**Down to the Struts**

Season 3, Episode 5:

Host: Qudsiya Naqui

Guest: Christy Smith

Transcript by Qudsiya Naqui

For more information:[www.downtothestruts.com](http://www.downtothestruts.com)

**Introduction**

Qudsiya Naqui:

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui, and welcome to another episode of Down to the Struts, the podcast about disability design and intersectionality. Before we get started, I wanted to let everyone know that Down to the Struts is now on Patreon, a platform where you can support content creators, and help them continue to make the content you love. If you're interested, you can follow the link in the show notes or just go to www.patreon.com/downtothestruts. Today, we'll listen in on my conversation with Christie Smith. Christy shared her experiences as the first deaf contestant on the reality TV show survivor and how it propelled her in her work as an international advocate on behalf of Deaf communities in the US and around the world. I learned so much from Christy's experiences, and I hope you will, too. A note before we start, I interviewed Christy, through a sign language interpreter whose voice you will hear in this recording. Okay, let's get down to it.

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Christie, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today. I'm really delighted to have you.

Christy Smith:

Yes, I'm so excited to be here as well! It’s my first podcast.

Qudsiya Naqui:

you're going to do great, I'm so excited that you're able to join me and I'm flattered and honored that I am the first podcast you've ever been on. So I was gonna start off by just asking you to introduce yourself and talk a little bit about your disability journey. And what brought you to the work that you're doing now.

Christy Smith:

Sure. My name is Christie Smith. I was born and raised in Colorado. I was born deaf. I was actually born early and something happened during the delivery process, the beginning stages of my life where I became deaf. And once I entered into the hearing world, I had a little bit of exposure with deaf people. And it was pretty much through Aspen deaf camp. And just so you know that a lot of deaf people are born hearing or to hearing families. And they are not born with deaf culture. That means there's language acquisition delays and impairment issues our inability to understand how to contribute to society. During my advocacy work, I've been trying to figure out what do people do? What are their limitations? What are their challenges? What are my own struggles and frustrations with the hearing world, and how we've been excluded and limited, , you know, and limited with access. So I learned sign language when I was 15. I grew up orally trying to fit in with hearing people. And once I learned sign language and started associating with deaf people, I learned more than just, you know, trying to accommodate other people. Now I joined this whole other brand new world. And it led to my passion and finding and figuring out what's going on with my people.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thank you for sharing that. And I know as someone who actually lost vision or became blind over time, I also had the same feeling of discovery when I discovered the blindness community and other people just like me, who did things the way I do them and who I had a special bond with. So I really can identify with that that experience. And so you were the first deaf person on a reality TV show you were on survivor, which was really popular a few years ago. Can you tell us about what led you to that experience?

Christy Smith:

Sure. You know, it's funny. Sometimes you don't believe in yourself or you don't have the full abilities to make a difference. And the cool thing is when you have people that see your full potential, unable to give you the support, and you know be able to believe in you or believe in me and my dad loves the show survivor. And he didn't apply for the show. But he thought why not me because I am a survivor and he kind of forced me to apply. I never thought of myself as being motivated to apply because we've never had a deaf person on that reality show. I thought it wasn't possible. And then when they actually picked me, I realized, wow, they identified something unique about myself. And that experience just changed the rest of my life. It gave me a larger understanding regarding media, how media view stuff, people, how media can tried to, you know, distort things to or adapt to things to fit the audience. So there is a big need for awareness for showing the world, the variety of people and also the variety of deaf people in the world. And my challenges with the show itself. One was, they didn't write anything on paper, they didn't provide sign language interpreters. They didn't have flashlights, they didn't have things that we typically normally use for access to communication. So when I went to Survivor, Amazon, I was deprived of things I typically used for communication. And that really challenged me. And I had to realize how could I adapt? How could I accept that I will never have 100% access to language or the world. And so I had to continue to be motivated on this show in order to survive in the forest with a group of people who don't understand deaf people, and don't have the ability to communicate with me, because you're everyone's competing for money. You know,

Qudsiya Naqui:

I don't know that everyone is familiar with how Survivor works, could you actually take a step back and explain, just like kind of how the show works?

Christy Smith:

Sure. So survivor, what they do is they pick 16, to 18 competitors to play the game, they take you to an island, and where you compete for 13 days, and every three days, people are voted out. And they're voted out through games. And if your team loses, you have to vote one person out. And I lasted 33 days out of the 39. And so all of there were 16 of us, and I was the 11th person voted out. And I was close to you know, almost winning, but I didn't win.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yeah, that's really helpful. And so was there ever an opportunity for you to kind of ask for accommodation or what you need? or How was that experience in terms of trying to figure out how to integrate you into the show in a way that made sense for you.

Christy Smith:

Their response was, if you're in an airplane crash, and you were left on an island, you can't call for an interpreter. You can't have internet access. You can't demand the luxuries that we have now in our life. So what would you do? And that's where I thought, hmm, the same time, I need to know the rules. And I need to know the important pieces of playing the game. Jeff, the host, took a two week Crash Course to try to learn how to sign. But then he realized it wasn't easy to learn sign language. So we then invented our own secret hand gestures. And if he explained the rules of the game, and I didn't understand them, then I would tug it my ear. And he'll be like, Oh, okay. And then once he was done explaining it, then he would come and explain to the team and to myself a bit more clearly to make sure I understood. It wasn't easy. To be honest with you, we You can't expect to have 100% access in life. And I thought, that's what made my involvement more powerful. And that's just a part of life. We don't always have 100% access to the things that we need. We need to sometimes accept change, and figure out different ways to be involved.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yeah, that's really interesting. So what were some of your sort of key takeaways about the representation of deaf people in, in the mainstream media,?

Christy Smith:

you sort of reflect back on the experience of being on the show, a lot of people believe that deaf people can't do things, they're not able to there we, we need help. And I believe that the media oftentimes tries their best to portray deaf individuals but at the same time, there's a variety of deaf individuals that have different modes come conversation of growing up different ways of problem solving. I believe that the media has a long way to go with the deaf community and I mean, as far as Deaf, authentic representatives in the world, you know,

Qudsiya Naqui:

yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And, you know, oftentimes, as disabled people, we see, you know, non disabled actors, like hearing people playing deaf people or sighted people playing blind people. So we often don't get to represent ourselves. But you did have the chance to sort of do that when you were on Survivor.

Christy Smith:

Correct. But you know, I did struggle with trying to lip read people all the time because there was no one that knew sign language, and the producer didn't know sign language. And I had to they showed sign language, sign language is critical. Because language is critical, whether I could speak or not, or I'm limited with that. But if we were able to find one another thing is to be more effective. However, it was hard to do when I'm just by myself. And at the same time, I was a role model on that show, to show other deaf and hard of hearing people that they're not alone, that they've had to, you know, they were raised with hearing people all around them. And I just wish I could show more sign language in the show. But that wasn't possible.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

Christy Smith:

But you know, right after that, playing the game, and you have people and hearing people around, and they became threatened. Because, you know, some of us were trying to sign and then they would eliminate, try to eliminate, everyone who signed, so there were some pros and cons in the game, you know?

Qudsiya Naqui:

Oh, that's really interesting. Could you say more about that?

Christy Smith:

If you have language, and they don't know the language, there’s a rivalry there. And hearing people will look down on people who sign because Oh, I can't sign so they're trying to, oh, are they signing about me? They get paranoid. Or you know, the same thing, vice versa, you know, deaf people are wondering if they're talking about me. So you know, sometimes that creates a diversion or, you know, separateness in the group. So I would be curious to see if they could do something like that, a rivalry show, with hearing people with signing people and how you can create conflict and how you learn from that, or they copy one another? I don't know, be just interesting to see.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yeah, that's really interesting. So after the show you you went on to do a lot of really interesting work and advocacy in the deaf community, both here in the US and internationally. Could you say a little bit about that?

Christy Smith:

While I was playing the game, I felt all sorts of emotions, because we were playing the game for money for $1 million. And I felt odd. And after the show, we went to Cambodia and to Thailand to debrief and to heal and process. And during that time, I met deaf people in those countries. And the fascinating thing about Deaf people is that we're able to communicate, and if you have, you know, the ability to gesture and see if easier to connect, rather than trying to Oh, now I get to learn how to speak Thai. You know, for me, as a deaf person from America, I was able to go to another country and be able to communicate and learn to bond with them and their families and their lives, you know, understand what their needs are, what they enjoyed. And immediately we had a connection. And from that experience, it made me realize that wow, what to deaf people do in other countries? So what are their issues in other countries? Do they have the same issues as we do in America? Do they have the same type of access as we do here in America, and the same time, I set up a nonprofit organization called Discovering Deaf Worlds, and the purpose for that organization was to bring awareness. There's nothing online during that time regarding deaf schools and other countries, problematic issues, and you know, what they're trying to fight for, because stuff, people are constantly advocating for things that they need. And then some countries they can't drive. So they're fighting to allow people to drive and in some countries, they're fighting for interpreter services. So another is are trying to fight for captioning on television, and then media and some are trying to establish their own sign languages and have it be recognized. And at the same time, I saw a lot of issues a variety of problems that arose. And in some countries, they have deaf people that do not have access to language, and they're adults. They can't quote unquote function. They can't think express themselves, they don't know their names, they don't know the purpose of life. They just sit there and oh my goodness, that really hit me. And that gave me hope and intention to establish that nonprofit organization to bring awareness, bring skills, understanding stories,

Qudsiya Naqui:

that's really great. Could you talk a little bit more about, you know, how you set the organization up and what it, how it works, and what it what it does,

Christy Smith:

discovering Deaf Worlds was started with the two of us wanting just to see the world. And so we decided to travel the world to find out what's going on to find deaf people learn about their country, their cultures, and it was challenging because we're Americans, we want to be neutral. We want to be, you know, people who want to hear their stories. So we just traveled and went to various countries, and we easily connected with people. And once you find a deaf person to connect with, you created this network, we visited deaf schools, deaf clubs, workplace environments that had Deaf employees, and we recognize the needs that they had. So we established this nonprofit organization to help bring awareness and to connect with other countries and bring them resources and information, advocacy, ideas, and to empower their countries to do the work. So we provided information to them, then they would just take over and just go from there. Because we don't know everything. But the people who live in those countries, they know what they need. And they understand that. And right now, we're working with different countries like Haiti, Dominican Republic, and we're trying to stablish a federation, I guess, or an association, that will help them fight for their legal rights. Many countries, they don't have legal rights at all or have even have legal recognition for their sign languages. And we're trying to bring more of that knowledge, that leadership that support to their countries, so they can fight for what they want. And it's sad that here we are in 2021, And we're still fighting for our basic rights.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yeah, that's, that's very true, we have a have a long way to go. And I understand that you've stepped away from the organization. So now it's running on its own, is that right?

Christy Smith:

Correct. And what's interesting is right now the organization is really trying to analyze, you know, we're supporting countries internationally, but we're also trying to support America as well, they're just starting to realize that America has issues as well, you know, and they give you an example, with our online media, with YouTube videos, they're not always accessible, they're not always captioned, or the same thing with the White House for the longest time, they didn't provide access for us. So we had to sue the White House, to tell them you needed to provide sign language interpreters for us to have access. So, Discovering Deaf Worlds really had to analyze what the issues are and prioritize them, you know, where the issues that needed support the most.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's great. So from being on a reality TV show to founding a nonprofit, what would your vision be moving forward for your community and sort of for disability access in general,

Christy Smith:

you know, I think because of COVID, because of isolation, and because of our youth, they are truly being impacted and with not being able to connect with their peers and appropriately. And right now I'm involved with Aspen Deaf Camp, and we are trying to reorganize and establish ourselves again, because we recognize we need a third place for deaf people to be able to assemble and get together and a lot of us have hearing families maybe have gone to hearing school. So where do they get connected with their Deaf peers. And I feel that Aspen Deaf Camp is a safe place, an important place for people to get together outside of their environment at the same time, connect with nature, and how many children out there really experienced the outdoors, probably not many. We've lost that. And for me, nature helps me tremendously. I just relax and meditate, Mabel to connect. So it's a special place. I believe that a lot of our youth are forgetting that and they don't have that opportunity to access for that. And for me, coming from Colorado, I feel it's critical to have a third place for deaf people to come together, to connect to learn to share and express and just to be and identify who you are as a whole person. And you know, there is one other thing the other thing is employment, deaf and hard of hearing individuals struggle with employment with jobs. I mean, there's so many reasons why how I feel that we need a place to provide skills, knowledge, training, confidence, you know, to be able to get jobs. There's a lot of people don't have access to jobs. They rely on social security disability income. I'm sure that maybe true with the blind community, is that correct?

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yes. underemployment is definitely an access to jobs is definitely a challenge in the blind community as well.

Christy Smith:

So how do we open up opportunities for people with disabilities to have employment to spread awareness with companies with different job environments to be able to provide opportunities for people with disabilities so they can you know, and invest back to the community? Absolutely.

Qudsiya Naqui:

So Christy, I really appreciate hearing your story and all of your many experiences and I was just wondering before we wrap up, if you have any anything else you'd like to share?

Christy Smith:

I think we need to create opportunities for people with disabilities. It may be uncomfortable to start but it is rewarding to give back to people with disabilities give them opportunities, and you know, they learn from it. And people with disabilities love to work we often go above and beyond you know, just like the typical abled person does. We need to open our minds in our hearts to people with disabilities and I believe they will be amazed at what we can do.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thank you so much, Christy, for joining me, I really appreciated and enjoyed speaking with you.

Christy Smith:

Thank you so much.

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Thanks for listening to this episode of Down to the Struts. Remember, you can subscribe rate and review the podcast on Apple podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you love to listen. You can follow us on Twitter and Instagram at Down to the Struts and join our Facebook group Down to the Struts podcast. If you're able, you can also become a patron by visiting www.patreon.com/downtothestruts. You can also do none of that and simply enjoy the conversations that you find here. Stay tuned for the sixth and final episode of our third season coming your way on Tuesday, September 21. So we can get down to it for one last time before we take a short break.