

Episode 45 | Jessica Kruger Pt. 1

Sarah Smith 0:11

Hello and welcome back to Discover Stories on Re-Imagine Radio. I'm Sarah Smith, your host of the podcast and a student intern at the Vancouver Adapted Music Society. Today, joining me is Jessica Kruger, also known as The Stubborn Baker. Jessica runs an independent business making custom cakes, cupcakes and cookies, and also plays wheelchair rugby—among other sports. Just before jumping into our conversation today, though, it's important to take a moment to acknowledge the land on which we are fortunate to host this podcast. This is the unceded and ancestral territory of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations, and has been stewarded by them since time immemorial. Vancouver is located on territory that was never ceded or given up to the crown by these Peoples. The term unceded acknowledges the dispossession of the land and the inherent rights that Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh hold to the territory. The term serves as a reminder that these peoples have never left their territories and they will always retain their jurisdiction and relationships with the land. Jessica, welcome to Discover Stories.

Jessica Kruger 1:24

Thank you. I'm happy to be here.

Sarah Smith 1:26

I'm happy to have you here. So why don't we just dive right in, and maybe if you want to sort of introduce yourself and tell us your story.

Jessica Kruger 1:36

Sure could be, could be a long story, but we'll see how we go. So as you already know, I'm Jessica. I am a full time baker. I own my own custom dessert business called the stubborn Baker. So that's what keeps me busy these days. When I'm not baking, I play wheelchair rugby for the BC provincial team, spend time with my husband, my dog Molly, friends, excited to get back up on the hill and do some sit skiing this year. So yeah, those are kind of the things that occupy my days lately.

Sarah Smith 2:17

Awesome. Awesome. Sounds very fun, like a good range of hobbies.

Jessica Kruger 2:21

Yes. I guess I should say that I'm in a wheelchair as well. I said I play wheelchair rugby, but that's maybe a little bit out of context. Um, yeah, I'm a quadriplegic, so I use a chair in my daily life. I had an accident when I was 15 that put me in a chair. So yeah, throw that in there too. Yeah.

Sarah Smith 2:43

And so use the term quadriplegic. We know you're a baker, and I think sometimes there's a lot of misconceptions about what quadriplegic actually means, because I can imagine people see your cakes and go, "Wow, that's amazing, but how does she do it?" So can you maybe talk a little bit about what that actually means? And if there's some common misconceptions or myths about that.

Jessica Kruger 3:04

Yeah, for sure. I think most people, when they hear quadriplegic assume that it means you don't have any function in your arms or in your upper body, whereas quadriplegic is actually just impairment to all four limbs. So for me, it means that I don't have, like, full flexion in my one hand, but I'm still able to, you know, grip things, so I can hold a whisk and a piping bag and all the things I need to do for work. And then in my other side, it's like my better side, but I still don't have full tricep function, so I'm able to use my upper limbs, but they have some forms of impairment, and that's why I'm technically classified as a quadriplegic, and also based on like, where you damaged your spine.

Sarah Smith 3:46

Okay, gotcha. So that makes sense. So it's essentially just some level of impairment in all four limbs to varying degrees, obviously.

Jessica Kruger 3:53

yeah, totally. So yeah, for some people, it does mean they have no movement at all in their upper body. And then there's people like me that you might look at as more of a paraplegic, but technically still a quad.

Sarah Smith 4:04

Yeah, no, that's interesting because it I think sometimes terms like that, sort of people can throw them around, not necessarily accurately. And that's such a broad range, too, of of disability as well. Like, that's, those are two very different ways to live, I would imagine.

Jessica Kruger 4:21

Totally, yeah, it's, it's one word to describe a whole range of capabilities within it. So I have people challenging me on whether I'm a quad or not, sometimes. Like, "You're not a quadriplegic." [Laughs] I think I'd know.

Sarah Smith 4:36

Oh, yeah, definitely. Well, thank you for that clarification. That's, that's really helpful, because I think that is something that commonly people aren't necessarily aware of. Definitely very cool. Okay, so I'm wondering sort of you spoke about some of your hobbies. You know, sit skiing, very cool, wheelchair rugby. Were sports like that something you were interested in before your accident? Or did you sort of have to adjust hobbies afterwards?

Jessica Kruger 5:02

Yeah, not specifically rugby beforehand, but I was definitely into sports. I did basketball, softball, volleyball, cheerleading, little bit of everything as a teenager. So when I had the accident, I definitely felt like I was going to lose the ability to play sports. I didn't really know about all of the adapted sports that are out there. So yeah, it was quick to find wheelchair rugby, and fell in love with it right away, and then slowly, have gotten better and better at the sit skiing. Sit skiing is, I skied before, so I think the transition of like starting a sport that you did previously as an adapted version is a harder transition than a whole new sport, because you have in your mind how it's supposed to be. So with skiing, I was a little more resistant to trying it in the beginning, because I just felt like it wasn't going to be the same thing. But now that I'm at the point where I have, like, a little bit of independence with it, it's pretty awesome. It's hard to feel that free, being somebody in a wheelchair, in any other place. So on the hill is pretty cool.

Sarah Smith 6:06

Yeah, that's cool. That sounds really special. And I like that you commented sort of on doing the same sports that you'd done in the adapted way, and sort of having those expectations about what skiing looked like for you before versus how it is now, and still being equally fun and freeing and adventurous.

Jessica Kruger 6:24

Totally, yeah. A few more falls and rolling down the hill these days, but it's part of the sport.

Sarah Smith 6:31

A part of the learning curve it comes I mean, as a new skier, non adapted, I think that's part of the territory anyways.

Jessica Kruger 6:37

Totally, yeah.

Sarah Smith 6:39

Yeah, that makes sense. Were there any other hobbies that you managed to sort of maintain with the adapted versions after your accident?

Jessica Kruger 6:49

Yeah, like in terms of sports, kayaking was something I did before the accident and something that I can still do now that I like. I didn't really play tennis before, but I play tennis occasionally now. It's like one of the sports that you can play with an able bodied friend as like an adapted version as well. So I like that aspect of it. And then, like outside of the sports world, baking was something that I did before I had my accident, and then something I really leaned into after the accident to sort of fill some of the gaps that I had lost in some of the hobbies I couldn't do anymore. I got into, like the decorating side of things after the accident, and started taking classes for that as well. So, yeah, I feel like for the most part, there's a version of everything that I did before that I can do in an adapted way. Now, just maybe some I'm not as excited about anymore.

Sarah Smith 7:44

Yeah, yeah, that makes sense. And I think there's a lot out there that isn't made aware of a lot of the time, in terms of adapted sports and hobbies and art, like any hobby, really, that folks do can be adapted in most most often, I think, can be adapted. So that's cool, just as a matter of finding out what that looks like and how to how to access that. Yeah, really cool. And I do want to get a bit more into the baking in a moment. But first, can we talk a little bit about the wheelchair rugby team? You mentioned you're on the provincial team, which is very cool and impressive for listeners who don't know, I recently learned that wheelchair rugby is also referred to as "murder ball" because it's so intense. So can you maybe tell us a bit about what that's like?

Jessica Kruger 8:31

For sure. Yeah, so it was originally called "murder ball" just because it's like a full contact sport. We're in chairs that are built reinforced with metal so they can be smashed into each other. People are getting flipped over in their chairs like it's it definitely has the contact aspect of able bodied rugby. But as it became like a Paralympic sport over the years, it wasn't the most marketable name, so they switched from wheelchair or from murder ball to wheelchair rugby, and it honestly doesn't have that many similarities with able bodied rugby, aside from the contact. So it can be a little bit confusing. It's played on a basketball court, and basically you just have to have possession of the ball and cross to the other end

and score between two cones to get a point, and then on defense, you're, you know, using your chair with contact to stop the other team from doing that. So, yeah, it's a pretty fun game. [Laughs] It's a co-ed sport, so when I started, I was one of two girls. I was 15, and, like, the next youngest person was in their 30s. So it was definitely a bit overwhelming to step into, but the community is incredible, and it's been a really good addition to my life.

Sarah Smith 8:31

Wow, that sounds really intense and also really fun. [Laughs]

Jessica Kruger 8:32

Yeah, definitely.

Sarah Smith 8:35

Yeah, yeah, especially being like a young girl at 15 and going in and with, I'm assuming, you said there's two other or, sorry, there was one other female on the team at the time. How big is the team?

Jessica Kruger 10:01

Yeah, typically, we have between like 12 and 18 people that play for the team, I would say. So there's not very many women that play in the world. Over the last like five years, use there's been some growth in the female department. I'm actually, I'm going to an all women's tournament in Paris this year, so that's the first time I've ever competed with like, an all female team. So that's exciting, but yeah, just in general, it's a pretty male dominated sport, so that adds a layer of interest to the whole deal.

Sarah Smith 10:31

Yeah, yeah. Very intense I would imagine.

Jessica Kruger 10:34

Yeah. I think they took it easy on me in the beginning, when I was 15, but now they're now, they're over it. They're not giving me any grace. [Laughs]

Sarah Smith 10:42

They're taking you very seriously now.

Jessica Kruger 10:43

Yeah, which is good. That's what I want.

Sarah Smith 10:45

Wow, that's awesome. Very impressive. Also going to Paris for an all female tournament. Amazing.

Jessica Kruger 10:51

Thank you. Yeah, I'm excited.

Sarah Smith 10:52

Yeah, that's super exciting. Is that in 2023?

Jessica Kruger 10:55

Yeah, in March coming up pretty quick here. Yeah, putting together like a team, basically, that they'll be sending of all girls.

Sarah Smith 11:03

Well, congratulations. Cool, so a national team now, kind of.

Jessica Kruger 11:06

I mean, technically, yes, but not really, like, I shouldn't get the title of being a national player. It's just it happens to be women from all over Canada that will be representing the Canadians. I don't want to give myself too much credit.

Sarah Smith 11:20

Very cool. I mean, it sounds to me like you deserve it, and that's a really cool thing to do. We'll have to keep an eye out on that and see how you fare over there.

Jessica Kruger 11:30

Yeah, we honestly don't know what to expect either, because you don't see all female teams competing ever, so we don't even know what the other countries are going to be bringing to the table, but hopefully will be some strong competition for them..

Sarah Smith 11:44

Yeah, absolutely, that's amazing. Sounds like a really cool experience?

Jessica Kruger 11:48

Yeah. Thank you.

Sarah Smith 11:49

Awesome.