

# That's Inclusive!

## Episode 8 Transcript

**Episode title: Ableism and Inspiration Porn**

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That's Inclusive! hosts Isadora, Patricia and Vanessa discuss inspiration porn. What it is, how we identify it, how it distracts from addressing real barriers, and how it needs to go away.

Welcome to That's Inclusive! Where we talk about disability and what it means to live a full life, engaging in our communities.

What does that look like? And how can we work together to make our world a more inclusive place?

VB: Hi everybody. Welcome to That's Inclusive! We have a fun filled day today. We actually have all three of our hosts in the room: Isadora Rodriguez-Legendre, Trisha Vincent-Piet (TVP) and myself, Vanessa Blais (VB). And we're here today to talk about inspiration porn.

IRL: The first question is – what is that?

TVP: Inspiration porn is the portrayal of people with disabilities or other uncommon life experiences that have been inspirational to able bodied people or other common referenced groups on the basis of their life experience. The term inspiration porn is by analogy with pornography in that the material is perceived as objectifying disabled people for the benefit or gratification of able bodied people. That's the official Wikipedia definition. Thank you Stella Young.

VB: I'm glad that you brought her up because she was actually the introduction for me to the term inspiration porn. Actually, I was talking with someone, Deodonne, who used to be a Council member, and is now with the Disability Rights Center, and we were talking about inspiration porn but I didn't have that language yet. And so she said, you have to watch this woman, Stella Young, and

she has a YouTube video, which I will post in the show notes for anybody to watch, and that was the first time that I realized that there was actually a term about that weird icky feeling that I would get when I would see certain things that other people just said I'm just cold hearted and cynical so that's why I can't like those things. But I knew there was something deep down inside that was telling me there was something icky about it.

TVP: Right. I'm the same way. I hate it. I knew, even the kids, I hated seeing people with disabilities put up on stage and told – you can overcome your disability- and I would go, no. I have a disability and I need people to help me. It was so great to have a term put to it.

IRL: Yah, the example that I always think about is singing competitions like America's Got Talent. And there would always be the person with the disability featured as just that much more inspirational because it was perhaps a deaf person who could sing really well. None of the other contestants got the same kind of recognition for their singing talent because they didn't have a disability. And so, for me, I didn't have a language yet on what that was but it was why, just because they have a functional difference are they highlighted as being special or especially noteworthy for their talent.

TVP: And that their voice is somehow so much better than everyone else's because they can't hear? It doesn't make any sense. Except for when you consider that doing that brings more viewers and more money to--

IRL: Right. Which kind of brings us to another part of inspiration porn is the fact that some organizations will profit off of highlighting people with disabilities or people with other lived experiences that are different from other people as being inspirational and then using that as a tool to either raise funds or make money. Like I always think about the Jerry Lewis Telethon—I hate to bring it up, it's such a sad spot in our history – where the intentions were good, but kind of how things went about that were all wrong.

TVP: It de-humanizes and objectifies people. Like when Jim and I go out and someone ultimately has to stop and say, oh it's so great to see you out. As if we're there to entertain them.

IRL: Or that you're usually locked in a cage somewhere.

TVP: As if we have somehow beaten back our captors! And emerged victorious!

VB: Who doesn't like to feel warm and fuzzy inside? Who doesn't like to have that good feeling? And it's kind of like a really easy way for people to get that shot of that feeling. It's not malicious, necessarily. I think that when we talk about it and we introduce that idea to people, I think what is really difficult is for people to kind of like put that aside, their presumption of there's nothing wrong with feeling that way and maybe look a little deeper into why do I feel that way and how is it affecting other people.

TVP: I have people tell me that I inspire them, especially in my gym. I always ask, what do you mean by that? I inspire you to do what? Because other people inspire me, right. People at the gym classy athlete. It's a little more comfortable for me to be there. Sometimes it feels like people say that because they feel like they need to say something. When you see people with disabilities, you can just ignore us. That's ok.

VB: I want to talk a little bit about the idea of using inspiration porn in a way that you create circumstances that are separate yet "equal".

IRL: Wasn't there a court case about that?

VB: Yes, there were a couple actually. But how, like you said, that there's entities that profit from it, whether it's fundraising or for-profit, and they will have certain events or do certain things and, I'm going to use Special Olympics as an example of that. They've been around for a long time, they can take it. They can take the hit. The idea that they created a separate but equal competition and now that our society is being introduced to this idea of what inspiration porn is and how it's actually damaging to people with disabilities. Like it's hard to get

people to understand that even though they've been in the business for a long time, and yes, they did some really great things, it's not throwing the baby out with the bathwater. We're not telling people they're terrible. But it's time to get people to motivate themselves to change their model and get away from that concept and still be able to do good things for the disability community. But how would you go to a place like Special Olympics and be like, you have to change your model.

TVP: Right. After starting how many years ago? One thing I noticed, I forget if it was this year, but Good Morning America one of the shows was featuring Special Olympians on their show. They don't usually do that. It was allegedly a huge step forward. And the way the interviewer was talking to the individuals, would you talk to a regular athlete like you're talking to this person? You wouldn't. So, don't do that.

VB: Would you talk to Bode Miller that way?

TVP: Right. Right. Obviously on a network TV show for profit, they're making money off having individuals, adult individuals, that they're talking to like children. And everyone is applauding it.

IRL: Yeh, that's definitely a problem. I always like to say that most people are not athletes, are not champions, and are certainly not Olympians, right? So, I think that part of the issue is that the model really is putting people with disabilities in situations where they are treated like Olympians. It's really great that they are doing things that they love and that they're participating in athletic sports and things like that, but it's because we don't have community inclusion for those folks that this separate event exists. If we had more integrated sports teams, more universal sports teams, more community based activities where the expectation was that anyone from that community could participate, whether it's bowling or golf or knitting or whatever it is, then we wouldn't need this kind of special place where people with disabilities can be athletic. Because it would just be part of community-based life.

TVP: Right. And I think when a show has Special Olympic athletes on the show, they claim that it's normalizing it, but in a way it's actually doing the opposite. It's not normalizing it because you're not treating it as a typical sporting event. It's treating it as something abnormal.

VB: First of all, you're referring to them Special Olympic athletes. Why not just call them Olympians? Because they win Olympic medals. Or athletes? But there's a lot of opportunities for these entities to learn about ableism and learn about inspiration porn. There's plenty of people with disabilities who are out there who are talking about it. And there's trainings being developed. There's a lot of opportunities for people to be able to reframe how they see this and how they might want to change the way that they do things. But the hard part is giving up that warm and fuzzy feeling. Because when things are normal, now I don't have anything to "inspire" me.

TVP: It's a very addictive feeling. And it sells, in a clickbait society. Inspiration porn is very clickbaity.

VB: It probably sells a lot of advertising.

TVP: Oh yeah. Tons.

IRL: Thinking about how, just piggybacking on the conversation, what our role is in our own communities, in our own society, to really encourage and support the expectation that people with disabilities should be included. And then it's not so inspirational. We can be inspired by a sunrise. Or working out hard at the gym. Sometimes I watch kitten or puppy videos and those give me warm and fuzzy feelings without exploiting or putting a person that has functional differences or a different life experience in a position where they are placed on this pedestal merely because they have that difference. And oh, look what they can do, when they're living life on life's terms like the rest of us. They should just be, and I use the word celebrated, because in my community I feel like we celebrate each other on a daily basis just for getting through the day. You didn't hurt anybody. You weren't mean when the cashier gave you a dirty look. And that to me is, for me, celebration worthy. And so I really think that part of the problem systematically is

that we have been accustomed to just to not have that true, authentic inclusion. And so it becomes this special thing. And we use that word throughout this podcast. We're talking about how problematic even just using the word 'special' is because really somebody who is living life on life's terms, whatever their similarities or differences are, shouldn't be deemed as special. It's not something to continue to perpetuate this exclusion.

TVP: It's when it's obviously for the benefit of people who don't experience things. We can inspire each other. It's part of my difficulty at the gym. People who are close to me. I like to be inspired or I don't get my butt out of bed and go to the gym. I need to know that somebody's going to be there that I can hang out and laugh with. But it's not the same as me putting someone who's not like me on a pedestal for my own gratification.

VB: When I try to explain to some people what inspiration porn is, I always say it's like the sideshow concept. If you know the history of the sideshows, they claimed that they were giving these people a better life. What would happen to them if we didn't put them on a box and sell tickets for people to come by and mock them? If you think of it that way, it's a little bit easier for people to understand. It's objectifying people with disabilities and it's harmful to them. It's not helping them. I think that's another message that needs to be loud and clear to certain entities, organizations, businesses.

TVP: You can feature people with disabilities in advertisements. You can show that you made your product more accessible by having someone with a disability demonstrate that accessibility. That is not inspiration porn. That's just getting the information out. That's not trying to gratify someone who doesn't have a disability.

VB: In my opinion, I think Hollywood is doing a great job of being inclusive, especially with characters with disabilities. I've noticed more and more that I'll be watching a movie or a series and I'll notice that a character has a disability and then I'll notice, cause we're sensitive to these things, I'll notice that it's never really mentioned or not used as a source of inspiration. It might be part of the story—

IRL: Yah, like it's just a family member who just happens to..

TVP: If you're using the disability as a plot device, that is inspiration porn. If the disability exists within the larger narrative and it's just there, then that's inclusion.

IRL: It's not always clear cut and we also want to get that message across. That not everyone is going to be perfect every time, and not everyone is going to catch on as quickly as other people. We all just have to try to do better and try to do our best in really kind of dispelling this concept, this inspiration porn, when we see it and when we realize it made me feel a certain way. I think that that's what this is and I'm going to call this out or I'm going to, I always like to provide education, teaching moments if you will. Where we can say, it's not appropriate to clap for someone just because they're a person with a disability who graduated from college. You wouldn't do that for someone else who graduated from college. It's appropriate to recognize that they got a college degree and to normalize that for lack of a better phrase.

TVP: What I like to do is I look at something and think, if this person didn't have that disability, would this work? And if it wouldn't work without the disability, and it's not always inspiration porn, but I need to look more closely.

IRL: We need to really just grab on to the concept that disability is a natural part of human existence and that we all potentially could experience a disability at any point in time and how would we want to be included or treated if we were just trying to live one day at a time. And some was like – good job!—

TVP: When you're just out for dinner with your husband for a romantic evening and somebody comes along and says "God bless you" and you have to say, well I'm an atheist.

VB: Or, someone we know very well, uses a pretty good example of when she talks about how her son, who has Down Syndrome, will be walking down the street holding his girlfriend's hand, and people will be like "oh, that's so sweet".

And then she'll say, if my other son were walking down the street holding his girlfriend's hand, would you even notice?

IRL: It would just be a thing that people do.

TVP: It's just what people do. You don't need to comment. It's fine.

VB: Or make a show out of it.

TVP: It's not about you. It's not about how you feel about the situation.

VB: So any last comments Isadora?

IRL: I can't think of any right now. Come back to me.

VB: I should mention that this is Pat's second podcast today.

IRL: She's a busy lady.

TVP: Not usually, but today's been a busy day.

IRL: I think that one of the things that the DD Council does is to try to communicate that community inclusion is all of our responsibility. That we need to be willing to maybe be the first person to say hey, why aren't there people with disabilities at this bowling group or at this community center or at this event, this gala. And bring that to light and really take on the role, a leadership role, in educating people about how to make spaces more inclusive, more welcoming for all people. Especially for people with disabilities that may have functional differences who may need ASL interpreters, they may need ramps available. I'm always shocked at how little thought goes into accessibility for different types of community events. Now it's like, oh hey, let me point this out to you. But, I know it's not intentional and I know that you are really trying but you inadvertently are excluding people by not having the availability of these things.



VB: And also, don't let inspiration porn distract you from recognizing the barriers that people have to doing normal things.

IRL: Don't believe the hype! Don't get wrapped up in the warm and fuzzies. Watch some kitten videos!

VB: Thanks for coming ladies. It was good to talk with you. Like I said, I'll put some references into the show notes. I'd also like to invite anybody who wants to come to the DD Council and talk to us about inspiration porn and how to eliminate ableism before Isadora and I retire.

[retirement banter]

IRL: I just want to say, it's really great to have this platform to really talk about community inclusion. If anyone thinks of another topic that you think would be important for us to discuss, please feel free to reach out to us.

VB: Thank you for joining us today. I'm Vanessa Blais and this was a production of the New Hampshire Council on Developmental Disabilities produced by Isadora Rodriguez, Legendre, and Vanessa Blais with many thanks to Josh Hardy and rest of the crew here at Concord TV.

We love to have guests with differing perspectives. These are personal, and do not necessarily represent those of the DD Council.