**Down to the Struts**

Season 7, Episode 6: Understanding What Is Unseen

Host: Qudsiya Naqui

Guests: Set Hernandez and Pedro

“Cornel West said, intimacy is what love looks like in private. Justice is what love looks like in public.”

**Introduction**

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

Qudsiya Naqui:

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui, creator and host of Down to the Struts, the podcast about disability design and intersectionality. It's time to wrap up another season. We've heard from journalists, activists, scholars, and media makers about how understanding the disability experience and applying that knowledge.

can shape our world into a better, more inclusive, and kinder place. To wrap up the season, it's my honor to share with you a project that it's been an honor to be a part of. It's a work of art that brings together many of the themes that we've talked about this season, including the power of community that can come together across borders through disability storytelling. Today, we'll hear from Set Hernández and Pedro, two of the co creators of the film Unseen, which chronicles the multitudes of Pedro, an aspiring social worker, as he navigates life as an undocumented immigrant with low vision. Set directs and produces the film. Pedro, Set, and I talked about the shared experience.

Experiences that led them to create the film, the role of accessibility as a core value in the filmmaking process and the healing space that they hope unseen will generate as it touches audiences around the country and around the world. Okay, let's get down to it.

[Gentle, contemplative musical pulses]

**Pedro:**

My name is Pedro. I am an undocumented social worker.

Set Hernandez:

My name is Set. I'm, I'm grateful to be the collaborator for the project with all the other folks that have been a part of this journey with us.

[Clip from Unseen trailer with Pedro speaking]

“After you have a disability, you're going to have some type of impediment. With the intersectionality between being undocumented and having a disability, it places a lot of stress and anxiety.

Into you.”

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

Pedro and Set share the experience of being undocumented and the consequences of that social invisibility for their own mental health and well being. Layered on top of this, each one of them navigates other identities that make up the totality of who they are. For Pedro, it's having low vision, and for Set, it's being queer. But the true beauty in both of their narratives Is there insistence that the world see their full humanity as expressed by the community that holds them close and loves them unconditionally? Here's Pedro on his own journey.

**Pedro:**

I came to the States at the age of 16 because back in my country of origin, I was diagnosed with a condition, degenerative eye condition called Retinitis pigmentosa. When I was diagnosed with this condition. I was told that there was no cure. We decided to come to the United States to seek medical treatment.

With all my parents sacrifices, they were able to afford some services for me. They found a low vision specialist. The low vision specialist confirmed the diagnosis, but he also introduced me to the world of low vision. Yeah, your previous doctors were accurate. You do have this condition and it's degenerative and you're going to eventually lose most of your functional sight, however, your life is not over. There are some things that you can do in order to continue moving forward. It's just that you will need to learn to do things in a different way. But throughout this process, losing my sight, coupled with some family issues, trigger you.

I developed clinical depression, and while I was battling with my loss of sight, I was also battling with my depression. This whole process lasted until I turned 23 years old. From 16 to 23, I was in a very dark place. I don't even know how I was able to get my high school diploma. I went to college, and that's because my parents made that sacrifice for me to go to community college.

But second, They threatened me that if I didn't go to school, I can no longer live with them. I didn't have any other place to go. So I had to be there. One of the things that I told my students that during my first two, three years of community college, I would drop and fail, I will say 15 to 20 classes.

One, again, I didn't have the right accommodations. I didn't even know if I wanted to keep living. One day I was slowly was getting some training or some resources here and there from, not from agencies, but from people who were kind enough that solved my situation and that they decided to give me a hand, such as my DRC counselors at college, that they too, they went above and beyond to make sure that I had some sort of accommodations, and then they connected me to some resources. Once I learned that my immigration status, that's when things got really tricky because of course I couldn't have access to many of the resources, but they were still able to connect me to a few non profits that were willing to help me out. But even then, because I was not in the right place mentally, I was not taking advantage of those resources. It was not until my mother was diagnosed with lupus and started having her first flare ups right around when I was 22, 23 when something click inside of me and when I realized that, and what I tell to my clients now, I don't know if things are going to get better, but for sure things can get worse if we don't do anything about it. So I decided to pick it up and try to do something with my life. I actually started putting the work and effort in order to get my accommodations. I also was connected to some clinical resources in order to cope with my depression. That helped me a lot. That gave me some tools. In order to first to start my grieving process and then just to cope with it, and eventually come to terms with it. I don't know if I have fully accepted

It. That's why I say come to terms with it because I feel that it's just like the acceptance is like the waves of the sea. They come and go, they come and go, at least in my case, it was not about my experience, but it was more about the help that I got through my experience. The people who were there for me, the people that despite that I didn't believe in myself, believe in me, the people that no matter how many classes I failed, they knew that I was not broken, that it was not the person, it was the environment. And probably that person could be placed in the right environment, probably that person might be able to move on and move forward. I was very fortunate because that's what happened to me. I was able to get my social work degree, my undergrad at the age of 27, 28. And then Because once I had a degree, I couldn't do much with it because of my status. I had to buy more time. I got the opportunity. To go to a grad program, I took it, and here I am.

[Clip from Unseen trailer with Pedro speaking]

“I hate that, that narrative of like, the good immigrant. Especially when it's like, hey, he's blind, he's undocumented, or he's going to college. He must be a saint.

Yes, I'm here, I was able to make it this far, but…How many people have to sacrifice for me to get a chance?”

[More contemplative musical pulses]

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

And here's Set on their own experience of being undocumented. including their evolving views on worthiness and the struggle for social justice

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**Set Hernandez:**

Pedro and I have been filming for seven years, but even though I've heard Pedro share their story multiple times, there's always something new that I'm able to reflect on. Being an undocumented person, when I first learned I was undocumented, I thought my life was over, because there was just no, there was just not much about undocumentedness, especially as a person from the Philippines. And I just wasn't sure like how to move on with my life. I honestly thought I was the only undocumented person in the world until I met like all these other mentors who are also undocumented and they resonate a lot with what Pedro shares about people believing in you because I wholeheartedly agree also that I feel like I wouldn't be here had it not been for the people who. This film also would not exist had it not been for the people who believed in us and the work that we're doing, people like you, Qudsiya, who joined us in the journey. I think the immigrant rights movement that I've been a part of, I, I started off in the immigrant youth movement in particular before DACA and all those other policies that have been won. I feel like who I used to be and the things I used to believe in, maybe they're still there, but I feel like it's not. In the same way that I understand the things that I was fighting for. Cause I think before in the immigrant youth movement, there was this push for like citizenship for dreamers in particular, specifically dreamers, like these hardworking valedictorians. Tax paying people, like, why aren't you rewarding them for the work that they're doing, contributing to this country? And I feel like it's such a merit based approach to dignity, I feel like all of us Are worthy of dignity, whoever we may be. And I think what Pedro was saying earlier, the people who believe in us, our family in particular, like my mom, my siblings, I was just hanging out with them earlier, actually today, because I had to sleep over, they were feeding me and I was telling them, I feel like a parasite because I'm just here like y'all are like, cause I've been working on the film also like nonstop and I felt bad that I wasn't cleaning up after myself. I wasn't contributing to the cooking. I was contributing energy to the household, hopefully fun energy. I wish I could do more, but nonetheless, like my, my, my older brother and my mom, they were just feeding me. They were letting me sleep in their couch. What did I do to deserve this love? They were treating me with love and dignity, even though I didn't do anything. Cornel West said intimacy is what love looks like in private. Justice is what love looks like in public. When the movements that I've been a part of, when we fight for liberation and justice, I think in essence, for me, what that means is that we uphold each other's dignity, we uphold each other's. agency, to live their lives in the way that makes sense for them, instead of telling them how to live their life and trusting also in that person to take risks for themselves, whether it's good or bad, whether it's going to harm them or not, ultimately it's their choice and giving them that power to live your best life, you might trip, you might fall down, but you know what? You're making it happen for yourself and there's people around you. That's going to get you back up whenever you're ready. What I'm trying to say and which is how it led me to working with Pedro also in the film. Because in the beginning, when Pedro and I first started filming it, I was approaching Pedro like, Hey, let's film about your experience being a person who's blind and undocumented. I was siloing Pedro in the beginning, just around the circumstances of his life. But Pedro is more than just that. And I think sometimes in movement spaces. We get siloed into Just the political circumstances of our lives. I'm undocumented. Let me fight for immigrant rights because that's the extent of my struggles and my identity.

It doesn't take into account that I'm undocumented. I'm queer. I'm Filipino. I'm working class. I'm struggling with mental health issues myself. I'm struggling to get up some days. Why do I keep on doing the work that I'm doing? And maybe that's where our movements need to go next beyond just fighting for.

The socio political, how do we recognize our own humanity within all of that and really nourish it?

[Clip from the Unseen trailer with Pedro speaking]

“On our path, there are going to be some obstacles. So, I want you to go swipe left and right, cover from shoulder to shoulder, just to see if we can find obstacles. Here's an obstacle.”

[More contemplative musical pulses]

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

Pedro, Set And I talked about the role that access played in the creation of the film, starting with a spark of curiosity between friends.

Set Hernandez:

A lot of the way the film ended up being is because of the input of so many people. So I can't take credit for a lot of it. Maybe I helped shape it and communicate it with people. But so much of the seeds that were planted in me were planted by other people, starting with Pedro, actually.

I was asking Pedro when we first started filming, the intention really is how can we make a film about you, enjoyable for you also. Film is like such a visual medium and how do we reflect on watching a film, not just like visually, but also by listening to it. And Pedro was the first person that introduced me to audio descriptions. Actually, there was one time when we were filming, this scene ultimately did not make it into the final cut of the film. But Pedra was like showing me like Daredevil and Netflix. I think it was like one of the early shows that had audio descriptions on streaming platforms. There's so many ways to tell a story by inviting audiences to listen. How can we make a movie that's Grounded in that same idea. And I feel like also the question that I would get before is why not just make a podcast or a sound project? And I feel like, I love movies so much. Why are we excluding certain audiences from accessing films? Like there's so many films that are about the blind community. So then does that mean that none of those films are ever designed for blind folks to also watch? And why is the community that's at the center of the story being excluded from this? And I say that also because as an undocumented person, we're often talked about and we're often excluded from the conversation, actively pushed out. So I think all these musings, I guess I had about storytelling accumulated together into Unseen. And folks who are sighted often assume that the blurriness is. It's designed to simulate blindness and to be honest, that was never the intention. I actually never thought about that until like maybe two years ago when more people started watching a scene and asking, as making those comments.

But really the intention is how can we invite folks to listen rather than spend so much of his time listening to other people? What would it be like now to make a film where we're inviting everybody to listen to the journey that he's going through? It just so happens also that thematically, the visual style, audio style of the film lends themselves to the themes of the project.

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

For Pedro, his conversations with Set about access in film and Set's effort to bring Pedro into the filmmaking process made him reflect more deeply on his multi hyphenate identity.

**Pedro:**

One time, Set invited me to this focus group about how to make documentaries more inclusive and more ethical. And one of the inputs that came to mind when I was asked is that sometimes I feel that the documentaries Use this, the person or the protagonist as a subject. You're dissecting a frog in front of everyone. I don't feel that it has any agency or any saying, even though that is that person's story. Unseen, it was something different. Unseen, it sounds that it was more about two friends hanging out together. Two friends hanging out together and being vulnerable. Open it, letting that armor down and letting each other see their wounds. It was intimate. It was safe. I feel that we have a tendency of label not only things but persons. And we just have them with one identity. The blind man. The undocumented person. The person with depression. I feel that... And we just assign that label. And for many people, that's it. It's just a blind person or just an undocumented person. So by showing the complexity of a person, my intention is for people to try to put together all the identities about one person and put it in the mix and start also touching into these not very comparable topics, such as immigration, mental health and disabilities. And also not make it like the story of or the sad story because no, it's not all sorrows It's not all hardships. There is kind. There is love there. There is community.

[Soft, thoughtful beats and musical pulses]

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

As we wrapped up our conversation, Set an eye, talked about the impact we hoped the film would have.

**Set Hernandez:**

Qudsiya is our impact producer and we're so grateful to have met her. Shout out to Cheryl Green, by the way, it. It's like the connector of so many people. Thank you, Cheryl, for connecting me with Qudsiya. With Thomas Reid, our other accessibility producer, for me, the impact that I want the film to reach is that, in the film, Pedro talks about, at the end, how the film has been a part of his healing journey for the very same reasons that he just shared with us right now, right? How do we not label people, fragment them, [00:20:00] and surprise, surprise, at the film, I'd say something similar. So the film has been a healing tool. For the people who have been working on it for the last seven years. And when we talk to our collaborators about the experience working on the film, I think folks get something from the film too, that contributes to their sense of healing. I think like in the film community or like just the world in general, it's so cutthroat, it's so competitive, it's so. Much about one upping each other. I don't want to live in a world like that, to be honest, because like I mentioned earlier, I get so much love from people around me, even though I don't do anything. And I'm like, why do you love me? I was confused how I feel like that feeling, how can we give that feeling to other folks too? that watch the film that you don't need to prove yourself to be worthy of love and care. Pedro talks a lot about that in the film. I talk a lot about it also in the process of making the film. And all of us are so worthy of love and kindness. And also, I think when we experience love and kindness, maybe that's an invitation for us to be vulnerable with other people. But maybe sometimes we're not vulnerable. Cause we're putting up all these guards because you're going to hurt me. You're going to be unkind to me. Other people have been unkind to me. Other people have punished me maybe for showing my full self to them. So I'm going to put up my guard. Maybe the film is an invitation for people who watch it to remind them that, Hey, maybe there's another way to operate. And whenever you're ready, I hope there's people out there that care about you in the same way that Pedro and I have felt it in the journey of our film.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Set's reflections on healing reminded me of the moment that solidified for me what the impact strategy for the film should be.

Qudsiya Naqui:

If I may share as the... As the Impact Producer, I feel like that experience happened for us when we screened the film for the students in the Immigrant and Non Citizen Rights Clinic at CUNY and we were so thrilled that you and Pedro's parents were able to be there for that experience. And as a teacher, it was so amazing to bring this resource, really, this story into the classroom full of students who come from immigrant families, have. Similar experiences to both of you who really identified with everything you were talking about and just seeing the emotional response and seeing how this room of law students in a law school class, which is supposed to be the epitome of a competitive environment, really feel seen on an emotional, physical sort of level and respond and just feel joy and sadness and all the emotions all at once and that was such a beautiful thing to see.

[Hopeful musical beats]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Now, are you itching to experience Unseen?

**Set Hernandez:**

Folks can follow unseen-film. com or you can follow us on social media platforms at watchunseen.

And you can keep updated about the project in that way. And then as we continue to build the audience for the film, we're also gonna, through our impact campaign, start to have community screenings, educational screenings. So please do look out for those updates on our website.

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

Qudsiya Naqui:

And that's a wrap on Season 7. Down to the Struts was produced by Alana Nevins and me. Our social media manager is Avery Anapol, with special thanks to Claire Shanley for designing our logo, and to Eiffel Gangsta Beats for our theme music. We're thrilled to share that we're already working hard to bring you Season 8. In the meantime, if you enjoyed what you heard this season, be sure to subscribe, rate, and review the podcast on your favorite podcast app, and share it with friends. You can also follow us On Twitter and Instagram at down to the struts, and join our Facebook group down to the Struts podcast. For monthly updates and news from the disability community, Subscribe to our newsletter, Getting Down to It on Substack. All of these ways of connecting with us can be found through our website downtothestruts.com. So stay in touch and see you in 2024 for season eight so we can get back down to it.