

## Sandra Pronteau Pt. 2 | Discover Stories Episode 78

### **Announcement** 00:06

Enjoy live music, want to support a local up and coming artist? The Vancouver Adapted Music Society wants you to join us on July 26 at the Blusson Spinal Cord Center to celebrate Rachael Ransom's debut album Sixty Seven Ten. Rachel and her band will be performing the album live from 6:30 to 8 pm. Tickets are by donation. For more information, visit the Vancouver Adapted Music Society on Facebook, @vamsociety on Instagram, or our website at [www.vams.org](http://www.vams.org). We hope to see you there.

### **Tanya Griffiths** 00:42

Get on to the next question. You recently received the Disabled Women's Network Canada's National Hummingbird Award. What does this mean to you?

### **Sandra Pronteau** 01:00

Well, I was really taken aback by this. I think all I had to do what my loving back from dealing with a lot in my job I had a decision to make. When I left my last occupation, and Bartonella after I've been there with that for almost nine years, I started dealing with a lot of health issues. So my mental health had taken a toll on me I was depressed, I was sad that I had to continue or realize, say realisation that it was time that I had to lead. And my body was not able to keep up with the pace and giving all this information because a lot of people that have a visual understanding of how this came about. So um, you know, I was like I was talking about mental health want to talk about that meant I helped me a lot. And for me, I was telling what, like depression. And I was I was grieving I also because I had made a decision that was not easy. And for those that do know me, they know I'm a very stubborn woman, I am determined to stand up and not give up. But I had to stand up and actually stopped by can realize, okay, you're you've been denying your own health, your body, your physical strain that you've been dealing with. And I live with a lot of chronic pains and aside my scoliosis, osteoporosis and other other factors that contribute to pain. So after coming Brown from being depressed, I had decided, You know what, I always wanted to be in a disability movement. And I always wanted to be a disabled African octopus. And so I've had connected with this group in my community called Curiko — C U R I K O. And they had this event. So because I was living, I was grieving and I was depressed I was also living in social isolation. And a lot of people do that when they are like feeling

withdrawn from society. Then I got involved with Disability Foundation and being on a Board and then I learned about other groups. And I said I wanted to always be a disabled advocate, I actually tried to promote that idea with my previous employers and they didn't seem to act too keenly. I said Oh well, I'll get there eventually. So what happened was I did eventually get hooked up with DAWN Canada, I met this beautiful woman from the Island who's also Indigenous who connected me with DAWN Canada. It's been a year now, I've been advocating, I went and got involved with different disability groups. One of them was Inclusion BC. And I went to Kelowna last summer. And for those who remember that horrific fire that we had in Kelowna, I was actually there. Crazy that was, there was a four day event that was held on self-advocate. So I went to that, it was a conference. And I learned so much there. I mean, I was hearing stories that just kind of really hit home for me. And this was people that were in institutionalized for years, in the, in the mental institution survived. And I met this beautiful man who shared a story. And when I heard a story, I really was impacted by that. And on that he was institutionalized. And another way to where I was like, bounced around to different foster homes, and how it feels to be displaced in society. And when you have to deal with that, you learn to overcome that. You learn to use your voice. Your voice is the power that you can articulate and get a message across to help those people in need. Are those people who haven't found their voice yet. Yeah. And I met a bunch of amazing women, through DAWN Canada online. They're from all over Canada, different regions. And we all were talking about the importance of women with disability, how we face discrimination, and all forms. You know, when we talk about intersectionality, we talk about gender based violence, we talk about our rights for us to access proper health care services. For us to stand for our cause of all what we need. Why do we need a brand new wheelchair? Why do we need a new hearing aid? Why do we need a sign language interpreter? Or what are we need brailles for us to follow and understand what's going on out there in the world. What we do is this — is about being inclusive in society. So all of that, I think, is basically my work I had shown demonstrating, going out there into the fields, and helping and being a voice and trying to be the change. And I think that's how I got the award.

**Tanya Griffiths 08:19**

Yeah, yeah, I can imagine—

**Sandra Pronteau 08:21**

I know it's a long piece.

**Tanya Griffiths 08:23**

Oh, no, it's but it's so needed. And I'm, and I'm really glad you talked about finding your voice too and using your voice throughout that journey and throughout that story. Because I imagine how receiving this award also affirms a lot of the work you do and that you are being noticed and recognized. And that folks like you who are doing the work and are walking the talk matter and that you are needed. So I forgot to congratulate you earlier but really this is such a huge thing for you and for the community. So honestly, well deserved more than deserved, beyond — that that's really cool work. And it does sound like a lot you put a lot of women in the forefront of what you do. Like a lot of a lot of what propels you to do the work is really for that is for equity all across the boards. Yeah. And also accessibility for many of the folks who yeah, don't have the the means to experience life, just like a person without disabilities.

**Sandra Pronteau 09:58**

Huh, yeah. And I want like all women to, to realize it doesn't matter what race you're from, we all deserve to be treated with dignity. And we also need, what we need. If we need like some kind of special device, we need that. And we need to feel safe. And we need to start a life over again, then we need to do that. We don't need to live in a less deserving way — nobody should have to. Everybody deserves a chance, everybody deserves to find their happiness and feel content in life. Yeah. And our work is never done. You know, like I said, I'm continuously learning online. I'm continuously reaching out to other women, trying to help other women that I see that are struggling to get them involved, connected. You know, yeah, there are some stories that I could talk about, but I don't, it's not my story. But there are stories that I can see and hear. And I extend an olive branch to that. That's why I'm here. Have you, have you thought of this? You know, here's some information for you to read. Are you interested in this? So any kind of approach that I find that are helpful? It's a start.

**Tanya Griffiths 10:01**

Yeah, yeah—

**Sandra Pronteau 11:03**

They'll build their allies. And for anyone out there that's listening, take a stand for your own cause. Don't be afraid if you feel like you're alone, reach out. There's a lot of good people out there that will support you and walk with you in your journey. You're never alone.

**Tanya Griffiths 12:15**

Yeah, no, those are very, very important words to hear. Because many of the time we we think to ourselves that we're the only ones carrying all of this weight. And we don't have to, you don't have to carry all of that weight by yourself. You can, you can share the load. Or you can also just take it off and take a break and be with others, and then continue on. So absolutely. And in the in the whole spirit of learning, because you said that you love to continue to learn and I'm sure there other conferences that you look forward to being part of. I'm wondering, what lessons have you learned from your children and also your grandchild that impact the work that you do and the way you show up?

**Sandra Pronteau** 13:22

Well, I think my my kids are, I learn a lot like about patience. They're still dealing with their stuff, and all and like, you know, they're young adults, they had their own journey as well. And as much as I love them, I also I have to let them take their journey too. You know, and I'm part of learning and that's part of life. You know, they know I'm always here when they when they need my support. My grandson, he, last time I saw him was around Christmas time. He lives with his mom, his mom's a single mom, my son — they don't really get to see each other too much. But my grandson knows he's very loved. And he's missed by his dad. And he knows he has his other family here. He is actually turning 12 and he he'll make a decision when he's ready to take a stand and say, You know what, I want to go hang out with Kokum. I want to go hang out with my aunties and uncles. You know, like his mom has gonna have to deal with. And that's, you know, like in Indigenous families. There are a lot of like, still a lot of family breakups, a lot of just sadness that goes on in the families. But they all have to do with, like, what had happened in our history. And it won't take, it'll take time for us to regain our strength and our like, in our families, to get strong to build that connection to learn to grow, and be in unity. So a lot of work in our Indigenous families we have, and there's a lot of good families out there who are strengthening. But like every other families, there's always gonna be some kind of dynamics. There's always going to be some, like, families and not in balance. There is no perfect family out there. And if there is, well, I like to know who the perfect family is. I learned that a long time ago when I was a young mom. And the program we took two years ago called Nobody's Perfect — great program for young parents on saying you're falling apart and everybody else.

**Tanya Griffiths** 16:31

Yeah, yeah. No, absolutely.

**Sandra Pronteau** 16:35

And I learned that from going in foster care. Like I saw so many families. And I had never even like, Christian families. I had never ever met. No, they try. But they can't. Everybody's got skeletons in their closet.

**Tanya Griffiths 16:58**

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, no, I, I hear you. And I, and I also hear that it's important for you to let your kids or your your children figure things out in their own pace and in their own space. And knowing that you're around when they need the extra support, I think. I think I personally also align with with such values of, of, you figure, you, you take your time to figure your life out. Because at the end of the day, you're your own person, and I am my own person. And learning that even though our family is an extension of ourselves, we can't save everybody or we can't do it all and we can't be everything for everyone. So, yeah, I hear that in what you were sharing. And, and also how important it is to build some form of harmony within a family. And yeah, again, to create the safe space where people can be themselves and at least feel welcomed and and that they belong. Yeah. Yeah.

**Sandra Pronteau 18:32**

And try to cherish the good memories always. And that's the one thing I love about our family, we love to reminisce of our good memories, and some our like, embarrassing moments. And as parents, we're very good at doing, we love rehashing up from the day embarrassing moments, where you're like four years old or whatever, showing a kid picture of you know, to your girlfriends or wives, like "Oh, Gosh, here we go again." Yeah, kinda thing and also things, these are like, joy. Like, my kids are all in the 30s. And I still see them at my little three four year olds. They're like, Mom, we're not that little kid anymore. But you still are in my eyes. It's like my grandson like. Yeah, yeah, I'm just very grateful like, being a woman with disability on top of that. Like they learned that, I was told I can never have kids. When I was pregnant with my first child. He's 35. And well, you know what I had four of them. Because they figured well, because of my disability, my scoliosis, my mobility, that they basically thought thought I couldn't, do it. Yes, I did have support from home care support. I had like homemakers. So I was very fortunate. I didn't have it every day. I had it like couple of times a week. You know, right. And then I had a partner. So yeah, there were some days that were like, Oh my gosh, how do I do this for four kids? And you know how they are elementary age kids. They actually like to do that today. They'll still have like, a bunch of little elementary kids all say Mom! Mom! Mom! kind of thing. Just to drive me nuts. That's okay. You guys are like how old? They start reliving their childhood too, right?

**Tanya Griffiths 20:55**

Yeah, no, we're, yeah, I always honestly, I don't know, I see a lot of the people that I love. I'm also just like, you know, even strangers, sometimes I just see them as children living in adult bodies. And yeah, you know, and just trying to figure out how to, how to keep up with the world and demands and yeah, and more responsibilities, nonetheless, which can get difficult to cope with, but at the end of the day, many of the ways in which we respond, especially when they come from hurt, they're, that that's the kid in us. And that and that, and the kid in us still lives. And, you know, when you're talking about having your kids at home, and them just playing around and all that, that's like, that's also a form of of liveliness, and, and, you know, and joy as you put it. So that is also celebrated. So sometimes even with me, and with me and my partner, sometimes I'll be like, Hey, do you want to just skip down the road instead of walking down the road? And he's like, Sure. And so we skip down the road, and we look, you know, we look funny, because we're a bunch of 20 year olds, just yeah, just skipping down the street. But at the same time, it's, it's just like, you know, the life can be whatever you want it to be and joy can look like whatever you need it to look like. And you don't need to just express joy when you're having a fancy dinner with your friends or a soiree or whatever, it can, it can look as simple as, you know, looking at your shadows, or whatever, whatever it looked like when you were growing up, too. So, yeah, that was a, that was a beautiful reminder. Yeah. Also, as as we come to a close of our inner conversation today, I'm also just wondering if there's anything else that you'd like to share with the folks tuning in today.

**Sandra Pronteau 23:23**

I just want to say thank you, Tanya, for taking the time to take an interest in hearing my story and interviewing me. I want to encourage people and the listeners to like, get to know our organization, Disability Foundation, and like, there's so many resources we have, you know, and I really think it's really important to connect to the disabled community. And you'll be surprised what you'll learn, if you surprise what Disability Foundation has to offer. And if you have any questions or wanna chat more, learn about any of the groups that I talk about, feel free to send an email to Tanya or myself. And my email is all lowercase [sandrapronteau@gmail.com](mailto:sandrapronteau@gmail.com). No space, all lowercase. And yeah, again, it's been a pleasure to actually sit here and talk. Don't let the disability of any kind hinder you in your life. Even if you're gonna deal with like, ignorance. I don't like saying that word but there's a lot of people that don't understand and still have a lot to learn. Take the time to explain it all, like if you see someone gawking at you, and be mindful of how you're address it. You know, I had seen myself, kinda like, in one of my Negative Nelly mood, saying, "You should teach your child not to stare." Instead, say hi to the child, or, you know, and I do that a lot.

You know, and then you'd be surprised what they say to you. They're just looking at you in wonderment like, wow, yeah, I wonder what that person is like?

**Tanya Griffiths 25:49**

Yeah, yeah. Especially when it comes from like a childlike wonder. I think it comes from just not just not knowing and or not seeing a person like that before. And it's just this curiosity, that when it when it's approached, when it's approached with that sense of wonderment and also humility, that's a connection waiting to happen. And if we open ourselves to those moments, I think we'll be living in a more coherent, in a friendlier society, for sure.

**Sandra Pronteau 26:27**

For sure, you know, and then you're always gonna deal with people that are not very educated. And that disability movement or maybe misunderstood, mislabeled people with disabilities. You know, I still have to, like I have, like, people, I know that other seniors who don't have a lot of knowledge. And it's kind of sad, you got to kind of educate them. Yeah, like I had one recently said, "What? You can have kids?" Yes, I had four children. And then, "wow, how did you do that?" Well, do you want to know how? Trying to be funny with them, right? They said, no, no, not that way! Well, I know what you mean. I get it. And change a dialogue, how you think how you react?

**Tanya Griffiths 27:28**

Yeah. And I mean, a lot of that, too, is because one, one narrative has been pushed out, you know, and one narrative is the norm. And you can only, you know, such as the narrative like, oh, you can only have children if you look a certain way. But really what I'm guessing what you did through that conversation, too, is add another narrative to this person's life. And now they're just like, oh, it can look, you know, mothers can look a whole array of of ways, and they don't have to be living in a body without disabilities. So, yes, as you shared earlier, I really am so thankful for this chance to sit here and talk with you and talk about the work that you've done. And I'm glad you gave your your email out to folks so that they can reach out to you as well. But yeah, it's such an amazing honor to be here and to be in this timeline with you. I'm just so inspired that not only did you find your voice and use your voice, but through everything that has happened in the circumstances that you've lived through, you're also using that to amplify the rest of the voices too and to make space for for everybody, honestly. So thank you, Sandra.

**Sandra Pronteau 29:07**

Yeah, well, thank you again, Tanya, it's been my pleasure and I hope everybody has a beautiful long weekend. Victoria Day's coming up and enjoy your summer, everybody out there. Stay cool. Be safe.

**Tanya Griffiths** 29:27

Thank you, Sandra.