Down to the Struts

Season 8, Episode 1: Access: A Love Story

Host: Qudsiya Naqui

Guests: Cheryl Green & Jasmine Oliver

Transcript by Qudsiya Naqui

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

“Thank you for traveling to be here with us today for this joyous occasion, the Union of Qudsiya and Sean.”

[The song, “Made of Gold” by Ibeyi plays and fades out through Qudsiya’s introduction]

Qudsiya Naqui:

This is Qudsiya Naqui—creator and host of Down to the Struts, the podcast about disability, design, and intersectionality, where we uncover the building blocks for a more just, inclusive, and accessible world. This season, we'll hear from artists, scientists, entrepreneurs, and other brilliant people committed to uplifting the visibility and power of disabled communities. Whether it's by improving the representation of disabled people in STEM fields, creating a pathway to success and scalability for disabled startup founders, or building access for disabled people so they can share equally in life's important milestones. Today, to kick off our eighth season, we have a very special first episode, A love story, just in time for Valentine's Day. On August 19th, 2023, I was blessed to marry the love of my life, Sean Collins, in a small celebration that took place in Chicago. You may remember my conversation with Sean in the bonus episode of our very first season entitled, “Accessing the News,” where he shared his gift of crafting vivid image descriptions to bring important news events to life for blind, low vision, and disabled news readers. Sean's commitment to creating access to photographs stretched into our wedding planning process. We enlisted photographer Jasmine Oliver of J Lauryn Photography and Access artist, Cheryl Green, of the Social Audio Description Collective to create an immersive accessible platform so that Sean and I could forever cherish both visually and through audio that unforgettable day when we committed to a life together surrounded by the people we love. You may remember, Cheryl from our season four episode, Disabled Podcasters Unite. I sat down with Jasmine and Cheryl to take a behind the scenes look at how they created our accessible wedding album, how the experience transformed Jasmine's perspective on her craft as a photographer, and the new possibilities for access art that Cheryl uncovered in the process. Access is not just about having what we need as disabled people to equitably participate in things like work and education. It's equally about being a part of the moments in our lives that bring us joy. The moments that bond us all in shared humanity, disabled and non-disabled alike. Cheryl and Jasmine gave me that gift.

It's my honor to share our story with you. Okay, let's get down to it.

Jasmine Oliver:

My name is Jasmine Oliver. I am the owner and lead photographer of J Lauryn Photography in Chicago, Illinois. I am black. I have like a, I'd say cocoa colored skin. I currently have very coily curly hair pulled back into a bun.

Cheryl Green:

hi, I'm Cheryl Green. I'm an access artist. I specialize in audio description, captions, subtitles, and transcription, and I am a white, Ashkenazi Jewish woman with olive skin and, uh, what I affectionately refer to as a blob of dark, curly hair.

Qudsiya Naqui:

I started by asking Jasmine and Cheryl to describe the journey that led them to their respective careers in photography and access art. For Jasmine, it was a winding path from chemistry to wedding photography.

Jasmine Oliver:

I actually started my journey in photography unconventionally. I started after graduating from the University of Illinois in Urbana Champagne where I actually studied chemistry. So a complete 180 from, my original path, I thought I was gonna go into the sciences and do cosmetic chemistry 'cause I always had an interest in makeup and hair products, so I thought naturally that was the path I was gonna take. But unfortunately for me, by the end of my schooling, I had no interest in chemistry. And I knew that by sophomore year, so I actually, while in school, would always take an art class of some sort. And my last semester in college, I took a film photography class and immediately fell in love with it. I was in college in 2011 to 2015. So, digital cameras were very much in style and no one was really doing film. So that process really allowed me to kind of really enjoy the art of photography and the pleasures of being able to slow down instead of click, click, click with your phone. I didn't think I was going to do anything with that. I just was like, that was cool. I actually I had a friend who had an event planning business, and she, had beautiful work, she had photos of her work, but she didn't really have great photos and I thought I could, help her with that. So I actually asked her if I could help her out for one event. I did photos for her. And from there, she really convinced me that there was a gap in the industry of photographers and especially for, African American photographers. And then immediately I knew I wanted to go into weddings 'cause I've always loved weddings since I was a little girl 'cause I just am a lover of love.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Cheryl had a similarly circuitous journey to becoming an access artist, guided by the needs of her disabled community. She also explains what an access artist is, in case you were wondering.

Cheryl Green:

Kind of similarly to Jasmine, I was going down a path and thought that was the path I was going to stay on. And it was not the path that I stayed on. I acquired a traumatic brain injury and a handful of disabilities with that. And I had already been a token non-disabled person in the mixed abilities dance scene both in Austin and in Portland. I worked on a storytelling performance project run by Curtis Walker and Impetus Arts called “No One Wants to See the Wires.” It was all, deaf and disabled adults storytelling performance project. And I did a comedy film called “Cooking with Brain Injury” about how I could not cook with brain injury. I have a degree in English. And I've been absolutely obsessed with typing since I was a very young child. I used to touch, type in the air to put myself to sleep at night. Like I would write messages to myself in the air, typing them out in space. I'm a very fast typist. I've been a transcriptionist for more than 20 years. And, going to all these disability arts events, I was like, Hey, oh, captions neat. So I got into captioning and there was a screening of one of my short films and it had great captions, but there was somebody whispering through the whole film, which I found distracting, and I asked about it later, and it turns out it was Carmen Papalia, not whispering, but being whispered to in the audience. And I asked somebody, why, why were people whispering? And they said, oh, well, um, somebody was describing the visuals to Carmen on screen because he can't see the film. From that day, I always hired a live describer at all of my film screenings. And then I went and I got, 40 hours of professional training and audio description and became a describer myself once I was confident in that, and I've just grown the practice around making as creative and immersive of captions and audio description as I can. I call myself an access artist because the art is not finished in my mind until the access is added. And also because the access is very artistic. It is part of the art. It is art in and of itself.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Much like a podcaster, Jasmine's approach to photography centers the love story for her, each love story is unique and she strives to capture that authenticity.

Jasmine Oliver:

I really love love and I really love story and I love telling people's story. So when approaching wedding photography, I keep that in mind. I think when originally people think of wedding photography, they think of all the fluff. They think of, like very contrived pose, , photography that doesn't really feel like them. And my approach to wedding photography, I want the complete opposite. I want it to feel like, it's just through the looking glass you guys are. We're just enjoying your day. And I, I really have a fully documentary approach. Now, I say that to couples and then they get really scared. 'cause that sounds like I'm not gonna give them any direction. And that's not true. What it really means is that I'm observing you guys from the time I first meet you. So we had our consultation, with you and Sean earlier, and from that interview I was looking at how you guys interacted with each other. I would see how, how Sean would describe something to you or, or would try to bridge the gap. I would see how you would react to him. So that's already me observing you so that when I picked up my camera and we did our engagement session, I kind of know, oh, there's a very caring type of relationship here, where Sean May lead in this way, but then Qudsiya will lead in this way. And there's this back and forth. So there's things that I notice and I call myself almost like a personal photographer. I'm really trying to understand who you guys are. you know, There's a camera in your face and you just freeze and you don't know what to do. I tell my couples, I'm like, I'm just coaching you guys and to being yourselves, I'm literally giving you step by step, into this is how you would normally react during a day. This is how you normally move. And then by the end, I don't know if you even noticed this, but the direction gets less and less because you guys are getting so comfortable in front of my lens that it's not even there. So I would say my approach is very story based. Your love story, very personal to you. I never want photos to look or feel the same. I want them to be authentic to who you guys are as individuals and who you guys are together as a couple.

Qudsiya Naqui:

As a blind person, for me, the process of being photographed has always been fraught and I worried about being the focal point of the camera on my wedding day.

Qudsiya Naqui:

so often there's a lot of friction when I am photographed because everyone's always like, look over here. Look over here. Or Look to the right, look to the left. Sean actually told me, and I guess didn't, I was just so wrapped up, I didn't notice this at the time, but he was like, Jasmine didn't do that. She just kind of worked with you. She just moved the camera to accommodate where you were looking. that's true. It's one of the only times in my life where I have been photographed and that friction wasn't there. My day was so much less fraught because of that. And that what you were doing there, that was access.

Cheryl Green:

To talk about accessibility as enjoyment and fully participating in your day as yourself is a, a beautiful way to frame access.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Cheryl explained her approach to access as a tool for eliminating the friction that I described and joined in Jasmine's insistence that a huge part of capturing experiences through art should center our authenticity as human beings. Access is a beautiful approach to immersing people in a shared experience no matter what mode they're using, visual audio or otherwise.

Cheryl Green:

access is not about compliance. I don't care about compliance. Disabled people are not walking around with clipboards looking for who to sue, that this is not how it…Disabled people are people moving through the day doing this stuff that we wanna do? And, to frame access as, “Well. How can you most be yourself? What can I do? Where can I move to face you rather than make you move and constantly say the word, look, look, look, look.” so I think that my approach to accessibility is about immersion. I don't want you to be like, thank you for that piece of access that got slapped on top of this other thing that I was supposed to be enjoying, but to make it immersive. It's not that I want access to be like, oh, I don't notice it. I forgot that there was even access there. Like, I want access to be front and center and acknowledged and talked about as beautiful and as something to enjoy. But it's not an afterthought. And it's not about compliance, it's about, it's about being a human.

Qudsiya Naqui:

For Jasmine, the concept of image descriptions was brand new. She explained how Alt text and its use to create access for screen reader users hasn't yet penetrated the mainstream wedding photography industry. But Jasmine was a curious and willing learner.

Jasmine Oliver:

I saw in the inquiry about photo descriptions, and I think the, the thing that strikes me the most is I was kind of embarrassed that I wasn't aware that this was a problem. When you guys approached me and, we had our call, I, I have never done, descriptions before. I had, photos in all of my presentation stuff and I was showing you guys galleries, but I didn't have any descriptions for them. But I had no idea about this world, about digital accessibility. And I know that there are a ton of people in this industry that I'm in photography that have no idea this is a problem either. And we're living in an age where there's photos being taken so much and there are new images being made, I think every second at this point. And they're being put on social media or they're being put in websites and different things. And, after the call, I went immediately to try to use, that accessibility app on my website, on other people's website. I'm like, this is infuriating. This is terrible. This is a real problem.

It was so hard to navigate. My second emotion was frustration 'cause nobody really realized it was an issue. And that whole week I was telling everybody that, you know, the world, is not very accessible digitally for people with vision impairments or anybody that has a disability. In our world there is, in terms of marketing, there’s SEO. so that's search engine optimization. And, how it was taught to us the alt text that you use to put the descriptions into things, it was just taught as, oh, you just throw in some words in there so that it's kind of searchable, but it would not be description based at all. and that was actually being taught as a marketing practice for photographers and just people in general on how to use that space, which is actually dedicated to accessibility for you to be able to read photos. So I just thought another embarrassment. I'm like, so we're just using something that's supposed to be making these images accessible for people like you, Qudsiya, And we're just using it to throw marketing things out there so it's a little bit more searchable. I was determined to figure out a way to make photos accessible for you. Even emailing my gallery provider that I use for my business, they didn't even have the option to put alt text on the, images. So I was talking to them and, and just reaching out to different things, but I just felt embarrassed that it's not something that people think about because it doesn't affect them personally. But meeting you and then thinking about there could be a father of a bride that has a vision impairment. There could be people that just need that kind of access and they can't enjoy, this beautiful celebration of love because, no one is thinking of making this part of, this section accessible to all. I just felt like it's something that needed to be addressed and I was very excited to, do something about it and to work with you guys.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Cheryl was equally excited to dive into this project because it offered her a chance for rich collaboration. The ability to slow down and engage in the storytelling process in a way that is not possible when writing captions and audio description for fully baked museum and film projects.

Cheryl Green:

I've never been asked to do something like this before and I'm so happy. I've done museum exhibits. I've done a few museum exhibits on my own. And then with social audio description collective, we did a big exhibit at the Guggenheim last year, and we've got a couple more coming up. image descriptions, it's in my wheelhouse. I was so excited when you said yes, because I also love, love and I love you. And I was like, this is gonna be so cool. I don't get the chance to be as creative as I want to be in a lot of my work because you are constrained by time and a wedding photo album, not only are you not constrained by time, but you are telling a love story. And so I was over the moon at the opportunity to try to, translate these exciting pictures. And also I had been to Jasmine's website and was like drooling, like I want to do anything related to this person's photography, whatever it is. So yeah, just excited all around.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Cheryl and Jasmine also explained why it is critical for image descriptions

to reflect the physical and cultural characteristics that the people in the photographs hold most dear about themselves. We lose so much when image descriptions fail to capture these details in a meaningful way.

Jasmine Oliver:

I think what, I was really drawn by is your unapologetic way of saying accessibility is also about making sure you are describing everyone exactly how they would like to be described. the, first , company that I was looking into, they had, they had beautiful website. they did descriptions, but I think the missing piece was, they were almost acting as if the descriptions of gender, race things, they didn't exist. It would just be very, almost sterile. And I, we're not trying to say this in a mean way or anything. It's just being a black woman is super important to me. I'm sure, Qudsiya, your culture is important to you. I know Sean's culture is important to him, and your culture is important to you, Cheryl. I think having those descriptions, it, it's a shame to lose that. Because it is part of your story and it, it gives context to who you are, how we move, how we function. So I was super excited to work with you because again, that wasn't something that was on my radar until you said it. And then I was like, this is so important to include all these different elements because who we are and how we describe ourselves is part of our story.

Cheryl Green:

I do remember that was one of the many things that stood out to me about that company. I'm like, who are the people in the pictures? I can see who they are. I can see real clearly who they are. This attempt to be objective Oh, will be, it's just three people enjoying a picnic. No, it's not just three people. Those three people are people and they have all sorts of things about them. And there's a reason you picked those three people to be in that picture. Don't tell me there's no reason that you did you like for these staged photos? The attempt to be objective is based in the compliance, the legal compliance model. Well, we described, you know, as a picture, three people. There, you, you, you should be happy, but it is insidiously just whitewashing everything, neutralizing everything. Pretending that the standard is cis, straight, white people, wealthy, skinny, pretty. There's nothing objective about love. When I describe a picture of somebody, I'm bringing myself to that description no matter what. And so that's why I use the self description questionnaire and Qudsiya and Sean and many family members and people in the wedding entourage and the party filled it out themselves. So I would know, you tell me your gender pronoun, you tell me your skin tone, you tell me your ethnicity. And some people listed, a nationality and some listed skin tone and some listed ethnicity. Every…people described themselves differently. It is not my job to tell them how they should describe themselves. So it was a real pleasure to put into the descriptions, where people filled them out, to put their words because they're describing themselves.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Specific details captured in image descriptions of events like weddings in particular are key because those images serve as a time capsule.

Qudsiya Naqui:

The root purpose of having photos at your wedding is so that you can go back when the memory starts to fade when years pass, so you can go back to that time. If I'm able to go back and look at those photos and I can hear the descriptions of my family members in the way they would've wished to be described, that's really, really, really special. Like, that is priceless. And in combination of course with, you know, Sean's enjoyment of being able to see the images of those people, you know, years and years from now. And I think that the approach that you both took to, getting as many of those self descriptions as possible and really honoring them throughout the description and also honoring who the people are in the photo.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Cheryl, Jasmine and I also talked about their approach to bringing the image descriptions, the audio and the images themselves together.

Jasmine Oliver:

In reading Cheryl's descriptions of my work I felt like it added so much to have them in tandem working together Not only, it's accessible to you, Qudsiya, but I think it it enhanced the work itself. We recorded some of the day, so it's just, there's so many different elements that we were able to add into each other that was just really cool to almost, expand the art of it all. So it was really cool. The day you guys got married, on the same day as the Aaron Water Show. So you have these rocketing planes racing above your heads. And of course it's like, oh no, you wouldn't want that for your wedding day. But it's really a cool detail to have audio memory of, and it's just, it's another element that enhances the day. And that's not something that is captured by just photo. You took a take a look look at my photos. There's no engine jets roaring above our heads at all. And I think to have that memory and I always say I want the photos to transport you back to the day.

[A clip of Qudsiya’s niece, Zoha, singing Ingrid Michaelson’s “The Way I Am” with a plane roaring overhead]

“I’ll buy you Rogaine when you start losing all your hair, sew on patches to all you tear, because I love you more than I could ever promise and you take me the way I am.”

Cheryl Green:

It wasn't terribly different from a lot of the stuff that I do because I researched places and people and things that I saw in the pictures. What was very different was my collaboration. My conversations with Jasmine was so much more than I ever get. Usually there’s one meeting. I write a script, one of our blind QC specialists reviews it, pass it on to the filmmaker, they put some comments in the Google Docs, change this, change that we narrate, send it in. But I could email Jasmine. Jasmine's like, no, let's get on a call. And we talked about Jasmine's love of storytelling. And then I was like, oh, I'm gonna do chapters. It's gonna be a storybook. It's gonna be a storybook, okay? It's gonna have a pre-show. It's like a playbill when you go to the theater. But my access to you, Jasmine, was above and beyond any other project I've worked on. And, you gave me access to your planning platform online so I could see the guest list and see all the locations and really be able to work independently on a lot of stuff because you just provided me the names of things and places. So it was a real pleasure. And then, you and Sean, Qudsiya, you and Sean did the blind qc rather than someone who wasn't there and couldn't confirm that I had named people correctly, and Sean, was able to pull up vocabulary that didn't feel good to him, and just asked for it to be changed. And I just changed it. It was just, it's just that easy. But that dialogue was always there from the beginning. And I knew, I trusted that all three of you would tell me if I had made a misstep or missed the mark, that if you liked something, you'd let me know. But that if you wanted something changed, you would definitely let me know because this is yours.

This isn't mine. My name's on it. Ramya's gonna say my name as the writer, but it is yours.

[Transition into an image description of Qudsiya’s wedding dress]

Ramya Ramuthan:

Qudsiya wears a nearly backless bottle green gown with a plunging neckline and slender shoulder straps. The entire piece is covered in tiny crystals that glint Silver gold, and the colors of the rainbow, depending on the light, they're arranged in geometric patterns from the top down. A series of dots give way to chevrons, which yield to vertical bars, which spawn a dense triple chevron pattern, then diagonal stripes, and then the pattern begins again. The ball gown style dresses, him just kisses the ground and although it does not have a train, it's full and layered with skirts and the back can be lifted as if it has a train. The gown hides her shoes. Though, if you had X-ray vision, you'd notice there are black strappy heels. The shimmering outfit is tied together with a single strand of diamonds around her neck, drop earrings with two strands of cascading diamonds and two slim diamond tennis bracelets. Her hair is styled in a subtle crown braid with a part just left of center.

Cheryl Green:

I never spend so much extra time staring at things. I'm like, okay, I got the scene right, the line. But I would just like stare at these pictures, just stare, oh, that dress is remarkable. Oh, and then I would flip through them, you know, I'd, I'd like, uh, tap, tap, tap on the arrow key and flip through them like, like a flipping through a picture book. Because you could see your smiles change. You know, maybe your pose didn't change so much, but over the course you'd see like, oh, somebody said something real funny just now, because then the smiles would grow and then change in different ways. There was so much emotion and I really spent a lot of time, even after I had written a description, still staring at the pictures. 'cause they're so pretty.

Qudsiya Naqui:

I asked Jasmine and Cheryl about their favorite part of working on this project.

Jasmine Oliver:

I think maybe if I had to pinpoint it, my favorite part of this project was knowing that we were gonna be able to produce something that you and Sean can enjoy for as long as you have it and you'll have it forever. You get to go back on your day, relive it, have the audio of the day, have the descriptions. We even picked, an audio describer, that has, a similar culture to you too, so that it's just like the different details that we tried to put in to make sure it's the, um, most authentic to the both of you. I think that's my favorite part. We just wanted to make you guys as happy as possible. That's it. Like nothing else. We just wanted to serve you the best that we could and make sure that you could enjoy your wedding day.

Cheryl Green:

My favorite part besides your dress was the process of culling the pictures down. So Jasmine had already probably put dozens of hours, if not more, to pulling out the top kind of selects the top, these, these will be these, this is what I'm offering to Sean and Qudsiya. And then, but that is too many to describe. And so, what was one of my favorite parts of the process was going through these carefully picked photos and curating a smaller set out of that and constantly trying to figure out what's the story, which part of the story does this picture tell? Which part of the story is missing? What else did Jasmine capture that will fill in this? And I mean, I made up the story. I hadn't heard the audio yet, but I was making up stories in my head the whole time. I'll never know if they were true or not, but they were fun stories. And so I really liked trying to piece together and kind of look at some of the photos as choreography as well as a story. A dance in a book with a playbill. And so I, I loved Pull, pulling it apart and then writing a set of descriptions and then checking, did I get the story? Nope. Didn't get the story. Rewrite them all. It was quite a pleasure.

[Transition to Qudsiya’s cousin, Sharique Hasan, reading the poem, “On Marriage” by Rumi during the wedding ceremony]

Sharique Hasan:

“You love one another, but make not a bond of love. Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.”

Jasmine Oliver:

there are literally thousands of photos to go through. And we were trying to edit them down, not only we were looking at how it would flow with the story, but we also didn't want to fatigue you with a bunch of descriptions.

We just wanted to make sure that it, it fit and your whole story was told without anything being redundant or things like that. But I think Cheryl did a really beautiful job at doing that. And that's something I wish I could do more with clients. 'cause they just want the whole shebang. They want everything.

I think there's beauty in editing it down to like the most key moments.

[Transition to Sean’s parents, Cheryl and Eric Collins, reading “Touched by an Angel” by Maya Angelou during the wedding ceremony]

Cheryl Collins:

Touched by an angel by Maya Angelou.

Eric Collins:

“We, unaccustomed to courage exiles from delight, live coiled and shells of loneliness. Until love leaves its high, holy temple, and comes into our sight to liberate us into life.”

Qudsiya Naqui:

I hope our conversation gave everyone food for thought about how we can work collectively to bring authentic, immersive, and inclusive access into the everyday life experiences that bring us closer together as human beings. My key takeaways. Access should be an integral element of any piece of art. It adds beauty and value. It is art in and of itself. Image descriptions should uplift the authentic self-expressed identities of the people in the images as much as possible. And perhaps most importantly, creating access is an act of love. If you want to learn more, here's where you can find Jasmine and Cheryl.

Jasmine Oliver:

You could find me@jlaurynphotography.com. That's J-L-A-U-R-Y-N photography.com. Instagram, it's j Lauren Photography or j Lauren Photo. If you are getting married anywhere. Hit me up.

Cheryl Green:

My website is, who am I to stop it.com. Uh, it's the name of, the documentary film I made kind of before I switched away from film and into media accessibility. So there's info about my media accessibility on there as well as my podcast Pigeonhole, which is transcribed and uh, it's on all the podcast places.

[An instrumental version of Nina Simone’s “Feeling Good” with violin by Adrian Morris of Quartetto Solo plays softly in the background]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thanks for listening to Down To the Struts. This episode was produced by Ilana Nevins and me. Avery Anapol is our social media manager. With special thanks to Claire Shanley for designing our logo. In this episode, you heard music from our wedding by Adrian Morris of Quartetto Solo, the song “Made of Gold” by Ibeyi, and “The Way I Am” by Ingrid Michelson, performed by my niece, Zoha Hasan. You can learn more about the podcast at downtothestruts.com and follow us on social media at Down to the Struts, including our Facebook group, Down to the Struts Podcast. You can also find us at our new home on YouTube. I can't wait to be with you again in a few short weeks so we can get back down to it.