

Justice:

Greetings, good people and welcome to this celebratory edition of Disability Inclusion: Required, as we commemorate 100 years of what originated as Negro History Week and ultimately blossomed into Black History Month. I am your host, justice Shorter, and this is a time for remembrance, reclamation, re-imagination, and communal relationships.

Today on the pod, we are passing the mic over to Black disabled creatives and movement leaders. I urge you to listen all the way through. Each dispatch brims with beautiful insights, not only for those within philanthropy, but for all of us with a vested interest in building beloved community.

Marq Mitchell, the founder of Chainless Change, is fighting like hell for the liberation of our people, he says. Marq believes his most valuable lessons came from his personal experiences with being a Black man in America and overcoming the barriers associated with his history of behavioral health conditions, incarceration and poverty. To Marq recovery is a lifelong journey built upon both self-sufficiency and access to community. Marq, kick us all.

Marq:

I'd become known as the person that you could count on, the person who would always show up, someone who carried a vision and will continue to work diligently until it was actualized. As the leader of a local nonprofit, I often had to wear multiple hats, fundraiser, strategist, organizer, who's willing to fight like hell for the liberation of our people. There were constant crises, this endless sense of urgency that I'd become familiar with just due to the nature of the work. But around February of 2025, it became different. There was a palpable difference.

Everything seemed to be anti-Black. Everything felt like a personal attack against my very existence. We were in a climate where funding for programs aimed at serving vulnerable populations was being slashed and taken away overnight. There was constant anti-Black, anti-disability, anti-LGBT rhetoric floating around us day in and day out. And despite feeling tired, I also felt responsible. Because if I don't show up, if I don't fight, then who will? Who's going to do it? Especially at a time like this.

As I look back, I can see how that sense of responsibility and that sense of obligation can actually lead to a sense of self-eraser. But that's a different story For a different day, gradually things started to change. There isn't a specific incident that I can identify as a breaking point, and I'm not able to tell you what day it actually happened or identify the moment that it actually happened. But things changed. One day my body stopped cooperating. My nervous system was dysregulated. I couldn't continue to show up. I could barely respond to emails or muster up the energy to even be present.

Sometimes it was difficult to make decisions and Lord, heaven knows that I was not showing up as the person that everyone expected me to be. I wasn't being dramatic, I wasn't being lazy. I was unwell. And I was also overwhelmed and reminded that mental health is a disability, nervous system injury is disability, trauma accumulation is disability. And for the past nine years, I'd endured all of that and kept pushing forward. But now my capacity was maybe a 10 or a 20 on a good day. I felt embarrassed.

I questioned if I should lead, and I wondered if I had damaged stress simply because I could not show up in the way that people expected. Then it clicked. The same systems that we identify as violent, we sometimes reproduce them within ourselves. The constant productivity, the lack of accommodation, the lack of rest. I was living inside of ableism in many ways. And ableism is deeply, deeply racialized because Black leaders are expected to endure, to absorb, to be strong, and to just show up. And while some might think that I was collapsing under pressure, I was actually being reminded that disability justice isn't ramps.

It isn't just paperwork. It isn't just accessibility to wheelchair. It's also understanding fluctuating capacity. Building interdependence instead of individual heroism and taking the time to pause and honoring your nervous system and taking the time to design society in ways that works for all humanity. And it is

disability justice that reminded me that I wasn't broken, I wasn't collapsing. In fact, I was responding normally to abnormal conditions and pressure. And it is this experience that changed and is continuing to change the way that I show up as a leader. It taught me how to protect our team's capacity and to normalize stepping away.

It reminded me that we needed to spend more time building infrastructure instead of martyrdom. And that what may feel like a realistic timeline for me may not be the same for everyone else. And so instead of being rigid, to be flexible, to be nimble, to be understanding, to be empathetic, to be more compassionate. I also learned that leadership isn't measured by how much pressure we absorb, but instead how we're designing spaces so that people don't actually collapse. Because after all, we need organizations and movements that do not require our breakdown to demonstrate our commitment.

Justice:

Powerful words from Marq Mitchell. Now let's toss the mic over to Heather Watkins, who shares reflections about the importance of knowing and grounding in your radius of impact. Heather Watkins is a Boston-based disability rights activist, author, mother, peer researcher, and consultant born with a form of muscular dystrophy. She loves reading, daydreaming, documentaries and chocolate. Learn more about Heather on her website, slowwalkerseemore.com. Here's Heather.

Heather:

So as a Black disabled person working in advocacy, what I think grounds my liberatory process and service is thinking beyond the box of self, thinking intricate, extending from the personal to folks in proximity like family and friends, then having it spiral out to the wider, broader community. That allows me to visualize the radius, the impact to myself first by taking periodic inventory, doing an internal deep dive, assessing what works, what needs to be cast out in terms of antiquated systems, belief systems, antiquated belief systems, stressful habits, lack of insight and knowledge gaps.

When I show up as an enhanced version of myself that has taken time to pour into me, those people who are in proximity are generally impacted in more beneficial ways. And then they may go on and out into the world interacting with others, having carried the energy from our exchange, from whatever capacity that may be. And I think of how that can get replicated, go on and on, and have a far-reaching impact. That's empowering. And the responsibility of leadership is service first, and that's an honor.

I don't take that lightly in power roles, as a parent, caregiver, writer, speaker, consultant, in my advocacy work. That may sound heavy, but there's a dance and a delicate balance from what feels like staccato struts instead of smooth steps. That dance is the joy. It's the joy of being in community with like-minded others, working in collective effort toward beneficial change and progress, from the local community to cosmopolitan in a cosmological sense, gives an access point, a mapping if you will, and movability when you feel like you're spinning in place.

In that regard, it's leaning on elder wisdom and downloading insight from ancestors. That's an exhale when it all feels like there are no handoffs and you have a full plate. It's like breathing between the extensions and because of the connections. And that's liberating. That's part of a liberatory process where you can reflect, you can relate, and you can take the necessary time. Because it is heavy, it gets to be a lot. And you have to juggle not only your self-care, you being in care, in need of care and caregiving and community building all at once.

And so if you take time, listen to your body and what it needs, you are better able to relate to the world around you. And I know that's easier said than done, but sometimes the time that you take might be a little more that week, that day, or might be a little less. And so you get really good at saying no or trying to minimize the stress so that you can breathe easier, you can think clearer. You get good at evaluating where you are going next and how your life is shaping up and how your self-awareness is being shaped.

And I find that this helps sharpen my own advocacy skills. I've seen it take place over the last 20 years by just slowing down and seeing what's next for me. Some things get taken off the plate. There's been times when there's been a lot added and I had to just take the time to renew my strength, my energy, my spirit. Because it can get really heavy and it's not for the faint of heart. And we have to remember that we're people too. We're humans and we have sensitivity levels that need balancing. There's things that happen in the world that maybe you're not surprised by, but you don't want to get desensitized.

I don't want to lose sight that at the end of the day I'm human. So I might cry, I might be emotional, I might be overwhelmed by things, and that's okay. What's not okay is not taking care of me so that I can catch my breath, so that I can rest my bones, my muscles, recover my peace of mind as best I can. And I find that all of these things help my laboratory process because I've pouring into myself, putting me first so that the next part of that equation also gets to benefit as well. So yeah, so just to give an idea of what that looks like for me as a Black disabled person working in advocacy, what that looks like, what my liberatory process looks like, and how it gets balanced in my advocacy work.

Justice:

Listening to Heather always reminds me that we must care for the care bearers because in true community, we all bear the responsibility of loving and caring not only for ourselves but for one another. Next up we have Natasha Nelson, Natasha, also known as Supernova Momma is the founder and CEO of Supernova Parenting Foundation, a nationally recognized nonprofit advancing disability, social justice, and empowering caregivers in communities of color, a highly decorated US army veteran and credentialed educator.

Natasha is known for her neuroaffirming solution-focused approaches. As a neurodivergent individual and mother of two autistic daughters, she brings both personal insight and professional expertise to her advocacy for disability, neurodiversity and mental health nationwide. Here's Natasha speaking so profoundly about working with Black families of children with disabilities. She explains how the ways in which we parent, nurture and love gives children their first glimpse into what liberation can actually look like. Natasha, over to you.

Natasha:

I knew that this was the work that I wanted to do, that I needed to do during one of my nine-week courses. So I provide a nine-week virtual Supernova Parenting course, usually specifically for families of color that are navigating autism, ADHD, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder, those things, depression with positive discipline and how do you incorporate that in their households along with understanding the diagnosis and how to support. And around week seven, I had a Black father of an autistic child who had a breakthrough. And what he said to me was, "you know, Natasha, I think that I get it."

And I said, "Get what? I love to hear from my parents, and I'm sure that the other parents will be very grateful to hear what you think you get because it might give them a moment." And he said, "I get that there are alternatives to whipping and yelling at my child to still get them to have discipline and routine and good character in their lives." And for me, that little moment is why I do every bit of this.

It's getting a Black family, mother, father, grandma, auntie, cousin, to realize that one, autism is very real and it does affect the back of community. Two, that autism truly is a spectrum and that it will look different on every child, every person, that autism is not just a child disorder and that it follows this person while they're a teen, while they're a young adult, while they're an old adult.

And then finally, to understand that discipline does not just mean corporal punishment or just punishment. That discipline means teaching, educating, supporting, and sometimes doing things with others, showing from social learning theory. And so my work, I believe in the realm of the social justice dynamic is to start in the homes. Children are truly our future and we as parents and caregivers and villagers of these

children are their first image and glimpse of what liberation could look like, of what social justice and reform can look like.

And that starts in how we parent, nurture and love and educate and guide and discipline these children. And so my work in my lens and my perspective, my purpose is in teaching parents in the homes, acceptance and awareness of neurodivergence, of a different way of brains wiring and thinking, and acceptance and awareness of disability in Black homes.

And then an acceptance and awareness of the possibility of positive discipline, of discipline that does not contain punishment and corporal punishment, of discipline that has everything to do with thinking about what you're teaching someone, thinking about the life skills and characteristics you want that person to have, and modeling that and implying that and enforcing that in ways outside of yelling and corporal punishment. So I love what I do. I love what I do for my community. I love... I won't say I love being disabled. It is a challenge, but I love the fact that my disability allows me to share my life's experiences when I am teaching these families. I do love that.

Justice:

We close this episode with a phenomenal and poetic reflection from Mel Brown. Mel is a practicing artist and Black social worker who co-founded Deep Space Mind 215, which is a Black queer-led, Philadelphia-based mental health and wellness co-op.

DSM 215 seeks to invest in creating local responsive community-grown meta-systems, revisioning Black psycho-education that reconstitutes ancestral and indigenous knowledge as common knowledge. Mel does this work while centering the genius of mad Black people. Here's Mel reminding us all that collector survival and insists on leaning into each other.

Mel:

A reflection as an offering. Each day I have a newfound respect and homage for the years of unlearning the myth of strict self-dependence, understanding it as a way of being that upholds individualism, a disconnect that brings with it isolation, leading us to believe that we somehow aren't responsible for our neighbors. As a Black disabled leader, I understand myself through interdependence and connectedness to my community, to nature and the environment. There are countless times that when I share my experience of disability institutionalization, someone hears it and sees themselves, a true reflection.

And the same goes for me whenever we hold spaces for witnessing, being vulnerable. Today I understand it as a privilege to convene, to dream together. It reminds me of this meme that is a person reaching out and the caption says, "Here, take my hand. Let's unlearn shame together." Being seen no matter how uncomfortable at times it may feel, has saved me from dark nights of the soul. On summer nights gathering in the garden, we sit in circles, fireflies twinkle. We listen to the wisdom of elders share so freely matters of the heart.

We laugh, savor the sweetness of figs from the overgrown fig tree, home to nesting nightingales. We pour libations for the long-gone neighbors, freedom fighters, keepers of our shared history, leaving us their lessons. We welcome youth arriving on their bicycles with so many questions. They are proof that we will survive. In the 20 years of organizing care with folks who are mad and Black like me, I've found the boundaries at my fingertips of where I begin and you end.

There's relief in knowing that before me there were others, and one day I too will enter the infinite fold as an ancestor. The time comes at the end of the circle where we leave each other's sides, remembering when we do find ourselves alone that we did not come this far by ourselves. We need not go it alone. Our collective survival insists on leaning into each other, not just when times are hard, but also to rejoice because radical determination requires that of us.

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Justice:

If you want to keep your learning journey going, visit the Disability and Philanthropy forum at disabilityphilanthropy.org. I'm Justice Shorter, and this has been another episode of Disability Inclusion: Required. Thanks so much for tuning in and join us again next time.