

A CommunicationFIRST Webinar

The Power and Art of AAC:

Disrupting Racism, Ableism, and Oppression

*A Conversation with Three Generations of
Award-Winning Artists and Activists*

June 20, 2022

Transcript

The Power and Art of AAC: Disrupting Racism, Ableism, and Oppression

A Conversation with Three Generations of
Award-Winning Artists and Activists



Devva Kasnitz
Lateef McLeod
DJ Savarese
Bob Williams

[TAUNA SZYMANSKI] Welcome to the latest CommunicationFIRST community building event! My name is Tauna Szymanski, and I am the Executive Director and Legal Director of CommunicationFIRST, the only disability led organization dedicated to protecting and advancing the rights and interests of the estimated 5 million people in the United States who cannot rely on speech to be heard and understood.

I am a white woman in her forties with long brown hair. I have a wonky left eye and I'm wearing glasses. My pronouns are she and her.

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<https://CommunicationFIRST.org/>



We are providing ASL interpretation as well as real-time captioning tonight. You can turn on the captioning at the bottom of your screen, or by clicking the StreamText link in the Chat, which I'll paste again.

Now. I am delighted to welcome you all here tonight, the day after Juneteenth. Before I turn it over to my colleague, CommunicationFIRST Policy Director Bob Williams, I would like to thank you all for being here for this critically important conversation about the Power and Art of AAC: Dismantling Racism, Ableism and Oppression, featuring three generations of AAC-using artists and activists: Devva Kasnitz, Lateef McLeod, DJ Savarese, and Bob Williams.

There has been a lot of excitement about this event. Over 250 people registered from at least 29 different US states and 15 different countries, including Tanzania, Chile, Singapore, and Croatia. If you are new to CommunicationFIRST, we encourage you to explore our website and sign up for our newsletter at communicationfirst.org.

We have a packed program tonight and the panelists are unlikely to have time to address any new questions that are asked during the webinar. But, if you do have a burning question, please submit it in the Q&A box, instead of the Chat. The panelists may be able to answer one or two if there is time.

If you did submit a question in advance, and it is not addressed tonight, the panelists do hope to answer some of these questions in writing after the webinar. These will be posted on the webpage that will host the recording. The recording will be available in a few weeks, once we've had time to produce a version with corrected captions. We'll send an email to all who registered to let you know when that's ready. Please avoid using the chat box unless you have a technical issue or question, in which case, please direct the question to the hosts and we will try to assist you.

Each of our panelists and moderators are using some form of augmentative or alternative communication, or AAC. This may be in the form of a text-to-speech generating device or a human reader who will read text they have put in the chat. A human reader may also revoice their speech that may be unclear. Each of the panelists and moderators have opted to type out some of their thoughts in advance to save time.

There will be two short, three- to four-minute video clips played during the program. Both are captioned, but are not audio-described. So I will describe them both briefly now. The first clip will be a video of Lateef McLeod, a Black



man in his forties, performing his poem, “Why Are You Scared of Me?” on a stage using his AAC device as he sits in a power wheelchair.

The second will be a short clip from a movie called [Deej](#) that DJ Savarese co-produced. The clip features a man reading “Swoon,” a poem of DJ’s set to oil paint animation, followed by a clip of DJ, a white man in his late teens, entering his school and participating in a high school English class.

I will now turn it over to Bob to introduce tonight’s program and participants.
Bob?

[BOB WILLIAMS] It is amazing to have all of you with us tonight. I am Bob Williams, the Policy Director of CommunicationFIRST, and one of its founders. I am an older, white man with brown and graying hair. My pronouns are he and him. It is my honor to be with Devva Kasnitz, Lateef McLeod, and DJ Savarese. Thank you for being here, and, far more, for your artful and constant activism and the pride you evoke in us.

You know, mere words do not capture the great pride and joy we feel in hosting what we hope to be a series of gatherings that elevate and celebrate the power and art of AAC in offering us the tools and mediums to liberate ourselves, one another, and, most importantly, to liberate millions of our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, and countless others who require AAC to express themselves, be understood, and live life.

Because of the racism, ableism, and multiple oppressions many encounter, I believe the hardest part of having a conversation comes in starting it, and then in continuing to engage and to broaden it out. We are taking the first step here and now.

Juneteenth offers up lessons and contradictions in the American Dream and nightmare. In a [piece from 2020 and republished yesterday](#), Jamelle Bouie of *The New York Times* writes that the most urgent of these is that of dis-enthraling ourselves from the myth that Lincoln, or anyone else, freed anyone, and recognizing that it was enslaved men, women, and children who fled by the thousands through enemy lines during the Civil War, joining in battle, and in so doing made their freedom and that of all of us not merely possible, but absolutely imperative. By breathing life into Frederick Douglass’s self-fulfilling prophecy, by seizing their own freedom and power, the three gifted colleagues and friends who join me tonight live by the same creed. And I am very pleased to introduce each of them to you.



Devva Kasnitz is an internationally recognized scholar. She is a founding member of the [Society for Disability Studies](#), serving on its Board, and later as its Executive Director. Devva is a medical anthropologist by training and mentored a generation of disability scholars. She is an adjunct professor at the City University of New York. Devva, thank you for being on the CommunicationFIRST Advisory Council and for helping to facilitate our discussion.

Lateef McLeod is a Black disabled scholar, poet, author, and activist. He is a performance artist with the [Sins Invalid Theater](#) in the California Bay Area, and has performed at venues in New York City and elsewhere. Lateef is pursuing his PhD in anthropology and social change, committed to bringing about equity and social justice. He is a visionary and a member of our Board of Directors. Lateef, thanks for your art, your leadership, and for sharing both with us this evening.

Finally, DJ Savarese is a self-described artful activist, writer, teacher, filmmaker, and public scholar. He is the Director of the [Lives-in-Progress Collective](#), and is the co-Chair of the [Alliance for Citizen-Directed Supports](#), committed to meaningful, inclusive, self-directed lives for all, and serves on our Advisory Council.

Devva, Lateef, and DJ, all of you are revolutionaries of the mind, heart, and spirit. We applaud you for who you are, as well as the justice you seek and help bring about.

Devva, I will turn it over to you to make your framing remarks, followed by Lateef and then DJ to make their opening comments this evening.

[DEVVA KASNITZ] Well. We all learned something.

[DEVVA'S REVOICER] Yes. We all learned something.

[DEVVA KASNITZ] Lateef and I both are anthropologists.

[DEVVA'S REVOICER] Lateef and all of the other panelists—

[DEVVA KASNITZ] No. Lateef and I are both anthropologists.

[DEVVA'S REVOICER] Lateef and—

[DEVVA KASNITZ] I.



[DEVVA'S REVOICER] —and I—

[DEVVA KASNITZ] Both—

[DEVVA'S REVOICER] —are both—

[DEVVA KASNITZ] Anthropologists.

[DEVVA'S REVOICER] —anthropologists.

[DEVVA KASNITZ] [gesturing and vocalizing]

[A post-event editing note from Devva: Upon reflection, we decided to just give you my words to read from now on in this transcript. The above exchange is an example of what it takes working with a revoicer to be understood. For the rest, I will give you just my intent, not all the actual negotiation for meaning.]

[DEVVA KASNITZ] I am a short but curvy 72-year-old Jewish anthropologist teaching at City University of New York with long curly hair, which I occasionally accidentally spin into my multi-fiber yarn. My life's work has been to develop disability anthropology from art to politics, using tools from phenomenology, systems theory, ecology, and life course research.

I focus on communication impairment, and on aging with disability, versus aging into disability.

My baby, the Society for Disability Studies, has grown, and my focus has turned to CommunicationFIRST, and my spinning wheels.

As an anthropologist, culture is my organizing principle. We also believe that culture is created, expressed, and changed by community. **We constitute a community here today in a very conscious way.**

Who would have ever thought that people who communicate outside of speech are a community? Well, that includes Deaf culture, an area CommunicationFIRST will reach for, but we start with other communication disability experience, as we have not really claimed our cross-impairment community until now. And we have been fragmented into impairment-diagnostic categories, be it CP, or dystonia—like me and our dear departed [Neil Marcus](#)—autism, or any other medical designation.



Art has always had a role to play in activism. Some of it is behind me. My work on immigration, and now, disability, lives because of art.

Today, we celebrate art with words. Poetry and song both share a rhythm and flow different from simple speech. It is also embedded in a different part of the brain. **It invites us to not only care what the art maker wants to convey, but to also bring our whole selves, our whole disabled selves, to the party, to pull what we each need from the art.**

Artists thrive when the audience becomes part of the community. **Only in community can we refine our ideas and move into constructive action. Find the culture, build the community, explore its problems to keep it on track. Each new idea can improve our direction, or at least keep us debating and communicating.**

All of our varied modes of communication are also the message. They become a dance when I stand to lecture or Bob sits to finger dance with the keyboard. **We of course struggle to convince the world that we do have something to say, even if we say it differently.**

Today, I'm typing with just one baby finger. This is still faster than me speaking, even with Susie revoicing. Even faster because I prepared this ahead. I also don't really like Chat, because it doesn't know all the tricks my typing software does. I must trust you to not think me lazy if I type into the Chat that doesn't clean up my typos. I pass this now to my comrades who never make typos.

[BOB WILLIAMS] Guess that is me following Lateef.

Lateef, please share your opening.

[LATEEF MCLEOD] Hi, I am Lateef McLeod. My pronouns are he and him. For an image description of myself, I am a Black man with cerebral palsy, with a mustache and a beard. I am wearing a button-up shirt and am in a Permobil wheelchair. Thank you for inviting me to speak on this symposium on racism and ableism, because I think the public needs to be educated on these two topics.

There especially needs to be more discussion on ableism and how it affects people with disabilities and their engagement with the larger dominant society. Also, there should be a discussion on how disabled people of color can simultaneously experience racism within disabled communities, and ableism



within people of color communities, so they **experience a double sense of marginalization.**

Also, both systems of oppression interlock with other systems of oppression, like sexism, homophobia, and transphobia that creates a hierarchical stratification that we need to contend with if we are to build a better society.

[BOB WILLIAMS] Thank you. DJ, please share your comments.

[Silence]

I will go because DJ has technology issues.

Thank you. Just now, like all of your favorite public television stations, I want to take this opportunity to strongly urge you to do the following.

Number one, check out our [website](#), and all of the work we do to safeguard and strengthen the civil rights of all people who require AAC, regardless of their race, disability, language, culture, class, gender identity, or circumstance.

Number two, [email us](#), let us know who you are, what you think of tonight, and the work we are doing.

Number three, take action by writing and [submitting a blog to us](#).

And number four, [make a donation](#) in any amount you can. The cost of just hosting and making an event like this one accessible to all can be \$3,000. We want to do more. Donations, however small, add up to make greater change, and we will be grateful to receive them. Tauna has put all the links you need in chat.

DJ, are you able to speak?

[DEVVA KASNITZ] Bob, he put in the Chat.

[DEVVA'S REVOICER] Yes, DJ put his comments in the Chat and I will revoice for him until his technical difficulty is fixed.

DJ says,



[DJ SAVARESE] Hi everyone. I'm a white male in my twenties with short reddish brown hair, a goatee, and glasses. I'm wearing a black t-shirt and sitting on a light brown leather loveseat in front of an abstract stained glass window that's brown, cream, and electric blue.

I'm excited to be here tonight because **I believe artful activism is essential to our emancipation. I think without it, we are left trying to make room for ourselves in the cultivated garden of a speech-based society. And I think without art, we are forced to conform to the dominant culture's power structure and management of our identities.**

For me, creating the world we want to live in is as much about changing the lens people see us through as it is about changing or improving the law. It's about unearthing the societal assumptions that still stand in our way.

It's about moving all of us beyond a world of inclusion and exclusion, and toward a celebration of all forms of bio- and neurodiversity. In an ever-unfolding universe, there's room for everyone, every kind of kin.

[BOB WILLIAMS] Well said. Devva, I will turn it back to you.

[DEVVA KASNITZ] Okay, everyone. I have a couple of questions. Are there specific questions or perspectives you hope others will think deeply about or be moved to action based on your work?

DJ?

[DJ SAVARESE] Sure. **I'd like people to think about what relationships might be possible in a world that decenters speech.** When I'm inviting people into a neurocosmopolitan meeting ground, I'm hoping they'll lose their tendency to answer fearfully, grow connections with others outside their usual realm of comfort, leave on a new path made possible by our entanglement, rely less on reason and more on their multisensory capacities, and be less prone to argue, more inclined to communicate without words. I want to lure them out of their heads and into their sensual and sensing bodyminds. But more than anything, I hope people will become more aware of, and more interactively engaged with, and therefore more caring toward, the other beings within their ever-expanding ecosystems.

[BOB WILLIAMS] In all your creative work, both of you reveal and challenge racism, ableism, and other deep-rooted oppression, as well as your vision of



what justice demands. Where does that urgency to be an artful activist come from in you?

[LATEEF MCLEOD] The urgency comes from the pain and heartache that I experienced from racist and ableist interactions throughout my life, and a growing desire to change the culture that produced those interactions in the first place. I think it is my job as an artist and an intellectual to deconstruct and envision ways to dismantle these forms of oppression so future generations will not have to go through the same experiences that I do.

I also see the country just currently seriously dealing with the legacy of white supremacy and racism and how it affected our society and culture. There should also be the same level of introspection with the history of ableism in our capitalist culture's unhealthy fetish for the abled body.

We need to reckon with this history, which includes the history of eugenics and ugly laws that bar disabled people from being seen in public. I think that is part of my job as an artful activist, to explain this history and envision a path for our future that is greater than our past.

[BOB WILLIAMS] Thank you. Following their responses, DJ, would you like to add anything?

[DJ SAVARESE] I think we're all activists, but for me, I'm a lot more privileged than many. I've been fully included since I left foster care and a segregated school setting in kindergarten. And I've always felt an urgency not to leave behind those less fortunate.

I used to think that was about opening the door for them. But now I realize it's about asking the questions that seek to disrupt the inclusion/exclusion binary. It's about dismantling the garden walls. That's it. It's not simply about answering and informing and translating. It's about transforming, and art is best equipped to do that. Neuroscientifically, it quite literally erases boundaries in the brain, but it also answers less and invites more.

[DEVVA KASNITZ] Thank you for that. So what is the power and art of AAC and how do you tap into it?

[LATEEF MCLEOD] The power and art of AAC is to say my truth unabashedly and unashamed to the public in an elegant, artful, and articulate way. That way people can understand and be impacted by what I am saying.



If you love what you are doing and regularly practice at it, you will become good at what you do. That is how I approach expressing myself through my art, writing, and communicating with my AAC device. I love doing those things, so I take my time to hone my skills, so I will be good at my craft.

[DJ SAVARESE] I love you, Devva and Bob. Your questions are gorgeous. AAC can offer alternative pathways to literacy and alternative ways of communicating. **It slows down the jabberers and asks them to hear us as the listeners we are. It asks them to acknowledge the effort involved in what we're asked to do as translators.**

It leaves silences, and asks us all to mingle there without words. That's my favorite power it has, I think. I think it's less artful, to be honest, but it allows me to manage a lot, and to engage with multiple speech-centric communities across the globe. Yes. AAC is not about making art. It's about reaching out and connecting.

I like to use writing instead of speaking most of the time, because most of the time it's more calming and less aggravating. I taught poetry writing to alternatively communicating autistics for the [LYNX Project](#), and some days the whole class took place in written language. The atmosphere was one of quiet, inviting communion.

[BOB WILLIAMS] Now we are going to two potent and exquisite video clips of Lateef's, followed by DJ's artistry, in action. Lateef, tell us why you selected your specific clip to share with us.

[LATEEF MCLEOD] I selected this poem for a couple reasons. It shows me performing at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York City, which is the premier spot in the country for spoken word poets to perform. I was so honored that I could recite my poetry there. Also the poem "Why Are You Scared of Me?" is one of my signature poems, and it interrogates the negative stereotypes that people have of me and illustrates how foolish and misconceived these stereotypes are, and it obscures people from seeing me from who I really am.

[Music]

[VOICE IN RECORDING] I'm recording.

[LATEEF MCLEOD, IN RECORDING] Here is my poem, "Why Are You Scared of Me?" Hope you enjoy it.



[CROWD, IN RECORDING] Yeah. Yeah.

[LATEEF MCLEOD, IN RECORDING] Why are you scared of me?

As a child I knew I was good, adorable, and safe. Because that was what my parents told me. That was what my grandma told me. That was what my physical therapist told me. That was what my teachers told me. So I believed it. I rolled around in my power wheelchair with my head held high and knew I was God's child blessed with promise.

[CROWD, IN RECORDING] Hey! Yeah! *[Cheering]*

[LATEEF MCLEOD, IN RECORDING] But the vision that I had of myself was not always reflected back in the eyes of others. From an early age, people used to stare at me and bore their eyes in the backs of my skull, like I was some freak, some monster whose face was too grotesque to look at.

I grew up with kids who gawked at my gangly limbs squirming in my chair with an unease that never went away. Kids' taunts taught lessons of how I was out of place in their space. Malicious words sprung off their tongues and crashed into my ear drums with their hate and indifference.

Why you fear me? Why you freak out whenever I am around? What is it about the sight of me that makes you cringe? Is it because when you look at me you see a reminder of your own fragility?

[CROWD, IN RECORDING] *[Gasping, snapping]* Mmm. Wow.

[LATEEF MCLEOD, IN RECORDING] The fact that one day your body will go weak and die, decomposing into dust?

Or do you fear me for my skin? The smooth maroon encasing of my body elicits fears that I might kick you, hit you, roll over you in my wheelchair? Am I that nappy-headed criminal that makes you clutch your purse as you walk past me?

[CROWD, IN RECORDING] *[Snapping, noises of appreciation]*

[LATEEF MCLEOD, IN RECORDING] Do you secretly wish that a police officer will come and bust in my head and take me to jail? Or better yet put a bullet in my heart to stop the enraged monster you see me as?



Or do you see me as a freak? A monster whose body medicine cannot fix? Whose body cannot be loved, cannot be sexually desired? Cannot provide a woman with her physical, emotional, spiritual, and sexual needs? Why does a woman emasculate me with her gaze?

Do you see my body as only acceptable if rehabilitated? If I work on a surgical or therapeutic way to fix me, then you will embrace me with open arms because then I will be just like you. That may look like a happy ending to you, but you will never know why you are really scared of me.

[CROWD, IN RECORDING] *[Cheering, clapping]*

[DEVVA KASNITZ] Okay. So now I have a question. What would you like people to take away from this video, especially, and in particular AAC users?

[LATEEF MCLEOD] I want [people] to understand that people who use AAC can express their real truths without fear and know that people will hear them and understand. We have power when we use our voices in an articulate way. When we do that, we will get more people to empathize with our stories and join our struggle to change things for the future.

[BOB WILLIAMS] Wow! What did I say it would be? Powerful.

DJ, you are up. Tell us why you selected your specific clip to share with us.

[DJ SAVARESE] The reason I picked this clip is to show a lot of different things in a short period of time. In the first four minutes of the film, I use a myriad of technologies—my laptop and Dynavox, trees, walls, backpack, other people's bodies and voices, film, literacy, and a combination of spoken poetry and animation—to maneuver my way past communication and movement barriers at my high school.

This opening sequence is something of a model for what I imagine communication might be like in a world that doesn't privilege speech over other, more interdependent modes of communication.

[SPEAKER, IN RECORDING] The ear that hears the cardinal hears in red. The eye that spots the salmon sees in wet. My senses always fall in love. They spin. Swoon. They lose themselves in one another's arms.



Your senses live alone like bachelors. Like bitter slanted rhymes, whose marriage is a sham. They greet the world the way accountants greet their books.

I tire of such mastery. And yet my senses often fail to let me do the simplest things, like walk outside. Invariably, the sun invades my ears and terrifies my feet. The angular assault of heaven's heavy metal chords. I cannot hear to see, cannot see to move. And so I cling, as on a listing ship at night, to the stair rail.

[Music rising]

[DJ SAVARESE, IN RECORDING] My name is David James Savarese, or DJ for short, but I prefer to be called Deej. I attend honors classes at Grinnell High School.

I plan to go to college. I look hopefully forward to a golden life of full inclusion.

[VOICE OF HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER, IN RECORDING] Uh, let's talk about how this may or may not be a tragedy if it's somewhat, maybe the fault of a character, a tragic flaw that the character has. One more. DJ?

[DJ SAVARESE, IN RECORDING] In stark, rural poverty, Ethan Frome perseveres, and creates a vibrant internal life of hope and love, planting seeds of life and joy. Tending to them in the midst of desolation requires fortitude.

[STUDENT, IN RECORDING] Oh, well, I like, I agree that yeah, all his hope comes from inside. Nothing is given him, like to give... hope to him. *[Voice trails off]*

[DJ SAVARESE, IN RECORDING (VOICEOVER)] Until I learned to read and write, people thought I had no mind. Reading and writing are rarely taught to non-speaking autistics.

[TEACHER, IN RECORDING] Okay. Anybody else?

[DEVVA KASNITZ] That was just beautiful. So, what would you like people, especially AAC users, to take away from this video?

[DJ SAVARESE] I want people to realize that I'm only interested in speaking if engagement in a particular activity or environment requires it and that otherwise I prefer other modes of communication. For example, together Em Cooper and I create a kind of neurocosmopolitan dialect, or diet, of poetry-and-oil-paint animation.



Its multisensory, multi-vocal, non-logocentric, non-textocentric collaborative expression was purely liberating. Poetry is asked to paint and painting is asked to play the drums to keep rhythmic time. Em Cooper's animation makes my poetry dance. Together, the two art forms suck us all into a space where motion, rhythm, pattern, color, sound, and texture freely converse.

[BOB WILLIAMS] The arts always play an indispensable role in revealing all forms of individual and societal inequities, as well as spurring actions to create greater equity and justice. Is there anything in particular you would like to say to those who use AAC and engage in or want to engage in the arts or social activism? Lateef?

[LATEEF MCLEOD] You should absolutely pursue those endeavors of art and activism as a person who uses AAC. We need more people who use AAC to advocate for disabled rights and disability justice issues, and bring the perspective that only a person who uses AAC can give.

My advice to those that want to participate in the social justice movement is to read up on your disabled history, so you can know what happened before and then you can get involved with organizations that already do disabled rights and disabled justice work in your local area.

[BOB WILLIAMS] DJ?

[DJ SAVARESE] I want people to realize—

[BOB WILLIAMS] I am not certain I heard all of it.

[DEVVA'S REVOICER] DJ says just a minute.

[DJ SAVARESE] I think I'd say that each of us is an activist, regardless of the hopeful ways we engage in it. I've been disrupting the status quo since I was five, actively getting myself out of foster care and into mainstream educational settings. **I think AAC users understand: we're always working to disrupt the status quo.**

I'd encourage everyone to engage artistically though. I think that's where people's minds change. In the first special edition on neurodiversity in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, anthropologist and autistic [Dawn Prince](#) said this about words: quote, "For me, language was like food. Each word was onomatopoeic and tasted and smelled, even sustained me as a whole thing of its kind. Like food, I saw



language as a necessary element for survival and a web of interdependencies. But I learned very early that for most people, language was a kind of weapon, rather than an amorphous mist of the birth waters of reality. It seemed that for most speaking humans language could be considered a violent activity, in that it cut up the world, and its use also cut groups of people from one another.” End quote.

It’s not enough to use words. It’s how we use them that matters. And art offers us a way through that’s less about the dominant culture’s ideals of independence and self-reliance, and more akin to interdependence and self-efficacy, more akin to being and becoming-with.

Practically speaking, if you’re interested in knowing more about engaging with the [Lives-in-Progress Collective](#) at the Alliance, or with poetry writing for non-speaking poets and collaborative opportunities with musicians and performance artists through the LYNX Project in Chicago, please contact me at dj.savarese@gmail.com.

[BOB WILLIAMS] Each of you have a strong calling to be heard for who you are, but to create dissonance that changes how others view us, and I believe, creates dissonance in our own hearts and minds, changing how we view ourselves and the justice we seek. Can you say a bit about whether you view art and activism through a similar or different lens?

Lateef, would you like to respond?

[LATEEF MCLEOD] Art and activism are interrelated because social justice-minded art can inspire people to participate in activism that advocates the disciplining of systems of oppression. Also, acts of activism can inspire us as artists to produce art advocating for social justice goals. So art and activism are very much intertwined, and artists and activists sometimes advocate for the same issue to accomplish the same goals.

[BOB WILLIAMS] DJ, do you have something to add?

[DJ SAVARESE] Yes. I agree. I’m creating dissonance for both, because we are never supposed to simply conform to the dominant culture. And I’m less certain of being able to do that if all I’m doing is speaking my ideas.



I would say I do view art and activism as different, but overlapping. **I believe my art is activism. That's important to me. But it's not always overtly about disability.**

I write for myself, and I'm an activist for others. And sometimes I do both. Let me explain. I write poetry for a larger audience than just my fellow disabled poets or people. I write poetry because it's not about arguing; it's about finding similarities between seemingly disparate things.

If I'm answering less, I'm using my associative mind and creative improvisation more. And if I'm engaged in non-artistic activism, then I'm engaging with audiences who aren't able to leave behind words, systems, and abstractions. I found both are engaging, but my management of both is different.

I'm less creative if I'm simply using my voice to add on to preexisting ideas. I like my scholarly writing, but it's a bit like spying, communicating in that discipline's language, and then leaving and waiting to see if they respond or not. But I am currently managing a new project for the Alliance that seeks to merge activism and creativity more. And I'm hoping the Lives-in-Progress Collective will transform self-direction, not from within our current systems, but from without.

[BOB WILLIAMS] The wisdom you have both shared has been phenomenal. I believe we have time for at least one question from the audience, but clearly this is a to-be-continued conversation.

Is there a question?

Susie, can you read what Tauna just put in the chat?

[DEVVA'S REVOICER] Yes. This question was submitted in advance. "What do you think is needed or required to ensure disability is included in discourse around DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion)?"

[BOB WILLIAMS] Does anyone want to take a stab now or should we prepare a written response?

[LATEEF MCLEOD] The people behind DEI need to hire disabled scholars and activists to make sure disability rights and disability justice curriculum is included in what they are teaching, because we need to talk about disability and diversity. That will need to be of utmost importance.



[DEVVA'S REVOICER] This question was submitted by [Tom Olin](#) a few days ago: "Racism, ableism, and oppression. Those are what brought us to a genocide of over 300,000 disabled during COVID. Our disability organizations did a little to bring us together as a priority of saving lives. And our artists and poets were unseen and unheard, and many did not try to use their art to mitigate the deaths of those incarcerated in institutions or under guardianships. What happened, and where do we go from here?"

[BOB WILLIAMS] Tom, you ask the damndest questions. Seriously, though, I think something we must demand, both from government and ourselves, is a full accounting of what did and did not happen for, about, with, and by people with disabilities during the last two years.

And, more importantly, how we are going to avoid the same or far worse when the next pandemic and/or environmental, economic, political, or social catastrophes hit.

I have the difficult task of bringing this conversation not to a close, but to a pause. I know you'll join me in thanking all three of my friends and colleagues and we thank you for being here.

We'll be putting our thoughts and efforts together in preparing follow-up responses to any—

[DEVVA KASNITZ] Yes. Bob and I are both very good at follow-up! So we will all go over and look through all that we have, and send you all more steps by email. We won't forget you! We need you! We want you. This is all about us building community. We can't do anything alone.

[BOB WILLIAMS] And CommunicationFIRST is not just an organization. It is a vehicle to build the kind of beloved community Dr. King spoke of and the true justice we seek. Thank you all.

[DEVVA KASNITZ] Ditto, my dear. We fit well together.

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