

Episode 46 | Jessica Kruger Pt. 2

Sarah Smith 0:11

So why don't we shift a little bit into the baking? Because I know that that's sort of your bread and butter, if I may. [Both laugh] No pun intended, no pun intended. You've made a career of baking. I've checked out your website. Your cakes look phenomenal, like the artistry that goes into them and the creativity they are so, so cool. So I'm wondering sort of how you decided to turn baking into a career after your accident.

Jessica Kruger 0:41

So it was definitely a hobby for a really long time. I was, you know, I started taking the decorating classes right away, and was making cakes for friends and family. You know, you look back at the cakes that you made in the beginning, and you're like, "Huh, I've come a long way." [Laughs] Those were some rough cakes back then. But, yeah, it was just a hobby for years, I went to SFU and got an English degree thinking I wanted to become a teacher. Finished that. I was playing rugby a lot back then, and like, quite seriously. So after my degree, I took some time off to just focus on rugby and train to see if I could make the national team. Did that for two years, made it to the like, intermediary next gen team, got kicked off the next gen team, and was like, "Okay, time to move on to the next thing." So, yeah, I worked as an event planner for local nonprofit for a year. And while I was doing that, still all the while baking, keeping it as a hobby, you know, getting slightly better, a little less cringy-looking, and just knowing that was the thing that brought me the most joy, and I definitely had the hesitation of, like, does taking a hobby and turning it into a job suck the passion from it? So that was kind of something that was holding me back for a while, I guess, and also just wondering what it would be like to be a disabled person in the pastry community, because that's not something I'd seen. But anyways, I knew all along that that was what brought me joy. So I finally got to point where I started to apply to some pastry schools see if I could take my skills to the next level. And that was a bit of a journey on its own. I had a few rejections because of schools not wanting to accommodate, you know, a few things that I was going to ask for as someone in a chair. I had one school tell me I had to pay for double spots because I was going to take up twice the amount of room as somebody in a wheelchair.

Sarah Smith 2:42

Wow.

Jessica Kruger 2:43

So yeah, some pretty rough discrimination as I was looking for it place to go, but eventually I went to VCC, met with the disability coordinator there, and he said, "You know, we've never done it before, but if you think you can do it, then we're going to do whatever we need to do to make it happen for you." So I got into VCC and did the program there, and here I am. Finished that and decided to start my own business.

Sarah Smith 3:09

Wow, that's amazing.

Jessica Kruger 3:11

That's very long story, not so short.

Sarah Smith 3:14

No, it's nice to hear the detail and sort of how that all played out. And I mean having the colleges or the schools that were rejecting you because of the fact that you used a chair. For me—first of all, that's really terrible, and shouldn't happen, like that level of discrimination is just ridiculous—but also, I've learned in the last while speaking to people that a lot of it comes from ignorance, in that you don't actually people might not necessarily understand what you would need. That would be different from a student who doesn't use a chair and they don't even want to find out kind of thing. And the adaptations might not be so tricky. They might not be that complicated. Sometimes it's really simple and it's just a like a lack of a willingness to try and learn.

Jessica Kruger 4:01

Yeah, I couldn't have said it better myself, but that is exactly how I feel. Is just like, hear me out. Let me show you. Give me the chance. I promise you it's not as bad as you're expecting it to be. So I don't know, at VCC, they ended up getting me like an adjustable workstation. That was the only adaptation that they made. And in my current kitchen, I have just a lowered workstation. That's the only adaptation that I have. So it's a pretty simple fix, but it just took someone willing to actually do it.

Sarah Smith 4:31

Wow. Yeah, yeah. That's really not a hard thing to do at all, like, especially in today's world of, you know, people with standing desks and adjustable desks that have like, automated mechanisms that move them up and down to whatever height they need to be at.

Jessica Kruger 4:46

Yeah, that's literally what they do, is they took one of those standing desks and put like a food safe countertop on it. That was it.

Sarah Smith 4:53

Too easy.

Jessica Kruger 4:54

It's pretty easy.

Sarah Smith 4:55

Yeah, wow. That's, that's unreal. Well, I'm glad that you eventually did find a place. Space that was willing to bring you in because it sounds like you're very you know, you've gone far with it and done very well.

Jessica Kruger 5:08

Thank you.

Sarah Smith 5:09

You're welcome. Yeah, that's amazing. So I was going to ask you a bit about what your kitchen is like at The Stubborn Baker, in terms of adaptations that would be different from sort of other, I guess industrial commercial kitchens. You mentioned the lowered workstations. Is there anything else that you have different in there? Or is that literally it?

Jessica Kruger 5:28

Yeah, I work out of a commissary kitchen, so it's a shared commercial kitchen space. So when I came to them, I was kind of expecting the same experience I had when I was looking for a pastry school. Like, "Oh, we don't want to have this person in there." But actually, it was incredible. It was the complete opposite. So Commissary Connect is the name of the kitchen that I work out of. And that first meeting I had, I was like, "Do you think you guys would be willing to order a lowered station in like, I could pay for it if you wanted me to." And they're like, "Of course we can. And no, you don't have to pay for it." And they were, yeah, awesome from the beginning. And made that part a lot less scary and traumatic for me, because I was definitely nervous as I went in there. So yeah, it's really just to have, like, a wheel under a tabletop is the biggest thing, and then everything else is like, I just make it work. You know, it's not perfect. The dishwasher is a little bit awkward. The sink's a little bit awkward, but, yeah, it's all workable for sure.

Sarah Smith 5:28

Okay, yeah, so the lower workstation is really the only like, structural thing that's different. And then things like the sink and dishwasher might be a little bit less convenient for you, but you kind of make it work, sort of thing.

Jessica Kruger 6:43

Yeah, exactly.

Sarah Smith 6:44

Gotcha. Gotcha. Okay, well, that's, I'm glad that they were so willing to, I mean, I say so willing to, as though it's a big thing that they've done, but really, this should just be standard, in my opinion, it's not a hard thing to do.

Jessica Kruger 6:59

Yeah, I feel like I gave them credit, because they are like, one of the few that has taken the step right? So even though it would be great if that was just the norm, the reality is that it's not. So the people that are doing the things that need to be done to make the world a little bit more inclusive, I definitely applaud.

Sarah Smith 7:19

Yeah. Okay, and the name The stubborn Baker is what your business is called. Can you tell us why you chose that name?

Jessica Kruger 7:28

Yes, I can. I wish the answer was short, because this is obviously something I get asked all the time. It's a very strange name, but it's not that short, so hang in there, but I'll try and give you the Cole's Notes version, basically just a reflection of the characteristic that I feel has served me in getting to the point that I'm at with my business, and getting to the point I am like post having had my accident as someone that lives in a chair. So ever since I had my accident, people have referred to me as stubborn, and I think sometimes they mean it in a negative way, but I kind of take it as a compliment, because it's really the characteristic that has allowed me to, you know, keep looking for pastry schools after being told really rough things from the ones that I reached out to first. And you know the characteristic that allows me to make a not fully accessible world work for me in the ways that it has, and to be a person with a disability in the industry that I'm in when that's not really something that's out there is it's the reason that I say like I deserve to have a place in this space, despite what you guys might think.

Sarah Smith 8:44

Yeah, very cool. Very cool. I love that sentiment, I kind of like the word stubborn for it, because it's a little bit more punchy and rebellious, like that connotation. But really the way that you're describing sort of your trajectory into the baking world demonstrates, in my opinion, at least, like, a lot of resilience and determination. Stubborn is kind of a fun word for it, though.

Jessica Kruger 9:07

Like, yeah, I feel like resiliency is like, what other people say, but it's hard to say nice things about yourself, so stubborn is the word I feel comfortable saying about myself, because it's like, it's not entirely good, but I mean it in the way that resiliency would sound, you know, but I don't want to toot my own horn, so I don't say "the resilient baker." That just sounds embarrassing to me. [Laughs]

Sarah Smith 9:28

Fair enough. Fair enough. Yeah, that's very cool, though. And I mean, you mentioned not seeing a lot of folks who use chairs in the pastry world, but I think it's really cool that you're doing it and doing it so proudly and publicly, and the identity of your business is sort of centered around that, because now other folks might get the opportunity to see that and then know that they're able to as well.

Jessica Kruger 9:50

Totally. Yeah, thank you.

Sarah Smith 9:51

Yeah. Very cool. Very cool. Love what you're doing, shifting into sort of more cake related information. Yeah, I was checking out your cakes and your cookies on the website. I know I said this at the start, but I'm gonna say it again. They're gorgeous and so creative, like the burger, the lab coat, like all sorts of things. There's a whole range on there. So cool. I'm wondering, do you have a favorite cake project you've worked on, and can you tell us about it?

Jessica Kruger 10:24

That's a really hard question. There's no, like, really easy answer for me for sure. I have gotten to, like, make wedding cakes for some of my family and my friends over the last few years, and those have been really special to me because I have a skill that, you know, I get to use to bring a little bit of joy, not only to my customers, but also to my family and friends. So probably some of those would be the first to come to mind. And just like over the years, it's been, you know, I've gotten to bake cakes for people's 100th birthdays, or, like, 60th

wedding anniversaries, or, you know, you just, you hear the stories that this cake is going to help celebrate, and those moments, like getting to share in them, in some small part, have been really meaningful and memorable for me.

Sarah Smith 11:18

Yeah, that's really cool, like, sort of contributing to someone's special moment in some tiny way, right?

Jessica Kruger 11:25

If I can take credit for that. [Laughs]

Sarah Smith 11:26

Absolutely.

Jessica Kruger 11:28

Thank you.

Sarah Smith 11:29

Yeah, very, definitely, definitely. Oh, very cool. I think that sort of wraps us up here. Is there anything else that you want to share about your experience in either the baking world or living in a wheelchair?

Jessica Kruger 11:45

I feel like we've sort of touched on it, but I think the the one thing that I kind of always say, just as because I feel like the world needs to hear it, is just that people always will maybe underestimate you or tell you you're not capable of doing something, but at the end of the day, you're the only one that gets to decide what you can and can't do. So yeah, that's kind of been the mentality I've carried through my life, and it's what has allowed me to get where I am today. So yeah, I just urge people, no matter what situation they're in, able bodied or not, just to you know, look for that inner strength in the moments where you feel like the world is doubting you.

Sarah Smith 12:30

Beautiful. So we'll leave it there. Before we sign off, do you want to maybe drop like your website and any social media for folks to go find you and check out your baked goods?

Jessica Kruger 12:40

Sure, yeah, it's just The Stubborn Baker everywhere. So Instagram @thestubbornbaker, Facebook at The Stubborn Baker, the website is www.thestubbornbaker.com.

Sarah Smith 12:53

Perfect. Too easy. All right. Thank you so much for taking the time to join me today. This was a really interesting conversation, and it was great to hear about all that you're doing in the world.

Jessica Kruger 13:03

Awesome. Thank you, Sarah, that was fun.

Sarah Smith 13:05

And to all of our listeners, thanks for tuning in today. We hope you join us next time on Discover Stories.