Welcome to Exploring Your Creative Genius. Your host, Carl Nordgren, will teach you how to take an expansive view on what it means to be creative and entrepreneurial. Carl is an entrepreneur, novelist, and a lifelong student. For 20 years, he has been learning how to help folks grow their creative capacities. Now, here's Carl.

Carl Nordgren: Hello and welcome. Happy Sunday to you all. This is Carl Nordgren. You're listening to Exploring Your Creative Genius on the best radio station in the state of North Carolina, 97-9, The Hill. I'm looking out of the studio into the lobby, and I'm looking at all the trophies that they've won. Nine years in a row they've been the best radio station in North Carolina. This is the show that believes creativity is so important that I will not define it for you. I want you to create your own understanding of what it means to be creative. So I'll give you lots of perspectives. And one of the ways I give you lots of perspectives is by bringing in wonderful, awesome guests to speak to you, sometimes directly on the topic of creativity, sometimes about the creative life that they're living, which is a wonderful experience for you to listen to that.

And we've got a guest with us today from out in California. Her name is Jennifer Chassman Brown. For most of her professional life, Jennifer was an English teacher and a leader in school settings for the past seven years. She's worked as a DEI and disability advocate. And she found that too often, too often, the support for people who have disabilities is just not part of the national conversation. And so feeling that way, she wrote a wonderful book, a wonderful book. That's what she's here to talk to us about. Her book, which is ready for purchase right now, just coming out, is “See Us, Know Us, Profiles of Disability.” It's a remarkable book, both for its purpose and its content, so ambitious, and you pull it off. Jennifer, thank you so much for joining us. What more would you like to, for folks to know about your background, Jennifer, as we're getting started here?

Jennifer Chassman Brown: Thank you so much, Carl, for those kind words and that introduction. So the book really came about because as I was doing work as a disability educator and advocate, I realized that stories were what was impactful for people. , and so I decided to create this book that tells the stories of 30 people with disabilities, , through narrative biographies, through formal portraits, and through, , poems that speak specifically to their experience of disability, their individual unique experience, , with disability. So, like, I feel like my background has kind of led me to this place, and I'm super excited about the book. Just yesterday, I approved the hard proof. So the book is at the printer now, available for pre-sale, and will be in people's hands the very beginning of October.

Nordgren: Well, again, I've had a copy of it for a week or so, and I just love it. I, I love the ambition of it. I think I said that in the introduction. The way that you've structured this book is, is, is just wonderful. You mentioned you have 30 profiles in the book. I want the audience to know that we've got one of those people that you profiled also on the call with us. Jennifer, why don't you introduce your guest?

Chassman Brown: With us also today is Dr. Sara Thompson. As I said, Sara's one of the people who is profiled in the book, she is the assistant commissioner of research evaluation and grants units, with the New York City Department of Correction. Her background is, with a lot of work managing peacekeeping programs in African partner countries. She is a person who was born with hearing loss and identifies as a person with a disability. And she works to raise awareness about providing accommodations for

individuals in the deaf and hard of hearing community through local advocacy efforts in New York City. So I'm really glad to have Sara here today. Really glad to have her in the book.

Nordgren: Thanks for joining us, Sara. Thanks for joining us.

Sara Thompson: Thank you so much for having me. It's great to be a part of this conversation.

Nordgren: Well, let's get int the meat of the book through a series of questions that, that we've talked about. And the first is, as two individuals who have lived lives as disabled individuals, describe that experience, if you would, please, for us. Describe what it's like to go through your day as a disabled person.

Chassman Brown: I'm happy to have you start, Sara, if you'd like to.

Thompson: Thanks so much for that great question. I think for me as somebody who was born hard of hearing, it's difficult because I don't really know what I can and or should and should not be able to hear. And I talk about my life as kind of two major chapters. , and my sort of journey as having a disability is, is just that it's a journey. And there is a Sara who existed who did not wear hearing aids for a very long time. And then there was a Sara who did get hearing aids. And so before I got hearing aids, like I said, it was just really hard to figure out what I should and should not be able to hear. So I constantly struggled growing up trying to understand and navigate the hearing world. And since having hearing aids, I can certainly hear better, obviously, but it can still be very challenging. And so especially for somebody who is hard of hearing, it takes a lot of energy to hear. And so I have to constantly make an effort to hear what's being said and to try to follow conversations and try to follow what people are saying. And so that is a commonality that a lot of people who are hard of hearing have. It's also important though to recognize, like, so for me, my hearing loss, I can't really hear higher frequencies. So in engaging and interacting with females can be difficult. However, somebody else, with a different type of hearing loss, they might have different frequencies that they can hear. So even though there are some commonalities with how people who are hard of hearing engage with the world, the, levels and frequencies that we kind of cannot hear vary drastically across the hard of hearing community.

Nordgren: That makes sense. That does make sense. I had never thought of that that way before. Did, I read that towards the end of her life, Helen Keller had reached the conclusion that the greater, that deafness was a greater liability than blindness? Does that sound familiar?

Thompson: I'm not sure, but I do think it is important to note that we communicate through talking to each other. Right. And so if I can't hear what you're saying, I can't engage with you. I can't, you know, I can't hear what you're saying. And so it's difficult because it's such a barrier to communication. Right. And communication is how we navigate the world. That's how we get information. That's how we create relationships. Yeah. That's how we, you know, can thrive in, in the world. And so being hard of hearing, it can be so frustrating because you're, you know, you're just constantly struggling with trying to hear. And, and to be honest, it's not like I can try to hear harder. <laugh> I, I can't hear those frequencies. I can't hear them, you know? Right. I can't, like, try to hear them. So, and so it can be really frustrating because it becomes such a barrier to creating relationships. And that can, , and, you know, that's just,

it's really difficult, and it can be very lonely and isolating - Yes. Throughout the life of somebody who is struggling, , with being hard of hearing and trying to navigate the hearing world.

Nordgren: That isolation, that word you spoke, isolation, really seems so very powerful. Well, folks, we're up against our first break, but we're, when we come on back, we're going to hear Jennifer answer the same question, and, and we're going to hear them talk about other aspects of, of living lives with disabilities and helping us think about that. And so come on back from the break.

Welcome back. This is Exploring Your Creative Genius on 979 The Hill. I'm speaking with the author of the new book, See Us, Know Us: Profiles of Disability. Jennifer Chasman Brown is the author. We're also here, with an individual who is profiled in that book, with Dr. Sara. And so the question that, Sara was answering right at the end of that first segment is one that we'll now, remind you of. Jennifer, and if you'd pick it up, what is, just what is it like? The real basic question, right? What is it like to live a life of, with dis - with a disability? Yeah.

Chassman Brown: So Sara talked a bit about the kind of before the hearing aids and after. , and one of the things that, that I think about in doing this book and also in my life and my work as a disability advocate is what's visible and what's not visible. , so I think one of the challenges with someone who might have hearing loss or other disabilities that are not immediately visible is, like, if Sara doesn't respond to something, people don't know that it's because she can't hear it, right? So there are a lot of potential judgments that could be made or misunderstandings that can, that can happen. And so I think a lot about learning more about disabilities and also my before and after. Right. I have juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. I was diagnosed with that when I was six years old. And for much of my life, my disability was mostly invisible.

I appeared typical. I was able to be active and play sports. , and it was when I got to about 40 years of age that, , the natural aging of my body on top of my arthritis became a really visible mobility disability for me. , and I think about the fact that as hard as it was to deal with limitations, physical limitations, it was a lot harder for me and continues to be harder for me to know how to respond when people treat me like I'm incapable. , when they hold up a mirror to me and reflect something back to me that's not the way that I see myself or not the way that I think of myself. Those kinds of judgments are really hard. And I think that's probably true for a lot of people in the disability community. We think of ourselves as capable, happy, engaged human beings, but that's not always the way that we're seen.

And that's been the biggest struggle for me living with my disability is knowing how to respond when I'm out in the world and people are constantly offering me help, , or seeing me as someone who, you know, even seeing me as someone who needs that help regularly. Right. Right. , when I'm just doing my thing.

Nordgren: Yeah. The, this notion had never dawned on me until I'm hearing the two of you speak about this, that there are in fact, and you both have an example of it, a disability that isn't immediately obvious to folks. , and so the significance of that is very different, it seems, than a disability that is clearly a- a- a- a- available and present for folks to, to, to understand. That's a, that's a challenge. I have a close friend who has that situation, has a disability, and, and most of the time he lives with it gracefully, but sometimes he can't and people don't know, just don't know what's happening in his life. That's a real challenge.

Chassman Brown: Right.

Nordgren: So what would you, what, what's your thoughts? How, how, how do we, the folks who are not challenged with a disability, how, how should we be thinking about this? What behaviors that we can begin to cultivate?

Chassman Brown: I think that I'm, the point of the book really was, , is for people with disabilities to know other people with different disabilities and get a fuller sense of the disability community. But it's also really for people who are non-disabled to understand the lives of people with disabilities. And I think that's what it really comes to for me is the more that you can engage with us as people, whole, full, capable people, , see us as that, come to understand our lives, the more I think that, that able-bodied people will, , s - recognize that people with disabilities are people very much like them with the same sorts of hopes and dreams and experiences - Right. And challenges and, you know, the desire to work and be contributing, and have full and rich lives. And so when I think about that, I think about just recognize us as human beings and get to know us, right?

We're not all the same. We're very different in many cases but get to know people with disabilities so that you can understand how to continue to build an inclusive world.

Nordgren: What would you like to add to that, Sara? That's a great answer, Jennifer. Thanks for that advice. What do you, what do you want to add, Sara?

Thompson: Yeah, and I think it's so important to, , piggyback off at that last point that Jen made with regards to that inclusive world. That inclusive world not only benefits those of us with a disability, but it benefits everybody. You know when you look at accommodations, closed captioning, right? I'm listening to this, or, you know, I'm listening to this conversation while also reading closed captions. And, and I, you know, I've read so many reports on how people are now using captions so frequently, through, you know, streaming services and even with our virtual meetings that we have post - COVID. Those captions not only benefit somebody like me, but they benefit the entire population. Excellent. Similarly with ramps, you know, ramps, , if you have a suitcase and you're dragging suitcases along the sidewalk, or if you're a mom with a stroller and are, you know, rolling across the sidewalk, all of these people benefit.

I mean, everybody really benefits from these sorts of accommodations that kind of originally stemmed from ensuring that folks with disabilities are included and have, , and have access to these resources that help us function, , in a way, , so that there's, like, , equity in the environment, right? And so I think that's just such an important point about the inclusive, the inclusivity of this dynamic.

Nordgren: Yes. Yes, I like that very much. That, that we are all served when we serve the disabled community that has this wonderful, , re- reciprocity that we, the greater community has served. I very much like that observation. I very much like that observation. We have about a half a minute before we get to the break. Do either one of you want to add to that? And, and we'll pick up another question when we come on back.

Chassman Brown: I often say to people when I'm doing trainings and educational programs that people with disabilities are some of the most creative problem solvers that there are. And I think, you know, to, to Sara's point, we are because we've had to be, but the things that we design are beneficial for everyone.

Nordgren: That's a wonderful observation and a great one for us to, to take our break on. Folks, we have one more segment left. Come on back after the break.

Nordgren: Welcome back, and thanks for coming back, folks. This is the final segment of Exploring Your Creative Genius with Carl Norgren on WCHL, the best radio station in the state. Happy Sunday to you all. I've got a guest who brought a guest, , on the show with us today. We have Jennifer and Sara. Jennifer, , just is in the last stages of getting her new book out. It's ready to be purchased. Their new book is See Us, Know Us, Profiles of Disability. One of the folks profiled is also on the show with us today, and that's Sara. , folks, just to remind you, , the show will be posted on the Chapel Borough website on Wednesday, and both Sara and Jennifer will provide you with all the contact information, blog sites, , information about ordering the book. You'll find it there on Wednesday. Please order this book.

It's an awesome, awesome book. Please order it. So I think probably the question that'll m- maybe take us to the end of the show is for both of you, and that is how would you hope? How would you hope that the world will move forward in a way that makes it more graceful for folks , to live with their disabilities, with their disadvantages?

Chassman Brown: So for me, I, I think a lot about belonging. And belonging is something that happens for everyone when all of their sort of participatory needs are met, for people with disabilities when their inclusion and access needs are met- met, and they feel like they are wanted in spaces. They feel like they are s - expected and desired, in terms of their participation. So what I hope for, for the world moving forward, , certainly is that we don't lose a lot of the, , supports, in-home support services for people who need them. , the ADA being effectively applied so that we don't lose those access, , opportunities, but also that people continue to learn about people with disabilities and recognize that all of those things need to be in place. And that then when we show up, we want to be included fully, and we want to feel like we belong in spaces that we haven't always been welcomed into and haven't always had access into.

Everybody wants to feel like they belong. We need some specific things in place to allow us to engage and then, you know, to feel like, as I said, we w- we wanted to be there. I think about for Sara, like, for people to know what her needs are in terms of communicating with her, and then doing that willingly, happily, as a matter of course, without her needing to feel like she needs to continue to ask for - -h. For example, people to face her when they talk to her. Basic things like that. But I would hope that people continue to learn about living with disabilities from people with disabilities and then making efforts to ensure that we belong.

Nordgren: Excellent. Excellent advice. I love that. And, and then, and the simple notion of making sure that you're facing a person that has a hearing disability so that they can see your mouth, right? I mean –

Chassman Brown: And it's simple, but people don't always know. Right. Like I had, I made friends with people who are blind or visually impaired. And, you know, I said, "So if you're coming down the sidewalk and I'm coming down the sidewalk, how am I supposed to make sure we don't run into each other?" And they said, , "Say hello and say that you're on the outside of the sidewalk so that I can pass on the inside." And I thought, "Well, of course." Right. Right? Right. But I needed to be educated too.

Nordgren: And good on you for asking the question. And good on you. How about Sara? Would. What are your thoughts about this?

Thompson: Yeah, I agree completely. And especially with regards to something as simple as facing me when you talk. And, you know, especially in so many settings when I go to see the doctor, you know, the nurse filling out intake, she's talking to the paper, right? And it's just like, I'm, I'm over here. I can't, you know, especially with routine mundane questions, you know, it's kind of mumbling into the paper, mumbling to the computer screen or facing the computer screen. And so it's so hard for me to kind of pick up, "Oh, wait, are you asking, you know, how much caffeine I drink? What, what, what is the routine intake question you're asking?" And, and, you know, sometimes I'll say, "I'm sorry, could you, could you speak up? I am hard of hearing." And then there will be some sort of, , you know, complicity with that in the sense that, you know, the nurse might speak up for one or two questions, but then kind of revert back.

Right. And so it is always a challenge to advocate for yourself, but while also making sure that you're doing, doing it in a way that is clear and simple. And, and sometimes that can be really difficult for me. You know, maybe I've had a really frustrating day, and the last thing I want to do is to repeat. <laugh> Please speak up for me, you know? And so especially as somebody with a disability, the burden is on me to say, "Hey, you, could you speak up?" Or, "Hey, I'm over here. Could you face me and talk?" And sometimes that can be incredibly challenging for me because it's hard to meet people where they're at. And, , and it can be difficult trying to convey the best ways to communicate with me. , and so, so yeah, it would be great if people could be a little bit more patient or a little bit more, excuse me, willing to, to listen to what I have to say without me feeling like, "Oh, I'm a burden because I'm, again, having to say what?" And it's not because I didn't understand.

It's not because I'm ignorant. It's because I just didn't hear what you said.

Nordgren: Right. Right. Real quick, I've got, , , two brothers. One is, , is just about deaf. He's on his way to being there. And I realized the last couple times we're together that when my brother who isn't having problems with his hearing is talking to me when the three of us are all in the room and he's talking to me, I turn and look at my other brother with the hope that the brother who is speaking will also turn and look at my other brother. I don't say anything. I just make that gesture and, and I, I'm hopeful that at least once or twice that will help out. Well, we've got just a minute left here. What would you like to add to the wonderful messages, the wonderful advice that you've been sharing with us? What would you like to add? Either of you?

Thompson: To your point, s- sorry, to your point about family, you know, sometimes family can almost be the most difficult because, you know, before hearing aid, Sara, I, I just seemed to be okay. You know, I didn't really. I would just kind of nod and smile and got really, really good at it. And, you know, my mom is notorious for starting a conversation and walking into the next room. So - <laugh>. I certainly take the point that your family can be a bit one of the more challenging types of populations you work with, right? Right. No, I hear you. , so, so I take the point that sometimes it, , again, you just have to reiterate and try to be a patient and try to ensure that, , everybody understands, like, or, you know, maybe even say, like, "Hey, you know, we talked about this. Please talk to me.

Don't start a conversation and walk into your bedroom." <laugh> Right. You know? So, sorry, mom, I don't mean to help you out like that. <laugh> But, , but yeah, it, it, it is, , always a balancing act with regards to, , making sure that everybody is aware, like, "Hey, this is how we are best, , this is the best way to interact and engage with us as somebody with a disability."

Nordgren: Right. Well, I'm going to take the final word, because we just have a few seconds left, and I'm going to take the final word to say, folks, this is a great book. See us, know us, profiles of disability. There's 30 folks in there. There's wonder - I mean, Jennifer, you're a great storyteller. And again, the way you layer this, folks, Jennifer introduced the book as profiles, you know, in fact, a case study story about each one of the profiles, but also a beautiful, beautiful photograph that captures each one of the individuals. And then this poem that speaks to this individual's disability. What a great ambition this book had. Sara, excuse me, Jennifer pulls it off. Thank you both for being on the show, and folks, thanks for listening, and I hope you have a wonderful week.