

NARRATOR:

The Disability & Philanthropy Forum presents Jen White-Johnson, disabled artist, designer, educator, and activist.

JEN WHITE-JOHNSON:

I did struggle in school with staying quiet and simmering down and I would get pulled out of class and I would get reprimanded for talking a lot. But I grew up in a very supportive household that allowed for me to be joyful and to express that individuality. I didn't even really grow up thinking that ADHD was a disability until my son was diagnosed as autistic and also having ADHD. It wasn't until I started to notice a lot of really beautiful and wild similarities between me and my child, that I started to recognize how uncomfortable I was with the way that black and brown disabled folks and neuro divergent folks are viewed in the media, in visual culture, in the school system, K-12 and also in higher education.

I started to get really uncomfortable with how much joy was left out of the conversation and how rooted in ableism it was, and how rooted in sadness in the charity model of disability that we have to eradicate and cure this neuro divergent soul, and how we have to fix them, and how we have to, basically heal them. I was like, this isn't the language that was preached in my household, and I'm not going to preach it to my son as he's growing up. And becoming introduced to autism culture, autism activism, culture. I just felt I wasn't really seeing a lot of that community really amplified and really celebrated through art, through photography, through graphic design, which are a lot of the things that I really love to use to just talk about disability and to uplift disability.

I was very busy advocating for my son who was diagnosed at two years old. And I was like, okay, how do we move forward? How do we continue to express to him that he's a great kid and that he's going to continue to be amazing? My ADHD started to become a lot more pronounced as I struggled with executive functioning, mothering, being a full time college professor, which is something that is very rare among Afro Latina women being able to teach and mother and all of that under the helm of neuro divergency. I struggled a lot. I struggled a lot and I was very micromanaged at times. I was stigmatized. I was, don't talk about your disability. Don't talk about some of the things that are very personal to you.

Don't share with your students that you have a disability, don't share with administration. And I was like, I don't want to continue to live my life under this umbrella of ableism, under this umbrella of stigma, especially if I'm really trying to emote acceptance and joy to my son, I'm going to have to start flipping that narrative and that script within myself. And art activism and design really became a way for me to just channel all of what I wasn't seeing and to use that to give it, to share it, to not create disability justice, art and creativity in a silo, but to share it and to amplify it.

NARRATOR:

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