

Lauren Burrows Backhouse | Discover Stories Episode 57

Sponsor Message 0:00

Thanks for tuning in to Discover Stories on Re-Imagine Radio. Before we get started, here's a word from our sponsor. Do you wish you had a voice in making some of the world's most popular websites more accessible? Fable is recruiting a community of paid assistive technology users who work from home to test websites and provide feedback on how they can be improved. We're currently recruiting testers who use Dragon voice control, eye tracking, switch controls and head mice. No resume, no cover letter, and no experience with user testing is required. Learn more and apply at www.makeitfable.com/community.

Noah Stolte 0:45

Hello. Welcome to another Discover Stories with Re-Imagine Radio today. Volunteer host Jasper Chu is interviewing Lauren Burrows Backhouse. Jasper knows Lauren from when he used to participate in the Richmond Youth Media Program of which Lauren was the founder and program head. I hope you enjoy their conversation. Thank you for tuning in.

Jasper Chu 1:09

Long time no see. It's been quite a few years now since we last spoken to each other or seen each other. I've known you for about a decade, actually, over a decade, but you were at the Media Lab , or Richmond Youth Media Program long before I joined. So I just want to ask, what got you involved in the program?

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 1:33

I'm happy you asked. Well, first of all, it's cool to be part of a podcast called Re-Imagine Radio, because my education is in broadcasting, radio broadcasting. I went to BCIT, which is something I think we share. Some things were happening in my life, like I became a mom, and that just some different things kind of got me thinking about maybe making a change. I wanted to sort of help more people, like maybe my radio show helped some people, but I wanted to try to directly help people. And I was also thinking about how it was so motivating to me when I was hosting my show, when young musicians came in and they were talking about whatever challenges they were facing in their careers, and I could, like, help brainstorm with them solutions, or, you know, try to help them advance their careers as musicians. And I thought, like, maybe I could do this for young people. Maybe I could become a youth worker. I knew a youth worker at the time. Shout out to Tamim. He is also a musician. So I knew him sort of through the music scene. I'd seen him perform and stuff,

but he'd spoken to me about his youth work in Richmond, and it sounded really amazing, really rewarding and really cool. And Richmond, BC was doing such interesting things at the time with different types of youth workers, like Tamim was a music youth worker, and when I went and applied to become a youth worker in Richmond, I did not get that job, but the coordinator of youth services said, "Well, what about being like a DJ, youth worker?" And I was amazed at that possibility. And you know, one thing led to another. It wasn't instantaneous, but by 2011 we had launched the Richmond, excuse me, we had launched, in partnership with the Richmond Addiction Services Society and with funding from Vancouver Coastal Health, we've been able to launch the Richmond Youth Media Program so that it all started. Yeah.

Jasper Chu 3:38

Awesome. When you were a radio host and you brought people on, they spoke about their challenges when being music producers, what were some of those challenges they were facing that they brought up you?

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 3:53

Oh, man, I mean, it might be like a young band that's on tour for the first time, and they're trying to figure out how to, like, you know, find safe places to sleep or decent ways to feed themselves without spending too much money when they're out on the road. It might be like, maybe it was a musician who'd found a bunch of sudden success, and they weren't really sure how to handle it or manage it, you know. And it was very weird to them, you know, a lot of these conversations weren't necessarily in our official interview. The official interview would be like, so you've got a new album out, you know, tell me about the album. But then when we turn the mics off, we're having these really rich and rewarding conversations. And I thought, oh, you know, like, maybe I'm good at providing guidance to people in some ways.

Jasper Chu 4:45

Awesome. And one more thing before I move on to the next subject, it's about when you decided you wanted to actually help more people outside your original job at CBC, what made you feel that you should be out there helping more people, or what was your reason for feeling you should be out there helping people?

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 5:06

I think that becoming a parent was a was a huge part of it. And looking at my little baby and thinking about how that baby was going to be a child, and then a teenager, and then an adult, and like I don't know, I often talk about myself like I'm a very old person when I'm

talking to the teenagers, and I'm sure to the teen, from their perspective, I am pretty ancient. But you know, thinking about the differences from when I was growing up to what it's like now to grow up, and it seemed a lot simpler. You know, I grew up like before the internet. I grew up where I don't know it just, it just seemed a lot more complicated to me now. And so many families are nuclear families. You know, we don't have the support of our extended families very often in urban centers. And yeah, it just seemed to be like a really important role to play to help help youth. Like in Richmond, they use the 40 developmental assets philosophy, I guess you'd call it, which comes out of the Search Institute. And, you know, it talks about internal assets and external assets. And these developmental assets are what you need to grow into, you know, happy, healthy, caring adults. And it's kind of, there are 40 of them. So, you know, I can't, I won't do the whole list now, but one of them that always really stood out to me is this idea of three or more non parent adults. So you know, each young person, they the old fashioned way to say it is, it takes a village to raise a child, but science and research shows like at least five adults, right? If possible, if each young person can have at least five adults that care about what happens to them. And it can be a teacher, right? It can be a parent, it can be an auntie, it can be a sport coach. It could be a media program facilitator, you know, but, but kids can't do it by themselves. Young people need support from adults, so, yeah, I don't know if I'm exactly answering your question.

Jasper Chu 7:39

No, that makes sense. That makes sense. But this brings me to another issue about development in youth. When you were growing up throughout the 70s and 80s, what would you say was like the issue then around individuals who are neurodivergent or had disabilities and special needs?

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 8:00

Good question. There was a lot less discussion. There's a lot less visibility. And there were, there were a lot less examples of people out there living their lives, living their full, rich, enjoyable lives, with different abilities and neurodivergence. And you know, we didn't have that word neurodivergence at that time. There was no general understanding of a spectrum of abilities, right? And that we all fit somewhere in that spectrum, yeah, I don't know. I, when I was growing up, you know, and I was, like, 10 years old, I wasn't thinking about those things.

Jasper Chu 8:42

Fair enough. So what do you feel you were, do you feel that you were some way drawn to individuals who had disabilities or were neurodivergent provide special needs when you began your work at RYMP or Richmond Youth Media Program?

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 9:00

Um, I don't know. I don't know about being drawn to a particular group. I really love people. I love getting to know people. I love the richness of the human experience. I find it just endlessly fascinating. I love reading fiction. I love, you know, learning more about people, you know, like the Richmond Youth Media Program was not designed specifically for youth who are living with different disabilities. It was designed to be a low barrier program that anybody who is interested in media arts could come and participate in. And in order to keep it low barrier. You know, we had a wide range. It's still running. This free program is still running in Richmond. Go check it out. richmond.ca/RYMP. But keeping it free, it's 100% free, having it run frequently, you know, it runs three times a week, having two staff members on which was not always the case. The program grew to accommodate that so that one person can teach the lesson and one person can be available for any special challenges that a participant is facing, yeah. Did I say 13 to 24 it's like a really large age range, right? And we always ensure to like, bake in that idea that, you know, we are all responsible to each other, and that we are all learning together, and that we all have the ability to teach each other as well. And, you know, it just evolved in this way that we were getting survey feedback from our participants. And, you know, more than 40% of the youth come into this program identified as having a disability, and that was a bit of a surprise. You know, it didn't feel like we were specifically designing the program to, I don't know, you know, I don't know what I'm trying to say, but it was, it was really cool. It was really cool to discover that this widely diverse group of young people felt comfortable in the space, felt that what they could learn there was important, and felt that, yeah, they wanted to spend their their valuable time with us there in the Media Lab.

Jasper Chu 11:24

Why do you think that over that the program attracted like it wasn't designed specifically for individuals who are neurodivergent, have disabilities or special needs. But what do you think Richmond Youth Media Program ended up attracting like over 40% of its individuals identifying with such?

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 11:44

I mean, it's so fascinating. I probably should have asked more individuals at the time like, you know, but part of the other questions on the survey include things like, you know, and it's all on a range if you agree or disagree, but you know, "This is a safe space for me. I learn

new things when I come here. I'm able to, I feel better supported when I come to this program," you know? "I learn things that enable me to help support others," you know. And so although it is about media arts, which could be anything from a radio show to, you know, short animation to, oh my gosh, laser tag graffiti, like we did, a lot of really cool projects that can, could really be whatever you are interested in, right? But I wish that I spent more time asking individuals, yeah, like, what? What makes it feel like a safe space for you? What made it feel like a valuable place for you to spend your time? And you know, maybe I can turn that question around to you, because, Jasper, you were a member of the Richmond Youth Media Program for many years, right? Like, do you want to share any thoughts about why it felt like a good place to be?

Jasper Chu 13:07

I don't know. It's just I felt I could live out my passion there doing whatever kind of art I felt like doing at the time. Just, I guess you could say it was a place where I felt I could artistically express myself and feel like myself without, you know, in a rather relaxed environment that went at the participant's own pace, which I think is what drew me and led me to stay in that program for quite a long time.

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 13:39

It really makes me feel happy to hear that. Yeah, and it like, I think you said something about, like, why are you drawn to work with individuals with disabilities? And I wasn't aiming to work with a particular group, but I did find that, you know, quite a few of those individuals were extremely, you know, committed to their interests and really passionate in pursuing them, and extremely creative, you know, coming up with approaches to creative challenges that I never would have come up with, you know, and so interesting to learn to see the world from a different perspective, or many perspectives, you know. So I really, really appreciated that aspect of my work.

Jasper Chu 14:37

When you were working with these individuals, what were some experiences that have left, like a significant impact on you, or that you still remember to this day quite fondly?

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 14:50

I mean, there are so many do you kind of mean, like, how was I changed by this work that I did?

Jasper Chu 14:57

We could go with that.

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 15:00

I've always been really enthusiastic and like, maybe this is not a word people use very often anymore, but I have been described as being hyper, very hyper. And, you know, like when I was in radio, one time, I worked as a traffic reporter, and I was just, you know, speaking faster than ever. And so I've often come on really sort of big and fast and excited. And that is not, that is not a way that everybody likes to interact, you know. So I think that I really gained a much deeper understanding of how you can modify your methods of communication to effectively communicate with different different types of people. For me, also slowing down, being able to slow down and make a little bit more space for more effective communication has been a big, big lesson that I learned from the Richmond Youth Media Program. It helps me to be a better communicator, you know. And now I'm now I'm in communication, so, yeah, thinking about, how do you tailor a message to a particular group so that they're going to really be able to hear it right or receive it. That was a big one for me.

Jasper Chu 16:28

Would you say that being able to communicate better has helped you in your personal life, with your family, and in what way do you think that's helped you out in other areas of life?

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 16:40

Yeah, good question. Well, I think that, you know, if possible, to get better at being in relationships is a great goal for all of us in our lives. You know, I've only recently kind of come around to thinking about a relationship as more of a verb instead of a noun, you know, like it's something that's that you're actively doing, that you're continuing to be in relationship with people and yeah, definitely, definitely, the lessons I've learned from them being a facilitator with the Richmond Youth Media Program have helped me in my personal life and family with friends. I mean, I dare say that public discourse has gone downhill over the past, say, four years. Would you agree?

Jasper Chu 17:35

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 17:36

I try to really hold those skills close when you know, I'm like, I'm feeling that there's an inflammatory situation happening, and I really feel this urge to, like, blast out all my strong feelings. And nowadays I just don't think that that's gonna make anything any better.

Jasper Chu 18:01

Or that it's anywhere near productive.

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 18:06

So I'm really, really trying to find ways to have those most difficult conversations. And that ties in with my work in fundraising with nonprofits. You know, it also ties in with just building, maintaining relationships and yeah, I don't know. I'm definitely getting into the old fashioned side of things, but, you know, we gotta treat each other better, Jasper, we just have to. We gotta take good care of each other.

Jasper Chu 18:36

Of course. Everyone's worthy of respect, that's for sure. What was I going to ask? Um, are there some members of the Richmond Youth Media Program who were neurodivergent, had special needs or had disabilities that you could recall having a good time working with, or any experiences you shared with them that you particularly enjoyed or had a lasting impact on you?

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 19:04

Yes, like so many. I want to protect everybody's privacy, of course. So I'm not sure, not sure what I should share.

Jasper Chu 19:17

You don't have to name names at all.

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 19:19

No, of course. I mean, there was one time where something so special happened, and it didn't really have anything to do with the media arts that we were learning together, but the facility where we were, it just so happened that one of our youth media nights, youth media programs were running on Halloween night, right? Like that. That doesn't happen every year. So one of the years, we were having our session on Halloween night, and we were everything was wrapping up just as it was getting dark, you know, and the city in Richmond was hosting a fireworks display just like 200 feet from our facility, just. Over in the track and field area there at Minoru. And so we sort of made it like a little impromptu, not a non-official field trip, but like, you know, okay, the staff are heading over to watch a field the fireworks. If anyone's allowed to go, maybe we'll see you there, you know. Anyhow, we brought one of the program members who had been living with a physical disability, and had a quite a sheltered life until joining this the social group. And so there they were, at age 17, seeing fireworks for the very first time. And I don't think I'll ever forget the look on their face. You know, it was amazing. There are so many, but I've been also really impressed

with the post-secondary ambitions and accomplishments of some of the youth who've been in the program. You know, I just as I was thinking about this interview, I did a little bit of online research, and I saw a cool blog post from Inclusion BC, so they were talking earlier this year about post secondary opportunities for youth with disabilities. And one of the things they said, and they say, unfortunately, this is the case, but the vision for learners with an intellectual and or developmental disability is often drastically different from the vision for students without a label, and this vision lacks an expectation for lifelong learning. So I think that that was definitely true for many of the individuals who I saw in the Richmond Youth Media Program who'd been identified as having a disability of that type in the school system, they were working towards a completion certificate, but they weren't really working towards like, a diploma, right? And that can really become a huge barrier when you want to pursue post-secondary education. And so I'm just thinking about, you know, one person in particular who reported to me that they rarely felt engaged in high school, you know, and the projects that they were doing with the youth media program were much more interesting to them, and they were really able to practice and develop their skills during these programs. And now they're, they are in post secondary, they're going to college, and although they're doing a modified schedule, they're doing two courses at a time instead of four, like they're going to graduate, right? This young adult is going to be a college graduate. And I don't want to, I can't take all the credit, but I think being in the media program helped them to expand their vision of what was possible for themselves, right? Oh, yeah, and lift up their understanding of, yeah, like, what they're capable of.

Jasper Chu 22:57

And I can definitely speak to that too, because if it probably weren't for the Media Lab, I probably wouldn't be as fluent as I am now in or as experienced as I am now in things like Adobe Premiere, Adobe Photoshop, and I actually use Pixlr quite regularly too. I actually have a subscription to it. Yeah, it's amazing, by the way, but I think that the program I was in, it definitely helps with literacy and building confidence and technical experience in video editing or photo editing platforms that many other people, including individuals who are neurodivergent, have special needs or physically disabled or have a disability, might not be able to fully understand so I think this program did wonders for me, and I think it does. It's done a lot of wonders for other people too. Like you said.

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 23:55

I'm such a softy, I could practically burst into tears hearing you say that. It's so awesome.

Jasper Chu 24:01

Anyways, I want to move on.

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 24:03

[Laughs] No crying.

Jasper Chu 24:07

So, generally speaking, what are some common themes you've noticed about individual because you've worked with individuals who've had these challenges, what have been some common themes or common issues? Again, no need to name names here, but what have been some common issues that you've noticed they've discussed or brought up with you about what they're facing, especially in terms of trying to get into post secondary or in terms of employment or just trying to seek acceptance from the community? What have been some common themes that you've noticed from them that they've discussed with you?

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 24:40

I mean, there's so many differences between each of these individuals, but it's a bit tricky to think about what, what are all the things in common? But on the flip side, we all kind of face similar challenges, right? Like so definitely finding employment. Is a huge one for adolescents and young adults trying to build that independence, trying to get some money to spend on things they want to spend your money on, and I would say particularly for those people who are living with a disability, finding employment with room for growth, right? Like finding a job is one thing, but finding a job where you can develop your skills, get promoted, right, have work that helped live a full life. So you might, you know, you might get a chance to have a part time retail opportunity, but is that something that you're going to be able to find satisfaction with in the long run? Right? So employment is a big one. We did talk about post secondary education, I would say, also being able to access any sort of adaptations that are available to you as a learner, right? You've got a different learning style, making sure that you can access those types of supports. And, yeah, you said, like, being accepted by society. I would say that that sort of appeared in our conversations, just in terms of, like, friendships, you know, and and romantic relationships too, that they're tricky for everyone, right. Relationships are not easy, but they're also so important to us as human beings, and that was a theme. So I think also, yeah, like coming into the Richmond Youth Media Program, it's this, it's available three times a week. It's free. You know, there's a fair amount of unstructured time where you can pursue your own interests, but you can also be in a room with other people who have maybe similar interests, but are definitely, you know, around your same age and just being close to others, you know, loneliness and isolation are so, like, damaging and kind of dangerous.

Jasper Chu 27:11

Oh, yeah.

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 27:13

So, yeah, I think those are some of the challenges, for sure.

Jasper Chu 27:19

And before I wrap up up here. You don't mind just describing where you work now and what's your role?

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 27:26

Yes, I work at WISH Drop-In Centre Society. My role is development and communications officer. So talking about the website, our social media channels, you know, thank you letters for donors, all this type of work. I also have had a chance to interview a few participants too and try to share, again anonymously, some of their stories. So, you know, bringing in some of that, some of those media skills, and definitely keeping on the relationship, developing relationships tip.

Jasper Chu 28:06

Well, Lauren Burrows, thanks so much for your time. It's great to catch up with you again.

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 28:11

Jasper, too. I'm expecting great things from you. Keep me posted on all of your amazing adventures.

Jasper Chu 28:17

Well, again, Lauren, thank you so much for your time. It's great catching up with you.

Lauren Burrows Backhouse 28:22

Lauren Burrows Backhouse, signing off. Thank you, Jasper.