

## [Inclusive learning spaces for neurodivergent teens](#): Talking with Passages Centre founder Kristina House

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**Anne:** Welcome to Noncompliant, a podcast about neurodiversity. I'm your host, Anne Borden King. Today I'm speaking with Kristina House who's founded an experimental hybrid learning space for neurodivergent students and other students in Toronto. It's called Passages. Kristina has homeschooled and unschooled her kids for the past 11 years as an active member of the Toronto homeschool community, including work through the Ontario Federation of Teaching Parents and as a co-founder of the Toronto Homeschool Symposium. Kristina and I have known each other through the Toronto homeschool community which my family has also been part of for 10 years.

She also worked as an American Sign Language in English Interpreter for over 15 years and has a keen understanding of disability access and rights. She's the Executive Director of Passages which offers daily in person programming Monday through Thursday for kids between the ages of 11 and 18, learning at a pace that's right for them.

Passages was founded in 2020 and it focuses on education and learning without evaluations, grades and tests. And, as Kristina has pointed out, life without grades and tests doesn't mean a limited future. There are a lot of people who are hybrid educated that do many, many interesting and rewarding things, including going to really good universities--or not--when they reach adulthood. It's not limiting and actually opens up many, many opportunities. I'm so happy to have Kristina on the podcast to talk about the program.

Welcome, Kristina!

**Kristina:** Thanks Anne! That was a great introduction.

**Anne:** I'm curious about what some of your influences might have been in terms of thinking about doing this kind of hybrid project and especially why you decided to found Passages.

**Kristina:** I've been a member of the homeschool community for 11 years and I homeschooled my own kids. We started out homeschooling and it quickly moved into an unschooling model which is just child-led, self-directed learning. I had, in the beginning when I first started homeschooling thought well, I'll just replicate school at home. I think many of us when we first start out have this little bit of fear and we think we'll just do what tends to work in the school system, maybe? I quickly saw that my kids would rush through anything I gave them to do to finally get to the good stuff, which was their projects or the things that they loved to do. And so, after a couple months of seeing that again and again, I just went "well let's scrap my work because they are going above and beyond what I would ever expect of them or what any classroom would expect of them in their own projects," so, yeah, we went full unschooling and

we've never looked back. They engage in activities and both in the home, out of the home. They have a dense learning environment and from that, as they grew older, they wanted.

I have two kids who are now teenagers, 15 and 17, and they wanted more of a social scene. And there are alternative schools in Toronto but nothing out of the system. Like nothing where people really know an alternative perspective to education where there's not this like schooling mindset behind it or not the system kind of coming down on the teachers if they are alternative in some way. I saw that there was a need for teens to have a space. I started to see my own kids needing more. And the pandemic hit, and I had a lot of time sitting around thinking. I'd already been kind of planning it for years. But, I was like, "this is time. Let's give this a go."

**Anne:** Wow! Yeah, that's... and maybe we can talk just for a minute about what unschooling is and then how unschooling informs your hybrid practice. Especially I was really interested in how Passages places a value on mentorship, because what I've found in looking at schools as a homeschooler now considering school is that the public schools here tend to fall into one of two categories. They're either very, very rigid and not interested in [supporting] self-directed learning; and the other side of it is schools that are kind of *Lord of the Flies*--kids can just show up and do nothing and I know that kids, tweens and teens *do* need guidance, and they do need mentorship. And so, it's about sort of combining the unschooling and self-directed learning with the amount of guidance or direction that kids do need. And I'm wondering how you hit that balance?

**Kristina:** You're exactly right. That's what I saw in the school system as well and what I started to see was that it wasn't necessarily that that was the philosophy of the schools when it moved to like more of a *Lord of the Flies* attitude. It was that the educators did not know how to support self-directed learners. They didn't know what that looked like or they themselves had never had training or support. There's a very big self-directed education world and many of them don't have access to it, I don't think.

So just to answer your first question what unschooling is. It is the idea of allowing the child to lead their education. So, that means there's no grades, no homework, no assessments, exams... nothing that would I guess evaluate them except for their own self-evaluation. So, if someone has an interest in minerals, they can now spend as many hours they want on minerals and from all angles, diving into different kinds of places in the world. Like, from one topic it can spark into many different subjects that...tend to be compartmentalized in the school system but once you're unschooling everything just becomes about that subject and within the learning scope.

Mentoring a self-directed learner is a very delicate balance, because adults can very quickly squash any excitement that a kid might have in something that they have discovered themselves. The less we can take over and lead them and instead just encourage them from below and be curious about what they love is how you guide them. So for instance at Passages there's many kids there who have very, very special interests and dive deep into their topics.

Some of it is beyond what an adult knows or could support because like we just don't have the knowledge that they've spent hours and hours and hours cultivating.

**Anne:** Right.

**Kristina:** So the way you mentor is by checking in with them. Like, "what are your goals?" We have weekly one-on-one meetings. Each learner in the space meets with me one-on-one and we document what they are working on. "What do you want to work on? How's that going? Do you have timelines that you have for yourself?" And, sometimes those meetings can be two minutes long because they're like, "I'm not interested in doing that right now. I'm just kind of focusing." Or other times it can lead to half an hour to 45 minutes of them mapping out what they want to do and where they want to go, and next steps forward and who to reach out in the community.

And that's a big part of Passages as well: bringing in the community to help guide the learners. There's so many adults out there with expertise and their own passion that when they come to the centre, that their passion just spreads everywhere and ignites like a new sense of wonder in the kids. I call it like, they're living books. They come to our centre and just like breathe their love of whatever they're doing into the space and it's actually really inspiring.

**Anne:** It really sounds like an art form and it sounds like something that one would have to study and then override this sort of instinct as an adult to, like you said, almost end up behaving in such a way that it squashes the interest itself.

**Kristina:** Yeah, there's a concept called de-schooling. So, unschooling is one concept which is child-led learning. De-schooling is the work that the adults and also the learners need to do. And that's basically letting go of what learning looks like and letting go of the expectation of producing something. There's this kind of pressure in the school system and mainstream system to be "productive," to get grades, create essays...instead of just learning. And so, being able to just step back and understand that "no, this is just learning for learning's sake and that that is so valuable that you don't need to produce anything at the end."

Now, the kids usually produce something because that's what their passion is guiding them towards but it can look very different than a school essay or...I don't even know what they do in school all the time. But it can look very different from the paperwork that one would expect from a school.

**Anne:** I guess I want to pivot and talk a little bit about neurodiversity because I'm hearing you talk about special interests and being able to focus in on special interests, and it seems like that's an unmet need in the public school system. Neurodivergent students, especially autistic students can have very, very high focus on one topic. And it's not just autistic students, it's lots of students, given the opportunity, that like to focus on one thing and really understand it and in fact that's encouraged once they graduate...but somehow it's kind of like everybody has to be like a novice at 25 different topics and subjects [in public school]. You just start to get into

something and it moves on to something else. And I think that's really frustrating for a lot of students, not just autistic students. But it strikes me that students who are autistic and neurodivergent who have a hyperfocus on a topic or an interest or an area are really stifled in the school from exploring it, other than outside of school time. They're definitely for the most part not really encouraged or guided in the way that your school is. So, do you find that a lot of the kids that come to Passages are coming out of a school experience that just wasn't meeting their needs?

**Kristina:** Ah, 100 percent yeah. Well over 80 per cent of the learners that have come through our centre are neurodivergent. And yeah, the hyperfocus, the special interests I would say makes up most of their days and we think it's fantastic and we encourage it. It's really exciting to see them just dive in and then share with the other learners, and the other learners share what their special interest is. It becomes this like cross-pollination of ideas and information. For instance today we have two learners who are... *love* world flags and so they spent an hour putting flags up on the tv and labeling them and talking about the history of the flags and where they came from and how it influenced the country and it just became this really rich discussion that myself and a couple of the other learners, we just sat sitting in awe because it's just so phenomenal the level of understanding.

I get shivers when I think about it because it's just the amount of work and time put into this knowledge that might at school just be seen as like "okay, yeah but we have this English essay to do" or "yeah, but you didn't read this chapter." It's like yeah, but here's this kid who knows so much in such a well-rounded way and that's just shoved off to the side because this English chapter needs to be read. So at our centre, it's all about what you want to do, and how you want to learn and at what depth and then sharing with the community, or not. You have the autonomy to direct your education and learning.

**Anne:** Can you explain what an average week might look like at Passages in terms of the events and activities? I notice that you do PowerPoint Night, which is where kids can build and develop their projects into something and then share it with everyone. And, I'm also curious to talk about the mental health check-ins and kind of how you weave everything together through the week.

**Kristina:** Yeah, so everything at Passages is opt-in, which means we have what I call like a buffet of opportunity that the learners can join in if they want to. And what happens one week might not be the same for next week in terms of them joining because everyone's needs change constantly. So just remaining flexible and keeping communication open is the basis of how we operate at Passages. A lot of the classes are youth-initiated. PowerPoint Night, for instance it's "night" in quotes because it's during the day during centre hours but what it is they come together and they each pick a topic that they want to present to the group and they just create PowerPoints and then get a certain amount of time.

[15:06]

**Kristina:** I think the first time we did it, they each got seven minutes, the next time was five minutes. Like, the group decides how much time is allotted to each person. And then they just talk, so the autistic kids in the group are so excited because they can just have an audience for seven minutes where they can just talk about their special interest and no one can interrupt them and they can just go.

Like when they're making their PowerPoints it's like they're buzzing. They're so excited to be sharing and able to have this audience.

Throughout the week there are different classes that people have asked for. Like, right now we're starting Book Writing, because NaNoWriMo is coming up in November, so with that comes some writing preparation. There are a lot of writers in the centre. We also have some runners, so we're working towards a 5k, so a group goes out running.

Some learners have created their own schedule that they follow, and I can see them throughout the day like referring to their own schedule and pretty independently just working on their own activities. Others just come and they're like, "well, now what do I do," and they just sit around and wait and see what's going on and then join in on conversation or get inspired by someone else doing something and it just, they just kind of weave things into their learning throughout the day. Then others are working on, like "school subjects", trying to get credits. Or working towards getting credits for whatever goal they have for moving forward in their education.

When I was first founding... or thinking about founding Passages, the key for me was to always have some kind of social worker in the space or someone that could really support mental health because I really did feel that was lacking in the school system, and I can see so much that youth and teens are...they are each other's counsellors, constantly. They lean on each other, they support one another, sometimes not even ever going to an adult. And that can be a hard load for the person that's being relied on, especially if you're not someone that has the skills yet to support a friend, and so when I was thinking about what I would like in the centre, what was really important to me was having a space where it's modelled on how to support a friend. How do you not try to one-up their trauma, or not try to one-up their bad days but instead, sit back and support them?

And so, in the centre we have a Masters of Social Work student. We now have our second student. We had one last year and now again this year, and they're in charge of leading this mental health check in which is weekly, and again it's opt in and people can go and share how they're feeling. Share just about their life, or they can just sit and observe. There's no requirement to share and everyone is comfortable with that. From that they get the support, but the Masters of Social Work student knows that their role is to basically model how would you operate if you were the friend.

From that what I can see is they're all caring for one another more than they had been before. There's a level of empathy that they know from that sharing group which they respect confidentiality, so the stuff that is talked about isn't talked about outside of the group. But you

can see that when someone's having an off day or is a little bit short with people, they're getting more slack than I think would be typical in a teen setting. And I think they are getting slack because they know from that group what's going on for that person and how they're struggling. And the group just comes together and looks out for one another.

**Anne:** That's amazing. It's really radical compared to a traditional school where mental health is dealt with in a very *reactive* way, like typically waiting until there's a crisis and then having an intervention, right? As opposed to kind of having it a part of the daily habit of healthy living which is what you're doing.

It's really interesting that you're doing it that way, that people can opt in or opt out. Also allows for there to be less stigma. It's less individualized and then there's this whole learning component that you're talking about where the kids are watching adults as kind of active mentors, acting like a friend and supporting each other as friends and encouraging life skills like listening and compassion and things like that, but not in a lecturing type of way, which is so cool.

**Kristina:** I really, really believe that adults are very good at squashing out the kind of life energy of teens, so I feel kind of protective of that in the space where the teens are given a lot of power. I say teens but we are 11 to 18.

Over the years, when you're, I guess when you're an unschooler for your children, you as an adult become an unschooler as well which is a lot of work, not only to deschool, and get rid of that schooly voice of all the 'should-ing' all over yourself, but you start to learn and learn and learn, and you follow rabbit trails and it goes deeper and deeper. And, I'm sure you've had these experiences...

**Anne:** Yeah.

**Kristina:** Yeah, and so, the learning just by the end of this I feel like, "oh my gosh, do I have a PhD in this?" because I've done so much reading and learning and research and writing and thinking. And at the end of these 11 years I was like "what do I do with this?" And so that's where Passages came from for me is I was like "I actually have to use this and pass it on." Like I am so passionate about it, so I would say I'm living the self-directed life. I started Passages by like typing in "how to run a non-profit" [laughter]...

**Anne:** [Laughter]

**Kristina:** And from that it's kind of snowballed. Like, I had the foundation of what I wanted this to be and the democratic space, that's another thing that's important in our centre. So, I wanted it to be a democratic, consensus-based space, but now how do you kind of do the business side of all of it. That was where my learning really started.

**Anne:** Right. It's amazing! And you had this sort of down time I guess you were building it around 2020... Is that right?

**Kristina:** Mm-hmm. So I...yeah, I was working in the school system as a Sign Language Interpreter for a while, and that was, I guess, what I was doing because I knew I wanted to work with teens. I knew I wanted to help them and set them free in some way. I guess I would say I was a little bit scared to take the plunge to open my own space.

And then when the pandemic hit and I was sent home to work from home, Zoom wasn't really for me and I didn't really enjoy that level of I would say disconnection... It wasn't connection with people. That's when I dove into planning and thinking. And then things in my world just kind of weirdly lined up to bring me forward that this was the right thing to be pursuing. I met someone who knew someone with a space... that they wanted teens in the space in during the day.

**Anne:** Wow.

**Kristina:** And it just kind of unfolded that way, yeah.

**Anne:** That's incredible.

**Kristina:** Mmm.

**Anne:** I think that if we could talk about the pandemic for a moment. It's interesting, I hear from so many people that there were some surprises and opportunities that came out of that quiet period for some people. At the same time, also to talk about the grief that came out of that period as well. And now that we're sort of in this post-pandemic period, we have a way to look at it that's different than just being caught up in the moment, and there's really a lot of awareness coming out about the impact that those two years had on kids' mental health. So I wanted to ask, what are some of the issues that you see kids and families facing in the next year or two as we are transitioning back?

**Kristina:** Yeah, it was interesting, in the second year of Passages there was a moment we were all sitting around and the learners are a mix of past homeschoolers and kids that have left the school system and are now at Passages. So, they all started talking about how the pandemic felt for them and what they went through when kind of that day happened. I forget the day... everyone knows it... March 20<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> or something?

**Anne:** Something... yeah.

**Kristina:** That day where everyone was sent home and then it just, you never went back. And the homeschoolers were like, "oh, I didn't really feel like my life was any different." Like, "I was fine, I kind of was still online with my friends and it was even better because my school friends were now home all the time..."

**Anne:** Right.

**Kristina:** ... "my social life improved, I felt happier." And then the schooled kids in the circle, you could see that they were just kind of sad, because they really did suffer during that time and

they really felt a disconnect and they really felt alone. As we all know they were put on Zoom and then expected to operate at the same level that they would in person, during a pandemic. When the whole world and parents and everybody was like flipped upside down, these kids were told like, “just continue on like nothing’s changed.”

**Anne:** Right, right.

**Kristina:** And I know that a lot of teachers tried to make it a smooth transition, or tried to support them, but I think in those moments like there really wasn’t the support that each individual child needed. So just that day, them talking about their experiences made me feel very, very sad and very happy that they were now at Passages, like being supported by one another. But, I found it really interesting the difference between the homeschoolers’ experience and the schoolers’ experiences.

As people have joined Passages, what I’m noticing now is the kids had a bit of a taste of this freedom of learning on their own or saying that they were logged into their school but really doing what they wanted to do. And now the adjustment back to this rigid schedule isn’t satisfying for them anymore.

**Anne:** Interesting.

**Kristina:** Or they don’t have friends because they were so disconnected and they don’t want to now go into this super-overwhelming space like these large schools and try to make friends in a way that is really rigid because you’re now stuck in a classroom sitting at a desk and the saying “School’s not for socializing”. So how do you balance that of you want friends but you’re now in this environment that doesn’t encourage that social atmosphere?

A lot of them are coming to me – a lot of the families reaching out, their child is burned out, tired, sleeping all the time, disengaged. Used to love learning now wants nothing to do with anything and unfortunately they arrive because they feel desperate...and then within weeks, I regularly get the email within a couple weeks that the parents like “Oh my goodness, my child is back. I can’t believe they’re back! They are now wanting to join clubs and go with their brothers to the mall,” or just things that have like life energy back all because they’ve now come to this centre and now have this freedom, this weight lifted off where they can just now move forward with their own decisions, with their own autonomy. That’s what I think... the pandemic allowed them autonomy and it was taken away when they were sent back to school.

**Anne:** Yeah, it did. I’m so interested in what you’re saying because it’s making me wonder if people and families and individual kids are just going to feel so frustrated with this...this *dirge* about learning loss and this pressure to like make up for these like things they were supposed to learn. It’s totally a foreign concept to me. I think that, well, we’re homeschoolers too and in the first wave, or the first six months or so, we already did like so many outdoor activities and we never eliminated the outdoors from our lives, and we bypassed that whole virtual world thing, and we were just doing our real world learning at home or out and about or whatever in nature.

I'm not going to say that it didn't impact us, because it *definitely* impacted all of us and our family emotionally in very intense ways but it wasn't the same really unmitigated disaster that online learning was for kids. The absolute heartbreak that this caused families is...is like unbearable to even think about. The expectations that were put on kids to be in this virtual learning environment. It's unbelievable and it has to be reckoned with as just an absolute hundred percent failure. That's my perspective.

[30:03]

**Anne:** My son, ninety percent of his friends go to school, and so I'm working off of that, but one thing that was interesting that happened was some kids just didn't always go to their online learning and after school time was very different because there weren't any programmed activities, so we saw our neighbourhood sort of friendship circles from early childhood picking up on the streets, in the parks or in the neighbourhood again throughout that entire period. And there was more of a chance for the kind of free play and less adult-supervised activity. Now, that could be really terrible for someone who is in a family situation where they needed to go to school...

**Kristina:** Mm-hmm.

**Anne:** ... to get the supports and services they needed.

**Kristina:** Yes.

**Anne:** And then on the flip side, it was advantageous to some kids to have a little bit more free time, a little bit more time to invent and be outdoors and things like that. My takeaway from the whole thing is we want to take the good and bad from that experience and build different models. So, from what you're doing I could really see a trend going in that direction.

**Kristina:** Parents were tired, and rightly so dealing with the online school but then they're also trying to transition to their own work and caring for a home and then being home all the time. But that meant they almost released their children a little bit of these heavy expectations that are typically on schoolchildren to perform at a certain level. And so that allowed them, the kids, space to explore and to do more and the parents just went, "Ah, it's fine. Whatever, they're happy." And, at Passages I feel that that's where we operate, that's our baseline. I see it as a healing space essentially, so people come kind of tired and exhausted, and then they arrive and they start to heal, and they start to reconnect with their interests and things they love, and then they are able to learn.

Because you can't learn if you're not in a good headspace. And you won't take risks if you don't feel safe, so we provide that safety, and I think during the pandemic with the parents kind of saying, "It's okay, it's okay. This is hard for everyone, it's okay," allowed the children the space to take risks and allowed them opportunity to explore in ways they maybe didn't have before. Or like you said the free time in the evenings. So many families had fires together... I know it's, against bylaws, and all that...

**Anne:** (laughter)

**Kristina:** ... What I know is that most families – many families were having these fires and these really connecting evenings all together. It wasn't about homework and rushing to dance classes or any of that. It was just "we're here together now." And I think a lot of the kids I talk to say they had these moments with their families in their back yards and I think a lot of them will be left with that imprint of that time with their families in those early days. I don't know...

**Anne:** Yeah. It's so interesting to hear the different perspectives of the kids that had come from a school environment and the homeschool kids. And then that these kids are coming together in your space and like it's a hybrid space. I'm wondering, what do you think the homeschool families are learning from the schooled families and what do you think the schooled families might be learning about from the homeschool families?

**Kristina:** I would say, I mean for a lot of the families right now who have been coming, it's because their child hasn't been thriving for whatever reason, so the parents from school joining our centre are just relieved to now have a space where their child is accepted as who they are, has the freedom and is like essentially loved as who they are because honestly these kids are all so amazing. And so I can feel the relief from the school parents. A lot of unschoolers don't want to join Passages because they have their own life and the stuff they're doing. And that's fantastic. That's not necessarily our target market. These people already have like the homeschool life and resources and network set up. But for the homeschool kids that *do* want more socialization and more community, more everyday, regular – a regular space to come to. This is what we're offering. I think for the homeschool kids their takeaway is that they now have like regular, everyday people who they know and can come together with.

We haven't had a lot of parent interaction yet. I would say that's because of the pandemic. We were limiting our capacity numbers. We didn't have any events. Last year in March was the first time we had kind of a come together of all the families and we had a showcase night, where the learners put on a night of all that they had done throughout the year and performed and put up their artwork and hosted the families. So that was really the first time I would say that parents mingled. We are planning way more of those because you could tell we're all just wanting that connection and wanting to know that we're not alone in this way of supporting our children.

**Anne:** That's amazing. I see so much in our community and my kid included- he's going to go to high school next year. He, when you get to that age of 11 through 18, that's right around the age when a lot of kids, they want to pull away from their parents and have their own life. And if you don't have a built-in rich and broad community among homeschoolers and unschoolers, it's isolating. They want to be around a lot of other kids and this is a very natural part of their development. So, they want to go to school. And the question is for someone who's been homeschooled for 10 years, how will they adjust to a traditional school?

I remember this one Mom said to me that.. cause she came over to babysit my kid – the daughter, years ago-- and she really wanted to go to high school. She was an only child and

wanted to just be away from her parents which, more power to her. So, she went to a traditional high school and I asked her mom how she was liking it, and she said “oh, she hates it, but she can’t wait to go every day,” Right? Because it was still a better alternative than home ed. And that’s like a very real reality and parents that are homeschoolers just, if you’re going to be a good parent, you’ve just got to let go of that and you’re going to let your kid go to school, but you’re going to find the best school for them.

And programs like yours really seem like they’re a good hybrid where someone who is especially unschooled and really interested in focussed learning and self-directed learning. There aren’t a lot of places that they can go to and make a really great transition.

**Kristina:** Mm-hmm. My children as well went into school at various times throughout their lives and lasted a couple weeks and then were like, “I’m outta here. I wanted prom... Nope, never mind. I wanted the grade 8 grad... Nope, never mind.” But they kept going because they were like “I just want regular peers that I see every day, but I don’t want this school stuff. I don’t want to be quizzed on stuff that’s not important to me” and made to act like school is *the* most valuable thing in their life.

I had one learner recently at Passages who just came back from trying the school system for the last couple weeks. She was in it and then she joined Passages for the last year and then wanted to try again. So, she went off and then is now back, and she said, “it’s so weird, teachers think that we don’t have anything else important in our lives except school.” She was like, “I have so much I need to get done and they’re just messing up my time.”

**Anne:** (Laughter)

**Kristina:** I love that so much.

**Anne:** I really hope as your program develops so that you can go into the schools and talk to the schools about what you’re doing and outreach to neurodivergent students and students in general to take some of the practices from your school into the traditional school environment. That would be amazing. I know that’s down the line because you’re still like establishing your capacity.

I wanted to talk about this line that really reached out to me from your annual report. You wrote that “Everyone worked to make the community a psychologically safe space which allows risk taking, unmasking, growth, and forward movement.”

**Kristina:** For me, the psychologically safe space was kind of primary, and that’s always been top of mind for me. There’s a written piece that talks about having a *brave space*, because no space can be 100% safe. It can be safer, but this idea of having a braver space of – yes, we’re all in process and we’re all learning, and we’re all trying our best, but we’re going to make mistakes and we all come in with scars and hurt of some kind, so let’s just work together to make sure that we’re caring for one another. And then when you mess up, owning that and sharing that with the community, or what have you.

So, the psychologically safe space is all about if you don't have safety in a learning space, you will not learn, because your mind will constantly be preoccupied with making sure you're safe. You won't let your guard down. You won't take risks to ask questions or to even veer off from what the group is doing to learn something else because that is scary essentially.

So, the way we do this is by reducing shame. No one is really shamed for who they are or what their interest is in, or the questions they asked or their learning level. Like, nothing is shamed and as a community we just accept if someone needs to be stimming during a community meeting that is totally fine. A lot of kids have some kind of device that they're on, but I know that they're listening because they're looking at their device and they're talking to me while using it. This is just their way of thinking...like some kids need the input in order to have output. Just making sure that our space allows all kinds of flexibility so that they can feel safe.

And then with that comes this idea of unmasking where a lot of them felt like in the school system they couldn't be themselves--a lot of the neurodivergent kids – if they were excited and flapped their hands or did something that was like kind of “weird,” they felt embarrassed or they were mocked. And so, with that comes this suppression where inside their bodies this vibration that they can never let out until they get home, but then they're exhausted. Doing this day after day after day is super tiring...but now in our space they can come and just be themselves.

It's surprising how many still feel exhausted...like you can see them slowly trying to unmask and looking around quickly to see who noticed, or if it was okay and no one bats an eye. And slowly as the time goes on, they just become who they are.

**Anne:** Our public schools aren't at a place where they can meet the needs of neurodivergent students or do the things that you are doing in your space. Your solution was to create a space to do it and it's just amazing. I find you so inspiring and passionate and creative and innovative and I hope to see more programs like this. And it's really, really exciting to hear about your program. I think it's going to be a model for many more.

**Kristina:** I hope so.

**Anne:** Thank you so much for being on the program. I really appreciate speaking with you.

**Kristina:** You're welcome. Thank you for having me.

**Anne:** I was speaking with Kristina House, the Executive Director of the Passages Centre in Toronto. To learn more about Passages visit them online at [www.PassagesCentre.ca](http://www.PassagesCentre.ca).

You're listening to Noncompliant, a neurodiversity podcast. I'm your host Anne Borden King. Noncompliant is recorded at MCS studios and transcribed by Julie-Ann Lee. This episode was engineered by Lucien Lozon. Thanks to our team and thanks for listening.