

S2E2-Brandon Connolly

Mon, Oct 02, 2023 8:42PM 30:42

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

queer, legislative session, legislators, episode, podcast, talking, accessibility, brandon, amputee, queer community, passing, feel, lesbians, sidewalks, gender, idaho, kids, lgbtq, accessible, spike

SPEAKERS

Elle Billing, Brandon Connolly

E Elle Billing 00:00

Hi, my name is Elle Billing. I am a chronically ill queer femme, and I'm tired. I'm here this episode and every episode to dig at the roots of our collective fatigue, explore ways to direct our care and compassionate and sustainable ways and harness creative expression to heal ourselves and our world. And welcome to Hoorf: Radical care in a late capitalist heckscape. Welcome to part two of a special two-part live-recorded episode. Of course, live recorded sounds a little weird, so I'll explain. This summer we had the opportunity to visit Idaho and meet with today's guest in person. Instead of our usual web-based remote-recording setup, we brought a field recorder and had our conversation across the table from each other at the UU Fellowship; we had a lovely conversation. We do want to mention that the audio quality is different from our usual episode. Time got away from us while we were talking, so instead of cutting out any of the conversation, we have decided to give you two episodes of our interview with Brandon. In part one, we discussed the long term activism that is participating in Idaho politics is a member of the LGBTQ-plus community. In this episode, we bring you part two, where we dig into the accessibility of queer spaces and the reality of being a disabled queer person. Thanks for being here and we hope you enjoy part two. My guest for this episode is Brandon Connolly. Brandon is Afro Latino, an amputee, and a transgender man. Brandon embraces all of his intersectionalities, and it has helped him in his work as a community organizer, and advocate in Idaho. Brandon has appeared on multiple podcasts, news, interviews, articles, and even on a TV show on HBO. He is the president of a local LGBTQIA-plus nonprofit organization, and is the vice chairman for his county Democrats. Of all things, Brandon loves being the spouse of his wonderful partner and a dog dad. Welcome to the podcast. Brandon, we are so excited to have you here. What you were saying is so important about surrounding yourself with people who love you. I think during these hellish legislative sessions and North Dakota thank God only has the legislative session in odd numbered years. So like we get two years off now.

B Brandon Connolly 02:47

Oh, so jealous.

E Elle Billing 02:49
But it also means they have two years to come up with new schemes.

B Brandon Connolly 02:52
That's true. In Idaho, we just actually passed they just passed the law where they can stay in session for as long as they would like to.

E Elle Billing 03:03
WHAT? There's no cut off date now?

B Brandon Connolly 03:06
No, I mean, the worst. Yeah. If they if they decide that they want to extend the session they can. And that used to be something that they had to go through the governor to do.

E Elle Billing 03:18
Yeah.

B Brandon Connolly 03:19
And now they don't have to,

E Elle Billing 03:20
of course.

B Brandon Connolly 03:21
Yeah, of course. So like the the idea that it could be never ending was like, a huge thought on my mind this this legislative session. I was like, Oh my gosh, they could just do this all year long forever if they wanted to. And thankfully, they decided, yeah, it is super expensive. But everybody votes red here. Like it doesn't even matter what you care about versus what these legislators are telling you that they're going to do. Like, if there's an R next to their name, people just instinctively, reactively, like reflexively just circle that.

E Elle Billing 04:03

It's a lot like our-- Yep. So you were saying about people speaking love into our lives, and especially legislative sessions went never ending, but no matter how long they are, I think that is a really important time for our allies to show up. Like, we don't really need you at Pride. Maybe this year we do. Like, please show up, stand between us and whomstever. But pride isn't for allies.

B Brandon Connolly 04:35

Right.

E Elle Billing 04:36

Right. pride's for us. Yeah. If you really want to help us as an ally, show up at legislative time when we need those-- We need you to support us.

B Brandon Connolly 04:46

Right. And it's it's so important to show these legislators that their constituents are not in support of these anti LGBTQ bills.

E Elle Billing 04:56

There are straight, cishetero, quote normal, because that's a word that they would use, right, Idahoans who think that This is wack too.

B Brandon Connolly 05:07

Yeah. Like, that's the thing is that the people that are actively trying to oppress us? They already know how we think and that we feel

E Elle Billing 05:18

they already know. Yeah, we've made it pretty clear. Yeah. So

B Brandon Connolly 05:21

like, you'll be talking to a legislator, and their eyes just glaze over. And you could just tell that they've completely shut off, that they're not listening to anything that you're saying, because they already know what you're going to say versus, for myself, what I've noticed is that, because I am passing, I have this privilege to be able to go up to a legislator, and if I don't introduce myself in the way that I wish that I could. So I'm also like, hiding and lying in some way. But I introduced myself as a constituent, I don't have the details that I wish that I could add of like, I'm transgender, and I'm this and I'm that. They listen to me more, because I look

like a straight, you know, a cisgender. Man. And so they, they want to know what I'm thinking. But when my friends who don't pass who, you know, they definitely express themselves much more in the way that feels comfortable for them. Legislators just automatically, don't want to talk to them at all. And I think that I've had that moment multiple times, not just with legislative session, but also in smaller things like school districts, there was a school district not too long ago, that had a gender affirming policy. And a couple of parents realized that there was a gender affirming policy, and then threw a huge fit about it. And so the school district, had several meetings with parents, but also teachers and their counselors. And I wanted to be a part of those conversations, because I didn't feel like there was queer people that were represented in those in those conversations. And I would go with some of my friends, who also wanted to say like, Hey, this is the reason why this policy exists. Let me tell you my experience, but when I would speak up, they would definitely listen to me more, they were more curious as to my answers, they would ask me more questions to try and understand where I was coming from versus my friends, like I said, who did not pass who were were more expression in, in their appearance. And that was so incredibly frustrating to watch.

E Elle Billing 07:47

And I've heard that same thing, from so many trans people who end up, you know, we're both using, quote fingers when we say passing, because passing isn't the goal of being trans. It's not the point of being trans or seeking gender affirming care. It's to be happy and feel comfortable, and to be who you are, you know, however, that is on the gender galaxy nebula, I guess a little more complicated than the spectrum. But well, we can say that too. Yeah, it's that they noticed a difference between when they were presenting as their, their birth assigned gender versus after they transitioned. And then, you know, when they were perceived as female, versus when they were passing as male, you know, they were taken more seriously as a man, you know, because of like misogyny, or they were taken less seriously when they passed as a woman. Or, and then all of the different nuances in between, you know, during the time when they were sort of ambiguously gendered.

B Brandon Connolly 08:58

Yeah.

E Elle Billing 08:59

And then, you know, of course, being somewhat androgynous as a toll as a whole other phenomenon when you're interacting with people. And it is, it's just frustrating to see how people offer or withhold respect based on perceived gender, which just reinforces the whole idea that it's entirely a construct. And it's all constructed through communication. But that doesn't make it any less important to like, honor and uphold and care for people wherever they are, you know, in their journey and in their, you know, it's like, yes, it's a construct. Yes, it's still important. Yeah, like, it's just it seems so basic. I don't know why people don't get it. Like,

B Brandon Connolly 09:43

I'm so sorry. I get really emotional about talking about that i

I'm so sorry. I get really emotional about talking about that.

E

Elle Billing 09:47

You don't have to apologize for having feelings. But yeah,

B

Brandon Connolly 09:51

it's especially during legislative sessions. It's so difficult to watch these legislators dehumanize, like these wonderful, wonderful people.

E

Elle Billing 10:00

Absolutely, yeah. I mean, and I saw it in the school where, where a student would start asserting at a young age, something that was considered controversial in the school, you know, you know, for years and years, adults would try to squash that. And then it's like, why can't you just let this kid be this kid?

B

Brandon Connolly 10:17

Right? And it's put, it's so much, I feel like it's so much more effort and energy to try and tell them that they can't do something than to just let them flourish. And I just cannot, I've never understood that.

E

Elle Billing 10:30

So I think it's an emotional topic. Because it's our lives. It's your life, it's our loved ones lives. It's the kids that in our community, you know, that we're around all the time. And we're like, we want it to be better for you. You know, for a while we thought it was going to be and now we're like, oh, it's the same fight. It's the same fight. It's the same fight.

B

Brandon Connolly 10:52

Oh, my gosh. But I think that it's something that I like to tell people is that it will get better, and it feels like it's not going to, because queer history has these, these ebb and flows is up and downs where something historical happens that LGBTQ people either can express themselves more, because the historical event allows them to, and then another historical event happens where they have to go back into the closet, or they can't be so out there. And I'm solely talking about the United States, I don't have that clear history around the world. But in the United States, the late 30s and early 40s, there was more representation, clear representation at that time. And part of it was because of World War Two, all the guys went overseas to go help fight Nazi Germany, right. And that means that women were more out and about they were allowed to leave the home. They were allowed to wear pants, they were allowed to work. They had financial independence, they had social independence. And so there was a lot of lesbians that

felt this was a wonderful opportunity for them to be out. In fact, there's like a story about how Eisenhower knew that there was lesbians in the military, military. And he asked his secretary, he said, Hey, if you know of any lesbians in the military, I need you to report them to me so that we can get them out. And she said, Well, I will be the first on that list. And he very soon understood that his entire administration, which was full of women, were all lesbians. Yeah. Yeah. Nevermind. So I mean, more queer people were allowed to be themselves during that time. And then, of course, in the 50s, after the war was over in there,

E

Elle Billing 12:56

there was swung very strongly in the opposite direction.

B

Brandon Connolly 12:59

Yes, they were trying to get all the way back into the home. And they were trying to, to create that separation between man and woman and like, what's your role? And what's my role and, and then, in the 70s, we had our next spike, I guess, we were expressing ourselves more. And then we had that downturn again, like Stonewall happened during that time. I mean, we had our first gay representative in the United States ever, during that time, as well. And then we have that downturn again, when the AIDS epidemic happened in the night 1983 1984. And so that killed off most of our elderly, and the people or elders?

E

Elle Billing 13:44

Who would be our elders now.

B

Brandon Connolly 13:47

Yes, who would be elders now? That's right. And then we had our spike up again, in the 2010s. And then, of course, in 2016, when, yep, when Donald Trump came into his presidency, it became a huge problem again, but each time the timeline is getting a little bit shorter when we have our spikes. And I just try to remind myself like, we are going to have our spike again. And we will be stronger again, like we have been in the past, we keep getting stronger, every single spike.

E

Elle Billing 14:19

So I, I guess I have one more question. And if it's not something that you've really encountered here, or it's not something you want to speak to, that's fine, but I know you're not just a member of the LGBTQ community, you're you have some intersectional identities going on as well. And as a member of the disability community, can you speak to like ableism in the queer community? Is that something that you've encountered around here?

B

Brandon Connolly 14:46

B Brandon Connolly 14:40

Yes. I'm dealing with that right now. Actually. Yeah.

E Elle Billing 14:50

Like I know, You've had like, generalized ableism you've had problems previous like places of employment, like when you're in school, like It's tough out here for a crip. your experience is different than mine you were, I acquired my disability and you, you were born with yours? Is there anything you want to share about that? Are you just like us too much? That's a whole other episode.

B Brandon Connolly 15:16

I mean, it could be. It could definitely be another episode. But I think so I was born with amniotic band syndrome, which meant that my mom's amniotic sac fell apart when she was still pregnant with me. And what that did was, you know how, like when you're a little kid, and you think it's really funny to wrap rubber bands around your fingers and watch purple, yeah, and then they turn purple, and then you like, take them off really quickly, so you don't lose circulation your fingers. That was basically what the amniotic bands did is they wrapped around different parts of my body, they wrapped around like my whole left hand, and only one of my fingers didn't quite grow, and my right foot, so I don't have a big toe on my right foot, okay, and then also my left leg, which probably has made the biggest impact. So when I was born, my left leg was basically just a, this sounds, don't think about it too much, but it just was basically a little skin sack. There was really not a whole lot of development in my leg at that time. So my amputation was when I was eight months old, which is a huge blessing for me, because I don't have to deal with a lot of the things that most amputees when they have that happen to them when they're older, like I don't have Phantom Pains, I don't like-- I have been able to adapt to my environment much quicker than some people that have had that experience when they're older. So there's a there's a little bit of background, I have. So growing up, I've always been like, I've always been that kid that-- gosh little kids are mean, by the way. They, they would call me names, they didn't want to play with me. But at the same time, I was always like the educator, my parents and my teachers would get together before the beginning of the year, and they would kind of discuss on how best to bring it up to other kids because they didn't want me to feel so isolated by myself. And so there was a lot of me talking to every elementary school class and talking about like, this is what my prosthesis looks like. And this is what my leg looks like see, it's not so scary. So there was a lot of that so I feel like being an amputee has kind of like been the precursor to me being an educator now. Being trans and

E Elle Billing 17:51

it's like see I'm not scary.

B Brandon Connolly 17:53

Yeah, exactly. I feel like I'm yeah, like I repeating the same thing over and over and over again in different, like, in different intersectionalities. It's funny how life works that way but something in the queer community

E Elle Billing 18:08
but like not haha, funny.

B Brandon Connolly 18:09
Yeah, not haha, funny, but like,


E Elle Billing 18:12
"funny." And then we laugh so we don't cry

B Brandon Connolly 18:19
groans and sighs groans and sighs. But in the queer community, what I come across is, you know, people don't think about it when they're talking to me, especially when I'm wearing pants. And I also hear this a lot like, oh, you get around so well. So then they don't really think of like disability. Yeah, they don't think of it as accessibility when they're talking to me. Because I move around so well. And it's funny because not haha, funny. Because they don't see me when I'm struggling. So there's they're seeing me in that moment when I've taken the time and the preparation to be out that day or that week, or whatever I needed to do, to be out, out and about walking. So I think that accessibility around queer topics is neglected a lot, especially with pride coming up. A lot of pride festivals do not make their Pride festival accessible. They put everything on the grass like most of the time, like they're in park

E Elle Billing 19:26
They're in parks. There's no sidewalks.

B Brandon Connolly 19:27
Yep, exactly. So there's no sidewalks. I-- I've had this problem with people that I've had in the past organized with, and they've been like, oh yeah, we'll put all the canopies in the grass over here or like, it's funny. This year. We're going to have a we're calling it a sensory tent. And it's going to Yep,

E Elle Billing 19:47
yay. Oh, that just makes my heart smile.



B

Brandon Connolly 19:50

But we're trying to make it like a dark space so people can get away from all the lights. They can-- it's away from the stage, so if-- so people don't have to listen to all the noise. We're going to be putting earplugs in there so that people can use those earplugs, if they don't have any. Seats. But the thing is, is that it's in the grass. So anybody that's not able to get in the grass or walk around in the grass, like, they're not going to be able to access this sensory, this accessibility tent, the irony in it. And yeah, and the thing is, is that the way that we have our parks set up, we usually only use one half of the park for a festival. And really, we've really tried to push like, Okay, well, let's make it like every single cement sidewalk that we can find, let's just spread it out. Let's use the whole park, we're renting the whole park anyway. And that was a huge issue with some organizers that, I've that I've talked to. And so there's a lot of vendors that are going to be in the grass, the sensory tent is going to be in the grass. They were like, well, if we put the sensory tent on the sidewalk, it's going to be all the way out and away from everybody else. I'm like, well, that's kind of the point, like at least they can access that spot. At least they could get into the tent, at least they could use it. Even if it's away from everybody else. That's kind of the point.

E

Elle Billing 21:19

I can't even imagine trying to get through the grass of city park, like with a power wheelchair.

B

Brandon Connolly 21:25

Oh, I had one lady --

E

Elle Billing 21:27

or any wheelchair, especially like self propelled either. Yeah, like,

B

Brandon Connolly 21:32

--there's one person that has gone to the Pride festival here in town. And she, she gets around really well, as long as she's obviously on the sidewalk and she kind of pushes herself with her legs. She doesn't really use her arms. She uses her arms to kind of like, make those little stops on the wheels just so that she could turn. But she uses her legs push herself. So she's always like moving backwards

E

Elle Billing 21:59

I've seen her in town.

B

Brandon Connolly 22:00

Yep, yes. Anyway, last year, she came by. I was a vendor that year. So last year, um, she came

by our tent, and she started talking about how inaccessible the whole thing was, she was like, it took me forever just to get to you guys. And we were like, are one of the far corners of our map at that point. And she's like, it took me forever to get over here. I've been here all day. And then she was like, I'm not looking forward to going back because I'm not going to be able to get back up on the sidewalk because there's kind of a lip Yep, on the sidewalk in city park. And I asked her if she needed help. Like, I was like, I can't go, I would love to escort you and take you back over there. And, and I could help but I think that, you know, there's a lot of pride involved sometimes. And she was like, No, I don't need any help. I'm gonna figure it out by myself. And I'm sure she did. Yeah, with a little bit of struggle with us. The thing is, like, every LGBTQ person should be able to celebrate all parts of themselves. Like that's, that's the thing about being LGBTQ, is being queer people, we are more than just queer.

E

Elle Billing 23:08

Yeah.

B

Brandon Connolly 23:09

And that, I think, is it like, that goes over some people's heads of like, No, this is like my whole identity. But it's like, no, there's queer people that are, you know, like me that are amputees. But I'm also like, a person of color. I'm black. I'm, I'm Mexican. I, you know, my, my indigenous roots are, you know, with the Aztecs, and so I. So there's like things about me that are more than just being transgender and queer. And that's with every single queer person. Like, there's more about you than being queer. And so when you when you don't think about being inclusive, more diverse in the LGBTQ community, you are cutting off so many parts of the LGBTQ community. So it's, it's a huge struggle that we've always had. And we continue to have, but we're slowly working on it. Not getting there. We're working on it.

E

Elle Billing 24:03

Yeah. I mean, I think of if I just like, think about all my queer friends is like, yeah, they're none of us are like, just queer.

B

Brandon Connolly 24:12

Yeah,

E

Elle Billing 24:12

we all have all of this other gloriousness about us

B

Brandon Connolly 24:15

Exactly.

E Elle Billing 24:16

When, in 25%, give or take of the general population is disabled. So I would assume that about 25% or so of the queer community is probably disabled too, maybe even more, you know, I don't know.

B Brandon Connolly 24:32

Yeah. Or have you ever heard of like the Venn diagram between queer people and autism?

E Elle Billing 24:38

It's like a circle. Or at least neurodivergent. Yeah. Because like, I'm not autistic, but I have ADHD. Yeah, my sister is autistic. And like, it's like, Hmm, like what's up in our family?

B Brandon Connolly 24:51

But it is true. So I mean, but to not think about it like that. Like we joke about it, and then we do nothing about it. Make it accessible to us.

E Elle Billing 25:02

You've heard of a bisexual chair, right? Or how bisexuals can't chair? Yeah, well, but that's the whole thing is like, Well, neither can people with ADHD. So again, it's the it's the overlap of the people with ADHD and people who are bisexual is like Venn diagrams a circle, and none of us can sit in a chair. Yeah. Accessibility: weird chairs.

B Brandon Connolly 25:24

Yeah,

E Elle Billing 25:24

and sidewalks!

B Brandon Connolly 25:25

weird chairs and sidewalks. That's all we're asking right now!



E Elle Billing 25:27
Ramps...no fluorescent lights. I'm trying to think of things that I need to

B Brandon Connolly 25:34
Oh, my gosh,

E Elle Billing 25:34
fluorescent lights are really difficult. But like, I just wear shades everywhere. Like most of my accessibility needs are things that I have to handle on my own. You know, but it's like food and lighting.

B Brandon Connolly 25:46
Yeah, I'm also incredibly aware of like, if there's an elevator in a building that has stairs. Because I have had those experiences where I can't get on the second floor, third floor, whatever for to access, like resources, for example.

E Elle Billing 26:04
Yeah,

B Brandon Connolly 26:04
there's a lot of LGBTQ focused organizations that use these older buildings. Because that's either for aesthetics, or that's what they can afford.

E Elle Billing 26:18
Yeah.

B Brandon Connolly 26:19
And they don't have elevators in them. And it's like, okay, so there's like a population, a huge population of queer people that, I don't know, can't go see a therapist because you put your therapist on the second floor with stairs.

E Elle Billing 26:34
Yeah, I had a interview. I had a guest early in the first season who is limb different. So she was here with one arm. And she had a pediatrician in a building with no elevator. And so like

born with one arm. And she-- her kid's pediatrician is in a building with no elevator. And so like she uses elevators, because you can't-- you have to have two hands to lift a stroller up the stairs. Yeah. And so she's like, an, you know, you talk about the pants thing. It's for her. It's when she's wearing a jacket. People don't realize she only has one hand. And then she takes her coat off. And they're like, Oh, I didn't, I didn't know you only had one. And now I don't know how to be around you. But then, like New York City, again, all old buildings. Yeah, everybody's in a walk-up with no elevator, and she's trying to wrestle kids upstairs to see the pediatrician or to go wherever and it's just ridiculously inaccessible. And it's like, just stop staring at me and like, help me or something like, yeah, I don't want you to pity me. I just need a little something. It is not what you're giving me right now.

B Brandon Connolly 27:41

Seriously? Gosh, I Yeah. That happens to me a lot. Especially when I have a handicap placard. And so when I parking in a handicapped spot, and I'm wearing pants people glare at me. Yeah. They're like, yeah.

E Elle Billing 27:57

Do you do show a little shiny ankle?.

B Brandon Connolly 28:02

It's like everybody's policing me. And I oh my gosh, like, you don't have to see something wrong with me for me to have this for me. Yeah, gosh, mind your own business. And so. But when I'm wearing shorts, that's like, I step out of my car. And immediately people are like, oh, and then they like, look away. And then they go back to their own thing. And I'm just like, oh, my gosh, it's so annoying. But yeah, it's just everything is so incredibly inaccessible. And I know that there are, there's more architecture that is becoming more accessible. But that's such a slow process. And we don't do enough in our infrastructure already. To try and make things accessible. We're just like waiting for new buildings to pop up so that they can be accessible. And it's like,

E Elle Billing 28:48

what what about the ones that we already have?

B Brandon Connolly 28:51

Yes, exactly. Why don't we take that responsibility for ourselves and create everything more accessible instead of waiting for somebody else to build it for us? So

E Elle Billing 29:00

Well thank you. Thank you for joining us on this episode of Hoarf. To view the complete show

well, thank you. Thank you for joining us on this episode of Hoorf. To view the complete show notes, and all the links mentioned in today's episode, or to get a full transcript of the episode, visit [Hoorf podcast.com](https://hoorfpodcast.com). That's H O O R F podcast.com. Before you go, make sure you subscribe to the podcast so you can receive new episodes right when they're released. And if you're enjoying our podcast, I'd love to have you leave us a review in Apple podcasts. Reviews are one of the major ways that Apple ranks their podcasts. So even though it only takes you a few seconds, it really does make a difference for us. Become a patron for \$3 a month you can support the creation of this podcast, pay my editor and join a community of fellow caregivers out here just doing our best. Thank you again for joining me, Elle Billing, in this episode of Hoorf. Until next time, be excellent to each other Hoorf is hosted by Elle Billing at [elleandwink](https://elleandwink.com) ; audio editing by Ricki Cummings at [rickiep00h](https://rickiep00h.com). music composed by Ricki Cummings. Hoorf is a production of Elle and Wink Art Studio, all rights reserved. Hoorf podcast can be found on social media channels at [Hoorf podcast](https://hoorfpodcast.com) at H O O R F podcast Accessibility: weird chairs and sidewalks!



Brandon Connolly 30:39

weird chairs and sidewalks. That's all we're asking.