Down to the Struts

Season 6, Episode 1: Cripping Culture with Andraea Lavant

Host: Qudsiya Naqui

Guest: Andraea Lavant

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

**Introduction**

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

Qudsiya Naqui:

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui, and welcome to Season 6 of Down to the Struts, the podcast about disability, design, and intersectionality. We are thrilled to bring you six new conversations with disabled leaders, scholars, activists, and artists about how we can build a more just, inclusive, and accessible world. Our very first guest this season is Andraea Lavant. Andraea is the president and founder of Lavant Consulting. We talked about Andraea’s journey to becoming a disability activist, her role as the impact producer for the acclaimed film, *Crip Camp*, and the creation of Lavant Consulting, a firm dedicated to shaping the way the world reaches, views, and values people with disabilities. Ok, let’s get down to it.

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

Qudsiya Naqui:

thank you so much, Andrea, for joining me on the podcast today, it's such a delight to have you.

Andraea Lavant:

I am excited to be here. Thanks for having me.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Oh, it's my pleasure. And my honor, I'd love it if you could start off by telling our listeners a little bit more about you and your story and what brought you into disability consciousness and then later activism?

Andraea Lavant:

Absolutely, you know, I identify now, proudly, as a disabled black woman. And I say now because I don't think actually I know that I would not have held those identities kind of in the same sentence, or even honestly, called Disability and aspect of identity, if you would have found me, you know, 20 years ago, I was born with a physical disability and neuromuscular disability. So I have been, you know, disabled my entire life or, I mean, I was diagnosed very, very young, I started using mobility devices, pretty much, you know, since I was a child and wheelchair user, from the age of five. So, you know, I had the lived, you know, experience, however, I did not have, you know, many examples, particularly anyone that looked like me, so a disabled black woman or, you know, disabled woman of color. And also grew up in a, in a faith based community, the black church as it's known. And so I think, you know, often for those of us that come from certain faith traditions, along with not having representation of ourselves, that tends to cause us to whether it's have negative, you know, feelings or just to really assess our worth by what we see in society, or what or how it's, you know, talked about, so, the narratives were strong around, particularly, you know, the charity model as we know it, which which really focused on pity. My disability, actually is one that would be considered under the Jerry's kids. Model or focus that was popular the Jerry Lewis telethon. So I was one of those telephone telethon, folks that, you know, people would call in and give money to this charity, charity to cure this, you know, deadly horrible, you know, all of these things, disabilities that did not portray disabilities, anything but kind of sad, you know, and in the faith based community, also seeing it as something to be healed, something that needed to be fixed. So, I had a lot of pride in my other aspects of my identity, because my parents went to historically black colleges. You know, I had a lot of representation growing up in the, you know, 90s, late, late 80s and 90s, when it came to, I think, even black female representation on television. But again, not seeing disability represented. So all of that to say, that I was not super proud of, and in fact, I think spent the, into early parts of my adulthood really just trying to get people to not see the disability, the idea of overcoming disability, things like that. I really didn't want to be identified in that way. And then, you know, I moved up to the DC area from the south, I started working in the nonprofit space and started encountering different barriers that I knew and kind of expected when I was living in the South, but moving to an area where I kind of expected I expected things to be different. I was living in the nation's capitol. I expected, you know, to have physical access to places I wanted to go, expected to have access to the health care resources I needed personal care services, things like that. And, wow, I was like, you know, they make it really hard for people to live. And they tell us to pursue this, quote, American dream, but it seems like the system is really against is really against me trying to do that. And so, at that same time was introduced to particularly the disability rights movement and started learning about key, you know, figures in the disability rights movement, everybody from Judy Heumann, who, interestingly, I met on the streets of Washington DC, to, you know, so many others, Ed Roberts, and, and so, I was shocked, quite honestly, to find that there was this community of people, and they had been fighting for a long time to ensure that disabled people were a considered human and seeing, you know, from a perspective of equality. even with the passage of the ADA, that folks had been fighting for rights, it gave me a grounding, similar to the grounding that I had always had, in relation to black pride, because my parents, you know, made sure to if they weren't teaching it, at least to expose me to, you know, black history, and so I was, I knew so much in that vein, and honestly, I was super passionate about, you know, black history. And so once I knew that, oh, wow, there's this disability history. Often, you know, when you have that connection to a people group, that is what cultivates that sense of pride, because you see that there's something to be proud of, you know, there's a community, there is a culture connected to it, there's a language. And yeah, wow, like, reading the story of the woman who created the Quickie wheelchair, which was, you know, my first wheelchair when I was five years old, and it was hot pink, because she was, you know, frustrated by these very medical looking hospital wheelchairs. I was like, wow, that's so cool. You know, and, like, it made me proud of being having a quickie, you know, hot pink wheelchair. So that's what started my journey, both from a disability consciousness, you know, perspective and a pride perspective. And ultimately, it led to activism, I would say, because I felt like I didn't have a choice. if I have access to all these people and all these resources, and I still can't figure it out, you know, I considered myself in that way privilege. It was always bittersweet, even when I would have a win of sorts, because I knew that that was because of the access that I have. And the people that I was connected to Uh, you know, at these higher kind of levels of leadership, and so for me it it really kind of fostered in me or just this burning desire to say, you know, if not me, then who is going to continue to aim to ensure that all of these policies and all of this information, A, that we're moving beyond just the concept of, you know, rights but to actual culture and community, but also how is that communicated to the grassroots level and, you know, helping, you know, my people, particularly disabled people of color, you know, ensure that they have access to the resources that they need, and quite honestly, what they desire. So that's what really started to turn, you know, move me into the space of activism.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Andraea, I feel like I'm hearing my story and your story. In so many ways, just the pink wheelchair, I definitely feel the same way about my white cane used to be a source of shame and embarrassment is now a source of pride. And I also when I came to DC, I didn't know a single other blind person, and I met so many of them and I came into this consciousness. And so I really identify with that with that story. And, and the journey that you went on. you were the impact producer for *Crip Camp*, the film about the history of the disability civil rights movement. And you were the first black woman in a wheelchair on the Oscars red carpet, which is, you know, honestly, I wish that that had come sooner. But I'm glad that you were there. can you tell us a little bit about some some of the lessons that you took away from that experience?

Andraea Lavant:

Absolutely. Thanks for asking. i Oh, goodness, I mean, I took so much from that experience. And I am I am where I am today, thanks to, to that experience, I would say for sure. You know, when we we meaning Stacey Park Milbern, who, who passed away in 2020, and then the team that that joined us, when we started on that project, it really, you know, *Crip Camp*, the goal was to community build, it was really about ourselves that was saying about, necessarily the world. And their benefit. It was, you know, a recognition of the fact that *Crip Camp*, told a story. It told some, you know, some stories, but it ended, you know, essentially 30 years ago at the time that the film came out in 1990, with the passage of the ADEA. And so for us, you know, there's so many of us that we're continuing to do the work that have been siloed disconnected. You know, when the film came out, it literally came out like as the pandemic was also, it came out in March of 2020. So it was like, we signed on for the project, and two weeks later, the shut the first shutdowns in California happened. So for us, it was just like, Alright, how do we bring together our community? How do we cultivate and grow? How do we edify and uplift, those that have been doing the work and reconnect us and revitalize rejuvenation and then also, how do we support the building of these next, this next wave of folks you know, that are going to be pushing us past and that are already are pushing us, you know, much further beyond, you know, that particular movement, the disability rights movement. So, I and then with that what we saw in the movie and what we were in the film in what we were really grateful for from the filmmakers Jen, Nicole, and then Sarah as as exec as a, as a producer. And then, of course, having the Obamas as executive producers, what we, what they acknowledged beautifully was that, yes, it tells stories, it doesn't tell everyone's and in particular, there were stories that were left out of that, and, and, and more particularly disabled people of color again, and also just kind of the, the breadth of disability representation that we know that there there is, you know, it has focused heavily kind of on physical disabilities, and particularly the white, you know, disability experience. And so, what we did there, and I think, from a lesson perspective, what has continued to carry, you know, and support our work is, is the centering of the, the various perspectives that disabled people have, particularly in connection to our intersections, you know, whether that be from race, whether that's sex, you know, sexuality, gender, identity, faith, things of that nature, and so that has, it really sparked a lot of conversation in that time period, and has continued, and, you know, the world post George Floyd, and we're still in a pandemic, truly. And where we've seen the rise of dei and other, you know, diversity focused initiatives, it's has pushed forward those conversations and for us, and when I think about lessons, there's so many things I learned as a leader, and, you know, being in connection to people, but really, it was just that there is so much more of a need, than I even realized then. Particularly, it's like, at all levels of culture, from an entertainment space from a technology space. From, you know, a policy perspective, I think a lot of us particularly in DC, you know, which I no longer there, but when, you know, I started out my career there. And so it was very policy focused. And I've been, you know, *Crip Camp* really opened up so much more in terms of saying, wow, there's there is, from a cultural standpoint, we have to move the needle, particularly in relation to representation in the media. And so the lesson was really just seeing opportunities, which we're continuing to build upon, you know, to connect to, and hopefully, just really bring these conversation into present day across culture.

Qudsiya Naqui:

And, on that note, I'm interested, you know, *Crip Camp*, as you described, it just was such a, it was such a cultural moment for the disability community, in the sense of, it was an opportunity to bring people who are disengaged back in and sort of tell the story and bring it to new audiences and invigorate the movement. But what do you see as the next sort of the future of disability storytelling?

Andraea Lavant:

It's, um, you know, we have to we say, probably every day at some point in our work, that disability is not a monolith. And what we know of when I thought back to the resources and things that I read, when I started working in the disability space, it still was like, oh, yeah, that was definitely all white people, every single, you know, like, I'm thinking about books that I had read, particularly white men. And there was, you know, we had Judy and others, but for the most part, you know, even when you think about who was on the stage of the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act, is at least who we see it's a bunch of old white, white male wheelchair users. And that I think when people when you think about the accessibility parking sign the accessible parking sign, like, it's literally white, it's a white man in a wheelchair, like, that's actually what it what it is. And so, for me, it is, from a storytelling telling perspective, it's not just about it being that we need to see, like, literally see visually, ourselves, but it's the fact that our cultural experiences, and I'm sure that you can, you know, speak to this, as well as a, as a disabled woman of color that that perspective has impacts how, you know, we experience life, our family's, you know, culture and connection to, you know, for me, being raised by a black, you know, single mother, you know, in the black church, like, all of that is not going to be the same as I'm so grateful for so many of, you know, the folks that have essentially paved the way from a media perspective. But it still hasn't told my story yet, it still hasn't told your story yet, I would venture to say, um, you know, and so many others, and, you know, I have a physical disability. But, you know, one of the things that I remember us talking about, even with *Crip Camp*, was some of the cast, cast members even was also just that diversity, when it comes to disability. So we need to, you know, show all the breadth of neurodiversity, and with characters that actually have that lived experience, you know, that are not stand ins, or people, the fact that we still today have non disabled people playing disabled roles is just baffling to me, because I'm like, we would not do that. For most other communities. I don't want to say all because I certainly, you know, particularly in the queer community, there's still still issues there. But it has to be has to do with like, who is representing us how it's being represented, and not just in front of the camera, but who, as they say, is, you know, below the line, who is behind, you know, the camera who actually are who is driving these narratives, and that needs to be us, you know, as well, we need to be, you know, the producers, the writers, you know, we need to be the talent manager, and we need to, you know, have places and spaces and all of that to ensure that the storytelling is the most authentic.

[Jazzy musical interlude]

Qudsiya Naqui:

now you are in a new chapter of work, you kind of move forward from working on *Crip Camp* and are advancing a lot of the things you described. So can you tell us a little bit about what you're doing now and what it means to you?

Andraea Lavant:

Absolutely. So we have a…*Crip Camp* was really, really a catapulting space for us to start these conversations because, again, it being so highly profiled, it caused people to question I think, again, both in front of and, you know, in, in the rooms, in particular, how are we thinking about? Are we thinking about disability? How are we thinking about it? And so, the work that that we do, I keep saying, we have, a consulting firm, Lavant Consulting, and our mission and say our mission is to shape the way the world reaches, views and values disabled people and we say Uh, you know, often, when you have a mission statement, it's just that, but really, it's about not just the fact that you're connecting with disabled people, okay, we've done a, you know, we've reached out to them, we've included them one time, you know, in a disability campaign or whatever. But it's moving beyond just how it's connecting to, but a, how you see disabled people meaning like, you know, how are you seeing them from a societal perspective, not as othered not, as you know, from a place of ableism, or, you know, essentially, oppression, oppressing them, or oppressing us. And then the idea of valuing, really understanding that disabled people are perspectives are unique, in a way that is certainly valuable. I say, all the time, and we work a lot with everything from, you know, corporate organizations, to, to nonprofits, to entertainment to tech. And we say often disabled people are going to be the most creative people likely that you have on a team, because we are used to operating in a world that wasn't built for us, you know. And so we support organizations in a variety of ways, that's from, you know, a content marketing thinking about that representation, a lot of that the lessons that we learned, you know, on *Crip Camp*, just even from a content development, you know, ensuring that your social media is accessible and inclusive, and we have great folks on our team that do that. And then we do a lot around training. And then, and supportive of a variety of different things from, you know, accessibility to some of these concepts that I've alluded to here, race and disability, disability, justice, things of that nature. And then just overall strategy helping organizations think about how they're cultivating truly equitable workplaces. And I use that word very strategically, because we have, you know, Disability Rights was about equality, can we want the exact same things that other people have. And, you know, now, from a diversity perspective, we're having these equity focused conversations that are saying, I don't actually want the exact same thing that that person has, because that's not going to meet my needs. I want what I need, you know, and that looks like this. And so helping, you know, supporting companies in thinking about about it from that perspective,

Qudsiya Naqui:

that is so exciting. And such needed work, I often feel like in the sort of DEI conversations, diversity, equity and inclusion, access, and disability specific issues are often not at the table and organizations sort of forget, and it's really important to have this resource that you've created.

Andraea Lavant:

Yes, exactly. It is, it's, again, you know, oftentimes, we're like, we feel like we're saying the same thing over and over again, but it's but the fact is that these are not conversations that are being had enough, in the world, in the workplace, in, you know, again, in media and so many other places. So we're grateful to support folks that are, you know, committed to addressing it and actually creating some sustainable change. We're not check the box supporters, we're not okay, we did that, or we met the ADA compliance. Like, that's not not what we aim to do. We're not here to convince people of what we know, it's more than once people have made the acknowledgement that they need to, you know, take some movements forward. That's what we love to say. All right, let's like you know, get our get our hands dirty and work together.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's amazing. And where can folks find you and the work that you're doing?

Andraea Lavant:

Um, yes, so lavantconsultinginc.com is our professional website and we're on Instagram. We'll say Twitter for right now. But who knows? And then, and LinkedIn and then personally, I have a personal website, andraealavant.com. And that shows a little bit more of the cultural side of who I am. I'm very, you know, You talked about the red carpet fashion, I love fashion I love you know, just anything disability, culture, black culture, things like that. So that's on the personal side of things. And then you can find me on social platforms under Andraea Lavant.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thank you so much. And we'll link to all of your socials and your websites on the in the show notes for this episode. thank you so much, Andraea. It's been such a pleasure to have you.

Andraea Lavant:

thank you so much. I appreciate you inviting me.

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

Qudsiya Naqui:

This episode was produced by Ilana Nevins and me. Our social media manager is Avery Anapol. Special thanks to Claire Shanley for designing our logo, and to Eiffel Gangsta Beats for our theme music. If you like what you’re hearing and reading, be sure to subscribe or drop us a review on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Sticher, or wherever you love to listen, follow us on Twitter and Instagram at Down to the Struts, and join our Facebook group, Down to the Struts podcast. If you want a monthly update from me, including news from the disability community, sign up for our newsletter, Getting Down to It on Substack. If you have disability news or thoughts to share, drop us a line at downtothestruts@gmail.com. Thanks for listening, and see you in a couple of weeks so we can get back down to it!