Marjorie Aunos (00:03):
We all know that parenting is hard, so how do parents with disabilities do it? With creativity and because we know of the value of interdependence! Come hear about ways experts say we can best empower these families and let’s all learn about how parenting can be done differently.

I’m your host Marjorie Aunos. And today my guest is Dani Izzie. Dani is a quadriplegic woman who gave birth to twin girls in April 2020. She documented her journey through pregnancy in a beautiful documentary film and has produced several resources for women with a spinal cord Injury who are hoping to become pregnant one day. We started our conversation with Dani introducing us to her family.

Enjoy! And don’t forget, for more information about where to find the full recording and additional resources, check out the show notes!

Dani Izzie (01:21):

My name is Daniella Izzie. I go by Dani. I am married to my husband Rudy. And we have two beautiful twin toddlers. They're turning three in April. They were actually born April, 2020, so kind of smack dab in the middle of the pandemic. Actually at the very beginning, right? So that was kind of a wild experience. And, I also happened to be quadriplegic. Actually, you know, today is the kind of anniversary of my accident, or I like to call it a rebirth. And, I think I'm on 14 years. So it's been quite a journey. And, uh, yeah, I think, you know, there's, there's only a few other quadriplegic women that have multiples, twins specifically - that I've found. It's not that it's not possible, it's just, it just happens to be rare for, there's several layers of it to, you know, why it's kind of rare. Um, so yeah, that's pretty much it. <laugh>.

Marjorie Aunos (02:50):

Great. Thank you. Now I feel privileged because I saw a beautiful documentary that you did. And of course, that is one of the resources in a way that you created when you realized that becoming pregnant and becoming pregnant as a quadriplegic woman with twins was so rare, you decided to sort of document your journey. Do you wanna tell us what led you to the documentary and what other resources you created along the way?

Dani Izzie (03:23):

Yes, that's right. I, I almost forgot to mention the documentary. Which I have been absorbed in for the past, you know, since the girls were born and even before they were born. Um, so I, I think I could start back 14 years ago when I was in the rehab hospital, in acute rehab, in bed, watching television, and I was watching a movie called Million Dollar Baby. And I was, I think four weeks fresh out of sustaining traumatic spinal cord injury that had left me paralyzed, um, from my shoulders down, pretty much. And, um, I, I'm gonna, I'm gonna tell you what happens in this movie. It was directed by Clint Eastwood. Um, the protagonist was a, an athlete, a boxer, and she just, she sustains a spinal cord injury, and she specifically becomes a quadriplegic. And I remember distinctly watching the scene from my hospital bed, watching this character in her hospital bed, talking to another character in the moving movie, saying that she didn't wanna live.

She didn't want to live, but she had never gotten out of that hospital bed into a wheelchair. She didn't even try. And I was so angry because I said, here I am busting my butt, so to speak, trying to, to deal with this devastating injury, like dealing with the reality of it. This is not a movie. This is my reality. I'm getting up dizzy every morning, going through an existential crisis and a crisis of identity everyday, getting in a wheelchair, doing a thing, trying to learn. And here's this woman who is in this completely unrealistic situation. She hasn't even had a minute of rehab, and she wants to die because the people who wrote that script decided that that would be the narrative. And I don't think that, um, whoever was involved with this movie didn't have a, a very authentic view of what it means to have a disability, to sustain a disability, to be part of the disability community, to understand disability from a point of view of it being more than just an injury and a medical situation, but also a lifestyle, a culture, an identity, right?

Um, so that's where this all starts, I think, because 14 years later, or, well, actually, I got, I guess I got pregnant a couple years ago, so less than that, I'm not very good at math. Um, I get pregnant. And I was so happy. And then I found out a couple weeks in that it was not one, but two. And I was like, oh my gosh, how am I gonna, how am I gonna do this? There is no representation on screen, in the media. There's no representation in pop culture. So I'm just going into this completely in the dark. And, um, I did have access to some support groups. Um, but again, um, there aren't very many quadriplegic women who have multiples. So it was still very difficult to find information even within the spinal cord injury community.

And so when the first opportunity came around for me to be involved in, um, some media around my story, um, I was interested because I said in my head, this is something that I would want for myself. And I know that this is something that my community would benefit from and would wanna see, so I can create a resource here. And I think in part, I was driven by <laugh> the negative experience I had watching Million Dollar Baby. I was like I, I need to create something, something real. Let's tell a real story, and let's make it not just this story of sustaining an injury and then seeing that worth life isn't worth living. Let's do the story of someone who's adapted to their disability after several years, wants to have a family, and this is a positive disability led story.

Um, okay, so two opportunities came up for me to be involved in, uh, film. Okay. So the first one was with, um, a, uh, reality TV show. <Oh, wow> So a casting, yeah, I, I don't think I ever told you this Marjorie, but a cast, a casting director found me in a group for twin moms on Facebook, just a generic group for expecting twin moms. And I had introduced myself to the support group and said, “Hey, I'm Dani. I happen to be quadriplegic, pregnant with twins. Give me all the advice.” Um, and so there casting director in there had been looking for pregnancy stories. So she was in there to see who everybody was, and she saw my introduction. She sent me a message and said, I'm involved in this reality TV show called, I better not name it, <laugh>. Sorry, I'm not gonna <inaudible>. Um, so she was involved in this reality TV show, and she asked me if I would be interested in talking to her, given my motivation to create representation.

I said, yes, let's talk. And, um, we had a conversation. Um, it was a, it was being organized by a pretty well-known producer in Hollywood. Um, they were gonna pay me a nice sum of money to be involved, um, which was cool, you know? <Yeah> And, um, then I saw a contract <laugh>, and it was terrifying. It was basically saying that, um, there was, um, the exclusivity clause was a part that really freaked me out, particularly because it said that they could do whatever they wanted with my story forever. And they own, they would basically have ownership over my story. And I was like, okay, I don't know if this is a good idea anymore, because it may be reality tv, but they can spin it anyway they want to. And how can I trust that they're gonna know how to tell a disability story the right way? I don't, I didn't trust. I didn't trust that they could, because the record is pretty bad in media in terms of telling, um, in terms of telling authentic disability led stories. Um, so I said, no. <Okay>

Okay. Then, a couple weeks later, and I'm in my second trimester of my pregnancy and my friend, Brad, contacts me. He said, I saw your pregnancy announcement on Instagram, and I wanna talk to you about doing a documentary. Brad is a social impact documentary filmmaker and editor, and I've known him for 10 years. So I've been following his work and staying in touch with him. And there was immediately trust. And I said, okay, let's talk. And he introduced me to his partner and his small team. And, we talked about the angle of approach, and we talked about representation, and we created an agreement that actually involved me in the creative process for creating this film and involved me on the level of a consultant, a disability consultant. So this film, this documentary film was crafted, taking my voice into consideration and having that sort of drive the narrative. So…

Marjorie Aunos (13:06):

That's how Dani's Twins was created, right?

Dani Izzie (13:11):

How It started.

Marjorie Aunos (13:14):

That's how it started. And like I said, I mean, I saw the, the documentary and what I loved, and I guess it is what you just said, you know, throughout it is your, your voice that we hear. You are narrating sort of what is happening. I wasn't pregnant while being paraplegic. I had given birth to Thomas before my accident, but apart from that, every element that you mentioned, um, in, in the documentary, I was like, oh, yeah, I, I went through that. Oh, yes, I asked myself that same question, and yes, lack of representation, and that was, you know, difficult and looking for resources and not finding them. And so I, I really did feel like it was like almost you were telling my story or the story of every other woman who has gone through an accident and end up in and rehab and reinvents or like just modifies her journey, um, because of the life circumstances, but lives a good life and lives a happy life.

And that is one of the things that really drew me into to this, to your film and to your story and to who you are actually, because it's a reflection, I think, of how beautiful you are as a person and how generous you are to have sort of said, you know, I'm like two third pregnant, um, but I'm gonna accept film crews in, uh, in my life, to document this for, for other women so that they can feel supported and they could feel like they're not alone in a way. And that's pretty beautiful.

Dani Izzie (15:08):

Yeah. Thank you, <laugh>. Thank you.

Marjorie Aunos (15:12):

And, uh, kudos to your husband who sort of said, yeah, let's do this.

Dani Izzie (15:17):

Yes. <laugh>, I mean, I, I will admit that decision, we did not to take the decision lightly. Yes. You know, like you said, it's, it's very intimate time in our lives. It's very personal and, and, um, when we agreed to it, it was actually before the pandemic started. <Yes.> So we actually didn't know what we were about to face. Um, so it did get even more, um, even more difficult and challenging.

Marjorie Aunos (15:31):

Yeah.

Dani Izzie (15:32):

Um, but yeah, we're really proud of what we've done and we're, we just, we're so happy that we have something that we can give, um, give back to others.

Marjorie Aunos (15:56):

And the film has been shown in like, multiple, I don't know how many, do you know how many festivals it has been shown now?

Dani Izzie (16:05):

I wanna say. I mean, it's maybe 20, 20 festivals or so. It's been so well received. In fact, like at most, at a lot of the festivals where we won awards, our most typical award was usually, um, audience award. <Yes.> Which means, you know it, that it was a really well received among people who are viewing it. And what I found was that the story appealed to a much wider audience than I originally thought that it would appeal to. And it resonated beyond the disability community. It really resonated with women and mothers, of all kinds, you know, all diverse lives, lifestyles, and backgrounds. And it resonated with fathers who even, you know, even, or men who, who didn't have spouses with disabilities, they just kind of saw this relationship and, and saw the whole situation through new eyes, you know? <Yeah.>

Marjorie Aunos (17:20):

That's just awesome. Now, of course, you spend a lot of time and, and there was a whole team around the documentary, but what I found is that you didn't stop at the documentary. You also, like, documented your journey in other ways, that in a way also sort of serve as other resources that are available you know, to be used in different ways by, by moms, future moms, by women who have a disability. So namely, I'm talking about the blog that you, that you have and, and you have representation also on YouTube. And also you got your doctor involved in one, which I thought was, uh, quite amazing on your part, but also on his, his part. So I don't know if you wanna sort of say a word on all of those, um, differences.

Dani Izzie (18:19):

Yeah. Yeah. So I, I, I'd almost say, you know, all the kind of extra advocacy I've been doing, aside from the film itself has been all part of sort of the impact campaign of the film, or even just in general, uh, kind of an impact campaign to shed light on what it means to be a parent with a disability, um, and or a family touched by disability, right? And in terms of my doctor's involvement, I had a high risk ob gyn who handled my pregnancy, and honestly, I couldn't have asked for a better doctor. And I know that that is not the norm. <Yes.> So I know that I was very fortunate and very privileged, and I know that there's so many more stories to tell, um, about, um, disabled pregnancies and parents, um, who may not have had all the privileges that I did. So I know that I was very fortunate and very privileged, and I know that there's so many more stories to tell, um, about, um, disabled pregnancies and parents, um, who may not have had all the privileges that I did. Um, but I think this, this story is really valuable because it shows, it shows people how it should be <laugh>, right? Like it, it creates a, um, an expectation of, oh, so this is the kind of care that I should be expecting. And it's a really high level care where, um, the disability is respected.

My doctor, I knew he was different the moment he told me that your, he said, your disability prepares you for this journey. Wow. And, and he was referring to the twin pregnancy and the twin mom journey, which is a challenging one. And the moment he said that, I was like, this guy gets it. He gets it. He sees disability as a strength, not just a medical conundrum. He was just wonderful because he wanted to be involved in the film. He was involved in the film. We interviewed him a bunch, and he made himself available. And then he made himself available for multiple opportunities to do some impact projects, um, webinars and other speaking engagements around, specifically around, um, spinal cord injury and pregnancy. Um, so yeah, I, I feel like I was just really lucky that all these things kind of came together like that.

Marjorie Aunos (20:46):

Yeah. It's, um, it's interesting for me because through, through this year, you know, like through the podcast, um, there's many different researchers and professionals that I've interviewed. Um, some of them I've known for years because I've been in the field of parenting with a disability for 25 years. But my <mm-hmm> My expertise in a way was, working with moms who have an intellectual disability, so not a physical one. And when I became paraplegic 11 years ago, um, that's when I started getting sort of, oh, well, parenting with a disability, when it's intellectual, physical, are there things that are similar and so forth. The realization a little bit you alluded to was that the discrimination and the stigma and the prejudice and the, the attitudes that are, that are negative towards parenting and parenthood, uh, by persons with disabilities, was pretty much across all disabilities.

And the year I had my accident, the Rocking the Cradle report happened, and I know you know of it. That showcased sort of that discrimination and showcased, uh, the disparities also that many parents with disabilities face. And so I, I like the conversation and I like what you, you did and, and all the resources you created because it, it, one) it puts a, um, a face. It's, it's a story. And we relate to stories as human beings. And just like you said, it's the story of what should be expected for, for everybody.

Dani Izzie (22:35):

In terms of disabled parenting rights, um, you know, having a film kind of personalizes the topic, right? What can be a topic that can be, um, very difficult to understand if you've never encountered disability before, for example, on this level, uh, on a personal level, you know, when you're encountering sort of, um, statistics and policies and bureaucracy and you're viewing the issue through those, uh, lenses, it can really be hard to really empathize, I think. And so a film allows people to access their emotional intelligence, which I think is so powerful. And I think it's essential to getting people to understand, um, the issues on a deeper level. And, um, getting people to, um, become committed allies, right? Like, this is worth my time. Or when they see something like this, a story like this, they realize that this is also about them, because disabilities is universal. <Yes.> Disability can happen to anybody. So I, I think people kind of make that connection when they see the story. You see another person, they get to know the character, which is me in the documentary, and they start to relate. And, um, and they start to think, well, wow. Like if, you know, I can kind of imagine what it would be like to, to be in her shoes and to feel the same feelings she has. And so, so yeah, I think, I think it's a really important way to sort of illustrate, um, the issues that we face.

Marjorie Aunos (24:45):

A good percentage of the audience, the listeners of this podcast work in child welfare and child protection, where we do know that there's an overrepresentation of parents with disabilities. What would be the one thing or one thing that you would like to tell them about parenting with a disability?

Dani Izzie (25:10):

I think sort of normalizing the concept is really important and remembering that it is a human right, um, to, to become a mother, father, to have children. And I think the other thing that I would like people to know is that ableism runs deep.

Marjorie Aunos (25:31):

Yes.

Dani Izzie (25:33):

It runs deep. And, um, there can be people, um, your best friends or your closest loved ones, or people who have, are quote unquote disability experts when they're still affected by ableist mentalities, subtle, subtle ones. So I would just always try to stay aware and stay on top of that. And, and even people with disabilities themselves, a lot of us have internalized ableism. So it would just be wary of that <laugh> and open, you know? <Yes.> And open to dismantling it at all times.

Marjorie Aunos (26:14):

I actually wrote, um, a piece that was published this, uh, this year on my reflection, on my own internalized discourse after, uh, my accident. And, um, I was surprised to realize, like I'm talking eight years into my, uh, paraplegia, that all the struggles I was having in being a mom on wheels was all because of those internalized ableist. Once I found a community on social media and I saw other moms like you, like, you know, there's many other moms that I've met, um, you know, a lot of them were represented in, in the event that you participated in, in Amplifying Voices. Well, when I found all of you on social media, and I realized, um, I'm normal. I'm just like them and they're just like me. And, uh, there are some struggles, but there's a lot of happy times and fun and, you know, seeing our children grow up is just, like, beautiful. That I noticed that, you know, the struggle was not, the paraplegia was not the me being a mom on wheels or me not walking. It was really sort of what I thought behind the concept. And like, like I mentioned, you know, for me it was, um, eye-opening to realize that, because I had been in the field like for 20 years <laugh>, and I was like, no, no, I'm an ally, I'm an advocate. So it runs deep, like you mentioned.

It's being able to, to listen to the other person and see them, um, see their, their perspective. And I think that's, uh, can go a long way when we do that. If there was one thing you would love to see in the future or future projects, maybe, um, any idea of how we could, you know, talk about parenting more or I don't know, like, what would be your dream for the future?

Dani Izzie (28:22):

I mean, well, I think since I've gotten so involved in this film stuff and it's all very exciting, um, I just keep thinking about all the other stories that are out there besides mine, right? And, um, <affirmative>, I would love to see, um, a series that was just about parents with disabilities. <Yes.> And every episode would focus on one family. So I would love to see that because then, you know, it's not just one story, but there's suddenly a library of stories and with a series like that, that kind of allows people to really understand how prevalent disability is in the first place. Like, it's not, it's not a weird, rare, normal thing. Like it's, you know, in the States it's one in four people have a disability, so, um, it's out there <laugh>. <Yeah.> We just don't see it. Um, and then to show them credible sort of kaleidoscope of differences that exist in this community, right? And all the intersections, um, that interplay with disability.

Marjorie Aunos (29:39):

Well, you and I have a similar dream <laugh>, because I would love that too.

So I'm gonna ask you one last question. Um, and it's just what, is there one thing that your girls do with you, um, where you go like, disability is, is a normal thing and it's just something funny that they might do with you? So just like a little anecdote of how your girls are just, you know, adapted to, to their environment that is normal.

Dani Izzie (30:10):

Yeah. Yeah. Um, I mean, you know, for them it doesn't even phase them. It's not even a thing. It's just part of their every day. You know, mommy uses a wheelchair. Um, but I think it was funny when they were just a little bit younger and still learning words for things, they pretty much called everything with wheels a wheelchair. So the car was a wheelchair, the grocery carts at the store were wheelchairs. Um, just anything with wheels was Oh, wheelchair, wheelchair, <laugh>. And they'd get so excited. <Yes.> Every time. Um, so I thought that was really, really cute and, and fun. Yeah. And, and I, I love, like, I love the fact that they have like a positive association with a wheelchair. Like they, they see it as a tool and kind of a fun tool because they get to ride around my lap. Um, so I really, uh, I love that. They're turning out to be very empathetic, compassionate little girls. And I, I hope that they'll be, uh, open-minded, you know, in the future. They already demonstrated it now.

Marjorie Aunos (31:31):

So thank you so much for, um, taking the time. I know, or no, I don't know cuz I don't have twins, uh, at home, but I'm sure that being Mom to twins, you have a million things to do. So thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me. It is always, always, always a pleasure, um, to speak with you.

Dani Izzie (31:58):

Yeah, it was a pleasure. Thank you so much for having me. And you know, it's a pleasure knowing you and connecting with you and, uh, all the other parents out there with or without disabilities.

New Speaker (32:12):

This podcast was supported in part by a grant from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Children and Family Services Division.