

Philip D.:

Hello inclusion believers, and welcome to the Access Champions Podcast. I'm your host, Phil Dallmann, for this week's journey into the galaxies of accessibility, diversity and inclusion.

Philip D.:

We have once again, I guess back to back weeks, a little bit of a different episode. We're going to combine two previous episodes to share with all of you and some of our new listeners who may not have gone back and heard these interviews. These interviews are with Carlita Ector, who is the founder of Darkness Rising, a company here in New York, and that travels around the country dedicated to raising awareness and funds that support mental health issues within the black community.

Philip D.:

Then that interview will be followed by one with Aaron Gold, who is an improv artist and comedian and all of the wonderful things here. Also in New York, and has created a show called You Are Not Alone. I won't say too much about it. I'll let him explain it a little better in the interview, but it's something that since the interview I've participated in and it was a wonderful experience so I'm excited to share those two things with all of you.

Philip D.:

The decision to bring these back, these specific interviews back, stems from the fact that I will be stepping away from the Access Champions Podcast for a little while. I have been pretty candid on this show, when it's been appropriate, about navigating my own mental health and mental illness. Unfortunately, it has reared its ugly head, I guess, and so I need some time to sort that out. As I do that, I don't believe that I can be the best facilitator of this amazing work that is happening all across the world and to share it with all of you. For now, I need to take a step away.

Philip D.:

We have an amazing team here. I don't know what the next few weeks will be. I guess it will be some conversations with our executive producer, Matt, and our associate producer, Alie B. We have some things, some interviews, we've not aired. We may string those together. Alie may take over a while if that fits into her schedule. There is a few options, but for now I will be stepping away. Hopefully we'll still be able to launch a new website soon and all of the wonderful things. But I am incredibly grateful to all of our listeners that, especially those that have been with us since episode one, so almost two years ago now, I appreciate all of the recommendations of guests and those of you who have been guests come taking the time and sharing your knowledge on this show with the community at large.

Philip D.:

So with all of that said, as episode 100 gets pushed a little bit further out, that gives us more time for 100 patrons by episode 100. So if that is something that you're able to do and support the show as it moves forward in whatever capacity and does, I would encourage you to go to [patron.com/accesschampions](https://patron.com/accesschampions). Last week's episode is a great example of some of the content that's already up there and hopefully, we'll still be able to put some of things that we have in the can up there as well. If you're interested go ahead and listen to last week's episode and see if that's something, those kind of deep dives and some exclusive interviews are on there, but those kinds of things are up there. I rambled a hook for a bit.

Philip D.:

As always, follow us on social media at Access Champions across the board. Accesschampions.com@gmail.com is our email if you ever want to reach out and share your thoughts, opinions, articles, et cetera with the show, that does not stop. I believe that's that. So without further adieu, Carlita Ector at Darkness Rising.

Philip D.:

All right. Well, thank you, Carlita for joining us on the Access Champions Podcast.

Carlita E.:

I'm glad to be here. Thanks so much, Phil.

Philip D.:

I'm really excited to have you as we're delving into the world of mental health here on the podcast as it relates to access and inclusion. You're a very organic guest in a lot of way in that, my fiance, Zanza and her company, ALMA ended up celebrating you and your company with the Celebration series. I think it's amazing. So I'm really excited to hear from you, your journey as it is coming into creating this amazing movement and this amazing company, Darkness Rising.

Carlita E.:

Yeah. So I started Darkness Rising because I have been struggling with anxiety, depression, PTSD and a few other things for the past year or so. It was just in the past, within the past year, that I was diagnosed. The only way that I was even diagnosed was because I had come to a point in my life where I felt like I just could not continue and I became suicidal. I was on a medication that was just really not good for me. I had gotten to a point where I just, I wanted to change my life and I wanted to live a better and happier life. And so, I decide to just go for it.

Carlita E.:

As I did that, I was researching different ways to help myself. I started going to therapy. I got an emotional support animal, a little cute puppy named, Snow. I started seeing a psychiatrist and I started just opening up to my friends. But, I realized that one of the things that really helped me the most while I was, well, I still am going through it, this healing process, one of the things that helped me the most is music.

Carlita E.:

And so, I started just listening to songs. Some songs are inspirational, and then some songs are just nitty gritty, just hey, things suck right now, this is what I'm going through. It really helped me get through a lot of the really, really tough times in my life. I realized, hey, if this is helping me, then music is helping someone else too. Music is helping someone who is suicidal or someone else who can't see their way out and can't find the light.

Carlita E.:

As a singer and a dancer, a musical theater performer, I thought, well, hey, why don't I get some of my friends together and let's create a cover album of inspirational songs that have, has helped people who have mental illnesses and who are struggling with loving themselves. And so, that was the beginning of

Darkness Rising. Darkness Rising, it's basically, it's a three part project where we create this inspirational cover album, we create a visual album of the songs that are on the cover album and also, a live benefit concert that benefits and organization called, Black Health, which focuses on the health and wellness of the Black community. So, that's the skinny.

Philip D.:

Well, I had to say, I was at the concert.

Carlita E.:

Yeah.

Philip D.:

Up here at the Triad. It was fantastic.

Carlita E.:

Thank you.

Philip D.:

One of the things I appreciated was a really, the candidness of all the performers as they approached each song. They're sharing their own journeys with mental health or self-care. I was speaking to one of your performers a couple of weeks ago. I was saying, what I really related to was the idea of let's just pray on it. As a fellow man of faith, that conflict from an older school perspective on mental health, what I, I encountered it myself as a young man where some of my older family members, were, "Well, just make sure he's in church on Sunday."

Carlita E.:

Right.

Philip D.:

I was like, "Is that with the medication, or is the therapist there?"

Carlita E.:

Right, right.

Philip D.:

"Is that where I meet them?" But it was so good to hear that kind of connection, really a community of people. Talk to me a little bit about as you reach out, you obviously have a of extremely talented friends. But as you reached out of them to bring them into this project, what was, what were the dialogues? What was their response like?

Carlita E.:

I was actually surprised to find that so many of my friends and so many artists were struggling with the same exact issues that I was struggling with. We just kept going to auditions, kept performing and just didn't say anything to each other. A lot of times I would be at an audition and I might say, "Oh, I have an

appointment." Really that appointment was therapy, but I didn't want to tell anybody that I was going to therapy. I would notice some of my friends, they would say the same thing. Then over time, and through talking, and through finally sharing my story, they told me, "Oh, I've been seeing a therapist too. I actually just started but I was embarrassed and I didn't want to tell anybody."

Carlita E.:

I started getting so many messages, just Facebook, Instagram, my email, so many messages from friends, from friends of friends, from strangers, just telling me, "Hey, I've been struggling with anxiety. I just noticed it within the past year." Or, "I recently lost a loved one and I've been noticing that I've found it harder and harder to get out of bed. Do you think that maybe I'm struggling with depression?" Just all these things that I've been struggling with, I found that my friends are struggling with the exact same thing and we were just so afraid to say anything.

Carlita E.:

I'm not a mental health professional obviously, but I am a person who has experienced a lot of mental illnesses and so I can identify in myself and in my loved ones when something has changed and so it's been helpful to be able to just talk to my own family members and talk to my friends about talking to their family members about the things that they're experiencing.

Carlita E.:

I had a lot of people talk to me and say, "Hey, because of Darkness Rising we just had a conversation, a real conversation about mental health and mental illness in my family and this is the first time that's ever happened." Stories like that are just really inspiring for me because that's exactly what I want to happen. I want for us to get away from the fear that talking about mental illness is such a negative thing. I want to remove that stigma that comes with us getting the help that we need and I want us to really talk about it because most of the time if one person in the family is struggling with a mental illness, someone else is too.

Philip D.:

Oh, that is 100% true.

Carlita E.:

Yeah.

Philip D.:

1,000% if I could say it. In my experience both personally and knowing my friends and extended sort of friends, families. That's absolutely 100% true.

Carlita E.:

Yeah. I know the background in my family, but only because I have asked questions and because I've started doing research trying to find out well why am I like this? Are there other people in my family who struggle with the same issues? Once my friends started talking to their families they said the same thing. They said, 'Oh, I found out that my grandfather struggled with the same thing and I found out that my mother'-

Philip D.:

But it was never talked about, right?

Carlita E.:

Exactly.

Philip D.:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carlita E.:

You end up feeling alone.

Philip D.:

Yeah.

Carlita E.:

You feel like something is wrong with you. You feel like you're not normal, whatever that is, because you feel like you're the only one. Which is not true. There's so many of us that are out here fighting the fight.

Philip D.:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carlita E.:

But we just have no idea because it's on the hush hush.

Philip D.:

Yep. Wouldn't it be so much easier if we were all lifting each other up?

Carlita E.:

Exactly. Exactly.

Philip D.:

Which is what I think is so amazing about what you're doing, and Darkness Rising as a whole is doing. In the arts we definitely I think as a whole try to create these really positive environments and uplifting environments. We have many a benefit. The arts love nothing else, we love a benefit.

Carlita E.:

Yes.

Philip D.:

But I'll say between the concert and seeing you guys perform for [inaudible 00:15:50] and then watching your Celebration Series video, you guys are on another level in sort of the connection and sort of lifting each other up on a really individualized level. I think it's really special.

Carlita E.:

I love to hear that. Thank you.

Philip D.:

I'm happy to say it.

Carlita E.:

Yeah.

Philip D.:

One of the things, I obviously follow you guys on all of your social media and I've been excited to see some of the other things beyond the album that you guys have been offering. Talk me through a little bit of what the current state of Darkness Rising is.

Carlita E.:

Right now we are doing a lot of yoga classes because physical health and mental health, they go hand in hand. I think a lot of times we work so hard on our physical health that we forget our mental is important as well. I don't call myself a yogi, but I will say that in my experience with yoga it really does help me focus. It helps me get in tune with my body. It helps me discipline myself and just take a moment where it's just me and it feels like it's just me in the room. Even if you're in a room with 10 other people doing yoga, at that moment it feels like it's just you and your breath and I think that's the beautiful thing about yoga. That's one of the main reasons why we've been offering donation-based yoga classes. Just pay what you can and it benefits the project. It benefits Darkness Rising.

Carlita E.:

Through those donation-based classes I've been able to really meet some amazing people, just establish some beautiful relationships and talk to people about their own mental health struggles and how they have used fitness, yoga, physical movement to help them work through that. I find that sometimes when it feels like I can't get out of bed because the depression is just too much, if I can get myself to the gym then when I leave that gym those endorphins have gone through, they've been released and it feels good. It's not going to change you and make you suddenly not struggle with depression, but what it will do is it will give you at least a temporarily release from the darkness that you're feeling and during that temporary relief you can get a lot of work done.

Philip D.:

That's true.

Carlita E.:

Yeah. You can eat a meal. You can love on yourself. You can do self care. I find that it's the small moments that matter the most. I think a lot of times we so heavily rely on having these long stretches of happiness that we don't focus and we don't celebrate the small steps and I've found that especially when I was going through the worst parts of depression that I really had to focus on the small moments of happiness. Even if it only lasted for two minutes, I would celebrate those two minutes where I smiled, I laughed, I had a conversation with a friend, I worked out. I went outside and took a walk in the sun. Whatever it was, I did it and I did it for only a few minutes, but in those few minutes it felt good.

Carlita E.:

I forgot the question, but ...

Philip D.:

No, that was great. The question was the current state of Darkness Rising.

Carlita E.:

Oh yes.

Philip D.:

The understanding of yoga and its impact, because that is mostly what I've seen. I know you guys are offering that pretty regularly. I also am not a yogi by any stretch of the imagination, but the few times that I have engaged with it, you're right, it does, it can be incredibly impactful.

Carlita E.:

Absolutely. There are other things that we are currently working on. We have fully recorded the album. Right now we're just finishing up the final touches on the album and it will be out this summer. We're super excited. I have heard all the tracks and I cannot wait for it to be released. I'm biting my nails, I'm so excited.

Carlita E.:

We are also working on our YouTube video series. There will be concept music videos. There will be the song covers that we've been working on as well as dance choreography and then at the end of each video there will be an artist talking about their experience with mental health, whether it be a mental illness that they struggle with or it may be a family member or it could just be talking about the business and the importance of self care and what we go through on a day to day basis. That is coming out soon.

Carlita E.:

We will be performing soon in the African American Cultural Festival in Raleigh, North Carolina in September.

Philip D.:

Oh, very cool.

Carlita E.:

Yeah, we're so excited. It will be our first tour. Then we plan on also having an album release party in the fall when everyone is back from their contracts.

Philip D.:

Nice.

Carlita E.:

Yeah, so those are some things that are coming up, and of course we're always interested in performing at events. We plan on doing another Darkness Rising Live if we raise funds for that as well.

Philip D.:

Very cool.

Carlita E.:

That's the lowdown of what's going on.

Philip D.:

Nice. That's what's happening currently, and you guys are a big part of the current, in my opinion, the current state of mental health, mental illness and self care in the arts, at least here in New York City. You obviously had a vision as you dove into this project, but what would you like to see down the pike as it pertains to the arts and mental health?

Carlita E.:

What is most important to me is that Darkness Rising helps eliminate the negative stigma that's attached to us seeking assistance with our mental health. I want us to start having conversation about a lot of mental illnesses. It's often that you hear people saying, "Oh, I have anxiety," or "I have experienced depression," but we don't talk about postpartum depression that often. There are a lot of mothers who are also actors and they are just miracle workers [inaudible 00:23:42] as far as I'm concerned. But I find that they don't talk about it very often. I feel like they need a community as well.

Philip D.:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carlita E.:

I would like for mental health to be addressed in minority communities because while mental illnesses don't discriminate, they could affect anyone, what is different is often in minority communities the access to help is very different.

Carlita E.:

Often in our communities people are without insurance or people are without the type of insurance that covers therapy or certain medications and it's also a situation where a lot of minorities would like to seek assistance but they would like to seek assistance from people who they feel like can understand where they're coming from, so they might want to have a black therapist or a Latina therapist or someone who understands their culture and their community. We want to be able to provide resources and to be able to give people organization [inaudible 00:25:10] and the assistance that they need.

Philip D.:

Absolutely.

Carlita E.:

Yeah. Since we're not mental health professionals what we're doing is we're trying to acquire as much information as we can to be able to get the information out. For example, we gave out resource packets that Black Health helped us create and we gave those out at the concert but we want to be able to reach as many people as we can.

Philip D.:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carlita E.:

Any opportunity to do that is something that we're absolutely open to. Community events, any mental health event, anywhere where we can help spread the word, we want to be a part of that.

Philip D.:

That's really great, and I can say from experience that the search for specific mental health professionals can be very, very difficult.

Carlita E.:

Yes.

Philip D.:

A quick Google search or a quick foray into ZocDoc and you end up with a lot of middle-aged men.

Carlita E.:

Yes. Yes. That's so true.

Philip D.:

That may not be what you're looking for.

Carlita E.:

Right.

Philip D.:

A lot of middle-aged white men. Let me clarify even more. That may not be very relatable for you. Any type of additional resource I think is extremely needed.

Carlita E.:

Right.

Philip D.:

That's really great.

Carlita E.:

Yeah.

Philip D.:

I could spend a billion hours loving on what you guys are doing because from the first two-sentence pitch that [inaudible 00:27:04] gave me about the project, to your concert, to getting to speak to you

and many of the Darkness Rising performers a few weeks ago, the mission is good. The people are good. The impact is substantial. I don't think you can ask for anything else.

Carlita E.:

Thank you.

Philip D.:

It's true. It's true. It happened so organically and I think that's where things are the most successful, right?

Carlita E.:

Yeah.

Philip D.:

It came from a really true and honest place in your heart and in your mind and you understood that something that you needed could be helpful for so many other people, which I think is incredibly generous. It would have been so easy for you to be like, "Yes this thing works for me but I'm going to keep it for myself." But you had the world vision to see that it could help so many other people. I'm grateful that you had that and that you have brought so many other people into this movement, into this Darkness Rising movement. I think it's wonderful.

Carlita E.:

Thank you.

Philip D.:

With all of that world view and perspective, are there any individuals out there, any organizations that you think are doing great work as well?

Carlita E.:

Yes, absolutely. I've been so grateful to so many people doing amazing things along the way. First of all, of course shout out to ALMA NYC.

Philip D.:

Shameless plug.

Carlita E.:

Shout out to them.

Philip D.:

She's not here right now. You don't have to do that.

Carlita E.:

For always celebrating and providing opportunities for artists. I've always been loving what they do. We also love Black Health, which is the organization that we benefit because they help provide resources

and services for the black community, specifically health-related resources and mental health-related resources. We also really love The Other Side, which is an initiative where they have created this community of girls through a global drama exchange. They basically do dramatic storytelling globally and we really love what they're doing. It's a really cool community. Healing Melanins is one of my favorite organizations because they also focus on the mental health of the black community and I don't know them personally yet, I will soon, but I get good vibes.

Philip D.:

Absolutely.

Carlita E.:

I love what they're doing. Let's see. Sacred Brooklyn is one of the yoga studios where we have done a class and they have just been so beautifully gracious and helpful and they're so committed to helping their community and their mission is less for profit and more for being involved and helping their community and each month they have a theme for when you go in. They support Black Lives Matter. They do all these things and so I'm like, oh yeah. Like I said I'm not even a yogi but I'm like okay, I can get down with this.

Philip D.:

Absolutely. I'll do yoga for a cause.

Carlita E.:

Right. Let's see. The Lives of Men is an organization that focuses specifically on men and their fight for mental health. Specifically minority men. I feel like that's so important because sometimes our men, they're just taught to just be strong.

Philip D.:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carlita E.:

And to just ignore whatever's happening emotionally. Be strong, be this traditional man and support the family and that's it.

Philip D.:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carlita E.:

That's why I feel like The Lives of Men, it's so important because they're really reaching out to our men and saying, "Hey, we recognize you. We know that you need help too. We're here for you." Oh, one more. Industry High. I know it's a lot.

Philip D.:

No, it's great.

Carlita E.:

Industry High, it's a platform that celebrates new artists in the New York/New Jersey area. I love how they celebrate the small wins. They celebrate brand new artists. They celebrate people really working towards a goal, and I love that.

Philip D.:

That's great.

Carlita E.:

Of course shout out to the Access Champions.

Philip D.:

I appreciate that, the shout out on the podcast. That's solid.

Carlita E.:

Right. Subscribe.

Philip D.:

Fantastic. No. I think you spread the most love of any of our guests so far and I'm really happy about that, because as I was saying before we started recording, was one of the goals when starting the podcast was to start this continuum of people just loving on each other for all the good work that's happening, because there is so much happening that's just wonderful and people aren't told thank you enough.

Carlita E.:

Yes.

Philip D.:

Even though it's thought of as a selfish or a self-serving thing, but there's tremendous work that deserves thank yous and I will say that your work with Darkness Rising absolutely deserves a thank you from so many people, but I'll start it here as a thank you. I can't wait to see how this grows and this continues and I look forward to standing in the corner and championing it on. Pun not intended.

Philip D.:

All of this work, this selflessness, the understanding of the need and attacking it in such a unique way, it's what makes you and all of Darkness Rising access champions.

Carlita E.:

I love that. Thank you so much.

Philip D.:

Since that interview, Darkness Rising has recorded an album and I'm going to go ahead and share one of the songs from that album here and then in the copy of this episode will be the link to the album. Make sure you grab it if you like what you hear. Here's Darkness Rising.

Philip D.:

[Song plays 00:35:01]

Philip D.:

Next up we have Aaron Gold of You Are Not Alone.

Philip D.:

All right, thank you Aaron for joining us on the Access Champions podcast.

Aaron G.:

Thank you for having me. It's so nice over here. Look at everything. There's drapery of all magnitudes.

Philip D.:

Absolutely. I'm glad you have such a nice view in this non-video Skype call.

Aaron G.:

I'm in a theater of the mind.

Philip D.:

It's a beautiful place to be. I'm incredibly excited that Matt connected us, our producer Matt Kerstetter.

Aaron G.:

Lovely man. Very funny man.

Philip D.:

He's a very funny man, very beautiful man. Matt and I are actually celebrating our 25th anniversary of friendship this year.

Aaron G.:

Wow.

Philip D.:

Yep.

Aaron G.:

I mean, I hesitate to ask but I'm not going to hesitate any longer, how old were you guys when you met?

Philip D.:

We were five years old.

Aaron G.:

Wow.

Philip D.:

We met on the first day of kindergarten.

Aaron G.:

Gosh. There's no one I talk to that long.

Philip D.:

Yeah man.

Aaron G.:

Wow.

Philip D.:

It's a feat. It's a feat, but it's why I trust him when he emails me and says, "You need to go talk to this guy." I think it's going to be great. What we always like to start the podcast with is a little bit of the origin story. Kind of how you came into the world of improv, but also how you started your show, You Are Not Alone.

Aaron G.:

I came into improv when I was in high school. I walked into theater class one day and they were like, "We're doing improv games," and I had seen *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* before but it wasn't until that day I was like, "Oh shit, this is the greatest thing in the world." I've been about 15 years of doing improv now.

Aaron G.:

You Are Not Alone started, there's an annual wonderful thing that the Magnet Theatre does called Camp Magnet where it's like four days, three nights of improvisers in the Adirondack Mountains on these campgrounds and it's just a lot of fun. It's bit city.

Philip D.:

Oh I'm sure.

Aaron G.:

It's my favorite thing in the world. One year I went, I was very depressed and nobody really knew about it and I was just keeping it to myself and that made it worse because it was isolating then. When I got home I was so fed up of not talking about it. I started doing videos about living with depression, just what it was like and putting them on YouTube.

Aaron G.:

Another guy who was at Camp Magnet, who had apparently been going through the exact same thing and no one else knew about it, reached out to me and said he wanted to start a show. We built this show where people who have had their lives affected by depression or anxiety or any kind of mental illness, and that means literally everybody.

Philip D.:

Yeah.

Aaron G.:

If your life's been affected by it, then maybe somebody you know, but statistically definitely someone you know. The whole rule of thumb with getting people on the show is that I'm never going to tell you your not depressed enough to be on the show. People share their stories and that inspires uplifting and tension-breaking improv, and everyone in the show, improvisers and people who share their monologues or SAs or stories or whatever it is, everyone's had their life in some way affected by it. It's just a nice way of kind of breaking the stigma, making it okay to talk about, making it okay to joke about because when you joke about something that's weighing you down it's not going to beat you as much. That's a lesson I've learned multiple times in my life.

Philip D.:

Yeah, that's not a common thing out there, to joke about mental illness as a strategy of getting through it. That's what was unique when Matt told me about the show. I was like, I have never heard of that vehicle for that.

Aaron G.:

I think it's more common than people think, just because whenever there's something weighing us down, whenever we talk about it to people we're close to we'll probably have at least one observation that's funny. And kind of complain about it. No matter what it is, if you get used to pain it starts becoming routine and then you sometimes make light out of that out of boredom. But I don't think that we realize that we're doing that. I think it just happens. This show, we're definitely leaning into it a lot.

Philip D.:

Talk me through the structure of the performance.

Aaron G.:

Sure. My cohost and I, Katie Mordhorst, the indomitably funny Katie Mordhorst. Everything she does is just, she's dynamite. She's fantastic. She and I introduce the show and then we have the first of three monologists come on and they share their story, which is generally about five-ish minutes long. Then that inspires roughly five improv scenes. We kind of like to take a little tidbit or a figure of speech or an image from the essay and let that inspire our scenes, but we're never recreating what they were talking about. We're not making the improv about depression. We're letting the essays take care of that and then we bring people back. The improv is just improv. Then we do that two more times and then the show ends with a big group hug that the audience gets to join in on if they'd like.

Philip D.:

That's really nice.

Aaron G.:

Yeah. Just a nice little, hey we're all doing okay.

Philip D.:

I wish more things ended with a group hug.

Aaron G.:

Right? Movies. If The Justice League had ended with a group hug it wouldn't have hurt so bad.

Philip D.:

All right. Shots fired.

Aaron G.:

Yeah, shots fired at a dead, dead horse.

Philip D.:

Yeah, exactly. Talk me through a little bit though about, I can't imagine this was an easy pitch for any institution to add to their programming. What was that like?

Aaron G.:

Surprisingly easy. We only shipped it to one theater, Grand Goldberg, the guy who started it with myself and I, but he has moved away to Texas and good luck to him. We pitched it to the Magnet Theatre where we did most of our stuff and they gave us a slot. That slot ended up being very successful, and so they gave us more shows. Those kept on being successful. Then they just kept on giving us more and more and we've been going for three and a half years now.

Philip D.:

Oh wow. That's amazing.

Aaron G.:

Magnet just gave us that chance. I think they saw the value in it and we are very happy there. It's actually now spread to a couple other theaters. They did one with their own original cast in Baltimore. One's in Providence. One was done in ... Philadelphia, Boston. Now it's looking like there might be one at the HUGE Theater in Minneapolis. I'm trying to get one going in LA.

Philip D.:

Amazing.

Aaron G.:

Yeah. It's something that means a lot to me personally and apparently other people.

Philip D.:

Amazing that mental illness is something that touches most people and that we could all connect to something like this.

Aaron G.:

Yeah, it's so common and for a long time people were just not talking about it and thankfully that stigma is being broken down in a lot of different ways but still some people feel shame or uncomfortable or

like, "Yeah but I don't have it as bad as other people," and just because somebody's going through something that is objectively worse does not mean that your feelings and emotions and pain are not valid or that you need to deal with it in your own way for your own life. I think that people feel guilty a lot when it's just not necessary. Talk about it. You're safe.

Philip D.:

Yeah, it's a fantastic philosophy.

Aaron G.:

Thank you.

Philip D.:

One I absolutely subscribe to. Moving away from this slightly, I know you also have a podcast of your own, called Don't Mind If I Don't. Talk to me a little bit about that.

Aaron G.:

Sure. Don't Mind If I Don't is a podcast where fans and experts of things that I don't like come on and show me I'm wrong. Most of the time it works. Most of the time it at least lessens my distaste for a thing. Every once in a while it doesn't and I'm like, "No, I was right. This is bad."

Philip D.:

Give me an example of something you couldn't be convinced of.

Aaron G.:

I could not be convinced of?

Philip D.:

Yes.

Aaron G.:

David Lynch movies.

Philip D.:

Okay.

Aaron G.:

I don't like his style. I respect him as a filmmaker but it's just not for me, man.

Philip D.:

Fair enough. Yeah. I'm reading, I was telling you right before we started recording, I read through this list and I went, "You know, yeah. Santacon. I could do without that."

Aaron G.:

Yep.

Philip D.:

Donald Trump, yep. Could do without that.

Aaron G.:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Philip D.:

But then we hit some things like WWE.

Aaron G.:

Well WWE, everything on the show gets rated on a scale of ambivalence to full on hatred and WWE was closer to annoyance.

Philip D.:

Okay.

Aaron G.:

I had used to be into it and then I kind of grew up out of it and then now it's okay. I'll watch a Pay Per View here or there with a couple friends and I sometimes stay up to date on some of the storylines. They did their due diligence with that one.

Philip D.:

What's your issue with Mary Berry and the Great British Bake Off?

Aaron G.:

Okay. Sweetheart Mary Berry. Mary Berry, no one has an issue with. She is a lovely, older, vodka-drinking wonderful woman. No, Great British Bake Off was another one that I was convinced to like, and that one was also closer to just I don't care.

Philip D.:

Fair enough.

Aaron G.:

As I watched it, the episodes I saw, they did strike me as pleasant. Not something that I would actively watch, but I'd have it on in the background and not fight it.

Philip D.:

Yeah. I mean, it's just a bunch of lovely British folks loving on each other while they bake pies.

Aaron G.:

Yeah.

Philip D.:

Nothing wrong with that.

Aaron G.:

You get why that as a pitch in what you just said could make me go like, "Cool. I'm going to go watch 1,000 other things."

Philip D.:

I mean, fair enough.

Aaron G.:

Right? Okay.

Philip D.:

Yeah listen, I'm marrying a Brit. She got me on board early with that show.

Aaron G.:

Oh nice.

Philip D.:

Don't Mind If I Don't, your episodes are every Thursday, I believe?

Aaron G.:

Yeah. I release them every Thursday. Every once in awhile ... I'm really excited because I just recorded this one and I'm not going to be releasing it for a couple of weeks but very rarely I'll flip the script and do a Do Mind If I Do where myself and an expert convince somebody else to like a thing that I like.

Philip D.:

Oh, very cool.

Aaron G.:

In the past we've done Marvel movies. I tried to convince my mom to like marijuana by smoking it with her. That was a fun ep.

Philip D.:

That's an amazing episode.

Aaron G.:

The episode we just recorded was Dungeons and Dragons, and a good friend of mine ran a one-off campaign so that'll be out in a couple weeks and it was a really good time.

Philip D.:

That's fantastic.

Aaron G.:

Yeah.

Philip D.:

Very cool. Well for all of our listeners out there, go ahead and ... You're on iTunes. Where else can we find you?

Aaron G.:

SoundCloud, Google Play. If that's still a thing. All of them. I'm on all of them. You'll find me.

Philip D.:

Yeah. Same places you're listening to this podcast, everyone go ahead and search Don't Mind If I Don't. It's fantastic.

Aaron G.:

Thank you.

Philip D.:

Kind of now circling back, what I'd love to hear from you is a little bit of what it's like as someone who makes a living in the world of making people laugh and in comedy but navigating that as someone that's also navigating depression. Obviously you found a beautiful synergy with the show, but what does that look like throughout your career?

Aaron G.:

You mean how depression plays into my life?

Philip D.:

Yeah, and in your career and in your work beyond the show.

Aaron G.:

I learned a long time ago that when something really hurts you, turn it inside out where it is armor. Use it to your advantage. One of the most prevalent thoughts ... Well not as much anymore, depression, it's not as common. I do still have my days. Anxiety is actually a little bit more common for me right now, but still nowhere near as bad as it has been. But making fun of it, embracing it, realizing that sometimes there are days I just need to give myself a day off from things, and then I'll ride that energy back out.

Aaron G.:

Or I talk to people about it. Admitting it and just getting it out there, even if you're just repeating it sometimes, just saying it to somebody helps so inexplicably much. Or maybe very explicably, but exponentially I feel better if I talk to someone. On my really bad days when I feel like everyone hates me, there's nothing I can do, I'm crying, I'll force myself to reach out to somebody. It makes the world of difference.

Aaron G.:

Did that answer your question or did I get off the rails a bit?

Philip D.:

No, that absolutely answered sort of how you're navigating the day to day and I think that's an important insight for many people to hear. We've had some recent suicides unfortunately, higher profile. Higher profile suicides as opposed to the ones that are happening all the time that don't necessarily get as reported, but the idea of reaching out and leaning on that support system and being that support system for other people I think is tremendously important.

Aaron G.:

Yeah. It didn't really inspire the show, but by very sad coincidence the very first You Are Not Alone came out pretty much a week after Robin Williams killed himself. That had affected everybody in the comedy community and pretty much anyone who had grown up loving him, as so many of us had.

Philip D.:

Absolutely. It was one of the most jarring things.

Aaron G.:

Yeah.

Philip D.:

It's on the list of moments I think I won't ever forget, was getting that news.

Aaron G.:

Yeah.

Philip D.:

And trying to make sense of it, right?

Aaron G.:

Oh man. We made it happy.

Philip D.:

But I think that's a great example of why You Are Not Alone is important. You obviously have your own system in place for your day to day, but you, as an extension of that, have created a space for people to come bring their stories and use it as an outlet and create a community in a safe space that at the end, or throughout you're going to get some laughter and at the end you're going to get this group hug. You've translated what works for you in the simplest way and made it this much bigger thing that allows other people access to that kind of support, which I think is tremendous.

Aaron G.:

Thank you very much. I remember the first time I read an essay for You Are Not Alone and I walked off the stage when I was done feeling lighter. Like my hands were shaking in the first couple sentences, but I walked away feeling lighter and that feeling has been reiterated to me by the majority of the people that have read essays for the show. It just helps to get it out there on a stage in front of people and then

immediately receive nothing but love and humor and safety and community. It's a really weird, wonderful thing.

Philip D.:

I think it's amazing. I really do. I think it's incredibly unique and I'm really happy to hear that it's spreading around the country. I believe in sort of individualized approaches to most things, and I think what you've created is just another outlet for people to go to and to try out, as like maybe this is a thing that's really going to help me. Maybe it isn't, but you've created another option. That's what we need more of. We need options for outlets like this. I think that's really tremendous.

Aaron G.:

Well thank you. I hope people continue to use their pain to make art. Two of the most inspirational comedy pieces I've ever seen were Christopher Titus' Norman Rockwell is Bleeding, and Tig Notaro's Live. If you can see Norman Rockwell is Bleeding or you can listen to Tig Notaro's Live, which I think is on Spotify and all that stuff, do it. It is such a transcendent lesson in owning your pain to your advantage. I can't recommend it enough. They both greatly inspired me.

Philip D.:

We'll have links to both of those on all the copy for this podcast. What I'd also love to hear from you a little bit is what you'd ... Well I guess anything that you're currently working on beyond the podcast and the show and then if you could also speak to a little bit about what you'd like to see in media and art moving forward as it relates to mental illness.

Aaron G.:

I'm working on a few things but I can't talk about them at the moment.

Philip D.:

That's fair. That's fair.

Aaron G.:

Just double down on checking out You Are Not Alone, an uplifting show about depression at The Magnet Theatre every month, or Don't Mind If I Don't, my podcast baby that I've been doing every week. Those are the two most fun things in the world to me and they are just delightful.

Aaron G.:

As for what I would like to see more in the world out there, compassion. I feel in this day and age there's at least about a third of the country that is significantly lacking in empathy for those outside of their own situations or classes or races or sexualities or health. There's so many. I like seeing art made of empathy. Stuff like, there's this delightful podcast called Conversations With People Who Hate Me, which is really interesting and I recommend. I like seeing TV shows that touch upon these issues and explore them in a very human way.

Aaron G.:

I've said this multiple times on my podcast, but I think one of the best shows out there right now is an animated show called Steven Universe. It starts out very kiddy, but it's got so many high empathy

lessons about the world and about people who have experiences outside of your own and it's funny and often there's music and it is really good.

Philip D.:

I just Googled it. It looks amazing.

Aaron G.:

Yeah. If you're familiar with the R&B performer, oh my God, how am I blanking on ... Estelle.

Philip D.:

Oh yeah.

Aaron G.:

She plays pretty much the big badass on the show.

Philip D.:

Amazing.

Aaron G.:

Yeah.

Philip D.:

Fantastic. I think that's a great thing to look for, is more empathetic art. I would second that, that I also am looking for more of that out there.

Aaron G.:

You're doing great with this show.

Philip D.:

We're trying. We're trying. We're going to do the best we can. In that vein, is there any one or any institution out there that you'd like to shine a little light on, give a little love to that you think are doing great work besides the show Steven Universe?

Aaron G.:

Yeah. First of all I want to thank all the performers every month in You Are Not Alone. We have the standard cast of improvisers who are in every show and then we also have a rotating cast which is just guest improvisers or people who just would like to do the show. And our monologists are all always guests. But the core improv cast of Katie Mordhorst, Shaun Farrugia, Molly Kiernan, Michael Serpe, Candice Opperman, Tom Sanchez. They're all so unabashedly funny and talented and they push me to perform harder. They get my very first thanks.

Aaron G.:

Also the Magnet Theatre, who has just given so many opportunities and taken chances on me and just on these dumb, dumb ideas. But they give that to so many people and I've seen some of the most amazing art of my life at that theater.

Aaron G.:

I'll give one more thank you to the HUGE Theater in Minneapolis, which I just checked out. They are doing some amazing stuff. Some really, really high quality shows. I recommend if you are in the Twin Cities area, check out HUGE Theater. If you're in New York, come to Magnet Theater.

Philip D.:

Two plans for two cities. I like it.

Aaron G.:

Yeah. No matter where you are, listen to my podcast.

Philip D.:

Absolutely. Again, that's Don't Mind If I Don't. Well Aaron, thank you so much. Thank you for the work that you're doing. It's important, it's unique, it's interesting and you are creating another great space and a great outlet and cultivating a wonderful community down there.

Philip D.:

I believe the next show is on July 16th, I think?

Aaron G.:

That is a good question. Here I'm stalling while I check my calendar. I think you're right.

Philip D.:

That is what you emailed me.

Aaron G.:

But I want to double check. Probably shouldn't have started ... July 16th, yes. Monday. 7:30 at the Magnet Theatre in New York City.

Philip D.:

I will be there. I'm looking forward to seeing the show.

Aaron G.:

Oh thank you.

Philip D.:

I'm really excited and I can say, listeners, after we see the show I'm sure I will share my experience here on the podcast.

Aaron G.:

Yeah. If you'd ever like to do the show I'd love to have you.

Philip D.:

Oh boy. All right.

Aaron G.:

Yeah.

Philip D.:

I would love to.

Aaron G.:

Awesome.

Philip D.:

Fantastic.

Aaron G.:

Let's talk after this and I'll add you to the list.

Philip D.:

Awesome. Great. Things happening, listeners, Things happening all the time.

Aaron G.:

Yeah. See what happens when you talk about it? See what happens listeners when you just let it out? Beautiful things.

Philip D.:

Absolutely. Well again, thank you so much for joining us and thank you again for all the work you're doing. It's important and greatly appreciated.

Aaron G.:

It warms my heart to be able to just have fun, and then have that fun benefit others is the greatest thing in the world.

Philip D.:

That's what makes you an access champion.

Aaron G.:

Aw.

Philip D.:

Thank you to Carlita and Aaron for taking the time. Now it's almost two years ago or so. The work has continued and continued to be so wonderful and so impactful. Having gotten to experience both the Darkness Rising, a couple of Darkness Rising performances, and also participate in You Are Not Alone, I can say that these are two projects that are making a tremendous impact and continue to grow and grow and grow in that impact. Thank you both for all the work that you've done and continue to do.

Philip D.:

Thank you as always to our executive producer Matt Kerstetter for making us sound great each and every single week. Thank you to our associate producer Alie B. for all that she does. Thank you to our Champion intern Jay Reid for all his work across social media. Thank you to Justin Campbell for the weekly episode artwork. Thank you to Tommy Karr for all of our logos. Thank you to Eric Walton and Austin Begley for all the music on the show.

Philip D.:

I don't know when we'll be back, inclusion believers, but truly now more than ever, don't stop running through that brick wall.