and really take the reins on some of this stuff. So I think it's amazing what you guys are doing.

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 43:59

Thank you. That means a lot. Yeah, I think, yeah, everyone brings a different perspective, right? And with age, you know, it's interesting, like, I remember a lot of people saying, oh, you run your own nonprofit, like, how old are you? You know, and I totally get that, you know, when you first hear it, it's like, oh, wow. But, you know, you'd be surprised. You know, once again, I always think about the power of community, finding like minded individuals. Almost how, not easy but like, you know, things are always easier when you do them together. When you find people who have the same passions as you and who have experienced life in similar ways to you, you know, everyone that helps us out has had their own experiences with mental health, with being marginalized in different ways. And so I think it's really beautiful when you can come together like that and try to make a difference in your community.

R

Rob Mineault 44:51

So what's next for the organization now that Touchscapes runs until June? What's kind of the the plan going forward? Or have you guys had a chance to think about that after having organized Touchscapes for the last year?

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 45:07

A little bit. Yeah, I think we definitely want to delve more into art and mental health related projects. Like I mentioned, we just did another project with the Townhouse Community in Whalley and donating art supplies to them. And so we really want to start on these community

kind of art nights as well, for people, you know, with lived experiences of mental health to come together and create together. Because I don't know personally, for me, like growing up in the Lower Mainland, I feel like there's not a lot of opportunity for community building. And I think some of that is again, like, you know, I grew up like during peak pandemic time. And so we're just coming out of that now. And so we really want to create more, have more community building have more opportunities for people to come together to create to talk about life experiences. And so I know we're hoping to do something around that, but we haven't fully fleshed out the idea yet. For people who want to learn more about Touchscapes, want to attend or want to learn more about Voices For Hope, where can where can they go to to find out more and to attend? Yeah, absolutely. So I'll just repeat it for everyone. So Touchscapes is running on Saturdays and Sundays, from 12 to 5pm until June 1 with registration required online. For anyone interested in checking out the exhibit, they can visit www.nafvan.com, for more information and to register. And you can also follow us on Instagram @voicesforHope.ca and @nafvancouver for updates. And you can also visit www.voicesforhopefoundation.ca, for any updates on other projects that were were that we're working on, or if you're interested in getting involved in the work that we do.

R

Rob Mineault 46:54

Awesome. You'll definitely see me next week, I'll be going to check out Touchscapes.

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 46:59

Yeah, please do. I love that. Yeah. And definitely please help us spread the word. We want to reach as many people as possible.

R

Rob Mineault 47:06

Yeah, absolutely. And we'll make sure that we include all those links in our show notes. So for anybody out there is listening, just check the show notes. We'll have the links there. Thank you so much for coming on and chatting with us. It's been a pleasure. And thank you for all the really hard work that you've put into this. I really see this benefiting a lot of people and I see great things in the future for both you and for the foundation.

R

Rabiah Dhaliwal 47:31

Thank you so much. Yeah, thanks for having me and helping really elevate the work that we're doing and bring it to bring awareness about it. I'm really thankful and you guys are doing amazing work as well. I had no idea a podcast like this existed and so I'm definitely gonna be tuning into more episodes for sure going forward.

R

Ryan Fleury 47:51

Do you know anybody does marketing? We need a marketer.

- R** Rabiah Dhaliwal 47:58
Thank you so much. Have a good rest of your day. And you know, enjoy watching playoff hockey. Go Canucks.
- R** Ryan Fleury 48:08
Oh to be 24 again.
- R** Rob Mineault 48:10
I'm trying to think what what great life accomplishment I had achieved at 24 I don't think there was anything. I peaked when I was four and toilet trained and then I did nothing for the next 35 years.
- S** Steve Barclay 48:28
Yeah, I think my only notable achievement at that point was meeting my wife.
- R** Ryan Fleury 48:33
I mean, yeah, geez. I'd been married for a year already. And then I think working on a divorce.
- R** Rob Mineault 48:45
Paperwork.
- S** Steve Barclay 48:47
Which was the next notable thing.
- R** Ryan Fleury 48:50
That's right.
- R** Rob Mineault 48:52
Man know what a delightful - and we didn't even we didn't even touch on so much other stuff that she's done. But you know, I didn't I didn't want to take the focus away from the important work she's doing with the Foundation. But you know, we I should I'll mention now. I mean, she

was Miss Canada first runner up, and served as a National Canadian Miss British Columbia, 2018 and 2019. Like, yeah, it's amazing. She was you know, in 2020. She was the Community Leader Award, and she was named Youth Volunteer of the Year.

R Ryan Fleury 49:21

Like she's, yeah, that's why I couldn't do a proper introduction. Because looking all that that all that document is like, what do I pick? Where do I start?

R Rob Mineault 49:31

Yeah, you know, I recommend anybody you check out the links that we're going to have in the show notes. She's an amazing, amazing woman. And for sure, check out Touchscapes and checkout Voices for Hope Foundation because see how you can help because I really do think that they're doing really important work and it's nice to see the youth taking up the mantle and driving some of these social issues forward because damn it, we need it.

R Ryan Fleury 50:00

Go young people,

R Rob Mineault 50:01

Go young people! Hey Ryan.

R Ryan Fleury 50:07

Yeah Rob?

R Rob Mineault 50:08

Where can people find us

R Ryan Fleury 50:09

www.atbanter.com

R Rob Mineault 50:12

They can also drop us an email if they so desire at cowbell@atbanter.com. It's nice to see the cowbell back in action.

S Steve Barclay 50:23
This week in such convincing fashion.

R Rob Mineault 50:26
Good strikes today, so excellent. Glad we didn't we don't have to replace you with a young person. Not yet anyway. Hey, what else? Where else can people find us if they so desire?

S Steve Barclay 50:39
There's those those social media thingies right?

R Rob Mineault 50:42
Yeah. But honestly, honestly, kids get away from the social media. It's just not good for you. Got to atbanter.com instead. Just good to go there. Don't feed into the dopamine loop.

R Ryan Fleury 50:56
They've already got smartphones, they already got the dopamine happening. Instant gratification tap, tap, tap, double tap, tap, tap, double tap, tap.

R Rob Mineault 51:06
Yeah, it's true.

R Ryan Fleury 51:08
Remember, what Candy Crush did to people?

R Rob Mineault 51:13
Remember Farmville? Pretty sure, I still have strawberries that we need to harvest.

R Ryan Fleury 51:23
That's funny.

R

Rob Mineault 51:25

Anyways, all right. I think that is going to do it for us this week. Big thanks goes for Rabiah for joining us as we'll see everybody, next week.

S

Steve Barclay 51:37

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