

Margaux Wosk Pt. 1 | Discover Stories Episode 81

Announcement 00:09

The Strong Sessions are back. The Vancouver Adapted Music Society's Flagship Event celebrates musicians with disabilities, featuring performances from four talented artists and bands from our community. Join us on August 25 at the Roundhouse Community Center, from 5pm to 8pm. Tickets are by donation. For more information, visit the Vancouver Adapted Music Society on Facebook, @vamsociety on Instagram, or on our website, www.vams.org. We hope to see you there.

Tanya Griffiths 00:44

Hello and thank you for tuning into Discover Stories on Re-imagine Radio. My name is Tanya, your host, and a student intern with VAMS while completing my social justice practicum. Today, I have the gift of talking with Margaux Wosk. Margaux is a self taught autistic designer, writer, entrepreneur, disability advocate and activist. Their creative work includes enamel pins, patches and stickers available on retrophiliac.etsy.com and shopretrophiliac.com as well as in 40 retail stores. These links will be included in the description box for folks wishing to look more into Margaux's work. Margaux is a lower mainland West Director of BC People First, and founded the Facebook groups Made by Autistics Community and Made by Autistics Marketplace. Hi Margaux. So lovely to meet you and to be here today with you.

Margaux Wosk 01:46

Thank you so much for having me.

Tanya Griffiths 01:49

How is your day going so far?

Margaux Wosk 01:51

Good! Yeah, it's just getting started. So yeah, I'm looking forward to having a lively discussion.

Tanya Griffiths 02:00

Yeah, me too. I guess you can begin by sharing some of the salient parts of your journey, discovering and embracing your identity as an autistic individual.

Margaux Wosk 02:12

Yeah, so ever since I was a young child, I always felt like an outcast, you know. Like I didn't belong and my peers would make that very obvious by the way that they unfortunately treated me, which was not so great. But I was able to find out in my late 20s that I was autistic, and from there, I've been able to really leverage it in very positive ways. It helped me find a community that I didn't know about, and it helped me feel accepted and finding just people I could relate to, and I never had that before, so it really allowed me to understand myself more in terms of the way that I don't really understand social cues, and getting really hyper fixated on certain things and having, you know, focused interests and just different things that I didn't really think about before it all kind of started to make a lot of sense, and from there, I was really able to feel more comfortable getting involved with the disability community and utilizing the strengths that I do have to just make helping people really my mission at the end of the day.

Tanya Griffiths 03:42

Yeah, yeah, no, I hear how validating it was to embrace this identity of yours, and also how yeah, like growing up because you didn't feel like you belonged, it definitely, I feel like it's such a it's something shared within the community of not feeling included or not feeling normal, and to get to a point where you're you're given this, this ability to understand yourself on a deeper level and also share that with other folks, is it's, it's such a gift.

Margaux Wosk 04:25

It's been just very rewarding for me, and I feel like, you know the the disability space, or persons with disability, or intellectual disability, like those spaces and those organizations, many of them have really embraced the skills that I have, and I don't think that I really ever found any other space, group or organization that would do that. And so it's been really just freeing to, to know that there is a space for me and that I can continue to do the work that I'm doing with the goal of, you know, greater resources, financially and like, physically and like, there's just so many gaps in the way that disabled people are just not treated very well by society, and I want to help to be a catalyst for change.

Tanya Griffiths 05:30

Yeah, yeah, for sure. And if anything, I think that over the past couple years, there's definitely been more progress and more conversations that are happening and that need to happen, and it's also because of folks like you that are pushing it for it to happen, and and something that I've noticed, and not just with you, but other folks In the disabled community, is this shift from person-centered language to identity first language. For example, instead of “I am a person with autism, you quite proudly say I am an autistic person.” I'd love to hear more about this from you.

Margaux Wosk 06:17

Yeah. So when I think of somebody saying, you know, “I have autism,” it almost lends itself to sounding like very disease-like, and it's not something I carry. It's not like an accessory. It's not something I'm I physically have. It's who I am, and it is really all of me. And I know some people say, “Oh, well, you don't let your disability define you,” but my identity, who I am, does define me. It's literally why I am the way I am, and before my autism diagnosis — and I want to say that self-diagnosis is valid, and that I was self-diagnosed before I got a formal diagnosis—it's valid, and I embrace my autistic identity, because before that, I didn't really know who I was or why I was the way I was, and it just provided me clarity. And it felt like, you know, like the storm, the stormy clouds had parted and the sun was coming through, and it just, it just made so much sense for me, and so I firmly believe in embracing identities. Now, certain things that like through my business, that I have, I'll have both options for some things. Um, like “I have” or “I am” not for everything, but you know, like, I will never have a pin that says “I have autism,” because I just am not comfortable with that language.

Tanya Griffiths 07:53

Mhmm, yeah, yeah, I hear how for you, it's so empowering to say “I am autistic,” and I really like the way you phrase that, that it's, it's not a disease, it's, it's not something like an add on, it's, it's part of you. And being giving yourself that validation, giving yourself that diagnosis, and also receiving that diagnosis professionally, has helped you navigate the world with more ease and with more compassion too.

Margaux Wosk 08:29

Yeah, it just you know when you go through life feeling just like you're not supposed to be here on this earth, and then you finally realize, oh, like, this is who I am, and then you find other people who are really similar to you, when you felt like your whole life almost that

there couldn't possibly be another person who you related to. I think that's where a lot of the empowerment comes from — is community.

Tanya Griffiths 09:01

Yeah, yeah, community is definitely a big one and a lot of what you do too is for community and for building the sense of belonging and togetherness in a society that can be so fragmented. And as you said earlier, like many times, like society has created harm and hurt to these folks who already just need more support. And yeah, like it's, it's such a it feels, but when, like, I don't know — I get so, because I myself love leading and living a life for other folks, it creates this meaning and this purposefulness and really makes life worthwhile, in my opinion, to be in community for sure.

Margaux Wosk 09:58

Yeah, I just, you know when you feel so lonely and you just feel like you're the only person that like is experiencing things, it makes it just really difficult to be able to navigate those situations, when you feel like there's nobody out there, and then when you find those people, not only are you feeling accepted by them and validated with your own experience, but you're also doing the same for those people, and that's what I notice a lot with the people that interact with me at my markets or online, and they express, you know, joy from the work that I do, or just gratitude, and I expressed that gratitude back, because I never imagined I'd be in this position where I can actually try to do a tangible thing to help others.

Tanya Griffiths 10:52

Yeah, yeah, for sure. Actually, now that you've mentioned it, why don't you tell us more about retrophiliac and how your business came to be.

Margaux Wosk 11:02

Yeah. So when I was, I think, between the ages of 12 and 14, I started selling vintage clothing on eBay. That was before really anybody else was doing it. There was no dedicated platforms to that. I loved the whole, you know, finding the items, taking pictures, writing descriptions, all that kind of stuff, you know, to customer service, to mailing it out, everything. Then from there, Retrophiliac became visual art, which I would love to get back into, but I have had really no time. And then from there, I kept the same name, and I've pivoted into communication items, mostly enameled pins, stickers, patches, pride flag pins, pronoun pins. I even just introduced socks to celebrate neurodiversity and autism and lanyards and keychains and magnets. It's so much stuff. And I'm in, you know, a

number of stores, both locally within, you know, the rest of Canada and in the United States. And it's just something that's become, you know, full time a lot of the time, sometimes things can slow down. But I think that happens with really any business. And I got my IWSCC certification, which is for disabled and veterans. And then I got my CGLCC certification, which is for, like, gay, lesbian, queer business owners. And I just really want to help people find, you know, an alternative way to communicate that they can point to or gesture to. And because the majority of my items are around the same size, like my pins, a lot of them are 1.5 inches in length, you can actually, like, wear them together. And they they're pretty modular, so that you can create your own message with your identity, your pronoun, flag, and really like mix and match things to be able to just communicate something that maybe you weren't able to communicate before.

Tanya Griffiths 13:12

Mhmm, yeah, yeah, definitely just making it easier for folks to just be able to express and also take up space for who they are. And also have that received by other folks. Yeah, I just remember because I went to the Abilities Expo, and Margaux had a table there. So I saw firsthand all the enamel pins and just the diversity too, of all the things that you've come up with, I am honestly in awe. There was so many ones that I was like, I didn't even think about that, like there was so many, and they were just so empowering too. And I love that narrative, and I love that narrative that it's like you're reminding people that it's okay, it's okay to ask for, it's okay to ask for accommodations, it's okay to say, oh, it's actually really difficult for me to do this. Or it's not that I'm rude, I'm autistic and I'm just, it's, it's so empowering.

Margaux Wosk 14:23

Thank you. I take a lot of inspiration and ideas from the people that support me. I mean, I have people that are actively engaging with me on Facebook or Tiktok or Instagram, and they give me suggestions, and then I put those on a list, and then I kind of prioritize based on how often I'm asked for something. So the one that I was really asked for a lot was like for POTS, Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome, and EDS, Ehlers, Danlos Syndrome. And when I made those, they, they still are doing very well. Because I just, I really think it's important to listen to the people that are supporting you, because at the end of the day, like I wouldn't have a business if it wasn't for those individuals who, you know, find value in the work that I'm doing.

Tanya Griffiths 15:18

Yeah, yeah. And, what you said right there is so important. And I think something that so many people can learn from is to listen and to listen to community and really integrate what is being shared into what we do in our life's work.

Margaux Wosk 15:36

Absolutely, because it's it's all about, almost like being selfless and realizing that when you get to a point like the type of work I do, it becomes a lot more about access, needs, accessibility, identity than it does become about me. Like it's way less about me. It's more about the impact that I can make. And I'm really just every day I wake up and I'm just so grateful, and I always, you know, make sure that people know how much their support means to me. I hand write a note for every single order that I get online. I don't care if I have 30 to pack that day, every single person is going to get a handwritten note where I am thanking them, because it's just like a little thing I can do to really show how much them believing in my work, how much that really means to me.

Tanya Griffiths 16:36

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Oh, that's so—that must also be so heartwarming for your customers to receive, because I, I know, especially because you're you're an entrepreneur, and you're doing this business, and you're carrying this business by yourself, but at the same time, it's like you have this community to back you up and, and I hear how it's like you want to express the gratitude, and, yeah, the depths of gratitude that you have for them to that brought you to like, where you are now.

Margaux Wosk 17:15

Yeah, I just, you know, I feel sometimes like I can't say thank you enough. But yeah, I really it's just, you know, it's too difficult for me to work outside of my home. Like, yes, I do markets, but working for myself is the most accessible thing, and so knowing that there's people out there who are actually making that possible for me, like, how could I possibly ever thank those people enough.

Tanya Griffiths 17:42

Yeah, yeah, I hear you. I'm also wondering you've talked in depth about Retrophiliac too and and how that how much this work means to you and your community — and I'm wondering if you have a mission.

Margaux Wosk 17:59

Yeah, yeah, that's a good question. I don't have anything specifically like written out, but I think the goal is just to help people, and eventually, if I become profitable enough, I'd really like to start a grant to help other neurodivergent, disabled small business owners to be able to get going and get started. That is the goal, because nobody really helped me. I did get a few like BC Arts Council grants that I was able to, you know, be able to donate some of my items and be able to fund other items, but there's nothing specifically for the work that I do, or just self employment in this specific, you know, fringe community, I guess you could call it. So I really want to be the catalyst for change and have a grant and be able to, like, donate money, and get to that position where I'm also hiring neurodivergent people. And you know, those are obviously long term goals, but there are just so many barriers for people to enter when it comes to self employment, and, yeah, especially when we're talking with disabled and neurodivergent people, this has been the most accommodating for me. I know it's going to be the most accommodating for other people who want to work from home or want to be entrepreneurs, and it just pains me every day that I can't do more to change that.

Announcement 19:38

This podcast is brought to you by the Vancouver Adaptive Music Society. Since 1988, VAMS has been supporting and promoting musicians with disabilities in Metro Vancouver through various programs including music lessons, recording projects, and live performance opportunities. To learn more about us, visit our website at www.vams.org or @vamsociety on Instagram, the Vancouver Adapted Music Society on Facebook, or email us at info@vams.org. Thanks for listening.