Justice Shorter:

Greetings, good people, and welcome back to Disability Inclusion Required. I am your host, Justice Shorter. Listen, for those of us in the trenches of trying to bring about transformative changes, we know that the attacks on diversity, equity, justice, and inclusion are not new, but they are being repackaged in the form of executive orders, legal setbacks on critical issues such as voting rights and of course massive funding cuts for organizations serving communities of color. A recent study released by the nonprofit research service Candid and black philanthropic group ABFE highlights with profound precision how funding promises made during racial uprisings have failed to materialize or be sustained for black led and black serving organizations. Here's what they found. Black led nonprofits are less likely to be funded, especially smaller black led nonprofits. Across eight years of data, only half of black led nonprofits on average received a foundation grant compared to 70% received by white led nonprofits. And when they did, they received fewer awards. Smaller black led nonprofits were the most likely to receive no foundation funding at all. The study uncovered that post 2020 private foundation grant making was uneven temporary. Although more foundations began supporting black led nonprofits during the racial justice uprisings, most of that increased funding flowed to a small group of large organizations between 2020 and 2022, followed by a steep decline in 2023.

Lastly, the study confirmed that many funder relationships remain transactional rather than transformative. And those who listen to the pod will know we've been talking about this for quite a bit. They say that black nonprofit leaders report persistent barriers to building long-term partnerships, including limited access to networks, little feedback on rejected proposals and discriminatory double standards that undermine trust overall. Today on the pod, we're in conversation with Dr. Sami Schalk about these very issues, the most recent wave of anti DEI attacks and the ways communities are seeking out pleasure as a means of activism, safety and survival.

Dr. Schalk is a professor of gender and women's studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is the author of Bodyminds Reimagined and Black Disability Politics, both available open access from Duke University Press. Currently, Dr. Schalk is working on two new books that center pleasure activism and pleasure spaces for marginalized people. Let's get into it. Dr. Schalk, thank you so much for joining us. How are you doing today?

Dr. Sami Schalk:

I'm doing pretty well. We've got our first 80 degree day in Madison of the year this weekend and I feel like a whole new person.

Justice Shorter:

Come on. Come on. The heat'll do it to you, won't it?

Dr. Sami Schalk:

Yes.

Justice Shorter:

The he will activate something in the body. Well, with that being said, before we even kick off with the more formalized part of today's conversation, I just want to ask you if you would be so kind to tell the people, what are you made of? That's how I want to open today's conversation. Tell us what you're made of, Dr. Schalk. What's your response to that?

Dr. Sami Schalk:

Yes. My first thought is so much glitter. I'm made of so much glitter and magic and stardust and poetry and black feminist love. I just feel like who I have become is so influenced by creative, artistic, brilliant black women. And that feels like at the core of it. Yeah.

Justice Shorter:

Yeah. Let me just ask you, you want to pull that thread a little bit more? If there are any black, disabled or just black creative, black women creatives that you want to shout out or just work that feeds you, infuse you? Anything that you would recommend our listeners check out?

Dr. Sami Schalk:

Oh my gosh, a hundred percent. Well, Audre Lorde is literally all over my house. I have pictures and quotes. Yeah. Audre Lorde lives deep in my soul. But then also the work of Octavia Butler and the way that she dreams different futures for us as black folks and black women. The work of Bell Hooks lately, I've been coming back to her love series. Has been really important for me in coming to understand what I deserve in this life. And then more contemporarily, I think about Jesmyn Ward, her work ... Works of Fiction. And Adrienne Maree Brown, Alexis Pauline Gumbs. Yeah. Those are the folks that I think I'm really feeling. Janelle Monáe is perfect. I really enjoy everything just as a multi-hyphenate creative, everything that they do in terms of acting and music. They have a book of short stories that are set in the world. The future, like a sci-fi world, their brain is incredible. So yeah, those are some of the many.

Justice Shorter:

No. And all of those are stellar recommendations. I'm going to point people towards Alexis Pauline Gumbs book, Survival is a Promise, which is all about Audre Lorde, her life, her work, her liberatory practice. And if you are looking for something wonderful to delve into for a early summertime read, I would say go ahead and download that book or go to your nearest local bookstore and grab it. It's wonderful. Well, Dr. Schalk, I'm so happy that you've joined us. I want to get us started and I want you to share with us a few examples about how disabled lives have been irrevocably changed as a result of anti DEI policies. Today, as you know, we're talking all about anti-DEI attacks that have been happening all across the country and how that has also had a global imprint. But I'm just wondering ... Let's zoom into disabled folks in particular, any examples or stories that you want to share as we start that humanizes this a little bit.

Dr. Sami Schalk:

Yes. Absolutely. I think the first thing that I want to highlight is that anti-DEI policies did not start two years ago. I think we are seeing the explosion of this moment, but this has been ongoing for those of us working in public spaces, educational spaces for a very long time. And so I think for me in terms of my work is in higher ed, so that's where I think I see things sometimes the most, but it starts with the lack of accommodation policies as we returned from lockdown. That was the first time that we saw these anti-DEI, meaning anti-accommodation, anti-disabled folks policies, this explosion of the idea that, well, if you keep working from home, people are going to be lazy, they're going to take care of their kids, they're going to eat meals, they're going to do all these things. But we know that disabled folks were most aggressively impacted by that and forced out of certain kinds of work context by the forcible return to workspaces that were not COVID cautious, that were not making sure that they had air purifiers or masking or any other precautions to protect folks. And so I think that's in our recent memory, one of the times that I think it really changed a lot of lives because it literally forced people out of the workplace in a moment where then the job market was already bad.

And so we have more and more unemployed disabled folks because of the lack of accommodations and the return to the workplace and to the office, which I think most folks don't think of as anti DEI, but that's

what that is. When I think of anti DEI, it's not just formal policies, but it is all the ways that policies are meant to control and limit marginalized populations or empower us. I also think that a lot of folks ... White disabled folks, thought that it wasn't going to impact them, but we know that white women are often the ones that most benefit from DEI hiring policies, for example. And so I think folks were surprised when some of the DEI cuts that were happening were actually things associated with disability and accommodations, affinity spaces, things that folks thought it wouldn't necessarily impact disabled communities because of the fact that there is the ADA. But I'm like, "You think these people care about the ADA?" It's already the bare minimum. And so I think that surprised folks.

So for example, where I work, the UW system, University of Wisconsin, the state legislator, the GOP, put out a list of jobs within the University of Wisconsin system that they considered DEI jobs. And while they could not as legislators cut those jobs, what they did instead was they cut the financial equivalent of those salaries. And some of those jobs on the list were ADA coordinator for campuses. So even though technically those jobs should be protected because institutions need to have people who can help them follow the ADA, the folks in power, all they see is the word disability, they associate it with diversity and they want that gone. And so I think that a lot of us have seen cuts to the kind of funding that we have available to us, the programming we have available to us and the jobs that we have available to us because of anti-DEI policies, even if that is not explicitly the way it's being framed.

Justice Shorter:

This all seems to come back every time to a conversation around worthiness and whether people with disabilities, whether black folk, whether LGBTQIA folk, whether other people of color are deemed worthy enough to have the same standards of care with respect to what you spoke about in terms of the pandemic response and the after effects of people losing so many of those accommodations that were made available, whether it had to do with the rationing of ventilators or medical supplies or spaces within critical care units, or whether it's this larger conversation around college campuses and what's happening in educational spaces and cutting of vital funding that is necessary to sustain people being able to show up in these spaces and have the support that they need to be in these spaces. So whether or not you are worthy of even being in these places to begin with is continuously called into question.

You mentioned working in higher education and I want to stay on college campuses for just a second here. So as a professor, how do you hold the line, especially when you're trying to teach from a place that is rooted in truth amid conditions that call for the cancellation and the banning of content that is deemed too woke or controversial or DEI? How do you hold the line? How do you stay steeped in truth?

Dr. Sami Schalk:

I love this question and it's coming at an interesting time for me because I was actually on sabbatical last year and this year I am on a fellowship and so I haven't taught in two years and how much things have changed in two years between the attacks on ethnic studies and gender studies and sexuality studies and just the rise of AI. I feel like the classroom is going to be completely different when I go back in the fall, but it's been on my mind a lot. And obviously I'm not just a professor, I'm a professor of gender and women's studies. I teach in a relatively large four gender and women's studies department and it's a conversation that we keep having to have. And so there's holding the line in the truth of ourselves way and then there's the how do we navigate inside of the institution?

So I'll start with the institutional navigation, which for me has been to really read policies closely. And so our policy is if something is related to course content to the learning goals and description of that class, it can be taught. And so you better believe I know how to connect everything back to my course content. I know how to talk about genocide in Gaza and connect that to disability justice because we know those things are connected. We know the intentional meming is part of the process of genocide. And so that's one of the things that I do is to really make sure that I know where the lines are so that I can walk right on that line and they can't say nothing to me. People can be mad, but it's not going to impact my job and I'm

willing to take the heat when I walk that line. So I think that's one thing in terms of navigating within institutions.I know that my colleagues who are in places like Texas and Florida where truly they are not allowed to use books that they would typically use. It's a whole other challenge. And I think that's where we come back to this rooted in truth inside of ourselves, not inside of these institutions.

And so for me, I think about the fact that gender and women's studies, disability studies, black studies, these things are not that old. And before they were institutionalized into these higher education spaces and inside of academic presses, folks were doing this education inside of communities. The Black Panthers were having reading groups where they would read political theory together and feminists were having consciousness raising groups. And so it's really important for me to remember in these moments that the education that I do does not have to happen inside of formal educational spaces. Being on podcasts can be a way to provide some education. And putting things on social media can educate people. There are ways that we can still get this information out there.

And although I am very much an academic, this has been my career for quite a while now, even though I never thought that it would be my career, it has worked out to be my career. I don't have a strong emotional attachment to being an academic and to being at an academic institution. It's not the way I identify. For me, I identify as a writer and an educator and an activist. And so academia has become a place where up until now I've been able to do those things, to write and to educate and to work towards change freely. And the less freely I can do that in this space, the more I start looking to where else I can do the work that matters to me. And so I hope that folks who are on these college campuses know that the work they're doing and the research that they do and the education that they provide is not lost once it's banned. It just has to shift spaces. It has to become something else. It has to go underground a little bit, but it won't be lost.

I think this also comes for me from being a fan of science fiction and being a fan of Octavia Butler and trying to think forward a little bit. And so recently I built a new built-in bookshelf in my house so that I could bring more of my political theory and black feminist theory and disability theory text home because I was like, 'You know what? I don't know that I trust that something won't happen to all these books in my work campus office. And so I want to make sure that they're in my home, that I can have them always available to me to share with people and to pass around because yeah, they are literally banning books in places and I want to make sure my books are in my home.

So yeah. I think that's how I try to hold on to my truth of who I am and what I came to do to quote Audre Lorde is that I remember that it can be done elsewhere. Yes, I have built a life and a career in this space, but I have done it because this space facilitated what I wanted to do and if this space no longer does it, I'll fight until it doesn't make sense to fight anymore. Let's be very clear. But once they make it impossible for me to do what I need to do here, I will go do it elsewhere and it might bring less money and it might be more challenging, but I'm committed to making sure that our history is not lost and that this knowledge that we've worked so hard to make clear to folks and the change that we've gained is not lost. Yeah.

Justice Shorter:

You bringing those books home is a form of preservation and protection of the things that you love and the things that pour into you every day. I think about the things ... We receive so many toxic messages and news alerts on a day-to-day basis that quite literally drain you of your life force. It feels like it demotivates you, it leaves you feeling deflated, but having ready access to those books and those texts I think is a form of self-protection and a form of preservation. I have to ask you ... I have a couple follow-ups, but let me just ask you this. If academia was not your initial plan, if you didn't see yourself doing academia, I have to ask you because I'm so curious, what did you see yourself doing when you were younger? Who was Sami Schalk going to be before she became Dr. Sami Schalk later on in life?

Dr. Sami Schalk:

A poet. I was always going to be a poet. I was writing poems for my Catholic Church newsletter when I was six, writing poems about God. I have always been a writer and particularly a poet. And so yeah, before I did my PhD, I got an MFA in creative writing and I wanted to write poetry and teach creative writing in nonprofit settings. So I used to work for an organization called Women Writing for a Change where I would teach writing classes for women and girls. I would teach writing summer camps. I used to teach creative writing in a domestic violence shelter, in a juvenile detention center. I really believe that writing and self-expression is a way to save yourself, especially when I didn't have access to therapy growing up, but writing and being able to put my words down, it really helped me with my mental health as a young adult and to feel, I don't know, like I could see myself and other people could see me through that writing. It felt very safe to do a safe place to put my thoughts and my feelings into words on the page.

I have seen the impact of being able to tell one story with other folks. And so that's what I thought I would do. And then it turns out it's really hard to be a poet and work for nonprofits and live in this country and survive. And so I thought that shifting to academia where there was more stability and security would allow me to still do a version of that. I still teach, I still get to write not as much poetry and creative writing as I used to, but I still do it. I actually teach a class here at UW Madison called Visionary and Speculative Fiction, where the final project is to write a social justice-based science fiction story. So I'm teaching both the social justice stuff and I'm teaching about writing in that class. So I still get to do those things in a different way. But yeah. I always just thought I would be writing poems and teaching creative writing to people who needed, wanted a space of self-expression. And I still think that if I could do that and live comfortably, it would be my greatest joy. Yeah.

Justice Shorter:

Avid listeners of the show will know that I have asked this question a few times to previous guests, but I would love to get your thoughts on it because you have spoken so beautifully about your connection and your love of words. But what are we to do when words that we have used to describe and embody and encompass our experiences are weaponized and turned against us? I think about how DEI became something dirty and in terms of how people use it. "Oh, was that DEI? Well, we shouldn't be using it." How the same thing was done to woke and how that has been canceled, how affirmative action very much in the same way, identity politics, how many of these words, these phrases, these concepts and terminology had initially been used to acknowledge and reclaim experiences connected to black folk in particular, people of color in general and how those have been turned against folks and individuals no longer using them in the same way, the very communities who they were initially designed or put in place to serve. Just your thoughts on that in general.

Dr. Sami Schalk:

Yeah. I think that that's how language works. Language changes. I think about something like the R word that was very common and then we worked really hard to get folks to stop using it, but it was at one point a medical terminology and then it got picked up to become a slur and then the medical terminology changed because of the way it was associated with negativity and insults. But words like idiot and imbecile also used to be terms to describe an IQ level for people. Language changes, people pick up terms and make them something else to suit their needs. And so it depends on the situation. If I'm in a situation where I'm talking to someone who uses a word like woke in a negative way, I ask what they mean. I ask questions because most of the time people can't explain what they mean. They say, "You know what I mean?" And I'm like, "I don't. I know what I mean when I say or hear that. What do you mean?" So I do like to ask folks to explain themselves. And often folks get angry at that, which is indicative of something else.

So I ask questions. And then when I hear folks who are, for lack of a better term, on my side, who are working towards the same sorts of things that I am working towards not want to use certain terms. So I hear folks saying like, "Oh, I don't like the term people of color." Okay, how do you want to refer to the

global majority then? What's the language? Why do you not like people of color? And in those conversations people will say, well ... Someone will say like, oh, we need a person of color and they're not descript. Or they'll say, "You're a person of color, but I'm a black person." And I'm like, "Yeah, if someone's talking about one specific person, we should talk specifically about who that person is." They're not just a person of color, but when we're talking about a collective, what's the history? And so I try to talk to folks about the history of that term coming out of women of color, feminist organizing, getting together and saying, "We have this connection. We are all oppressed by white supremacy, although it happens differently and working together is one of the ways we can do that. How do we refer to all of us as a collective?" That's the term that came about.

If there's a better term, a new term for that that we like, I'm down. I'm not attached to holding on to language forever if that's not the way that it's working in the world, but I do want folks to have a reason and an understanding for that language. So I do ask questions like, "What does that mean to you or what do you think that word means? How have you heard it used?" Because I love history of terms and how they change over time and helping folks realize that words that they use have a history and that history can often be laden with racism and sexism and ableism that they don't even recognize, but it's still the undercurrent. As I was saying with idiot and imbecile, those words are used to say you are not as intelligent as someone else. And it was used to describe someone with a low IQ, even though we know all the problems with low IQ tests. I'm going to assume your readers can go ... Or your listeners can go figure that out if they need to read that history. And so there is ableism built into it. Even if you are not saying, well, you're a person with low IQ and you have an intellectual disability when you say, "Oh, idiot, imbecile." But that is what's there and that's the reason we have the associations we have.

And so I think it's really important for us to at once know the history of the language that we're using, but also not get so attached to it that we can't communicate with one another, that we can't adapt or that we limit our ability to talk to folks who use language differently. And for me, that really comes up in disability organizing spaces. I tell this story in a lot of different contexts, but I was part of a organizing space where we were working to try to get cops out of schools and all the data showed that Black students and disabled students were most likely to have these interactions with what they called school resource officers. We'd had several instances of some violence and there was a black mother who was talking about her "handicapable child." And there was a white disabled person who jumped down her throat and was like, "We don't use that term and that's bad and here's why." And that woman never came back to an organizing meeting. She never came ... Because why? Why are you going to go back to a space where people are yelling at you when you're trying to talk about what has happened to your child and how to advocate for them, but you used a word that they didn't like?

And so I also think that it's really important when we are building community and organizing ... I think that's why we ask the questions to understand why someone's using a word and their meaning and intent behind it rather than shutting them down because they're using something that they don't even know because they aren't in this community is not the word we might like or prefer. And so yeah. I love words and I don't want an obsession or a hardness around the kind of language we can and cannot use to become gates to keep people out of the community they need to grow and to learn more.

Justice Shorter:

Let's expand on organizing a bit more. Talk to us about the experience of witnessing. You talked about witnessing being in community with this black mother who was talking about her child and the experiences that she had in terms of people making the space quite honestly less welcoming, unwelcoming to her and her not returning at all. But I want to know a little bit more about your experience of witnessing DEI attacks on student organizations. How do you think that has also had a ripple effect on youth organizing in general?

Dr. Sami Schalk:

People are scared. Students are scared in a way that I haven't seen in a while. I think it's because the DEI attacks are coming from the outside. It's not just administrations coming down on students who break a rule or who have encampments. It's not just that. It's that then the larger world, these incredibly financially robust right-wing organizations are doxing students, are getting students deported, are really coming for students' lives in a way that I haven't seen before. Students being expelled. The response is deeply outweighed. Student organizing is at the heart of so much political change in this country and so much in terms of what happens on college campuses. Black studies, disability studies, women's studies, we wouldn't exist without student organizing and yet the impacts, the repercussions of student organizing is so much more intense now that it's creating some fear I think. I think it's making it harder.

Folks that were on the cusp of graduating and they're saying, "Nope. We're expelling you. All this tuition money you spent, nope, gone, no degree." It's become not consequence, but punishment in the language of transformative justice. Punishment. Student orgs that are being completely shut down, all their funding being taken. And so it's been really hard. And yet when I have one-on-one conversations with students, I remind them that there are also many ways to organize. And so I'm hoping that the long-term ripple effect after the fear subsides a little bit when folks get their feet back under them is that they know there's other ways. We don't all have to be on the front lines. It doesn't have to all look like a traditional kind of organizing. There's lots of ways.

So I often talk to students about the Montgomery bus boycott, which lasted months. Months, not days, not months. And the way that that was sustained was not just everyone going to sit-ins and marches. It was also the people who drove folks to work so that they could still be employed while boycotting buses. It was also the people who made lunches. Those folks are part of the reason that the work was sustained. And so one of the things I've been trying to talk to youth organizers and student organizers about is that there are lots of roles and we have to actually value and appreciate all of those roles. Those roles might not be Instagrammable. They might not be things that are cool to post. You're like, "Here I am driving someone to work," but it is important, that labor is important. And so if folks can find the labor that feels safer for them, especially folks who are more at risk, ... Undocumented students, immigrants, folks on visas, parents that just have to organize a little bit differently. If we can value those roles more, I actually think that it can expand the way that organizing is happening and can change.

I don't think that all organizing tactics work in all situations and in all periods of time. And so I'm hopeful that youth organizers are finding ways to do what they need to do differently in this moment despite the fear. But I do think that it has caused a lot of fear because there was a time where students could protest freely and not be at risk of being expelled or having their lives destroyed because of it. But that is a risk, especially around certain kinds of topics these days that I think is challenging. But I'm hopeful that ... I believe. I don't know, Mariame Kaba talks about hope being a discipline and young people are what continually give me hope. It's one of the reasons that I like being a college professor is that there is always hope inside of young adults who are determined to make the world better than it is in this moment.

Justice Shorter:

I'm happy you mentioned the different types of folks who were involved with the Civil Rights Movement. I often really adore the stories of subversive actions and behaviors that were happening amongst domestic workers who truly sustained the civil rights movements in a number of ways, whether it be financially, whether it be with access to information, what was happening inside many of those homes where they were cooking and cleaning in. So it's just a wonderful through line for you to bring full circle around how students can really learn from those actions and show up in a myriad of ways.

You talked about consequences and punishment and it feels so much right now like national organizations are being punished as well. So we talked about youth organizing. I want to shift from youth organizing to large scale national and even international organizing efforts. And I talk about this at the top of the show in the introduction. But in 2020, we observed a temporary surge and individuals and organizations expressing a commitment to unlearning, especially ideologies and mentalities that resulted in daily

destruction, danger and black death, quite honestly. But unfortunately it feels like many of those same folks have unlearned what they initially unlearned in 2020. Those very promises to protect and uplift people of color continue to go unfulfilled. So as a professor who specializes in gender, raised, disability, I'm sure you know that this type of behavior and backlash is not new. But what lessons can we learn from it now? You spoke about before how this is not new at the very top of our conversation, but I'm curious to hear your thoughts on what are we to take from it? What lessons are we to learn now?

Dr. Sami Schalk:

I will say with this question, I don't know that they unlearned what they unlearned. I think they decided to stop the unlearning. One of my advisors in undergrad used to say, "You can't unknow what you know. Once you know it, once you've seen it, you can't not know it, but you can choose to not do something about it." And I think some folks realized that the more they dug into the roots of white supremacy in their own lives and their own history, it got uncomfortable. It got hard and they didn't want to do that anymore. And so I think folks have taken the easy way out. I think we saw this in particular on a corporate level with Target. Target was like, "Here's your Pride collection, here's your Black history collection. We got y'all." And then there was backlash and they said, "Oh, nevermind. Nevermind." And now they're dealing with some real backlash. Boycott. Because Target's not doing well.

But I think one of the lessons that I really took from this moment was that progress is never unilateral. There's always going to be a push and a pull and a move forward and a step back. And we can see that for anyone who studied history, we know that that's the case. I think we also really learned that there is no freedom in capitalism. There's no liberation and capitalism. Target's not going to save us. Costco's not going to save us. None of these places that we're trying to profit from a moment of change are actually going to do anything materially different for us. And so learning to take a little ... And I was one that was like, I loved the Target Pride Collection. I loved that people in the middle of nowhere, Kentucky where I grew up could go to a Target and get a Pride shirt. I didn't have that. I didn't have Pride shirts in the store. There was something about it that did feel significant, but not as significant as it would've felt to have laws that protect trans kids. I would've rather have that than some T-shirts in Target. And so I think learning to move ourselves away from this capitalist version of liberation, this buy a T-shirt, wear a T-shirt, but put on a button, whatever it is, it's just not going to be enough.

And I think that 2020 showed us that for some folks they thought putting that in this house we believe in their yard, that was enough to say, I'm not a bad one, but not do any work to make that substantive change to stand up for folks to fight back because it was hard, because it was challenging, because it required them to butt heads with loved ones. I think that was a challenge for a lot of white folks in my life that they were like, I have to fight with my uncle, my grandma, possibly my husband over this stuff was too much. It disrupted their peace too much. And so that's really a lesson that I learned of that capitalist individualist approach that does not actually seek material change in ourselves as individuals in terms of our growth, our ability to handle conflict, to have hard conversations, to unlearn the things that we didn't know were oppressive inside of ourselves, that plus these larger systemic changes. I want us to focus more on that now rather than, yeah, can we get target to have a Pride collection? I think our goals have to be different. And I think for many organizers, that was never the goal. But I think for a lot of the population, it felt like such a win that then folks stopped fighting.

Justice Shorter:

A lot of philanthropic organizations and staff and professionals who work within philanthropy listen to this podcast. And I love you mentioning that capitalism will not free us. For those people working in philanthropic organizations who failed to ... Not the people themselves, but the organizations and perhaps if they're in decision-making positions who step back from decisions that would be consequential in the ways that you mentioned in terms of bringing back material, bringing forth material changes, advocating for legislation that makes a real improvement in the protections, the rights, the safety of individuals who

are part of marginalized groups, advocating for additional funding and supports and social safety nets to be in place. Organizations who made those very real concrete commitments back in 2020, but rolled them back in the years thereafter, how can those organizations, if they are so inclined in this moment, how can individuals, how can those organizations work to regain the trust of justice-based groups on the ground?

Dr. Sami Schalk:

I love this question and my answer is probably going to be controversial and maybe not feel good for philanthropy world folks. This is not my world. It's not my world. So I would say two things. One, I think that organizations need to make it much easier for folks to get money, much easier. Fewer report backs, fewer ... Make it easier because folks spend so much time just managing the grants, just getting the money and reporting back and being able to show the effect. Making it easier, making it not based on numbers and immediate impact. I think that real world takes time. Real work is not about, oh, we had a hundred people come do this event. What if we invested deeply in a group of 10 people for two years? What's that look like? How do we actually allow for scale and depth as opposed to what often feels like the biggest number of people you can reach, that's what they're looking for. So I think shifting that would be helpful in terms of what the impact can look like and knowing that that impact may not always be immediately apparent.

I feel that regularly as a professor where end of class and be like, I don't know if people really got everything or this one particular student really got something. And then somebody will come back around two years later and email me and be like, "Your class changed my life." And I was like, "It did? It didn't seem like it did two years ago." But sometimes it takes a minute for stuff to really sink in, to really impact. So I think about that. And then I recently learned about philanthropic spend down organizations and I'm going to say I'm a fan. I think that any of these orgs with million and billion dollar investments who are unquestionably investing in things like weapons and war and things that do not actually benefit our world, but that's how their ... The investment in the stock market is one of the ways that they maintain the amount of money in these portfolios. I think a spend down organization to cease to exist is the way it should be. Because if all of these organizations actually flooded our country and organizations on the ground with money to do the work, it would change everything. Instead of doling it out a little bit here and a little bit there while sitting on, again, millions if not billions of dollars in investments makes no sense to me. Not in this moment where we are in crisis.

The country is in rapid decline. We need an influx of money from the wealthy immediately to those who need it quick and fast and direct. And so I think that more organizations should look into becoming spend down orgs. I don't know a ton about the process. I just have a friend who works in this area and she's trying to convince her org to do it. And every time she talks about it, I'm like, "This is actually the way it should be." Why keep sitting on all this money so that you can dole it out slowly forever as opposed to making immense impact right now in a moment where things are really bad. They are very, very bad. And if we're talking a disability related organization, it is terrible for disabled folks right now. It is so hard to get the support. I know people that have been applying for disability like state support for years and getting nothing and having cuts and it is hard to live as a disabled person right now and orgs need to really figure out how to get that money directly to people fast.

Justice Shorter:

Yeah. We are going to shift the last portion of our conversation over to pleasure because we've been talking a lot about structural and social violence, which you just mentioned are key clear examples of structural and social violence whereby people are living in dire circumstances and quite literally cannot afford to live and certainly can't afford to thrive. And that is also in a sense resulting from some of these anti-DEI policies and orders that have come down. As you mentioned, this has been going on for quite some time. It's just been repackaged in different forms. But let's shift a little bit to pathways for processing some of that stress and pain because it is stressful and it is painful to have to live through this.

We're not just talking about this from a theoretical perch, but we're talking about this from people who have to live under these conditions on a day-to-day basis. So can you explain what is pleasure activism? Because we know you do this work as well. And how can disabled folks be in practice around it?

Dr. Sami Schalk:

Yeah. Thank you for asking about this. Sometimes I joke that I feel evangelical about pleasure activism.

Justice Shorter:

Come on now. The pulpit is yours. Let's go.

Dr. Sami Schalk:

So pleasure activism is a concept that folks can read about in a book called Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good by Adrienne Maree Brown. And essentially, pleasure activism as a concept argues that pleasure is political first and foremost. And we know that pleasure is political because the pleasure of certain groups is celebrated, uplifted, normalized while the pleasure of other people is criminalized, policed, shamed, stigmatized and so on. So if we're talking disabled people, we know that disabled folks and sexuality is stigmatized, shamed. Queer folks, trans folks, our pleasure being policed, literally criminalized. We know that the pleasure of certain folks is not prioritized. One of the frequent easy examples I give to folks is folks will say, oh, eating this kind of food or watching this kind of TV show is my guilty pleasure. But you never hear somebody say, going to the opera is my guilty pleasure because that's associated with wealth and whiteness and there's no reason to feel guilt and shame around pleasures that are associated with power. So we know that pleasure is political.

So then from there, pleasure activism says that we need to make pleasure a part of our organizing work and that happens on the individual level by learning how to embrace our own pleasure, to lean into our own pleasure so that we can sustainably do the work of change. We can't do that by burning ourselves out. I think especially important for disabled folks. We can't push ourselves to the limit. Pleasure has to be part of how we live our lives and how we organize. How do we bring pleasure into change work so that liberation is the most pleasurable experience possible is the way that Adrienne Maree Brown puts it. So that might be having food and music at your organizing event. That might mean that you just have a crafting gathering for disabled folks who are COVID conscious so that they can feel safe and in community together. That is the work of pleasure activism, of encouraging the pleasure of particularly marginalized people and bringing pleasure into how we organize. There's so much about the way that organizing work has become nonprofit corporatized that folks feel like they have to perform corporate workspace in organizing spaces and that it takes so much joy out of the connection and community. Of course, we need to do work and there will be ways we do work, but we don't need to sanitize it. And so that's what pleasure activism is.

For me, it really comes about in embracing and expressing my pleasure as a fat, black, queer, disabled woman that comes about through the clothes that I wear, the pictures that I post. I do a lot of boudoir modeling and just embracing my body in ways that encourages others to do the same. And then I'm also doing research on pleasure activism and pleasure practices that folks engage in. And so for disabled folks, I think it's incredibly important that we tap into our pleasure, whatever that looks like for us because so much of our lives is represented as painful and for some of us, pain is a regular part of our lives. I live with chronic pain, it is a regular part of my life and I've had to learn how to continue to find pleasure even in those moments with pain. And that might be a comforting show, that might be a call with a friend.

I think again, in a world where capitalism controls so much of what we do, we think of pleasure as pricey. We think of it as a vacation, as a massage, as getting your nails done, a fancy dinner. And those things can be pleasurable, no doubt. But there is also free pleasure to be had in your body in any given moment. You can touch your skin and feel good. You can sit out in the sun if that feels good to you and feel good.

All of those things are possible. I like to go just sit by the lake in Madison and watch the water and it regulates my nervous system in a way that is just so natural and powerful. My attraction to water is so deep. And so a part of pleasure activism is breaking folks out of the idea that pleasure is something that we have to wait for, that we have to earn, that we have to be able to afford and that actually it is the point of being alive. It is the thing that helps us know that life is worth living. We don't have to suffer. We are capable of pleasure.

And I think a lot of disabled folks, we are taught that we are not as capable of pleasure, that there's less pleasure to be had in our lives because of being disabled. And I think that we have to work very hard to not prove other people wrong, but to make sure that we don't believe that, that we don't internalize that and that we know all the ways that we can have a lot of pleasure in our lives. So I've been doing research on this for a while and I'm working on two books. One about pleasure spaces created for multiply marginalized people and how those spaces help folks embrace their pleasure but also build community. And then this summer I'm working on a new book on specifically crip pleasure and thinking about the fact that there is a limited amount of writing about disabled people and pleasure, especially academic writing and the writing that does exist, it really focuses on sex and sexuality, which is ... Let me be clear, as a slut, happy, happy to have writing about disability and sex, no doubt about it, but that is not the only kind of pleasure that exists. And if we focus so much on that, I think it's an attempt to prove to non-disabled people that disabled folks can have sex.

And I understand that desire, but even the work that exists on disability and sex, the academic work, a lot of it isn't about pleasure. It's about demonstrating capability, it's about internalized oppression, it's about whether or not people can reproduce. Can they get an erection? It's about this very physical mechanical thing and less about, do you enjoy what's happening? Is this fun for you? It's about proving, yes, people who are in wheelchairs can indeed get an erection, can indeed get pregnant. And again, it feels like it is in response to ableism rather than coming from the internal sense of pleasure and needs of disabled folks. And so the book that I'm working on is really thinking about how disabled folks engage in pleasure practices outside of sex. I'm still going to talk about disability and kink because that's something I'm really interested in, but it is going to be about community building and interdependence and pleasure art and really thinking about the various ways that disabled folks can access pleasure and the benefit that it has to us to remember that despite the way the world represents our bodies and our minds as broken. We are just as capable of deep satisfying pleasure even if it looks different than the way that other folks might go about getting it.

Justice Shorter:

You talked about the mechanical means that some writers and scholars have used to talk about sexuality and sex. And I can't help but think about how that is somewhat of an extension of the medical model of disability. We only have a few minutes left here, I want to ask you a couple of quick questions right before we close here. But the first, before I get into some of those prompts, let me just ask you, if you could give me two quick responses in your mind around what funders could do to get active around pleasure activism without sanitizing it, as you mentioned before, without co-opting it and stripping it of all of its beauty and its glory. But if you just had two quick suggestions, what would you give to funders thinking about getting more involved?

Dr. Sami Schalk:

Supporting things that are fun. In my interview with organizers of pleasure spaces for marginalized people, many of them talked about how impossible it was to get funding because folks didn't want to support, "Oh, I'm going to throw craft nights for disabled folks or I'm going to throw fat pool parties or queer dance parties." That's not something that funders wanted. They said, "Oh, this is just about sex or this is just a party." It's not just a party. When we're talking about creating space for communities that are being harmed and being separated and need to connect with one another. Funders, expanding their

understanding of what impactful community work is to include these things that are pleasurable and fun and not just the day-to-day mechanics.

Yes, of course, we need people to make sure that food banks are filled. We need to make sure that folks can eat, that they have rental assistance and it is also okay to fund things that are enjoyable because folks who cannot access food also deserve pleasure. They deserve good food, they deserve delicious food. So we can allow that to be a part of the way that we create funding structures I think is my main suggestion because I do think people get shy around providing support for something that seems like "Just fun" and not recognizing the incredible deep importance of pleasure in the lives of marginalized people and the way that collective pleasure, public pleasure builds communities in ways that allows us to be stronger to do other kinds of organizing and work as well.

Justice Shorter:

As we close, I want you to fill in the blank with three very specific prompts and I'll read them off one by one here. I'm reclaiming ...

Dr. Sami Schalk:

Pleasure.

Justice Shorter:

I'm refusing ...

Dr. Sami Schalk:

To be small.

Justice Shorter:

I'm remembering ...

Dr. Sami Schalk:

Who I am and what I came here to do.

Justice Shorter:

And today you came to slay. We so appreciate all of the insights, all of the information, all of the joy. This conversation in and of itself was a pleasure to hold with you. Thank you, Dr. Schalk so much for joining us today.

Dr. Sami Schalk:

Thank you.