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Description automatically generated**Participants:**

Holly Carmichael

Michael Murray

Andy Imparato

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**Introduction:**

A garrison is a safe place where an army gathers. In the same way, the *Disability Garrison Podcast* is a place for the army of disability rights advocates to gather and discuss complex issues. We are unafraid to identify problems in our world and have difficult conversations about them. But we are not just here to complain. We spend our time brainstorming solutions with generals in the disability rights movement. Together, we take action to make positive change and lead the fight for justice and equality.

**Holly Carmichael:**

My name is Holly Carmichael.

**Michael Murray:**

My name is Michael Murray. This is the Disability Garrison.

**Holly Carmichael:**

All right. Hello, Disability Garrison Podcast listeners. We are so excited for today's episode on disability identity and how society frames those of us with disabilities in in terms of how we're seen, what we have access to, how we're treated. And our guest today is a return podcast guest, Andy Imparato, the Executive Director at Disability Rights California, one of the largest protection advocacy groups. And Andy will share with us about his own disability identity journey. Excited to listen in. Well, welcome, Andy, Andy Imparato. The Director of Disability Rights California is with us today on the Disability Garrison Podcast. We are thrilled to have you and chat with you about disability identity and kind of dig into what that means, why it's important, and what barriers might exist to it.

**Michael Murray:**

Absolutely. Before we jump in, Andy, you have an incredible background. The influence that you've had on disability policy in America is huge. I wonder if you could just talk a little bit about your background and where you came from.

**Andy Imparato:**

Sure. So it's great to be here with you, Michael and Holly. Thank you for inviting me, and I love talking about disability identity. So thanks for picking this topic. I grew up in southern California, went to law school in northern California, and began to develop my disability identity in law school.

I have bipolar disorder. During my last semester of law school, I had my first serious episode of depression. It ended up kind of settling into a pattern where I got diagnosed with bipolar disorder that happens seasonally, six months out of the year. I have a lot of energy, a lot of self-confidence. Six months, my energy goes down, my self-confidence goes down, and it's pretty predictable for me. So I was really lucky. When I was dealing with this new diagnosis as a baby lawyer as we call the young folks, I was around other lawyers that had visible and non-visible disabilities, and they encouraged me to be out and open with my diagnosis and my lived experience and to see it as a source of strength and identity and authenticity for the work that I was doing.

And I found at that point, most of my life I've done either management or policy work, but at that point, I was representing clients, and I was out and open with my clients too. And I found they really liked it, that their lawyer had bipolar disorder and was open about it. And I found that it was a positive. I've certainly experienced discrimination at different points in my career, and it's not like—I find it's kind of unpredictable how people are going to react. But I've had way more positive experiences from being out with my disability than I have had negative experiences.

**Michael Murray:**

Well, and I think for those of us with disabilities, growing up with a disability and having an IEP through school, especially there is a projection on you and even your disability is defined by how you can't do stuff. And so I think for many of us, and really until I met you, Andy, my perception of my disability was that it was something to overcome. And so I wonder if for our listeners, you could just talk a little bit about when we say disability identity, what do we mean?

**Andy Imparato:**

Yeah. I mean so it's a broad category. When I was at the American Association of People with Disabilities, when I interviewed for the job as somebody with a non-visible disability, they asked me, what is your top priority if you're hired as the president and CEO? And I said, my top priority is to make disability sexy. And they were like, what do you mean? And I said, I want everybody who has a connection and who's protected by laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act to want to connect around that identity because it's cool. And if we can establish that kind of a cultural identity where it's not medical, it's not up to a doctor, and in many ways, it's political. We're making a political decision to connect around this identity. Then that will help our organization. We were created to bring together all the different segments of the displacement. Part of our job is to brand disability as a good thing, as a cool thing, not as a negative. So I felt like for AAPD, making disabilities sexy was completely connected to their mission.

**Michael Murray:**

I wonder if it would be helpful for our listeners is you're grappling with this concept of disability identity because I want to outline for you what is disability identity and then we want to talk about why we believe that having disability identity can be positive. But I want to focus in a little bit about identity before we get to that piece. One of the ways that I think is helpful is to differentiate between kind of a medical model of how to view disability and a cultural or social model of disability. There's a lot of different ways that you can view this. And for our audience who's maybe more focused on this, some of you guys are going to want to parse it out even more. But I think for our listeners who are maybe new to this, just having a basic understanding of the difference between medical model versus a social/political model helps you define those.

**Andy Imparato:**

Sure. Well, I think it's easy to see it in the context of the deaf community. So if you're a physician who specializes in people who have hearing loss or who are deaf, you're going to figure out what's wrong with the person's hearing, and you're going to give them a label based on what your instruments are able to measure. And it's part of your training to do that, and the idea is figure out the medical issues for this person and then help them navigate those medical issues as best they can.

Another way to think about the deaf identity is, are you culturally deaf? Did you grow up around deaf people? Is sign language your natural language? And are you comfortable in that culture? And none of that is medical. It's really a cultural identity, and I think the deaf community more than any part of the disability community has defined for themselves their culture. They have a visual language that they love, and they have been able to create a really strong cultural identity. Not everybody who's deaf gets exposed to that which is sad. I have an employee who is deaf and does outreach for us. She grew up in Indianapolis. She went to a school in Indianapolis pretty much for all of her K through 12 education where she was around other deaf students. Her parents were deaf. She went to Gallaudet.

**Michael Murray:**

Gallaudet is a university just for deaf folks.

**Andy Imparato:**

Yeah. And she's an African-American woman from Indianapolis, and she said, most of the other African-American students at Gallaudet didn't get that cultural exposure that she did. So they were like trying to read people's lips, and they were trying to learn sign language. And so she was just way ahead, and she feels like for white middle-class deaf folks who have deaf parents, they get all of this, and it's part of their upbringing. But a lot of kids that have other barriers don't get it. So I feel like the medical model is fine for what it is, and some disabilities are inherently medical.

Holly, your daughter has a lot of complicated medical things going on that you're trying to figure out. And if you do figure them out, her quality of life is going to improve dramatically. There's nothing wrong with that. But if all we think about when we see a human being is what's wrong with them and how to kind of fix the things that are wrong with them, human beings are inherently limited. Martin Luther King said, only God is able.

**Michael Murray:**

Wow.

**Andy Imparato:**

So I do think it's important—and I think the Native American community does this better—to recognize that we're all created by God, and that part of our job as human beings is to see the inherent value in every person.

**Michael Murray:**

Yeah. I think it's so valuable, going back to the deaf community, one of the things that a friend of mine who’s deaf said that I thought was really powerful is, Michael, even if I have hearing aids or a cochlear implant and I can hear perfectly what you're saying, I am still deaf. Because for him, it was a cultural thing. It was an identity that he saw himself as embodying.

And I think for many of us with a disability identity, when I look at it, it's not that I personally need to change me in order to look more like a larger segment of society, which could be labeled normal. But it's actually that there are environmental things that if you change those, I can exist and add value to my community. So the issue is not that I need to be able to walk. The issue is that there aren't curb cuts so that my wheelchair can get around. And so it's a different mindset of how we view disability.

**Andy Imparato:**

Well, I would also say that if we really lean into a disability culture, we may stop asking the question, how do you add value? The concept of adding value as our role as humans is kind of an ableist concept. We're not here to add value. We're here to be.

**Michael Murray:**

Yes. That's a better way to say it. That's a much better way to say it. So I think that gives us a little bit of an outline of disability identity. I think before we go on to the value of having a disability identity, Holly, I think you wanted to talk a little bit about our non-apparent disabilities and apparent disabilities and the difference in identity for some of that.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah. I was really excited to have this conversation with you because you're a very successful man with a non-apparent disability but who's very open and transparent, like you shared. And I'm I guess ashamedly not. And it's not about shame or I can't quite put my finger on what it is. I almost feel unworthy. I certainly have diagnoses and struggles. I have struggled a lot with depression as a child of multiple suicide attempts even and ended up losing our first daughter and having post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety. And then I kept getting sick with strep throat which turns out ended up leading into chronic fatigue and deep infiltrating endometriosis that I have causing this chronic pain. And so I have these things that I struggle with.

But I think the hard part for me is in my mind I'm always like, well, somebody has it worse. And I think disabilities are often seen as the physical disabilities or the things that are very apparent or visible is what's seen. And I think about the struggles that even my daughter Maggie goes through, and I think anytime I am complaining about going upstairs or something, I think Maggie would kill to do this. So it's hard for me to—I don't want to feel like an imposter. And I think that's probably not a good thing in the minds of disability.

**Andy Imparato:**

But I guess I would say, first of all, thank you for sharing all of that. I know that's all very personal, and I appreciate your willingness to be open about it with me and with your listeners. But I think we all get messages about what is and is not a legitimate disability. We had this problem in the Supreme Court when they were interpreting the definition of disability in the Americas with Disabilities Act. They didn't want to have a broad definition that would include people who wore eyeglasses. So they came up with a way to exclude people who wore eyeglasses that also excluded pretty much anybody who was able to manage their symptoms.

So if you could manage your symptoms with a prosthetic or manage your symptoms with medication, whatever you did to improve your functioning, if you got your functioning up to a certain level, the Supreme Court said, well, you're not impaired enough to have civil rights protections. And that was completely counter to what Congress said when they passed the ADA. The Supreme Court was very comfortable, a seven to two decision. Ruth Bader Ginsburg was on the wrong side. Very comfortable saying, we're not going to have this law protect people who are high functioning, who are doing well as human beings, whatever their mitigating strategy is. We're going to look at that when we see it, how disabled they are. The Supreme Court completely bought into this idea that if you don't have a serious problem, then you're not disabled. And it creates a catch-22 for a lot of people because it's like if you're doing well, then don't use that label, and if you do use that label, then you must be doing really poorly so I'm not going to hire you.

And this idea that you can't be legitimately disabled and better in part because of your experience with that disability, the Supreme Court could never wrap their head around that. But that to me is what our movement is about. Our movement is about embracing the full diversity of people that have any kind of an impairment or history of an impairment and saying, you should not experience discrimination based on your impairment and you should find a way over time to learn from your lived experience with your impairment and apply it in a way that can help you do better.

**Michael Murray:**

And I think for those of us with non-apparent disabilities, it is an interesting dynamic. Because for a long time, the disability rights movement would see folks like the three of us and say, I don't see your disability and are you a part of us? And I experienced some of that. I think, Andy, you experienced even more of that earlier on in our movement. I think we're starting to move past that. But Holly, I also think you brought up a really good point, that in general society, being the CEO of a $340 million company or the largest disability rights non-profit in the United States and being out and open about your disability, there's some risk. And I think recognizing that is important.

**Andy Imparato:**

Yeah. No. And I don't mean to make light of it, and I have experienced discrimination. But again, like to me, putting your disability out there as a CEO is a form of leadership and what you are doing as a CEO is you are saying, this is my authentic self. This is what I bring to this role. Your organization has a disability-centric mission. So you're bringing lived experience both as a parent and as a spouse and as a woman with a disability. And it may be that the parent role is really comfortable or the spouse role is really comfortable and this third role is less comfortable. I promise you, it will get more comfortable over time. Laura Hershey was a really important disability leader in Colorado, wrote about disability pride, a poem about how you develop disability pride. And she said, you get proud by practicing, and it's really true. You have to kind of talk about it and keep talking about it and keep telling your story until it feels natural and comfortable and you can tell it to strangers on an airplane, which is what I do.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yes, yes. And then you play them Justin Timberlake’s *Bring Sexy Back* and get them dancing.

**Michael Murray:**

Well, I want our listeners just to pause on that for a moment. There are going to be some of you who are going to be listening to this, and you're going to listen to Holly who for the first time is talking about her disability identity and think, I'm not sure I could do that. That's scary. But I think Andy's message to you and our message to you from the Disability Garrison is say that again around pride. I think that that's a really important point to hit.

**Andy Imparato:**

You get proud by practicing.

**Michael Murray:**

Proud by practicing.

**Andy Imparato:**

And you can start with people who are safe. Start with your best friend. Start with your spouse. Start with your sibling. But also, as a person with a non-apparent disability, surround yourself with people who see your disability as an important part of your identity, as a positive differentiator. Because there will always be people in your life who don't see it that way. And you need to make sure you find the people who do see it that way. That becomes kind of the people in your corner. But I think if you take your lived experience that you just described, which I'm sure it's not all of it.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Brief recap.

**Andy Imparato:**

But the experienced you describe, think about the mothers and fathers out there who have a daughter that is suicidal or the other people who lost a child. Like when you put your story out there and you're running this multi-million-dollar corporation, you're giving all of them hope of what's possible. Like being that depressed, it doesn't circumscribe what you can accomplish as a human being. Losing a child doesn't circumscribe what you can accomplish as a human being. You've been able to accomplish all these things I would argue in part because of the insight that came from your lived experience. You had resilience, and you had maturity as a young adult that a lot of people don't have.

**Michael Murray:**

Yeah. So good, so good.

**Andy Imparato:**

Well, I'm happy to share Disability Rights California is a free legal services organization. $41 million budget, 320 or so staff. And I have been very open with the staff from day one about my bipolar disorder, and what I've seen over time is some of my most accomplished attorneys are now talking about their lived experience with their mental illness. Could be depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress. And they're doing it in part because somebody has modeled for them how to do that. They see how people react to me being out, and they realize that it can be safe to be out as a professional with this chronic health condition that's connected to the mission of the organization. So I really do think there's an aspect of it that's contagious.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Andy Imparato:**

If you and Michael and others in your company are out and open and it's part of your identity, you're creating a safe space for other people to be out and open. And you'll be surprised how many people fall into that category. So in the corporate world, companies are trying to get their employees to self-identify because as a federal contractor, you're supposed to have a certain percentage of your workforce. And it's the people with non-apparent disabilities in leadership roles who really create a wide space for other people to step up. And it's sad to me how many people in leadership roles, even when they've attained that level of success in their career, still don't feel safe being out with their disability.

Even the fact that they have that lived experience is part of why they've been successful, they still don't feel comfortable making it part of their story. And the issue of shame or impostor around should I own this identity, am I somehow cheapening the concept of disability, I think we get that message from the medical model that we talked about earlier, we get that message from people who try to police the boundaries of what is a legitimate disability. And I would argue everything we've done as a culture throughout history to police those boundaries was bad for disabled people. When we police the boundaries, disabled people don't do well.

They're basically trying to find the truly disabled, which is a code word for people that can't help themselves, and everybody else is not disabled. And the disability movement is the opposite of that. It recognizes that we all can have self-determination, we all can be the captain of our own ships. And it doesn't matter how impaired we are, we all have that capacity. So don't buy into anybody's effort to say you're not disabled enough to be a proud disabled woman. That's up to you.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Well, and when we think about civil rights and the disability rights movement, all movements benefit when we can come together more. And I don't think that's really happened a lot. There's a lot of segregation, even in, for example, my daughter's rare disease. Rare disease is—for her, there's only a thousand people in the world with it. When you look at the number of people combined with rare diseases and really efforts like if we could all come together and push for civil rights or different pieces, I mean that would be really powerful.

**Michael Murray:**

And you just hit the nail on the head. I think that as a movement, so you want to talk about one of the values of disability identity. If we can create a disability identity as a movement and as a culture that says there is no us versus them, there is no you're disabled or not, there is us and that we as a movement have each other's backs and that we're going to support each other, the value of that and what we could accomplish on a political spectrum for those of us in the disability community would be massive. We would be a political force that nobody could recognize.

**Andy Imparato:**

Well, and then to just kind of take what you just said and apply it to this moment that we're living through, we have all these folks who have long COVID who have civil rights protections under the Americas with Disabilities Act. We have an opportunity as a movement to welcome them into the movement. Holly, you talked about chronic fatigue. A lot of the long COVID stuff is very similar to chronic fatigue. Walking them into the movement, helping them understand accommodations, helping them understand assistive technology, helping them understand disability culture and disability identity, that's all stuff that we can do as practitioners and people who are part of this movement. It's not stuff that their physicians are going to be particularly good at.

**Michael Murray:**

They're so bad at it.

**Andy Imparato:**

It's not stuff that their spouses or their parents or their children necessarily are going to help them do. We're the ones that can help them do that. We're the ones that can say to them, don't let the long COVID keep you from doing whatever it is that you want to do in your life and don't let other people's ableism kind of lower your hopes of what's possible for you to do in your life.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah, yeah. Well, that learning from one another so we can build allies. I mean that was a big thing with was getting an accessible playground built in our community is a lot of people are saying, well, it's one kid. It's not one kid. Learning how it benefits all of us, some of these basic civil rights. Like you said, the ADA was in place and is now protecting those who have long COVID who have probably never even thought of the ADA or don't even maybe even know what the acronym stands for. Yet they have this protection and understanding how this civil rights movement is bigger than one disability type or just physical disability.

**Andy Imparato:**

And I mean the playground example is important for lots of reasons. If you have a universally designed or fully accessible playground, it sends a message to anybody who visits that playground that you're thinking about that form of diversity. Any kid or parent can move in and out of disability. The playground's ready for them. And to the extent that, again, going back to making disabilities sexy, to the extent that the accessibility features are cool, and they become expected, that's where we want to get. So you don't have to wield your disability to get what you need because everybody wants what you need.

**Michael Murray:**

And I think you did that. Hashtag fair play for all. Go back and check out some of our work on that. But I think that's what you did when you fought for an accessible playground in Sturgis was made it so that it was sexy. And some of the stuff that they play on, I mean every kid wants to play on it. It's really cool stuff.

**Holly Carmichael:**

That universal design concept of figuring out there are ways that you can smartly design playgrounds or places or work that is helpful for everyone, that's helpful for the grandparent who's using a walker to take their child to the playground.

**Andy Imparato:**

And you can think about it in the context of work too. If we create workplaces where everybody can get the accommodations they need to be as productive and happy as possible and they don't have to wear their disability identity to get those accommodations, the workplace is going to work better for everyone.

**Michael Murray:**

Yeah. I want to dive in for just a moment and look at some of the potential negative impacts of not having disability identity. There's some really interesting research around what's called covering. So the covering is the concept that I have to hide a piece of myself or change part of who I am in order to fit into a dominant culture. And so we see this for women, for example, who feel like in order to survive inside of the workplace, they have to act more like a man. And there's some really interesting research around this, but there's also been some really interesting research about what happens to those of us with disabilities and the amount of energy that we have to spend to hide our disabilities and to hide that part of our identities. And all of that energy that's being spent to cover those things up is energy that ultimately isn't being put forward inside of the workplace, and ultimately, it's just really tiring.

**Andy Imparato:**

I think in some ways it's deeper than that. It's almost like kind of go into your core as a person. A lot of us develop our disabilities during childhood. Some of us develop our disabilities during adulthood. But for those of us that develop them during childhood, many of us get a message from our parents yeah that nobody should know about our disability, and that it's a deep dark secret yeah and that we have to basically suck it up right and be super human.

**Michael Murray:**

Yes, yes.

**Andy Imparato:**

And part of the message that we get from our parents, I think it's unintentional, is that we are not going to be loved if we are not super human. Like this kind of impairment part of us, which again, I think is there because God put it there, my parents are telling us, don't tell anybody about that thing because it can only be a bad thing and it can only lead to bad outcomes. But one of those bad outcomes is less love from your parents. So getting parents to love their disabled children and love the disability part of their disabled children is really important. And if the parents who are able to do that, I think it helps that child grow into adulthood where they're not worried about their disability because it's not a barrier for them with their parents. And I think it's really sad that a lot of parents with really good intentions tell people, don't tell anybody about your disability. Only you have a choice. Obviously, some people don't have a choice.

**Michael Murray:**

Well, or if you do have to talk about it, talk about it in the context of overcoming.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yes. Well, you brought up a good point too of one of those parental fears or maybe about overcoming or hiding it is because if there isn't a world that's accepting or supportive or accessible. And I mean there's some moms in the rare disease CBG group that talk about grieving, not having a normal child, which I can certainly relate to. You have this little girl and you think, oh, we're going to play volleyball together like because that's what I did in high school and we're going to do all the—you have this dream or life that you envision for your child. And certainly, having a disability can hinder that thought. It changes it.

**Andy Imparato:**

But I think the concept that any child is normal or any child is average or any child is typically developing, there's all these euphemisms.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Oh, yes.

**Andy Imparato:**

None of it really holds water. There is no normal.

**Michael Murray:**

And I think you were about to finish that sentence because, Holly, I know you and I know that your perception of how valuable you find both of your children with disabilities and how you wouldn't change them is something that you fought for. So I just want to make sure that you get a chance to kind of—

**Holly Carmichael:**

Oh, no. Yeah, yeah. Absolutely. But I mean I think that one of those pieces that can help some of those families is we need to build a better world. And I told our employees last year that I wouldn't change Maggie for anything, but I would change the world for her. And I mean you talked about some, of course, medical interventions to give her a better quality of life. But certainly wouldn't change her. She brings a ton of joy and value to the world.

**Andy Imparato:**

And to bring it back to the disability identity concept, I recognize that not everybody is going to be able to read literature to develop their identity. People develop their identity in a lot of different ways. But if you think about the impact that Maggie can have when she rolls into a room or crawls into a room, however she moves around—

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yes, yes. Both.

**Andy Imparato:**

She's going to be noticed in most rooms, and the energy in the room is going to change.

**Michael Murray:**

It does.

**Andy Imparato:**

And that's going to happen no matter whether she has a strong disability identity or not.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yes.

**Andy Imparato:**

But if she rolls in that room ready for that change, expecting that change, and then ready to leverage the change to get whatever she wants out of that room, that's a skill where she's the one who's changing the world.

**Michael Murray:**

I feel like you've met Maggie because that is who ***[inaudible 00:32:38]***.

**Andy Imparato:**

It is a superpower. But I think it's interesting to think about it as that's something that she's doing. You as a parent can just stay out of the way and let it happen.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah. Help her develop her own—I mean that is the job of a parent, helping your children with disabilities develop self-advocacy because they will need it. And it's really critical to our piece on self-determination is a huge thing for people of any disability. You're going to hopefully live beyond your parents I hope.

**Michael Murray:**

Well, and I said that Andy was a huge part of helping me understand my disability identity. But I think I have to go back so far as to talk about my dad and a realization that as a person with a disability, he gave me some example by which to see my own disability wasn't perfect as far as identity was concerned. But it definitely helped me see myself and the things that I would bring, that my disability was not a negative but a positive and that I could bring all that I had and that there was no shame that was brought into there. And so I think stepping into that disability identity and saying, yeah, I have something that I am excited to add, not in spite of my disability but in part because of that that and because of who I am and because of all that that's made me to be. And there are lots of things that have created who I am. But ultimately, I end up seeing my disability as a superpower. It's a superpower that adds empathy, excitement, joy, suffering. I mean all of the things inside of there that make life rich and beautiful.

**Andy Imparato:**

I feel like the biggest thing that I get from my disability identity and being out with it is connection, connection to other human beings. And again, this is my third CEO job. I've now spent most of my professional life as a CEO. Connecting to your employees, especially in a pandemic, especially during all the upheaval that we've been through as a society, could never be more important. And the leaders who connect in the deepest way are people who put their own stuff out there. They make themselves vulnerable, they're authentic, and they're real. So living into your disability identity can be an incredible tool as a leader. And I just feel like not enough leaders are taught that. If you go to business school and you read all the management books, there's not a lot of talking about what disabled leaders can accomplish that non-disabled leaders could not accomplish. Have you read that management book?

**Michael Murray:**

I have not seen that management book.

**Andy Imparato:**

I mean Satya Nadella from Microsoft wrote a book about how he was successful at Microsoft. He called it, *Hit Refresh*. But the core message of his book was his experience as a parent of two disabled children helped him develop empathy, which helped Microsoft rediscover its soul.

**Michael Murray:**

Wow. That’s wild.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah. And he's done some work around video game controllers that are adaptable and lots of really cool projects.

**Andy Imparato:**

Yeah. But again, this is what I love about that book, it wasn't a commercial for Microsoft. It was about his personal journey as a parent. He basically was saying my children made me a better leader, and I took that and helped Microsoft rediscover its soul.

**Michael Murray:**

So I feel like there's a book for you to write, which is how my disability has led me to spend most of my life as a CEO and what that's done. I'm excited to read that book.

**Andy Imparato:**

Well, there's a lot of CEOs with bipolar disorder and depression and ADHD. I mean these are all high incidence conditions. And the high part of bipolar disorder can make you accomplish things and have ambition and capacity that can be really helpful, and the low part can help you connect with people that otherwise might be hard to connect to.

**Michael Murray:**

Yeah.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah. Well, you talked about too, that sense of connection and community as being part of disability identity. And I know for my son Dexter who's autistic, he's done a lot of recently research on autism because he's been struggling with school and learning about how his brain works with autism and how he interprets this authority figure of a teacher and how he approaches it. It's really been helpful to see more confidence and understanding of his own self and be able to approach and problem solve. Now do we still have trouble with school? Yes. But it's really interesting to get his thought and perspective of researching and learning more about that.

**Michael Murray:**

And I think for our listeners, hopefully, you're walking away from this seeing three very different disability identities in different stages and different ways of viewing it. And our goal today is for all of you guys to be able to do the same, to reflect on what is that disability identity, what does that look like for you, how can you impact and change the world, and what part of yourself do you want to become comfortable with, both in sharing but also in just when you look in the mirror. And so I think today we're going to end out this with a simple message. My name is Michael Murray, and I have a disability and I am proud of that disability.

**Andy Imparato:**

My name is Andy Imparato, and I probably have many disabilities and I'm proud of all of them.

**Holly Carmichael:**

And my name is Holly Carmichael, and I am a proud disabled woman who's also a CEO.

**Michael Murray:**

Thank you guys for listening. Wow. That may have been one of my favorite episodes. I know I say that every time, but that was such a powerful episode. Holly, I think for you this is one of the first times that you really like in a super public setting talked about your disability identity.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah. I mean I think it's probably the first time I've really explored it myself. I don't think I probably viewed or saw myself as disabled. I certainly didn't want to take away from somebody. When I look at Maggie who has such significant physical needs and has a developmental disability, obviously, my disability impacts me much differently.

But when I think about and reflect on people with disabilities and then those of us that have disabilities, do we benefit from shrinking and narrowing our tent and drawing boxes and saying, no, you can only be in this tent if you meet XYZ or have these 10 diagnoses, I think that's really silly. And when we think about even mental health and part of my disability is around my mental health, I have physical health diagnosis in terms of chronic fatigue and deep infiltrating endometriosis, but mental health as well in terms of anxiety and PTSD and depression, even so much so that that at the point where I've had suicidal thoughts and attempts.

And I think one of the things that really maybe helped me come to terms with disability was just conversing with Andy really. I mean he made a comment to me that said, Holly, your disability could have killed you, but you don't see it as something significant. So I think when we talk about disability identity in terms of this larger tent and disability rights really being human rights and that we all just want to have the same access to control, we could all join the disability community at any moment and just really embracing the identity. Like it's okay to not be okay. It's okay to have a disability. It's not this derogatory term that is only for the people with significant impairments of mobility.

**Michael Murray:**

Well, and I think especially for those of us with non-apparent disabilities like myself and you and Andy, we've been taught by society unless you can see it, it's not really there. But a realization that my disability has had a profound impact on my day but also has had a profound positive impact on who I am as a person and the way that I view myself and the way that I view others and I really value that and I wouldn't change it.

And I got to tell you, Holly, I also had my eyes opened during this conversation because for years I've been framing disability in the context of we make valuable contributions to society. And we do as people with disabilities. We definitely do. But I think that Andy also really challenged me on that framing to say we as people with disabilities have value because inherently life has value and we have value. And that was also a challenge for me. So I think that our first—we always like to give all of our listeners three things that they can do to make a difference or an impact on this issue.

So the first thing is do what Holly and I just did. Listen to this podcast, and you're going to be challenged. And sit down and have a conversation with someone that you trust and someone that you love and just say, hey, how did this impact you, what did you learn, what did you walk away with? And so that's the first thing we'd encourage everybody to do. The second thing, we always like to tell you about some legislation and some things that you can do that could have a broader systematic impact.

One of the things that we know as those of us especially who grew up with a disability is that we don't see a lot of positive role models in school. And being able to see those of us with disabilities who throughout history have had an incredible impact would make such a huge positive change in our disability identity and how we're able to view ourselves. And so we really want to encourage, there are states that have outlined disability history curricula for high school, middle school, elementary schools so that those of us with disabilities and the contributions that we've made as people with disabilities are seen and heard of in schools. And this can have such a positive impact on our experience and how we view our identity as people with disabilities.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah. It's part of our history. And my son Dexter's in fourth grade, and they did a fourth grade historical figure project. And there are all these civil rights leaders and all of these past presidents. And we had to get special permission to do Judy Heumann, the mother of the disability rights movement who definitely should be on that list. But we just—

**Michael Murray:**

Special permission.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah, yeah, yeah. We need to teach disability rights in school, and it's important for everybody to learn about it. Disability rights are human rights, and this should be part of our standard education.

**Michael Murray:**

Absolutely. And then last but not least, we always want to give you an organization that we're going to donate to and that we would encourage all of you to donate to you. You want to tell us about our organization today?

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yes. Youth Organizing, also known as YO, they are disabled and proud. They're a program for disabled youth that are 16 to 28. This is a California-based program, and it gives youth with disabilities some opportunities in leadership, to social network, and some resources to help them in their disability identity. They work on different advocacy campaigns and provide disability focused mentoring, and they connect youth to volunteer opportunities in their own communities. So you can check out their website, Disability Youth Organizing, Disabled and Proud. And our website will have a link to theirs, and you can make a donation to this wonderful organization that we've selected today.

**Michael Murray:**

I love it. I love it. All right. Well, and we've got a big announcement to make. This is coming out on July 26th which is the anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. We have spent the whole month celebrating inclusive play and celebrating the opportunity to build inclusive playgrounds where everyone can be a part. This is a passion of ours here at GT Independence. It was started by Holly. And do you want to tell them what our giveaway for this time was?

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah. Our giveaway this year is we are giving away a trip to Morgan’s Wonderland, this all-inclusive theme park in Texas right along with me and my family to celebrate Maggie’s ninth birthday. So she is super excited. She asks me every day, how many days till her birthday. And so we are really, really excited to announce our winner. The Shore family, Adam, Blake, and Amber Shore. We are so excited to have you join us. Thank you for your engagement with inclusive playgrounds, for your highlighting of it, for selecting your favorite feature. Thank you to all our contestants who engaged. Because honestly, that is a huge part of advocacy is just knowing and talking about issues and making people aware and speaking up at your own community meetings about how important inclusion is and how important it is for everyone to be able to have access to play.

**Michael Murray:**

I couldn't say it better. Disability Garrison, thank you for all that you do. Holly, it's a pleasure.

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