



Berklee Institute for Accessible Arts Education

ABLE Voices Episode 56: Patty Liang

[Introduction music by Kai Levin plays]

[Dr. Bernard] Hello, everyone, and welcome to the ABLE Voices Podcast. I'm Dr. Rhoda Bernard, founding managing director of the Berklee Institute for Accessible Arts Education, and I'm proud to present this podcast featuring disabled artists and arts educators. We are inviting artists with disabilities to be guest hosts for the ABLE Voices Podcast.

Today's guest host is Kellie Martin. Kellie Martin is a queer, non-binary, deaf artist. Kellie worked with art, culture, and theater organizations for over eight years and loves to collaborate with other creative people for creative projects. They have a master's degree from SCAD in Creative Business Leadership, specializing in art and culture nonprofit organization. They currently work with Deaf Spotlight, an organization based in Seattle, Washington, as the Art and Design Program Director. Deaf Spotlight supports deaf artists by helping them raise their professional level and transition to the art professional world. Kellie enjoys sharing their views and encouraging words in blogs for the creative people who are struggling to navigate as artists in our fast-paced society and share their artwork on Instagram.

[Kellie Martin] Alright! We'll go ahead and get started. Hello! Welcome to ABLE Voices. Our next guest and artist is Patty Liang. She is the Executive Director for Deaf Spotlight in Seattle, Washington. Deaf Spotlight hosts four different programs: a theater program, a film program, an art and design program, and finally, a youth program. They host various events and cultural events for the deaf, deaf-blind, and hard-of-hearing community with the goal of fostering the growth and development of those artists.

So, welcome, Patty!

[Patty Liang] Great!

[Kellie Martin] Thanks for joining us.

[Patty Liang] I'm happy to join!

[Kellie Martin] I'm just going to go ahead and start off by asking if you could tell us a little bit about your story as an artist. How did you get to where you are today?

[Patty Liang] Sure! I'm very fortunate to have a supportive family. On my mom's side, my mom has a lot of creative artists, painters, drawers in her family. My family is from Taiwan, previously from China. My family is still there in Taiwan and growing up, I would go to Taiwan and see my aunts and uncles' art studio during the summers. And so I would keep myself busy doing art, working with clay, painting, drawing. My aunt and uncle, they taught me how to be creative and do hands-on stuff and play. That was when I was growing up. I had gone to school and I was very adept at art, all different kinds. I really enjoyed it. The teachers loved my work. I was involved in art competitions, that sort of thing. I had gone to the University of Washington. I majored in Ceramics, minored in Women's Studies. At that time, I didn't know anyone in Seattle, Washington, so I had to build a network. I was meeting with different organizations, volunteering and learning about advocacy. And I had studied in Italy, I had done a three-month stint there. I was learning about art, history, and sculpture. I learned about Renaissance and Baroque art. It was amazing work I was studying, and at that time, I had seen an artist residency there, and I wanted that experience.

I was in Rome, and I remember that at the residency, they provided food and board and allowed artists to focus on their craft- their work. I loved that experience. I had come back, and I finished my BFA degree, and I was trying to research what possible opportunities I could have as an artist, and I didn't see many options for an artist residency that would be readily accessible to me.

[Kellie Martin] Yeah.

[Patty Liang] I didn't want to necessarily have interpreters there mediating communication for me, I wanted to have direct communication with artists without the communication barrier. So, I studied art, and then I had continued my volunteer work. I had gone to grad school at NYU- Nonprofit Management and I had met with different artists and friends there while in New York. There was a deaf-centered artist organization, and I was looking into how that happens. In Seattle, I was invited to join a committee for the Seattle Deaf Film Festival, and so I was allowed to have my thesis put into action and I was able to marry that with art, and I enjoyed it.

[Kellie Martin] Yeah! Wow! What a rich experience you've had. So much diverse exposure to different culture- your family's culture, your travel, and your connection to the Seattle

community. I'm wondering- are you still doing ceramics or other forms of art that you're still involved with?

[Patty Liang] No, not ceramics because it requires space and materials. But I do paint and draw and do some photography on the side. That's more for my enjoyment. Right now, I'm focused on my work and supporting other artists, and I can focus on my art in my private time. It's just an outlet that I have for myself.

[Kellie Martin] Yeah!

[Patty Liang] I would say that Deaf Spotlight- this organization is here to help- how do I say it- we're considered a launch pad. We set up events; we spotlight artists; we work with other organizations; we work with artists who haven't yet quite had the experience of being featured; we invite people to come to work with us; we develop projects; and we allow artists to grow. I really quite enjoy seeing that process. People don't realize that artists- in order for them to succeed, they need support, they need funding, they need time, space and resources, and information. So we have different workshops out there, but they're not accessible, they're not captioned, or they don't provide childcare. There are various structural barriers that prevent artists from succeeding.

I've been doing this for what- 13 years at the beginning of the Seattle Deaf Film Festival and the reason that started was because the community wanted to see more deaf cultural events. Sure, there were sporting events or recreational events at bars, but where was the space for artists to come together? Deaf artists.

[Kellie Martin] Right. Yes.

[Patty Liang] Rob Roth, Howie Sego, and Jason Plourd, who is a hearing ally, the three of them had come together. I mean, previously, up until that point, there had been nothing. So, on January 11th, I joined that committee and we saw that, yes, we could do this. We planned for a year.

[Kellie Martin] Yeah!

[Patty Liang] They chose me to become their film festival director. So April 12th is when we had our first festival and it was throughout the weekend, which featured various films. And then we discussed having this product, this thing that we developed, and yes, there were many cool organizations in Seattle, but maybe more like direct services organizations for deaf people.

[Kellie Martin] Yeah.

[Patty Liang] -was specific for deaf artists. So, Deaf Spotlight was born. We recognize that artists aren't just in film. There are a variety of media- theater, there are youth, there's art and design. We also established a BIPOC deaf arts grant and that has been very successful in the last several years. There's been a lack of resources for BIPOC, Black, Indigenous, people of color, and deaf artists- they experience barriers to funding and networking. We have the funds to allow them to grow and hopefully open doors for them, and we've continued doing that work. It's been a great experiment working on projects- some that have been successful, some not so much. We have improved and changed over the years. We've looked at what works and doesn't work. Deaf Spotlight is meant to feature deaf, deaf-blind, and hard-of-hearing artists.

[Kellie Martin] Yeah, wow! It's such a beautiful encapsulation of what your experience is as a deaf artist, as an Asian woman, and the barriers you've experienced to your own access and growth in leading to the establishment of this launch pad, as you said. That leads me to my next question. Can you tell us more about your journey as a disabled person and an artist, the experiences, the challenges that led to the foundation of Deaf Spotlight? How did you get to that point? What made you realize that it was time for that project?

[Patty Liang] Well, I am a deaf person. I was born deaf. I have siblings who are deaf, just as I am. I didn't know any different. I was very fortunate to have parents who were willing to learn sign language. At that time, when my brother was born, there wasn't enough information and resources. We were in California. Our family needed support, so we went back to Taiwan, but there weren't enough resources or information in Taiwan either, so we can back to the U.S. My parents met a hearing teacher who knew sign language and was teaching in a deaf and hard-of-hearing program. My parents learned in that program. They came to understand that deaf people need a visual language, and they learned sign language. When I was born and my siblings were born deaf, we just had that already ingrained in us from birth. My parents advocated for me to get a good education. I was placed into a deaf and hard-of-hearing program, a mainstream program, much meant that I was with interpreters all day in school.

They had a deaf and hard-of-hearing program. My siblings were there, too, and we had peers we could interact with. My parents always emphasized a good education and for me to go to a good college and get a degree to have a good life. They wanted me to have a life, whether I was disabled or not. That was the foundation that I had.

[Kellie Martin] Yeah. Hell yeah!

[Patty Liang] And, yeah, I didn't see a lot of role models who are deaf and Asian. I didn't see many of those people growing up- very few, I mean, if any at all. I see more deaf Asian representation now, but not in my time.

[Kellie Martin] Yeah!

[Patty Liang] And so- the point is, representation is difficult when there's a lack of resources, and there is not enough featuring of BIPOC deaf people. I've seen a lot of artists such as me lacking opportunities. There's more opportunities now, but I wish I had that sooner in my life.

[Kellie Martin] Yeah, sure.

[Patty Liang] Yeah, I would say that.

[Kellie Martin] Yeah, so following up on that question, or that comment that you made, you said you'd wished that you had seen more earlier- what would have made a difference, or how do you think your life would have looked if some of that exposure and access had occurred earlier in your life? What would have been possible?

[Patty Liang] Yeah, definitely. If I had seen- okay, for example- now you have the movie "Echo," it's actually a TV show. It's "Echo." It's an Indigenous person with a disability in an action series. I wish I could have seen that. You know, now young Asian deaf people have more artists they can look towards. Christine Sun Kim is an example of somebody who led the way. She had to fight her way through. I'm not saying that it's easier now, but there's certainly more opportunities now, and people are more aware of her work. There's more awareness. This is happening for deaf, deaf-blind, and hard-of-hearing artists. I didn't see a lot in movies and TV. I mean, there are Asians in general I saw for sure, but not deaf Asians.

[Kellie Martin] Right? No, yeah.

[Patty Liang] And so, if I had earlier exposure, I could have seen more ground-breaking opportunities. It would have helped if there was more exposure that we could see- yes, we can do these things. There are a lot of people- I mean, not all artists, but- are doing breakthrough work but if there were at least more opportunities, it would help the next generation of artists.

[Kellie Martin] Exactly.

[Patty Liang] For example, myself as the executive director, I'm an Asian executive director, and in terms of deaf-led organizations who are BIPOC executive directors, there's only four that I can think of.

[Kellie Martin] Right. So few organizations, BIPOC-led anyway.

[Patty Liang] Right! So, yes, there are artists doing the work, and there are arts organizations for deaf people, about 15 in total within the US, but that's it. And in Seattle, there's only one. In Portland, there's one. California, I guess-

[Kellie Martin] In D.C., one, I think, or two?

[Patty Liang] It's one or two. And so, we're very spread out, right? We can't be doing this in isolation. We have to collaborate and work together. We have to support each other's events, share funding, cross-promote each other, cross-promote our workshops, and support BIPOC and other artists. We need to learn from each other. It is my hope, you know, what happens after I'm done? Of course, I enjoy leading this organization now, but we need other people to learn and get that experience so that they can take over and lead. It is nice to have a team working together to share knowledge and resources.

[Kellie Martin] Yeah.

[Patty Liang] That's my hope.

[Kellie Martin] Yeah, that kind of leadership. It can lead to really great conversations just about our concerns, our fears, and what the future can look like for artists who are deaf, deaf plus, deaf-blind, BIPOC, LGBTQ plus, what other plethora of identities are out there, how we can sustain our organizations and our work. Access to art is limited, and small organizations face really great challenges, which actually leads me to my next question.

I know that our audience wants to know- you've talked about your experience with directing this organization. Can you talk about your education and how you apply it to your work today? What does your continued education look like, and what are your plans for the future?

[Patty Liang] Yeah, it's interesting. Both of my degrees, whether in school or out of school, have helped me. So, for example, my BFA, I learned the foundation of art history and different media, such as printmaking, photography, etcetera. Also, I practice- I learned the practice of creating art by having hands-on experience. With my master's degree, I focused on theory. I met more

deaf artists outside of school when I was in New York City. I was networking. In school, it was fine, but I had more exposure outside of school. What was great was I could apply that to my degree in real life, in real time. I had examples right there. I could see the result of my thesis in action. It was evident there. So, as long as artists have resources, time, space, and funding, it's possible. But if there's a lack of that, it's not possible to sustain yourself. Every artist has a passion, and I know that people might doubt whether they can do it, but artists can do it. It just requires nurturing and growth. Art is everywhere, whether it's in computer science or, culinary, or landscape-

[Kellie Martin] All over the place!

[Patty Liang] It's everywhere. People don't see that, don't understand it. I am very fortunate because- our organization is unique because we are involved in different media versus other deaf organizations that might be focused on one medium. This allows an artist to have more of a portfolio. We have a portfolio of different events and workshops that we host, and this allows more artists to become involved. It doesn't limit anyone, and it doesn't exclude other organizations- we don't exclude others.

[Kellie Martin] Yeah! I think it's great because there's so many options to explore. You could be a designer or a visual artist, but then there's opportunities if you want to learn about theater, or there's workshops for playwriting, even if you don't have any experience in theater previously. There's so many artists out there who can't afford those kinds of experiences outside of their formal education, and even when they can, the interpreters are not guaranteed. Right? So yeah, I really appreciate that your organization provides such robust support for artists.

[Patty Liang] Yes! This organization believes 100% in full accessibility. That's our ethos. Offer accessibility, such as providing interpreters, interpreters for the deaf-blind community, captioning, and transcripts, because this is where you get the information. This is how you learn. We offer that. Oftentimes, people are excluded because of a lack of resources. It's absolutely necessary nowadays. We want to have different audiences with these different media. We want everyone to be able to enjoy and understand art and then be able to support art.

The deaf community doesn't have opportunities to go to museums or film festivals. They may have never been before. Just a general film festival- if the films aren't captioned. Nowadays, we have to tell theaters they have to add captioning. It's an argument and a negotiation, but that's what deaf people need. We shouldn't be in the position of having to negotiate all of this. This should all be already in place. Of course, we wish we could offer

year-round offerings in film, et cetera. That is a future dream, but we want a world in which deaf audiences can go anywhere they want at any time.

[Kellie Martin] Yes, absolutely. Well, that is such a perfect segue into my next question. You are, in your own right, a very active artist. Can you tell us about your work? You've been working as the executive director for your organization, and you're also an artist. Can you tell us about both, that work as an ED as well as your own creative work?

[Patty Liang] Yeah, personally, I've talked a lot about this, but I've actually established my practice a bit more. I wanted that to take off, but I had shifted my focus more on my executive directorship.

[Kellie Martin] That's so nice. Congratulations!

[Patty Liang] Yeah! Of course, it takes time for me to be able to focus on that, too. It's been exciting and fun to direct Deaf Spotlight, and I've been thinking a lot about what its future will be. You know? I wanted to transform the art community. I'm hoping- a major goal is a deaf artist residency. I've been researching how to make that happen and how we can offer that. After 12 years, we finally have a physical art space.

[Kellie Martin] Yes! Whoo!

[Patty Liang] An office and a place to offer workshops. We can test our artists out, and it's an exciting thing because thus far, as artists, we've had to work remotely at home, in makeshift spaces, we've had to maybe show in library spaces, and everything's been online. Now we can actually be in person with each other. So that's been awesome. And now we'll have the seventh film festival. It's a biannual festival. We can't do it annually because, again, for filmmakers, it takes time and resources to create their work, so we offer it biannually. In this film festival, we'll have 85 different films. For the first time since the pandemic, we'll have a hybrid model, and we want to make it fully accessible. Either people can attend in person, or they can watch it streaming. People may be can't come in person due to health reasons, et cetera. So, there's an online option. It'll be available streaming for two weeks. It's great to feature different filmmakers and artists' work, and it allows them to get more exposure for their work and to see new films.

And so, this fall, we'll have a deaf literary festival, which is a new thing we're testing out. So we've had film and theater, and now we thought, why not try a literary festival? Literature of poetry and other kinds of written arts. We want to spotlight deaf, deaf-blind, hard-of-hearing artists and writers. We know that there are people who are poets, and they need the space to

be able to come- for the community to come together so they can show their work, whether they're writing books, poetry, creating poetry, or whatever poetic arts. So, we had just set up a committee for looking at a deaf artist residency program and what that program could offer. And so, we're trying to test this out. Maybe next year we could pilot something.

[Kellie Martin] Wow! So much coming up. Oh, my gosh! I'm really looking forward to seeing what's going on in the next few years, especially finally having a space. It's been such a challenge for the last few years since COVID, especially for deaf folks in particular and for artists. Artists are often already isolated and working on their own, and if you're a deaf artist, even more so. For folks working behind the scenes even and running organizations, it can be really isolating. It's a huge challenge.

So yeah! Coming back to this, being in person, finding a space where we can build each other up and share ideas, it can be really magical. Just getting together to create work, share stories, and be creative together. It's a really exciting time coming back. And for Deaf Spotlight, too. Deaf Spotlight has been so well reputed throughout the US. Everybody's talking about you. Everybody's talking about Deaf Spotlight! And people are well aware of the organization. It's one of a kind, and it prioritizes accessibility, and also just shows that we can hold ourselves to these high standards. We can do this. We don't have to be timid. You can be an artist. You can think of yourself that way. People say that everyone has an artist inside of them; sometimes, it just takes that spark to get them started.

So that's really good. It leads me actually to my last question which is, as an artist yourself, what advice would you have for the young artists who are deaf-disabled artists for our future generation?

[Patty Liang] Deaf Spotlight's vision is that we want to offer culturally relevant things for the deaf community in the art world. We're hoping that with the ticket sales and grants, we'll be able to grow this. We want to offer opportunities for these artists, whether it's through fundraising and foundations, and our board is trying to work really hard to support that. That's the next step that we see for ourselves. This is something that you don't see everywhere, and the important thing is that, as an artist, you have to believe in yourself. Within yourself, you have to believe you can do this, and then that can lead to opportunities. Then, you have to figure out your "why" for doing art. You have to stand strong in that. You have to be willing to identify as an artist and not allow anything to derail you from that. And also, it's okay to fail. I know that there's a lot of pressures in life. Making mistakes happen. Deaf Spotlight has made many mistakes, not always apparent to everybody. Sometimes, we didn't get the ticket prices correct, or there were things where our promotions didn't work out, or a project or an event didn't work out so well, and that's okay because the point was to learn and experiment.

[Kellie Martin] Yeah! Sure.

[Patty Liang] I want to encourage people to realize it's okay. You can learn from your mistakes. There's failure and experimenting. With experimenting, you don't have to stay with one genre or field your whole career. I allowed my art to go off in a different direction. You could maybe start with drawing and then maybe veer into fashion, design, or some other field. And it's okay for you to experiment. You never know! Experimenting can lead you to amazing ideas and it can help you improve your work. And I do think it's important- we work as individuals, but have your support system, your network, or maybe not necessarily a full network, but at least have good friends or family, people around to support you through the good times and the bad times. These are people that can remind you to keep going. If you believe in your art, you can do this for a lifetime because it is a lifetime journey. You're not going to become successful overnight. You have to be willing to weather this through anything.

[Kellie Martin] Yeah, that's such good advice. You are so right. Art is a lifetime journey. And through that journey, you arrive at places you never imagined yourself. Right? All your experiences are a benefit, and they culminate in your ultimate end knowledge of the place where you end up. Seeing your flow, your experience through all these different programs, you're managing this program, it all changes who you are and who you are as an artist. And it's just a beautiful, powerful journey.

[Patty Liang] Yes. When I was growing up- talking about role models- I hadn't seen any. In the end, I had to just do it for myself and test out things. I had to build my own path because I didn't have a role model to show me that way. There's no right or wrong answer there. I just had to do what worked for me and forge my own way. So now I hadn't been able to see my impact until I've looked back.

[Kellie Martin] Yeah, for sure!

[Patty Liang] I know now because Deaf Spotlight has been in operation for 13 years, I can see what impact we've had, but I also have to wait for the future to see what further impact we have. Any artist can make a living if they can succeed in art, but we have to build this for the future. I don't know. I don't know- I mean, hopefully, we see this come to fruition soon, but I believe that what I do is the good for everyone. I want to see people succeed.

[Kellie Martin] Yeah, I think that that is so relatable for so many artists out there, that experience of working on your own, waiting for that breakthrough or that opportunity. It can be a really tough and a lonely battle. You can have a really great external support system like you're

talking about but still struggle with that internal doubt about fear of failure. Strong systemic support is really key for artists with disabilities because society is not designed for us. We have to build it ourselves, and then we have to offer that for our next generation of creative people.

[Patty Liang] Yeah!

[Kellie Martin] Well, wow! Thank you so much for all this information that you shared with us. Did you have anything else to add before we close?

[Patty Liang] Yeah, sure. I just wanted to- one last thing. I was on a panel last week, and the question came up: what was my vision for the world? What's my future vision? I was thinking about taking down barriers in many arenas allowing deaf people to run for political positions, for political office. People need to allow us to thrive. We need free education. We need a good quality of life. Things need to be safe. We need to have free access to health care. In the disability community would have to pay more for their own care, which makes no sense. So my hope is disabled people, for disabled artists, can live in a world where it's open and accessible, whether it's museums, or other spaces. I mean, in person, I know there are remote options, but there's so much out there in the world to see and taste and smell.

Right now, there's too many barriers. Right now, this whole system, people have to believe that disabled people should not have to fight for all of these things. People may become disabled themselves, whether it's temporarily or permanently, and people should have more compassion and understanding. It just doesn't make any sense to me that we don't have that. So that is my vision for the future one day.

[Kellie Martin] It makes me think about when I talk about traveling outside the US and experiencing different cultures through food and visual means- people think that experiencing other culture is often about music, they listen to podcasts, a radio, other oral means, but for deaf people and people with other disabilities, we have to get out. We have to have different kinds of sensory experiences. For deaf folks, a lot of times, the music, the song of a culture, is the visual experience for us when we arrive, the things that we see passing through our eyes, the smells, the tastes. For deaf-blind folks, it's the tactile experience. They have to be there. They have to touch the place, the plants, touch the art in the museums. If you're traveling in a wheelchair in older countries, it's often really difficult for folks with mobility disabilities to get around.

[Patty Liang] Definitely.

[Kellie Martin] Yeah, there are so many different ways of accessing creative inspiration. It doesn't just fit into a one-size-fits-all box. I keep remembering that one of my study abroad professors this past fall said that deaf people tend to need to have this immersive experience in a country to really integrate it and that it is a creative experience. It really rang true for me, having just been abroad and feeling myself integrate that experience and a new style from that experience. It helped me break out of my own box. We often do need to get out there and experience it. So many deaf, deaf-blind, deaf-disabled artists don't ever get to have that. It's really unfortunate.

[Patty Liang] Yeah. Well, hopefully, one day, we'll see a shift where everyone has equal opportunity and experiences.

[Kellie Martin] Yeah! Great. Well, thank you so much. I think we're going to wrap that up here. It's been such a wonderful discussion about the concerns and challenges of leading an arts organization as well as your own individual journey and about your dreams and goals for the next generation of deaf, deaf-blind, deaf-disabled, and disabled artists of the future.

Thank you so much for sharing your knowledge and your experience with us, Patty, and thank you to the interpreters!

[Outro music by Sebastian Batista starts]

[Dr. Bernard] ABLE Voices is a production of the Berklee Institute for Accessible Arts Education, led by me, Dr. Rhoda Bernard, the founding managing director. It is produced by Daniel Martinez del Campo.

[Outro music ends]

The introduction music is by Kai Levin, and our closing song is by Sebastian Batista. Kai and Sebastian are students in the arts education programs at the Berklee Institute for Accessible Arts Education.

If you would like to learn more about our work, you can find us online at berkee.edu/slash-B-I-A-A-E or email us at B-I-A-A-E at Berklee, that's L-E-E.edu.