

Episode 29 | Sean Burdette

Graeme Wyman 0:10

Hello and welcome to Discover Stories on Re-Imagine Radio. I'm your host, Graeme Wyman with the Vancouver Adapted Music Society. Today on this podcast, we have Sean Burdette. Sean is a former VAMS intern who is currently studying at Adler University. Sean, thank you so much for coming on today.

Sean Burdette 0:31

Graeme, thank you so much for having me.

Graeme Wyman 0:33

Yeah, no, I know it's great, and we're kind of doing this as your term's, somewhat ending. So just wanted, wanted to have you on the other side of the glass, as they say.

Sean Burdette 0:44

Absolutely.

Graeme Wyman 0:45

So just jumping right in Sean, before working with the Vancouver Adapted Music Society, what would have been your lived experience with disability?

Sean Burdette 0:55

It's a very interesting question. For me, unfortunately, I just, given my line of work, I'm unable to really speak in greater detail about my experiences personally. What I can say is that I had intimate experience with mental health issues, and as well as, like just viewing experiencing mental health with individuals who were around me, but in terms of physical disabilities, it was pretty minimal. I just, it wasn't a demographic that I had really run into in my life.

Graeme Wyman 1:41

Gotcha. Well, no, and thank you for sharing what you could there. Why don't you tell our listeners a little bit about Adler University and what you're taking at school at this time?

Sean Burdette 1:56

Sure. So Adler University is a private institution. Their main campus is located in Chicago, with a satellite campus in Vancouver, as well as some online programs. They specialize mainly in Post Graduate Psychology degrees, masters and doctorates. I'm personally in my first year of the Doctor of psychology in clinical psychology program here at Vancouver. It's a five year program. I'm about just finishing up my second semester here. Yup.

Graeme Wyman 2:31

There we go. And so through the internship, I guess what drew you to work with an organization like the Vancouver Adapted Music Society, and how did Adler frame what this work experience might be like?

Sean Burdette 2:45

Part of my education, I guess, is the completion of four different practicums, three to four practicums, I should say, the first of which is what we would call our non-clinical or our social justice practicum. The idea behind it is that it is designed for us to not gain work experience, per se, but more so to gain contact with communities that we would otherwise maybe not have contact with.

Graeme Wyman 3:17

Okay.

Sean Burdette 3:20

The reality is that the work that we would do is quite varied in terms of what the positions might actually look like. None of us really had a great idea of what we were getting into. A lot of it is community outreach, but a lot of it is more research intensive and more administrative. I guess you could say part of the reason why, I guess I picked VAMS. Well, there were multiple reasons, I suppose, but the first one was it was more outreach based, rather than administrative, which is something that I really wanted, in the position. I wanted to, even though it wasn't psychology related, per se, I wanted to be able to be more hands on and be, I guess, providing more of a tangible service to my community, rather than, I guess, just doing writing, because, frankly, I spent most of my life writing, and this would be a good reprieve from that. But also beyond that, I really liked the music, and I really liked the mission statement. You know, music, as an industry, is very it's a physical discipline. It's very hands on, and if you have a physical disability, there's a lot of barriers to entering it. And VAMS is one of the few, in fact, the only organization I'm aware of who is really looking to bridge that gap, has identified it as a real issue of the discipline. A hobby, and is prioritizing implementing a solution for individuals who really, are really interested in music and really want to get into it, but are otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity, or

would it would be very difficult, very costly on there. So that really appealed to me, as well, as well as my musical background, I felt would be bit of an advantage, bit of a better understanding towards the work. Yeah.

Graeme Wyman 5:30

Yeah, no, great answer. So how did your time with VAMS meet or differ from what your expectation might be going into this part of your course?

Sean Burdette 5:45

Um, I have to be honest, when I went into this, I didn't really know much about the position itself in terms of what the actual work would be doing. The description I was given was just, this is what our organization is, and this is, you know, what our mission goal is, but what I would actually be doing? I didn't really have a great idea until our actual interview. So I suppose I sort of went into it thinking I would be doing more, I guess, music lessons, or maybe, like concert promotion, or something along those lines. It wasn't again, until the interview, that I really learned about the podcast. And now you guys were looking for a host and editor, and my main duties would be sort of the facilitation of that end of the work.

Graeme Wyman 6:35

Having seen you in interviews and listened to you and going through the process, you seem very natural when interviewing people within the disabled community and fostered great responses in the podcast that you produce. Did that come naturally for you?

Sean Burdette 6:55

Yeah, to a certain extent. My background is in vocal music, primarily. So this idea of, I guess, of speaking and tone and stuff, like that battle sort of came to me naturally. But despite, you know, my background being primarily in psychology, I actually have very little experience in actual interviewing and public speaking, I have a bit, but not as much as I think others would assume. So to that end, the actual process of me talking with people and synthesizing questions as to how to be able to get a dialogue out of individuals, that was all very new to me. And I mean, I guess you could say it came naturally. I like to think that it was a bit rocky at the beginning, and I've slowly improved, or at least I'd like to think so, but yeah.

Graeme Wyman 7:55

Well, and how you touched on something that I was just thinking of. How do you see yourself when you first started interviewing to where you are now, what maybe skills have you gained along that line?

Sean Burdette 8:06

When I first went into this, my main motive, my main mindset was, "Oh, God, just get to the end." [Laughs] Like, "Just say the questions. Don't flub your lines, don't try to dig in just, you know, finish the interview." And in many ways, it still is. If I'm being honest, it's a very interesting job, but I found out, I guess, the main skill, at least in terms of the interviewing, is I've been able to learn how to sort of read the I guess, vibe of the interview, be able to look at the answers and say, "Okay, is this interview going well? Or is, does this client, per se, do I need to kind of work with this, the guest, a little bit more to try and get more detail out of it?" Or, "Is the interview going in a direction that I don't really want it to go into? Do I need to come up with questions on the spot to be able to try and redirect this to the best of my ability?" I think that's sort of the main skill I'd say that, I guess, garnered over my time here.

Graeme Wyman 9:22

Right. Now, you've conducted quite a few interviews, and your seven months with us are almost there, almost seven months. But what have been some of the more memorable moments in the interviews that you've had on Discover Stories?

Sean Burdette 9:40

I don't want to give specific names of guests, but there were, there was definitely one interview a bit earlier on that I found to be quite difficult. It was done in person, actually. So that kind of added an element in terms of, like the actual editing. And turning our physical environment to sort of get off the best sound that we could possibly get. But I found that it was also the topic itself was very different from other interviews I had at that point and other interviews that I would continue to have it was the focus was a lot more on the hardships and the challenges, rather than sort of the adversity aspects, which I I tend to see as a common theme in these interviews. So it when I was in the mid-interview, a lot of it was sort of trying to balance it, to be able to highlight both the adversity aspect as well as the challenges. Because I do think it is, it's important to discuss. It's not all pretty. It's not glamorous. It's difficult. It is challenging, but it's, you know, if you, I like to think about, it's like a 20/80 rule you can spend. You want to spend about 20% of that of your time, you know, acknowledging your hardships, but you want to spend the 80% also talking about how you have overcome and how you are able to maybe give back, if you can, to other individuals in your position, because if it's all, if it's zero and 100 then you're just going to get negative headspace, and that's not going to do yourself or anyone in your life any favours. It's all about that balance. And I guess that was what I was trying to capture within that interview. So that one was definitely very insightful and challenging. But I had, there

was others where I just met some really incredible people who, for one reason or another, you know, they really rose to the challenge, and just seeing the variety of perspectives and interviews and experiences was really, I don't know what word to really use, I guess, humbling, but more so insightful, I guess.

Graeme Wyman 12:18

Yeah, I can totally relate where you're coming from, even before doing these podcasts, but just hearing people's stories, and you're right. It's that there are certain issues that need to be dealt with, in the sense of how we can move to making the world more accessible. Again, there was one quote, and the pandemic has definitely pointed at this, but, you know, what disabled people, from the thing that I hear, and this isn't true for everyone, but they don't want the world being brought to them. They want to go and experience the world and just given certain accessibility issues, that's not necessarily the case all the time. But I think again, we're making that shift where we're transitioning into that more and, you know, and this is, and this is why the work that we're doing specifically on this podcast, and it really took shape when you came on as well, is again, giving a platform just to have these conversations.

Sean Burdette 13:19

No, definitely. You know, it's hard for me to really speak on that, given that I am able bodied, but I can definitely I've heard it in both the stories and the tone of individuals about their frustration, and it's just how, how simple, mundane tasks become such Odysseys for them, and it's just when they try and voice their concerns, all they get back is an echo. It's silence. And there have been strives to improve it. And I mean, perhaps this is ignorant of me to say, but I do think that there has been some improvement, but it's not enough. And I guess only time will tell, and efforts of individuals like you here at VAMS and other organizations, how, how soon we can get there.

Graeme Wyman 14:17

Yeah, no. And then again, this is why we thought of having this podcast, and it's starting to really take a better shape. So last question that I really had for yourself would be how you said that before you really didn't have much lived experience with physical disabilities. How has your time with VAMS maybe shifted that perspective, or just understanding around what that looks like?

Sean Burdette 14:53

I'd say I've gained a more micro level perspective of the disability community. When I went into this, while I hadn't had much experience, I felt, with the disability community, I felt I

had a general grasp about some of the institutional challenges, some of the, I guess, wider-spread issues that individuals were facing. But it wasn't until I was able to really talk to individuals on a one-on-one basis, I was really able to understand their feelings and their thoughts and their challenges and frustrations. It's one thing to say, yes, you know, there's a lack of parking spaces for community x or whatever isn't really following guidelines as to how to make it accessible. But it wasn't until I was able to speak to individuals saying, you know, my son has this disorder, and we aren't able to go to the park. We aren't able to, I had to cancel my doctor's appointment because there wasn't a parking space left. So there's definitely that side. But I think more than anything I also learned, and I don't want to generalize here, but I think really the biggest takeaway I learned is the adversity of these individuals and their ability to bounce back from their situations. Almost every person that I interviewed with at my time here said that there was a moment for them where they were told that they wouldn't be able to live the life that they once had. And, you know, maybe it wasn't immediate, but eventually there was some point where they said, "No, that's not good enough. I'm going to overcome this." And then there was another point where they said, "Okay, I have overcome this. Now it is my obligation, my responsibility to try and help others through whatever that may be, be it through foundations, be it for advocacy work, be it through auditing, be it through whatever, be it big or small." It was just seeing this progression of individuals, and I found that incredibly admirable. I think it's a skill that not enough people have today, and I applaud each and every individual who has gone through that process.

Graeme Wyman 17:38

Well, I know from personal experience, we've been very lucky to have you over this time that you've been with VAMS. We're still lucky, you're not gone yet. Still got a couple month and a half left with you. But um, just want to thank you so much for all the work you've done and for being such a team player throughout this bit of time that we've gotten to know you.

Sean Burdette 18:01

Thank you for all your support and all your guidance for me going into this as well.

Graeme Wyman 18:06

Yeah, no. Thanks. And to our listeners here, remember to click that like and subscribe button and stay safe out there.