

Janice Laurence Pt. 1 | Discover Stories Episode 87

Announcement 0:08

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 0:41

Hello and thank you for tuning in to 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 pleasure of being in conversation with Janice Laurence. Janice Laurence is joining us today to chat about her passion for inclusive dance and community building. She has been facilitating virtual dance workshops since 2020 and has spent wonderful people through her love of movement. She is a disabled dance artist, and her unique movement practice includes a joyful exploration of using various mobility aids. Janice was born with the neuromuscular disease Charcot–Marie–Tooth (CMT) Type 1a. She enthusiastically believes that movement, community, connections and diversity are our strengths. Hi Janice, thank you for joining us today.

Janice Laurence 1:41

Hi Tanya, thank you so much for the invitation.

Tanya Griffiths 1:44

I'm really excited to hear more about you, your relationship with dance and also your journey into this space, because I know that before dance, it was mostly academia for you. So I guess we can begin with, what does dance mean to you?

Janice Laurence 2:12

Well, you know, dance, to me, is a way of going through the world, and if you could breathe, you can dance. And I really believe that dance saved my life. I found dance. I started

training as a dancer in 2017 and it just opened up a whole new world for me, because I just needed to go in a different direction, and it got me there. I can elaborate on that.

Tanya Griffiths 2:48

Yeah.

Janice Laurence 2:53

I, you know, I was, I was born with my disability and, and it's a progressive disease, and I've had lots of lots of different health setbacks, and I was lucky enough to be working as a teacher, and I've taught University, and I've been a summer session principal in the Burnaby School District, and I've done lots of work in academia, as you mentioned, and and then to lose that because of my disability, and to be put on a, you know, a very nice disability pension gave enough financial security to take care of myself, but I didn't really feel like I had much of a purpose other than just taking care of myself and managing my health and and then. And then one time I was I was sitting at a bus stop in my power chair, and woman ran up to me, and her shoelace was undone and and I said, "Oh, your is undone." She said, "Oh, I'm just on my way to a dance class, thank you." And and then I said, "Do you happen to know where someone using a wheelchair could dance in Vancouver?" And she said, "Oh, yes, you should come to this class next week. And she introduced me to All Bodies Dance Project, which is in Metro Vancouver. And the people in All Bodies Dance Project were so welcoming, and it was taught so well, that I just decided I must learn to teach and share what I'm learning in All Bodies Dance Project. And that led to dancing with many different other dancers, not just All Bodies Dance Project, but dance for all bodies and community dancers and just lots and lots of different opportunities, Action at a Distance, new works I perform, I've been part of dance festivals, and I've met so many people, and I just keep learning more about what dance can be, and it's really changed my way of moving through the world, and when the pandemic started in 2020 I decided to just start using my skills as a teacher and as a dancer and and and start facilitating online dance workshops. And that's how I got involved with Connectra through Disability Foundation. And so typically, once a week, you'll find me facilitating a dance workshop on on Zoom for Connectra. And people come from all over the world and dance and you know, and I'm back in the dance studio and dancing in parks and dancing wherever I can, but then I'm always going to offer dance workshops to people on Zoom, because I'm so privileged. I'm learning so much, and I want to share it, and I've got this virtual community of people I mostly won't ever get to meet, right? But I can bring dance into their homes, and that's a long answer, but yeah, dance is dance has given me a whole new recent life. I would say I reinvented myself.

Tanya Griffiths 6:08

Yes, yes, I was going to say, it sounds like dance has really given you this new passion and purpose for life, and just spreading that, that joy and that relationship you have with movement, especially in the disability community, where there's still a lot of barriers to movement and to activities such as dance, I can imagine.

Janice Laurence 6:42

Yeah, I, you know, I certainly have learned a lot more about what it means to be disabled, because I'm meeting more and more people with disabilities through my pursuit of dance. Most of the people I dance with are not disabled, so I'm really lucky enough to be part of inclusive dance spaces where we talk about access needs. And you know, what do we need to know to dance with you today and like, you know, lots of check ins and kindness and gentleness and welcomeness. And you know, ableism is always the default in society. It's very hard for people to understand what it's like to live with a disability and feel excluded from many activities, and it's great when people don't have to worry about financial barriers as well, and most of what I am offering is free. So I'm really, really proud to be able to be able to share dance with anybody who has a body, and then just try to figure out how to make it work and explore the possibilities of difference, because that's how I'm treated. And I've really tapped into my creative side and my silly side. You know, dance can be any kind of emotion do. So sometimes I'm crying when I'm dancing, or I'm laughing when I'm dancing, and I just feel like a more authentic human being and and i i It's just it feels like my calling, like, where has this been on my life, I've always loved to dance. I was always that person, you know, at a wedding, or, you know, if I was out in a nightclub with friends, you know, just, I would get all my friends out. Let's get let's start dancing. Yeah, keep people going, you know. And you know, I would never know when, when my knee would dislocate on the dance floor, and down I would go, or, or, you know, I'd have my walker on the dance floor, and people would be buying me drinks, and my walker would be filled with alcohol. I just, I've always been rather fearless. Oh, and, of course, yeah, you know. And I, you know, I've taught, I've, I've taught a zillion students in elementary schools and high schools and at the university and as principal. So I'm not shy, and I'm never concerned with what I look like, except, you know, I give it my best, but I mean, I'm not going to look like somebody's image of what they think a dancer should be because, you know, I might be using a manual wheelchair or a power chair or scooter, a walker or a cane, or I might be on the ground, or I might be standing. So it's like really pushing the envelope about what disability can be, what dance is. It really gets people's attention. I think it's a very political statement for me to just show up in a dance space and just expect people to find a way to to dance with me, through communication, through listening to each other,

through looking, you know, just, I just need to be able to be in this space, you know, right? I like ramps. I like accessible bathrooms. Yeah.

Tanya Griffiths 10:00

Yeah, oh, oh, wow. I can. I totally have a picture in my head of you just being on the dance floor and just being fearless and really taking up space. And I love that.

Janice Laurence 10:19

Yes, yes. Yes, that's, that's an expression I learned, like, take up space. I think there's so much internalized ableism that comes from living with a disability, and, you know, and I, and I have been told that I take up too much space, for example, on public transit. So it's just a matter of like, really feeling confident in my identity and knowing that I'm that I'm having fun, but I'm offering something as an entertainer, as a performer, as an educator, as a friend. I think when people see me being vulnerable and authentic, it encourages them to be more open and to share. And you know, when I'm saying, Hey, I'm uncomfortable with touch because it hurts a lot, then that gives somebody else a chance to say, Oh, I don't like being touched either. You know, like just, just, you know when you when you really know who you are and why you want to be like that. Then it, it, it just invites other people to to be like that as well. And a lot of people come to my virtual classes not knowing anybody, and then they're welcomed as friends. And they might be very shy about turning on their video, but then they see the other lovely people from all over the world who are moving in ways that they might not have expected. And they were like, Oh, this is dance. Like, this is dance. Yes, yes, this is dance. Just, yeah, I'm really proud that I'm part of this movement for inclusive dance and connectors. Really, really helped by hosting these classes.

Tanya Griffiths 12:14

Yeah, no, I can hear it in your voice, and I really feel that I really am a huge believer. Sorry, I'm a huge believer in that being authentic to ourselves and showing up in a way that is most genuine and authentic to who we are also gives other people permission to step further into who they are. And it, and it sounds like that's exactly the effect that happens within your dance classes, too, and also just in the spaces that you go to and you dance.

Janice Laurence 12:56

And yeah, it's, it's, you know, I would say I'm deeply entrenched, kind of, in a contemporary improv genre of dance. I've taken some adaptive dance classes in ballet and hip-hop and salsa and cumbia and, like, it's always fun. Like, I just like different music and different

styles, but I really like improv, and sometimes, you know, I'm working with choreographers, and we're figuring out a performance project that has a structured improv, you know, which is never like everything is all kind of mapped out. So I like to to work with a choreographer and figure out, you know, what is it that my body can do, and then how can I learn to do that with more technique and skill and grace, if that's what's called for, but, but I never feel like I'm being forced to move in ways that don't feel good, and I think I have a very wonderful relationship with dance, and that I've never gone through like the traditional kinds of training, where people are are shamed or made to feel bad or have body image problems, you know. And the fact that I dance with so many different mobility aids. Means that when I meet people who use the mobility aid, or are on the verge of using a mobility aid, but haven't quite got there yet, then I can say, well, this is how I move with a walker. This is what I have found useful with the cane. And this is, you know, when I dance with a power chair compared to a manual chair. Here the differences. Like I do the research all the time, and I had to learn it myself. I have had some guidance from some dear friends who also use mobility aids, but, yeah, most of it is just figuring it out, just like just trying it and having the belief in yourself. And then. Mentorship and and the time to just kind of explore. And if you have a body, then you can always find a little dance snack, you know, like just, just a little, tiny dance snack to help you get through the afternoon.

Tanya Griffiths 15:15

Yeah, yeah, for sure, just that little bit of movement. And you've, you've touched on this, but what is your philosophy when it comes to teaching, and how has it evolved over the years?

Janice Laurence 15:33

Um, I learned a lot from other participants, who who come and I really, I really value diversity and understanding what people are enjoying and are curious about. I think I'm much more playful and silly than I ever dreamed possible. I think, I think that's, that's a harder thing to do when you're working in the public school system, but, but as a, as a, you know, as a dancer, there just seems to be an invitation for that sometimes my my philosophy is I'm more of a facilitator, I think, than a than a stage. On a stage, I have my own life experience and my understandings that I can share from my own perspective, but I don't know what it's like to be in someone else's body, but I want to help them figure out what feels good, whether they will be comfortable dancing on the floor. They might not have ever thought that you could dance on the floor or on their bed. You can do bed dancing. You know, you can dangle an arm off the bed. You can bounce on your bed. You can jump on your bed, you can roll over your bed. You can I like to show people different

choices, like how I dance using my couch and different pieces of furniture. Or I'll go out on my balcony and dance on my balcony and use the wheel as a place to hang on to so I don't fall over just like I want to be the person that they never knew was out there, like I want to show people just how much you can enjoy your own body I have, I have taught dance even right after surgery, and I've had a cast on my foot, and I haven't been able to to weight bear, and I've joined dance classes from my hospital bed. I just think, if you're like, just letting go of, like, the ego and want to feel better, so I'm going to the as a gift to myself. And people always say that they feel better after the dances. That's just great. I even had somebody join the last few days of her time on Earth. She was very close to dying, and she joined, and she was dancing from her bed. And what a beautiful compliment that she's spending some of her last hours on Earth dancing. There's other things you could be doing, you know, yeah, just very much in awe, very odd, of the resilience of the human spirit and the willingness for people to briefly show up and dance in a little zoom box. And I do sometimes facilitate classes in person. It's but, but, you know, you and I met through the disability foundation VAMS program, and so I'm talking a lot about the virtual classes. You know, I'm disabled, and I have to manage my energy and time, so it's easier for me to dance using zoom, if I'm, if I'm facilitating an in person class, that's, that's fine once in a while, but I never know how my body's gonna feel.

Tanya Griffiths 19:16

Yeah, of course.

Janice Laurence 19:25

It's very, very rare that I actually missed a dance event or class, because it's just so good for it's just so good for me. My body always seems to find the strength to do it. You know, even if it's the only thing I do all day, basically, is like, I will make it to dance. I will get out of bed, get dressed, dance, and then go back to bed.

Tanya Griffiths 19:54

Oh, that's so beautiful. And and you really talk to a lot just about, you know, learning from from the participants, as much as they're probably learning from you in the process of figuring out what feels good, which is definitely a form of self exploration and figuring out boundaries. And it sounds like it's a very collaborative process where nothing like everything is an invitation, and also redefining the spaces in which we can dance, like being in bed, for example, which honestly is not a place where I thought somebody could dance in but that's also because a lot of what dance has been in my life has been taken over by

that dominant narrative that's been swept by ableism. And so to me, dance has looked a certain way, and the way you talk about it, it's very much redefining and re narrating all the spaces where we can dance and how dance can look like, which is a very empowering yeah thing, and experience.

Janice Laurence 21:17

It truly is and and to be, you know, like I have, I've had so much grief through my my health complications, and just incredible, incredible, awful, awful pain and and it's like to to to to know that much pain and then find so much joy in something, and go back and forth between those worlds. It's, it's quite something like you, you never know how much pain someone has. But if you, if you offer something that feels really good, then it just can, can just improve the quality of your life so much, and that's why I have so much appreciation for life, is because I just know how hard life can be, and just like that, when you go through hard times, you often just have to develop new ways of moving forward, new resilience, new new people to connect with, because, because everything can change when you're dealing with the really hard stuff. And thank goodness that that there's, there's opportunities for people, and there needs to be more and there needs to be more funding, and there's more and more dancers who are interested in how to facilitate inclusive dance classes so that they can not be afraid to welcome anybody into their class like there's Just so much there's there's so much uncertainty when somebody sees me roll in with my wheelchair. People often are very uncomfortable when they're nervous, and so I'm finding myself, I often kind of have to put people at ease, and just maybe that's why I can be kind of like life-of-the-party-ish, right? Because I want people to to feel comfortable around me that, you know, those just some things I'm working through but, but I am genuinely pretty happy when I go to dance, because it's something that I can do there's and I don't care if it doesn't look the same as what other people are doing, and I can figure out modifications in most classes so that that I'm having a good time. And yeah, I just, I would just never teach a class where I'm going to criticize anybody for living in a certain way or not being able to do something. And yeah, people get Yeah, just, I just want people to just enjoy their bodies. And dance can be stillness. To dance can be breathing. Dance can be internal. Dance can be tiny. You know, somebody watching somebody's face can be dance too. So in my virtual classes, we often do solos where everybody turns their video off and one person has their video on and they do a solo for us, and sometimes we give back something that we remember from their soul. Or sometimes we just enjoy it, and we do little group works or duets or trios, or, you know, it's just fun. Depending who shows up. I never know who's going to show up. Sometimes it's 10 people, sometimes it's 27 people. Sometimes it's four people. Like, I never know. And, you know, it's always kind of exciting, what's Dad's gonna

be like today? And, yeah, yeah. And I learned to DJ. I use Spotify, I make up playlists and then, and, you know, I try to have different varieties of music. And I. Typically, it's instrumental, and just what my classes are a gift for myself, what I want to explore that day, and then hopefully when I'm really curious and eager than then that brings that energy to the to the people that are chosen to spend their time with me.

Tanya Griffiths 25:18

Yeah, yeah, no, I can totally imagine that.

Announcement 25:23

This podcast is brought to you by the Vancouver Adapted 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, @vamsociety on Instagram, the Vancouver Adapted Music Society on Facebook, or email us at info@vams.org. Thanks for listening.