

Noncompliant-The Podcast

[Neurodiversity & Disability Rights in Alberta: An Interview with Christopher Whelan of Neurodiversity YMM](#)

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Transcribed by Julie-Ann Lee

ABK: Welcome to Noncompliant. I'm your host, **Anne Borden King**. Today on the show we're talking with **Christopher Whelan**. Christopher is an autistic self-advocate and a Housing First social worker operating in his community of Fort McMurray, Alberta. He is the founder of Neurodiversity YMM: a grassroots sharing circle for neurodivergent and disabled people in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, as well as the current director for his local chapter of Autistics United Canada. His new publication, the 95 Theses of Neurodiversity, offers 95 principles to guide communities in promoting Love, Self-Determination, and Inclusion of neurodivergent people in society.

I'm so happy to have Chris on the show. Welcome to the show, Chris!

CW: Thank you for the warm welcome, Anne.

ABK: So we met up when you were visiting Toronto, and we had some really good nosh at the Free Times Café, and one of the things we found we had in common was that we both grew up until our tweens basically in these deeply rural settings, and then we moved to less rural settings, to small cities in our tweens or early teens. In my case, my family lived in the woods in a small town, a little mill town in Wisconsin before we moved to the capital city of Wisconsin when I was 13, and where did you grow up and when did you move away from that place?

CW: So, I grew up in a little town named Triton, Newfoundland, population less than 1,000 on the coast of Newfoundland, in a place called Notre Dame Bay. It's the northern coast of Newfoundland, not the peninsula but, the bay there.

So, like a whole lot of people in Fort McMurray, Alberta, the home of the Athabasca oilsands, my family migrated here during the decline of the Newfoundland economy and the boom in the oilsands. They moved here in 1999 when I was 8 years old.

I don't think my neurodivergence was on my family's mind when we lived in Newfoundland. I don't think it was apparent in the environmental context of small town Newfoundland. In the small towns everything is so quiet and so slow, only a handful of places to see, only a handful of things to do. I can't imagine a better environment for a sensory avoiding autistic to be and simplicity was comforting.

Nothing was unexpected.

ABK: That's so interesting, so that of the culture...it wasn't even detected that you were neurodivergent because it was- how would you describe it then, *accessible*? Or more accessible or more inclusive than the environment you moved to?

CW: It's like when I go back to Notre Dame Bay in Newfoundland now, the community where I grew up feels like being in an open-air sensory room. Because everything is so quiet and peaceful, everything is exactly where you left it the last time you were there, might be new restaurants, new bed and breakfasts, but- and the downturn might mean there's fewer younger people, but the feel of the towns are the same, and you know what you're waking up to every morning.

ABK: Right.

CW: Everything's predictable.

ABK: What about school? Was the school experience different there as well?

CW: School was really the only place where my divergence really came up. I was exceptional at math and science, but those fine motor skills – things like handwriting class, cutting straight lines with scissors – those were the first real indications that I had a divergent mind. And you know blinking lights and classroom noise, people chatting, people knocking, people next to you knocking against you, bothering you. I didn't experience that at home or anywhere else in the community, just the school and I had sensory stimulus from school and I didn't do very well in the classroom. My homework is where I learned everything, where I could be in my home, in my predictable environment, I could finish all that.

ABK: Um-hmm. Right, of course, the school day is a big part of life, but it's also less hours of life if you have summer break and have weekends and things like that. There's a *whole other* part of life- like I grew up- we lived on 3 acres of woods, and it was surrounded by more woods and there was a creek. There was a little river and little lakes and bogs and my childhood memories...it's almost like bifurcated into the "school thing", and then like my real life which was outside in the out of doors. That was where I learned a lot of things that give me strength that didn't come out of, kind of adversity- but out of like nice experiences like understanding my body in space, and assessing risk and deciding like 'can I jump out of this tree or not', you know the sort of problem solving skills that come from that very real kind of relationship with the land and the animals within the land and the life and the deaths too even within the land.

The forest is such a- I don't know how to- a *fertile* kind of place to learn about life...and the other thing that for me about this second world that I had outside of school was that in the outdoors, nature always had time for me. Like, I had a place there, and when [my family] moved a suburban setting, it was just blacktop. I was 13 years old when we moved to Madison. I really missed the country because it was almost like a mother to me, or something that those natural spaces- very forgiving and warm and it was

a safe place for me. So, yeah, for me it was like a real adjustment.

So, you got to Alberta, and you had to make sense of it all, what happened to you when you got into the school system that had the switch in the sense of time and dealing with the environment that you eventually then survived and kind of came out of it, and you're kind of giving back to the community. Can you talk a little bit about that?

CW: Yeah, when I came to Alberta, my grades slipped every year. I used to get 100s when I was in elementary school but they turned into 85s, and they turned into 70s and 75s when I was in Junior High or Middle school, and in High School they were more like 50s and 60s.

I had to redo my math courses in summer school two years in a row, and one year I even failed the summer school course. It wasn't for a lack of trying. I wasn't a partier, I wasn't in with a 'bad crowd', I wasn't purposely underachieving, but every year I just became less and less able to maintain focus in the classroom and all the material was going over my head and it hurt because I always wanted to make my family happy and do good in school, but I just couldn't.

ABK: Right, and we hear that a lot from people who are autistic or otherwise neurodiverse. This desire to make it, but the environment just not having- just not being an accessible environment to do well.

CW: Um-hmm. The classrooms were busier here in Alberta. More of us were packed into a class. Because of that the teachers had a hard time managing us. So, so little got done when I was in an overcrowded classroom. And the textbooks also became less and less helpful. You had to pay attention to what the teacher had said in order to understand the homework. And I hadn't done that. I hadn't been able to pay attention in class, so I was... it was... They didn't set me up for success.

ABK: Um-hmm. Some things like the class size that you mentioned is so crucial like, when I transferred high schools to an alternative school the class sizes were really small there. There were like 12 kids per class, and it was- it was an *accessible* environment, it was incredible to be able to have this opportunity to learn and I was able to do independent study and things that- where I really thrived. And it's interesting to think about the solutions that districts, school districts tend to come up with, or what they call solutions for **mainstreaming** neurodiverse kids into the classroom. Their solution is never something like smaller class size or sensory friendly spaces in classrooms, although there's a few pilot programs that are doing that...

The overarching approach that they seem to take is that we need to put more people in the classrooms and we need more aides, and they stack these personal aides to just help people cope in this very, very difficult environment rather than... inclusion...I got this from you, where you said: 'instead of changing the environment to fit the child, they're trying to change the child to fit the environment.' And that, not surprisingly, isn't working. It's an utter failure.

So, I'm interested in why? When so many autistic and otherwise neurodivergent people make the suggestions for improving classrooms by making them smaller, by making them more sensory friendly,

why there is resistance to that within the district system? And then in Alberta, do you see that same kind of resistance, because this is what we see in Ontario?

[10:18]

CW: My heart goes out to all the Alberta teachers because our classes are getting more and more crowded to- because of funding cutbacks. And we have “**inclusion**” where neurodivergent children are being put into these crowded classrooms without support just to include them with their peers, and they’re not able to have a successful education, because they’re not being supported they’re not in an environment where they can learn. It’s just, “let’s save money, let’s get all the kids in one class” (sigh)... My heart goes out to the teachers because they are doing their best.

ABK: Why do you suppose there’s resistance within districts to trying different approaches? I mean, you’re suggesting something that has to do with budget, in terms of that, or...?

CW: (Sigh) Yeah, it’s all budget. We’re facing a long string of cutbacks in education in Alberta right now, and schools are becoming more like factories than places where people can learn. It’s like it’s not a priority.

ABK: With the work that you’re doing now, then, you are working mainly through **Housing First**, you’re working mainly with adults and people who have children looking for housing. How does that connect with what we have been talking about in terms of this institutional difficulties or oppression that people are facing in trying to manage within these institutions, being disabled?

CW: It’s particularly hard for neurodivergent people who experience **homelessness** to get to get out of it. Like we- my job is to set somebody up with a home, set somebody up with a job or with income support, disability income support, or pension- whatever more stable income supports they can have and then to graduate them from our program. And that is helpful for a neurotypical, homeless community but people who need extra supports to know how to pay their bills, to know how to set up a doctor’s appointment, and they have a harder time holding down a job because workplaces are being built with neurotypicals in mind instead of people with divergent minds. So, it’s a really sticky situation for a neurodivergent person who is experiencing homelessness to get out of it.

ABK: Yeah. I hear so much from people about, I mean people want their own place, and they want to have a job, but it’s so often not attainable. And again, like we’re talking back to the solutions that districts have had for inclusion, the solution in Canada, and I think some people, Americans etc. are shocked by this, but the solution- housing solution for autistic or neurodivergent or intellectually developmentally disabled people – the housing “solution” that the government of Canada and the provincial governments tend to put forward is segregated housing – **group homes** rather than independent living.

CW: Correct.

ABK: So, that’s another challenge, right?

CW: Um-hmm. And we have a hard time securing that even here. In Alberta to be considered for PDD supports which is when you get disability supports, you need to prove that you have an **IQ** of 70 or lower, and I highly disagree with this 1. Because IQ is not scientific, and 2. Because IQ is not a determinant of health. It's not a determinant of your ability to work, or maintain employment, maintain tenancy. It's got nothing to do with it.

ABK: Mm-hmm. So how do you, in the work you do, and maybe we can draw this in as well with **Neurodiversity YMM** because in Neurodiversity YMM, it's a sharing circle for neurodivergent, disabled people in Wood Buffalo. How does that kind of tie in with helping people and hoping to give people tools and bring people together and build a grass roots for changing some of what we've just been talking about?

CW: Neurodiversity YMM is a place where **people speak for themselves**. I can't really advocate for somebody else within the sharing circle unless they ask the circle to help them. It's- I'm a very privileged autistic person in that I was able to graduate university and I had a family that was so, so supportive of me and I was set up for success, if not by my environment that other children didn't get, but because I had such a supportive family and teachers and doctors and people who believed in my success and so I don't have a lot of experiences that autistics have about behavioural therapy- I never had to do that. I have no experience with seclusion rooms. I never had to experience any of that, so it's hard for me to advocate for another person because I don't have that **lived experience** and we created the sharing circle because we wanted to bring lived experience to the table.

So, if we had somebody who was experiencing homelessness, experiencing poverty, or they were an ABA survivor, seclusion room survivor, I wouldn't speak for them because they are a part of my circle. I would **ally** with them to help them advocate for themselves.

ABK: Right. It kind of ties in with this **idea the personal is political**, right? Because the personal struggles that people are facing are very much tied in with the political and social kind of structures that might, I mean this is an old phrase from like the 1970s: 'the personal is political' and it's this idea that we can't really separate our personal experiences from our place in the world, and that's largely determined by these broader systems of hegemony ...or whatever you want to call it. I think that's what I would call it. So, let's talk about that. For autistic people in Canada right now, in Alberta right now, how is the personal political?

CW: It's like, I'm autistic but I can't speak on behalf of other autistics because of my other social locations being a young adult male, being a white settler here in Canada, coming from, you know a family that was able to make oil field money, I don't have a lot of experiences that a lot of people have. And I do my best to make sure that the sharing circle has all these **diverse experiences** to it, so that nobody is talking about something that they actually don't know anything about, because we need more Indigenous autistics and neurodivergent people in the circle. We need more women, we need more trans and non-binary and intersex people, and we've gotta work on accessibility and looking for who's not in the room, and who should be here.

ABK: Um-hmm. You're doing some of that with doing some of this virtually, right? Because, when you have a project where people **connect virtually** so that you can reach people in remote areas or for other reasons can't attend a group in person, what are some of the ways that you're doing this virtual outreach?

CW: Um-hmm. That's part of our whole accessibility package. We've got a whole lot of **supports** in place to open up our community to people from a diverse set of social locations. So, right now we've got ground floor meeting places with wide doors so people with mobility issues can access our circle. We've got new gender-neutral washrooms, single stall. We use a talking stick at our meeting so people who are quiet or shy or don't know how to interject into a conversation can indicate that they have something to say. And, once the person who is currently speaking is done the person with the talking stick has the floor.

As for reaching the remote communities, one of our accessibility supports is a video chat channel where people can call in over the internet and be present at our meetings. Originally that was put in so people who were out of social energy – out of **spoons** – at the end of their day, could crash at home, be in their comfort zone and call in and be present at the meeting. Then people who were not comfortable being around strangers or being in an unfamiliar environment could call in from home and still attend. Then I had someone from one of the remote communities in our region Fort Chipewyan which is only accessible by aeroplane or by our winter road, or ice road, they joined our group and started calling in to meetings. So, this outreach to outlying communities has been a happy side effect to our video chat channel. In the future, I'm hoping to work with liaisons to have more neurodivergent Indigenous people living in the remote communities call into our meeting, and offer their perspectives and talk about their needs.

[20:52]

ABK: Mm-hmm.

CW: Indigenous people are not consulted in policies affecting them and neurodivergent people are not consulted in policies affecting them, so Indigenous neurodivergent people are really silenced. Neurodiversity YMM is about neurodivergent people **building our services together** and we're going to do this right the first time. We're going to keep challenging ourselves to tear down these barriers to having certain populations not included, and we're gonna keep asking our Indigenous neurodivergent community to hold us accountable to that mission.

ABK: So, it's about intersectional connections and making sure that everyone's in the room.

CW: Mm-hmm. Making sure we do this right the first time.

ABK: That's great. It's a big- It's a big project and it's a project that's been overlooked for too long.

CW: Mm-hmm.

ABK: I wanted to get into the document that you wrote, the 95 Theses of Neurodiversity. You **consulted** with over 100 neurodivergent self-advocates and you outline methods for presumed competence accepting authenticity in neurodivergent people. You talk about intersectionality and you also talk about **consent**.

And I wanted to talk about consent because of course, there's this terrible history and a current precedent of people putting disabled people into conditions against their consent, whether that's an abusive group home or place like the **Judge Rotenberg Centre** or into **ABA** or other phony autism cures.

It also extends- you extended it in your document to talking about companies and hospitals using the genetic data of autistic people to inform their research. Putting their genetic data into a database without really their consent, just by their parent's consent- these are kind of like young kids. So, this guideline for your document really jumped out at me. You wrote... and this is a guideline, "A guardian of a neurodivergent child under the age of majority may not consent to the collection of data for research purposes on behalf of their child." Could you talk about how you came to write that and what that new standard would mean?

CW: So, there's a really problematic project happening between **Autism Speaks** and **Google** called the **MSSNG Database**. This partnership is to create a database of the DNA of autistic people and when I heard about it, I was horrified. There is no controls on this database about what this data can be used for. Of course, it's going to be used for things like cure research, genetic engineering, genetic treatments and I wondered who is volunteering their most personal data- their DNA to be given to this database.

I found out from my research that it was the parents that were volunteering their child's blood samples to this databank. So, when you grow up and you become- when you learn about neurodiversity later on, you learn to **accept** yourself, you learn to **love** being an autistic person and you don't want to be cured, your DNA is being experimented on to find a cure against what you actually want. Your blood will be used to work towards a future where the world has no autistic people.

I want to add that most of these theses were not my own opinions. They were picked up in- as general sentiments expressed in **Neurodiversity Pride** groups on Facebook and conversations that I've had with other self-advocates, these were things the community agreed on and then I send out this document to all the groups I'm on, on Facebook and got hundreds of reactions, got feedback, changed some things, but those submissions on research ethics were submitted by me based on my own visceral reaction to autistic people not having **control** over our bodies through what our DNA is being used for.

ABK: Right. And there's a- there's definitely movements of- a lot of autistic led movements against the MSSNG project, because obviously it's not working in the interest of autistic people. It, first of all could lead to **eugenics** and designer babies and genetic engineering, and all sorts of things that fail ethically.

But then, as also, Autism Speaks in general in their work and through this, they always come back to this idea of autistic people as broken versions of 'normal', and the cost of being perceived this way and being portrayed this way by Autism Speaks as a broken puzzle piece... the cost of that to autistic people is huge.

I mean, the **suicide** rate of autistic people is something like twelve times that of neurotypical people and it has to be a factor- this sort of dehumanizing version, this looking- this approach to autism where

autistic people are an 'epidemic' and a 'burden', and you just hear this kind of messaging over and over again from Autism Speaks and some other autism groups as well.

So, I mean, it makes me wonder, this is the question that I have, the correlation that we always see in the research is they make a correlation between anxiety and autism- that they go together, but there is no biochemical link that shows a causation. It's just a correlation and what I'm thinking is we don't actually know what life could be like for autistic people who live without **stigma** because everybody does. We don't actually know what the mental health outcomes would be if we had inclusive schools in Canada and if we had acceptance, and if we didn't have this story constantly being told about autistic people as kind of broken, what would the mental health outcome be if we removed that stigma and replaced it with *acceptance*?

Like, there's no question to me that the mental health outcomes would be better because a lot of anxiety and other mental health problems are coming about as a response to this **trauma** that I just kind of outlined. I guess my question is how do we get there? How do we get to a point where there is acceptance, and then we can look and see what the actual mental health results would be of that? When we have a system-the official kind of system that's run by Autism Speaks basically kind of blaming the victim for all the problems--does that make sense? Am I being clear?

CW: You sure are. Yeah, I do blame those- the issues of depression and anxiety felt in our community, I do blame it on the trauma of not being accepted, and in having to force ourselves to conform to environments that were not built for us.

So, within my circle we address that in two ways, we address it with **building connections** between neurodivergent and disabled people that when you form connections with people who have experiences like yours who can pass on wisdom, who care about you, then that connection is a healing from trauma and I believe in my social work that connection is the basis of all healing from trauma. And, any kind of treatments or therapy that doesn't work connection into it, whether that's connection with your family, with your friends, with Mother Earth, with people, with your experiences - If [the therapy] doesn't have a connection piece to it, it's junk.

So that's- the second way that we address trauma in the sharing circle is that the rules, the policies are built by the people in the circle, even if it's your first meeting. Like I am the director of Neurodiversity YMM in that I print the posters, I make our marketing material, I meet with community members and talk to them about neurodiversity, I set up our meetings. I administer our social media, but I don't make the rules. I don't make the policies. I don't make the positional statements. I just make sure the meeting happens. And once we're all in the circle, we'll build the system together. And you know, that metaphor that's so present in our community about **the square peg and the circle hole** – how forcing a person to conform to their environment that was not built for them is like forcing a square peg through a circle hole and causing so much damage to that peg – well, our sharing circle is when the peg makes the hole.

[30:24]

ABK: Mm-hmm.

CW: The peg is making the hole, then there's no damage to it. It fits perfectly.

ABK: So, you're really informed by the whole '**nothing about us without us**' ethos, like for the whole group.

CW: Sure am.

ABK: Now, I'm just thinking again about what kind of- how neurodiversity is like this total counter-narrative to what we've had- the story that we've had about autism from basically the beginning of the invention of the term which was very pathologizing and *othering* and giving autistic people no subjectivity, and certainly not letting- not allowing us to tell our own stories- I hate that term- 'tell your story' because of all the baggage with that. But...more than telling one's own stories, being able to **drive the programming and the solutions**--

I was just reading the other day about a program being funded by the Government of Canada- an autism mentorship program and I saw the headline and I always get fooled. I always get fooled like (laughing) things are gonna be great and then they're not-

CW: (Laughing)

ABK: And so, this is what happened to me (laughing) when I read it. And I read it, oh "autism mentorship program" and it's like half a million dollars or something right – just petty change to them, and the people who are the mentors *are not autistic*, so they are mentoring autistic kids but they are not autistic themselves. And, it's such a- *so symbolic* for how things have been done, like completely nothing about us with us approach, and then what strikes me is that all this change is happening and autistic people are really rising up and the neurodiversity movement is really changing the story, but it's almost happening in a different realm than actual policy. Like, it hasn't penetrated into policy yet in Canada.

So we have groups like yours, we have online spaces where parents are happily receiving this new approach of neurodiversity and seeing how it's beneficial to their kids, and people are connecting globally around this idea, and it's this very *vibrant, powerful movement* but yet it's almost happening in another orbit than how things are still being done in Canada. And I don't really know- I think it's inevitable that it's going to start impacting policy, but as of yet, it's really not like that I can see very much if they are still running programs like the mentorship program where your "buddy" is not actually autistic when we have all these amazing people in the community who could be doing mentorship and that could also have a job from that, and things like that.

I guess I don't really have a question but it's more of an observation of being at this moment in our history and I see it generally as like a really positive moment where big changes are happening and they are starting to penetrate into institutions but they haven't happened yet, so I also feel really anxious to get it going. You know what I mean?

CW: I do- I know you don't have- this isn't a question, but I do have an addition to this in that the reason why such a mentorship program would exist is that we still have this idea that we're seeing disabled people as individuals. We're seeing them as people who were part of us and now they're broken. They're not seeing a disability *community*, they're not seeing disabled families, and that's- Neurodiversity YMM is meant to be a **microcosm** of a disability region, nation, international relations between us. It's like how the person is a microcosm of the family, the family is a microcosm of community, the community is a microcosm of the nation.

So, alone, an individual will be seen as a broken person but together in the disability community we're a shared experience, a shared culture, we've got a shared history and autistic identity. We share our industries and economies. When one of us stumbles, we support each other. It's my vision for disability communities to have everything in common with neurotypical and abled communities, and maybe even more of that **communitarian** spirit where you help your neighbour just as you would help a member of your own family.

ABK: There's that whole kind of, we should define this for listeners too – this sort of “spoonie-share” thing: are you familiar with that?

CW: Yes I am, and not only it came to my attention once I had been more active in self-advocacy, I learned about queer and neurodivergent spoon sharing collectives, and I'll let you define that more for your listeners.

ABK: Oh yeah... I mean the way I understand it, and correct me if I'm wrong cause I'm not *in* one...they're often online- they often have an online component. It's where people come together not only to connect but also to help each other out, so if somebody is- let's say a person is homebound, there'll be people in that network that can help them that are also disabled themselves but they are in a space where they can bring the person groceries or things like that. Is that- that's kind of a basic definition of it, but if you have more experience to share about it, I'd love to hear.

CW: No, you've got it. I do want to talk about this international idea sharing because I had listened to all your episodes and I listened to the interview you had with [Gaby](#) and she had talked about how looking somebody in the eye is very disrespectful in her traditional culture, but that's expected in our settler Canadian culture, and having these international disability communities allows us to share these ideas that challenge what we grew up in. So, we get to see our disabilities in a cultural context because we have this international community between us, and that's among many reasons why I see the social media component of the disability community- disability nation, so important to our consciousness about who we are.

ABK: Right, I don't know how much differently our communities – our disability communities would be forged if we didn't have the virtual world. Like, it's so important to have that, especially like you said connecting rurally and also connecting internationally with people. It's just been such a powerful force for bringing people together.

CW: It's so important when I- because my hobby is that I'm piecing together the history of disability culture and disabled people have really come around two foci – two places where we all came together, one is the institutions where we started our noncompliance and our rejection of abled neurotypical society and the second one was the internet. And, the internet allowed people who did not have access to what neurotypical society would consider *friends* and community connections. It allowed them to connect with each other.

ABK: Absolutely, absolutely. And it does bring- if you make the effort like you're doing with your organization, for outreach and connection, it also brings people together from cultures that are different from one another which you might not have if you live in a little bubble, right, like many of us do. And then it opens people up for challenging their own racism and, you know, their internalized biases against other people so it's really **social justice** work all around.

CW: That's right.

ABK: That- that is much broader than just simply, you know, boiling it down to disability.

CW: It's all connected.

ABK: Mm-hmm. That's so interesting.

I was going to mention, because just last week we had the **Disability Day of Mourning** which is an international vigil. It was started by autistic people at the **Autistic Self Advocacy Network** and they wanted to have a day of mourning for people who have been killed by their caregivers- disabled people who had been murdered by their caregivers. It's a way to remember people, and it's also a way to call for justice because what we see is that when a disabled person is killed by their caregiver, way too often the justice system goes easy on the caregiver and they get lighter sentences than when a non-disabled person is killed. We know that these lighter sentences lead to people doing copycat crimes and really kind of- it's very dehumanizing to disabled people in general. And it's of course, it's a grave injustice towards the people who were murdered.

I was wondering- I know you did a vigil in Alberta--if you could talk a little bit about what the vigil was like for you this year.

[40:52]

CW: This was my first one. It was actually the first community event that I had ever coordinated in my life other than my monthly sharing circles, so this was a whole new experience for me. We had about fifty or sixty people that I had a conversation with. We had our vigil next to our library in town and so we had people who responded to the event because they saw us on social media and they wanted to check us out, or they were already involved with disability justice in our community and wanted to come and pay their respects. But, there was a whole lot of me talking about this issue with people who had just come to the library on a Sunday, and I got to- a lot of people who had never heard about this before.

ABK: That's a great space to do it in. A place where there's passersby and I think some of the original organizers are from like warmer climates so it's a little bit- you know they'll have their vigils outdoors and things like that. I mean, this time of year in Toronto, you can't really have it outdoors but- or in most of Canada. But having it-

CW: You really can't have an outdoor vigil in Fort McMurray.

ABK: No. (laughter)

CW: (laughter)

ABK: Hmm. Yeah, but having it at the library is a great idea because you also get, like you said, passersby and like you said raising awareness about this as well.

Is there anything else that you're working on that we haven't had a chance to discuss or anything that you want to mention that's going on in the West that we should be aware of.

CW: I want to talk about what a confidence barrier I had to cross in order to do something like this because I had like no mentors for developing Neurodiversity YMM. I had more help from my social work textbooks talking about developing intentional communities, talking about participatory action research and qualitative research than- there wasn't anything like this in Alberta that I could copy off of. But, I just made something, made the circle, invited a few people, started advertising us on social media.

That's how I got the attention of Anne Lessnerkraus out of **London Autistics Standing Together**, in London, Ontario, and she introduced me to you, and I began speaking to Vivian Li at **Autistics United Canada**, and I got some – I actually got a whole lot of help from you and from Vivian in developing this project.

I want to say if there is nothing like this in your community but you want to develop a neurodivergent sharing circle just to get people together, just to start talking about disability justice, reach out to me either through Neurodiversity YMM, through **Autistics United Fort McMurray - Cree, Dene, Dane-zaa, & Metis Territory** or message me on Facebook- Christopher Whelan, and I will- if you've got any questions about how to start something like this, I'd love to be able to help anyone I can who can develop these communities that are speaking to each other and developing new ideas together.

ABK: That's amazing. I'm gonna put everything on the blog in print as well, so if people want to make that connection and do that outreach. It's really incredible what you have done in a very short period of time in terms of building community and it shows that there's a lot of capacity and there's a lot of desire to have these kinds of communities. So, I really admire what you've been doing, and I really thank you for coming to be on the show. It was very, very interesting.

CW: Thank you for inviting me, Anne.

ABK: Thanks so much!