

Marie Dagenais-Lewis: Hello, everybody, and welcome back to Diversability Amplified, the podcast where we elevate disabled pride together by sharing the voices and stories of our community. I'm your host Marie Dagenais-Lewis, one of the Content managers here at Diversability, and I'm a pale skinned woman with her dark hair pulled back, wearing a dark shirt sitting in a white room. I'm joined today by Lala Shanks, one of the members of our Diversability Leadership Collective, for a Chronically Candid Conversation. Lala is a multi-hyphenate creative, storyteller, care worker and cultural organizer—but I want to give her the chance to really tell us about her identity, and why she uses the particular language she chooses. Lala, do you mind indulging me by describing yourself and the significance of your word choice?

Lala Shanks: For sure. So first I can give a visual description. I'm A biracial black and white person, light skinned. I'm wearing circle frame, sort of cat eye glasses. I have curly hair that goes to my shoulders, a purple shirt, gold chain, necklace, a ring. I'll be moving my hands around a lot so that's what I'm doing right now. I have a window behind me, a light yellow wall and some boxes that I'm in the middle of unpacking. And yeah, so some of the language that I use for myself are terms like chronically ill...But I also use the word "mad" to describe my status as a psychiatrically disabled person. I have a plethora of diagnoses and so I'm very familiar with like mad liberation, the peer support movement and things like that. That's really where my values lie. and the word mad felt so liberating when I found out about it. It allowed me to sort of name my experiences surviving medical gaslighting, and neglect and abuse from the medical system in regards to my mental health, but also to name that, you know, my diagnosis sort of do define me, but in a way that sort of aligns with with my personhood If that makes sense that that's kind of how I say it, and short because I could go on forever about about that word. I also use the words neuro divergent and neuro-expansive which I newly, learned from an advocate I can't remember their name off the top of my head, but I will let you know shortly Once, I remember which sort of is the same as neurodivergent, but specifically in regards to the black experience of how neurodivergent black people experience, being for example, autistic and developmentally disabled and having intellectual disabilities different than other folks, and I feel like that is something that really honors my lived experience and the the multitude, and in the different facets of what makes me Lala. And so some other words that I use i'm queer more specifically pansexual in regards to my sexuality and my gender I identify as non-binary and to get more specific I use the word gender abundant so i've gone through the process of thinking, Oh, maybe i'm a trans guy and then I thought, Oh, no, maybe i'm gender fluid and all these different terms that didn't really sit with me and allow me to feel like Oh, that's that's truly who I am. And so I decided to use the words gender abundant, because I just have such an abundance of experiences. When it comes to my gender, how I want to portray myself. I want to be perceived. I want to express myself when it comes to gender and that sort of thing. So. those are some of the the words in the language I used for myself, and and what it means to me MDL: I love How thoughtful you are with all of your word choice because listening to you Speak! it's like I feel a sense of empowerment just oozing out of you

LS: Oh thank you!

MDL: because like you're reclaiming all of these terms that ableist society wants really weaponized, and it's like, if my neck did in hurt, I would have been nodding my head even more because it's so it's so I can't even find words for how I feel when I see someone reclaiming and it's like you don't just have disabled experience. You have such a multifaceted,

multi-marginalized experience as a queer biracial chronically ill in visibly ill disabled person that How have you really found a way to like? Communicate your experiences with the world, because that needs to be told and it's like It's so hard to find a real good avenue that is easily communicated that someone can be receptive to

LS: yeah so I feel like I can say so much in regards to this. But so, as you said, I am very intentional with my words, and I have a lot of words that I use a lot, because I've just found so much and I found like home in them. So an example is the word expansive, and when it comes to defining my like career or my role, my title, all these things I tend to use social, different words as you use earlier, like multi-hyfinite Storyteller, etc. But I like to use the word expansive a lot, because I feel like my skills. My talents might interest my passions...they they range so much they vary and my focus shifts a lot, and what I'm interested in shifts a lot. So I started out as a poet, and also sort of like a community organizer and peer support in the realm of like Lgbtq Youth, and I worked as I'm trying to think of the top my head was called because it was quite a while ago. Oh, oh, what was it? Sorry, You know those brain fog moments?

MDL: Oh, yeah, gotta love those times.

LS: I know I know. But So basically I facilitated like social support groups for Lgbtq youth. For a long time, and we also had a bunch of different events and opportunities to be creative and artistic. We really found that expressive arts was a great way for youth to connect and for us to tell our stories, especially that we were not just Lgbtq youth. We had so many different identities. so sort of starting there, I was able to stretch out and delve into like speaking opportunities. I was getting invited to speak in places because of my youth, advocacy, and things like that. And I actually ended up being able to facilitate a workshop with my best friend Kiana tech Sarah at a disability intersectionality summit, and we talked about the intersections of being a young adult youth with disabilities, and it was amazing. It was a great time, and it was like my first time really feeling immersed in the day, disabled community, and, like seeing other people who had multi marginalizations. But thriving, and, you know, being able to build connections and things like that. So present day I'm doing a bunch of different things I'm, still doing poetry, poetry, performances, and workshops, and things like that. And so in general, when it comes to like my creative and my advocacy work, I like to use the term activist or activism. So a lot of my activism work tends to be through the lens of being creative and being expressive. Being a writer, also getting more into like visual arts and things like that. And any way that I can storytell and use my narrative as a multi-marginalized person, to sort of amplify the experiences of my community, not only to raise awareness, but also to like work towards liberation like that is my goal, and that is my motivation is liberation. I see and experience all the ways that we struggle because of the system, and because of stigma, etc. And I just really want to see the ways that we can reclaim and shift our own narratives, and I will do whatever I can to contribute to that. So if that's, like painting, if that's poetry performance, if that's doing like disability 101 workshops for a company, or whatever it is like I'm so down for it as long as it's activism. you know that's what I do

MDL: you are like, speaking to my soul honestly I have not heard of the term activism until you set it. I have always like art activism, and activism is just so catchy, And it's like the beauty that we can really create from a bad situation Is it's not just beauty. we're creating representation we're creating that visibility that lets a disabled child know that there is a specific group. There's a specific culture. There is a place that you can be exactly who you were born to be.

and it's like with art it's so universal and it's eternal, like we're still looking at art from the ancients. Can you imagine, like we like? I just like to think our disabled art is going to be there from like decades or centuries. And with activism How, what does it? Because, you explained a little bit about what it was to you? But it's like, yeah how can someone who might not find themselves creative. They might not think they're a good painter, they might have always had a love for the arts, but like they want to be an art activist. They want to help with activism. How can they get involved without really feeling bad about themselves, because it's like a Catch-22. You create something. but then, if it's not as perfect as it was in your head, it's like a failure. So how can we really work to make activism inclusive and accessible to everybody?

LS: Yeah, so honestly That's something that like I still am working through to this day like i'm 21 i'm gonna be 22 in July, and I've been creative since I was very young, but every time, I make something i'm like Oh, that's not how I wanted it to be, or oh, other people's work is better, or because i'm not really like a full-time artist and things like that I convince myself i'm not really an artist but to me like all art, is what inspires what tells a story. What allows for expression like there's art in things that we do just as people there's art in existing. There's art in our friendships and and whatever so I feel like art is sort of what you make it, and and just really where you can find yourself. I don't know, just really feeling authentic like art is authentic. Art is the truth, So that being said like for for me when i'm creating my one goal is it's not to make something good to make something perfect, or anything like that it's not to impress somebody but it's will this leave an impact, and even if it's just on me even if it's help me heal through grief or just something i'm gonna crumble up after. But I still got something out of my system that's art so for other people. As long as they can get something out of it whether it's to inspire somebody else, or educate somebody else, or just share their story with somebody else, or if it's just to honor something within themselves like that is art and and that's enough, and a quote that really inspires me in specifics to activism is that it really is the artist's role to be able to inspire change and like make liberation sort of i'm forgetting the quote off the top my head. but to make it unavoidable basically to kind of like, put it in people's faces and make them go. Oh, okay, this is what liberation is about so that's really what activism is to me is just like letting other people sort of in on it, because I feel like sometimes activism and advocacy scares people it feels so much bigger than us, and it is bigger than us It's a collective process, and it's a community process, you know. But but we're a part of that process, we're a part of our communities, and and we're really important. So yeah, activism is is like runs through my veins like I'm, i'm get so excited to talk about it. My brain has a 1,000,000 thoughts at once, like I have so much I want to say. But you know, I think I think the important thing is just like expressing yourself staying authentic and and making an impact, even if it feels small,

MDL: and that that that's just such so beautifully, said because that it takes away the intimidation factor of art, and I have that quote that you were referencing by Tony Kate Van Bara—"The role of the artist is to make revolution irresistible".

LS: Yes, it's perfect!

MDL: that just sums it all up because it's like even if because for me I became an artist because I wanted to do it for myself. I needed a distraction. I needed to cope with really a lot of stress. And so it's like you start. with yourself. and then you create that such type of like self-acceptance that you want to share, and you can share it through your art. And then it's just the all effect and the way that you were describing activism. It's like it's not just painting, it's not

just poetry. It's not just any type of visual art that we stereotypically think of. Yeah, like content creation can be fashion. It could also make up. it could be, whatever your existence wants it to be. I love how you said art is in existing right like I-I want the ableist society to start going towards that way, if it like that, that is just like finding the art and existing in every day in the everyday things that we do. I feel like we would not be intimidated to mess up. We would not be intimidated to be scared of the rejection of our art and just create.

LS: Yeah

MDL: and we have just a few minutes left. And so I really want to be able to amplify Where can we find your work? How can we follow you? And do you have any upcoming projects that we can really support you in?

LS: Oh, thank you so much. So I'm actually in the process of working on my website, which should be out at the beginning of April. It will be LalaShanks.com so La la Sh a n Ks and on social media I'm mostly on Twitter and Instagram. You can find me at autieshawtie so that's a-u-t-i-e-s-h-a-w-t-i-e. "Autie, short for autism, autistic. Yeah, So what I'm currently working on is I'm actually moving towards content creation. I'll be creating for instagram and I'll also be opening up a coffee page once my website's all set up as well. So yeah, just stay tuned for that. I'm also gonna start streaming on twitch soon, because i'm a bit of a gamer. But yes, I'll be playing some games over there just to kind of have a cozy, chill space to hang out with friends and build community, and have some fun conversations and things like that. So that's what I'm working on right now and that's where folks can support me and follow me.

MDL: That all just sounds amazing, and I can't wait to see everything that comes next for you. Thank you so much, Lala, for joining us today for this chronically candid conversation, and stay tuned for more.