

## **“A Catalyst for Activism”: Talking with Finn Gardiner from the Autistic People of Color Fund**

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*Transcribed by Julie-Ann Lee*

[Intro music: Jazzy synth pop music]

**Anne:** Welcome to Noncompliant: The Neurodiversity Podcast. I’m your host, Anne Borden King. Today I’m talking with Finn Gardiner, Director of Policy and Advocacy at the [Autistic People of Color Fund](#).

Finn Gardiner joined the Fund as Director of Policy and Advocacy in 2022. He’s a Boston-based, queer, Black and disabled writer, designer, community organizer, speaker, editor, researcher, advocate, activist and artist. Finn has a Masters of Public Policy from the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis, and a Bachelor’s degree in Sociology from Tufts. He has spoken at the White House’s 2016 LGBTQ Disability Day, the United Nations’ World Autism Day event in 2019, and other venues. Before joining the fund, Finn worked as a Communications Specialist for the Lurie Institute for Disability Policy and before that he was a Policy Fellow at the Autistic Self Advocacy Network.

I’m so excited to welcome Finn to the show. Welcome!

**Finn:** Thank you so much. I’m glad to be here.

**Anne:** Let’s start with talking about the fund. Can you tell me a little bit about the Autistic People of Color Fund, and what it does?

**Finn:** The core part of our work is our microgrant program which supports Autistic People of Color, whether they need help to pay for rent or food, buy accessibility tools like iPads that support Alternative and Augmentative Communication, or personal enrichment projects like art supplies. We know that economic justice is an important part of collective liberation, so we’ve decided to provide direct mutual aid to those who need it most.

And then on top of that, more recently, we’ve expanded our mission beyond the microgrant program. Over the past year, we’ve put more energy into our work on Federal and Local policy, and I’ll talk a little bit more about that later.

**Anne:** Oh, that's great. How did the fund get started? What's the history behind the fund?

**Finn:** So, we started a few years ago and Lydia Brown was the primary force in getting this project off the ground. They saw that so much of mainstream autism advocacy was led primarily by white people and they wanted to provide support and mutual aid to people who experience oppression and marginalization both for their disability *and* their race.

We can trace a lot of this back to the publication of *All the Weight of Our Dreams*, an anthology about autism and race that was released back in 2017, to which I was a contributor. The book is no longer on the market, but it was still a catalyst for a lot of this advocacy that we've been doing surrounding autism and race and the complexities that are linked with experiencing multiple forms of marginalization.

The fund focuses on several areas of equity like, access to health care, access to food, economic security and access to housing, and education.

**Anne:** Could you talk a little bit about those areas of focus and sort of how they're connected in the advocacy work of the fund?

**Finn:** Okay, so last year we sent out a survey to autistic People of Colour. We had 39 people respond from four countries in North and South America – the U.S., Canada, Brazil and Mexico. And we had a broad ethnic and racial mix – Black, Brown, Asian, Indigenous, Latine or Latinx, and multi-racial. We asked people to identify priorities they want to focus on and five topics wound up at the top of our list: Health care, housing, employment, food justice, and education. We had a few other topics as well, but we picked the top five to focus on in our report. This happened just before I joined the fund. I joined last July, but I reviewed the report before it was sent out and did the layout for it.

**Anne:** Mm-hmm.

**Finn:** And since then, we've published some policy briefs and are working with various advocacy groups to have our perspectives heard. For example, we've been working with the U.S. Federal government's Inter-Agency Autism Coordinating Committee to advance policy priorities for autism research that promote our well-being in those areas.

**Anne:** Yeah, can you talk a little bit about the IACC? This is really exciting. We're hoping to have something like this in Canada as well. How do you work with that group?

**Finn:** So, it's a group of policy makers and various people with an interest in autism research and policy. We have a lot of parent organizations and we also have some self-advocacy organizations, including ours and the **Autistic Women and Nonbinary Network**, which is an allied organization. They're also our fiscal sponsor, and so we work a lot with AWN to help advance our priorities in autism research and funding for autism research, because often a lot of the participants in IACC tend to be from parent groups.

They tend to focus on doing things like identifying "biomarkers" for autism. They tend to be focused on autism "risk". They tend to be focussed on funding behavioral treatments. They don't tend to focus on autism throughout the life span, they don't tend to focus on the intersections of autism and race or autism and gender. They don't tend to focus on the needs of people after they reach the ages of 18 or 22.

They don't realize that, that there are diverse experiences of being autistic *and* that it is important for autistic people ourselves to be part of this conversation. And far too often, these people leave us out – they focus on parents' priorities, and they don't talk to autistic adults, which is infuriating because eventually, those kids are going to grow up. Those kids are going to grow up and they're going to have their own opinions and priorities and they're going to need help, they're going to need support throughout their lives as adults: in the workplace; when dealing with social services; when trying to get housing; trying to get food; trying to get health care. You're going to spend most of your life as an adult, not as a kid. And, it is unfair and frustrating to see people acting as though autism research should be centred on children, and children alone; that the priority should be focussed on parents, and parents alone; or that we're going to be focussed on biomarkers and avoiding autism 'risk' as opposed to actually helping people.

So that's the main reason why we're there, because we need to make sure that autistic people's voices are heard.

**Anne:** We have a similar dynamic here [in Canada], although we're not yet even at the table. There's a big table and it's all autism researchers – very many of them focussed on biomarkers and biomedical solutions. Very many of them are very focused on behaviorism and promoting harmful treatments to the kids.

The flip side is that while the kids are going to grow up and become adults, also *we* used to be kids! And so we have an insight as well into what works and doesn't work *for those kids*, but it's

incredible that it's just only been a few years in the U.S. where autistic led organizations are actually at the table.

Do you feel that the policymakers are listening to you when it comes to research and other funding priorities?

**Finn:** More so than they did in the past, I'd say. I do feel as though a lot of the autism organizations that are able to sort of gain an audience with policymakers tend to be primarily white-led and I think there's still a lot of racial disparity there. And that's what we're trying to remedy in our work.

**Anne:** Yeah. I want to talk about racism in the autistic community, specifically in the U.S. It seems like it started out being very white-dominated and having a very white worldview, in its activism and I don't know how much that's really changed. It certainly has not changed nearly as much as it needs to change. We need to take action to stop racism, not only in the broader systems that we deal with: education, housing – all of the kind of pillars that you just talked about. We also have to deal with racism *within our own advocacy organizations*. And I'm wondering what your thoughts are. It's a topic that not everybody is thinking about. Because there's that easy-to-identify racism like the MAGA style racism...

**Finn:** Oh G-d.

**Anne:** ...And then there's the other kind of racism which some people seem to have a hard time detecting whether it's in the form of kind of excluding people, excluding people's voices, excluding people from power, from decision making. Within autistic led organizations, they still tend to be dominated by white activists who tend to be keeping all the power and leadership to themselves.

**Finn:** That is absolutely correct. For example there are autism organizations in which they do hire People of Color but all the senior leadership is white and they don't give junior staff members much decision making power at all, and at very little autonomy. That has been a problem I have seen in the community. And, as you said, I think that a lot of the conversation is dominated by white autistic people and most of the major autism organizations, whether they're led by self advocates or parents, are white dominated.

And, as you said, racism is not about MAGA-hatted people throwing out racial slurs. It's about the systematic exclusion and marginalization of people whose ethnic background or phenotypic features mark them as somehow 'inferior'. Of course, that's nonsense! Ultimately, we belong to one race – the human race. But racism blocks people off from recognizing that.

And, it's infuriating because there is so much work that needs to be done. And yet, there are people who are not doing enough to address these problems. This racial exclusion, this constant being shut out, of being talked over, of feeling that you don't have a real voice that you're never going to have a real voice; you're never going to be able to make these decisions about the direction of an organization, about the policies that we espouse, about anything. And it is demoralizing.

[10:20]

**Finn:** But, how do we fix that? Well, we need to open the conversation. We need to make as many people represented as possible, whether they're Black or Indigenous, Brown, Latino, Latina, Latinx or Latine, Asian, Pacific Islander, anybody else who is deemed not white. And then also, we need to include LGBTQ people, women, trans people, nonbinary people, working class people, poor people, people who have suffered from the state, people who have suffered from the effects of state-abetted economic inequality.

So, how do we rebuild our community? By making sure we're being listened to. And, I think a lot of the problem we're dealing with is people are not listening to each other! And specifically, it is people in power – white people, non-disabled people in power who are not listening to those who are the most affected by policies that do not take into account the intersection between race, class, gender et cetera. A lot of our work is based on principles of Disability Justice, **Sins Invalid** put out this [document](#) a few years about what Disability Justice means. And one of those principles is called “leadership of the most impacted.”

**Anne:** Mm.

**Finn:** And that means that you need to have leadership from people who are the most affected by a particular concern. And in the case of people with disabilities or disabled people that involves being led by disabled people. And in the case of race or ethnicity, it involves being led by People of Colour, being led by people who experience ethnic exclusion. And, when you put that together as an autistic person of color, that that for autistic People of Colour that means being listened to, having our voices put out front when we are talking about autism and race and issues surrounding autism and race that involve that intersection, and that involve policies and practices that affect us more because we're experiencing more than one thing at once.

For example, autistic people and People of Colour are more likely to experience housing insecurity. They're more likely to be homeless or marginally housed. Both groups are at higher risk of having insecure housing. And so a policy that targets housing justice and autism must also in turn consider race because both play a role, and the effects of both racism and ableism

have a detrimental effect on people's ability to stay housed and that means that you're going to have more people on the streets, more people couch surfing, more people whose housing is insecure. They don't know if they're going to have a roof over their head the next night or not. They don't know if they're going to be getting food, they don't know if they're going to be having any resources...

And then on top of that you have these service providers who may or may not understand autism and homeless services. You have people staying in these shelters that are overloading, they are crowded, they are obnoxious, they often have one-size-fits-all policies that don't take into account autistic people's needs. They will kick you out during the day and make you fend for yourself and not give you that stability that you crave, and a lot of autistic people really need stability. I know this is a highly specific example, but it's something I've personally experienced. I had extremely unstable housing in my early 20s and I dealt with service providers who didn't know what they were doing and often discriminated against me. Like, one of these service providers, a case manager, told me this is not a program for people with disabilities. Well, guess what? The ADA says otherwise.

**Anne:** Yeah.

**Finn:** But these people creating policy, and in the case of this case manager, are implementing policy they do not understand. They do not know about these things and are going to continue to handle these policies inadequately if they are not willing to listen.

**Anne:** I agree with you 100% on everything. I think what we have in our society is, in Canada, and I'm saying this as a white woman, we have within autism services a kind of a complex that I think of as, I call the 'nice white lady' concept.

**Finn:** Oh, that, yeah that concept.

**Anne:** Right? First of all you obviously have the level of ignorance and bigotry that leads to things like the school-to-prison pipeline within institutions, right? Then you have at *the policy level* the same mentality. It's like they just work their way up and they became bureaucrats and they're doing something very similar.

I remember we were invited to take part in this conference led by the government of Canada. So I'm spilling some tea here, about autism, it was the National Autism Conference and they had all these different panels and they're like "find people from your organization to be on these panels". Well, there's a housing panel, there might have been a health care panel, an education inclusion panel, couple other panels, and then they had like 'the diversity panel'.

**Finn:** Oh Lord.

**Anne:** Right? That's going to be 'the place'. That's where it all gets talked about, rather than understanding that *every single one of these panels has to be a diversity panel* to get the conversation going, to be inclusive. It's threatening to them because these are white supremacist institutions...

**Finn:** Mm-hmm.

**Anne:** ... if I may say. You can talk around the bush trying to educate them about this but at some point you also have to stick your foot in the door and be in their face about it. Because it's not comfortable for them. And it's very challenging work and then it's aggravated, I think in some circumstances, by the fact that autistic and autism organizations themselves aren't allies in doing that kind of work! It shouldn't just be groups like yours who are sticking their foot in the door the whole time, right? There needs to be a stronger sense of allyship for white autistic and autism organizations.

**Finn:** Yeah, I absolutely agree. There needs to be something has to change here. Something has to change when you have this you have these well meaning people...

**Anne:** Mm-hmm.

**Finn:** ...who aren't listening as they somehow think they know best.

**Anne:** Right. And then you know, what surprised me when I got into the activism is that with the 'nice white lady syndrome,' there's a certain extension of that within our own movement.

**Finn:** Yeah, we definitely have the 'nice white lady syndrome' thing going on down here as well. And it's frustrating and I've noticed that both among autistic advocates and among non-autistic, often parent advocates or people who are out there, they want to listen to us, they're trying to do the right thing, but I feel that their position, because they don't have direct experience with racism or ableism in the case of non-disabled people who do this, they often do and say things that are well meant but don't always solve the problem. And the problem is that because they are patting themselves on the back and talking about how enlightened they are, they're not listening.

**Anne:** Mm-hmm.

**Finn:** It's like yes, I know you want to help, but to actually help you need to *listen to people* and you find this in a lot of different areas in which you have people supporting others from the outside. This happens in disability communities. This also happens in international aid where you have a lot of well-meaning Westerners going into low-income countries, often post-colonial countries...

**Anne:** Mm-hmm.

**Finn:** ...and they have this white savior mentality, 'we're going to go into, we're going to go into... Africa,' cause these people think of Africa as a *country*. 'We're going to go into Africa and save the *natives* and it's really just a modern day version of missionary activity that happened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Think of these 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian missionaries going in to countries in Africa or other parts of the world and spreading what they think is the 'good news' or the truth to Indigenous peoples and suppressing their voices and erasing their stories.

And although the intent of the 'nice white lady' does not have the same imperialist cast to it that missionary activity did in the past, there is still this underlying assumption that because they're in this sort of exalted position, because they have these privileges their voices still matter more than the people who are most affected by particular policies, or programs or practices. And that kind of connects to what I said earlier about the Principles of Disability Justice and the Leadership of the Most Impacted because the people who are being most affected are not being listened to and that is not at all justice.

[20:08]

**Anne:** 100% and I'm glad you brought up the missionary thing. I was reading recently about a group.... I can't remember the name, it's called like Autism International Project or something and it's ABA providers, BCBA's...

**Finn:** Mm-hmm.

**Anne:** ... that are using that model to go into non-U.S. countries in Europe and Africa. I'm not sure if they're in South America yet. They go into these communities and they're trying to push ABA just like missionaries. They *call* themselves missionaries and they say they're on a mission and they do funding, like fundraising with crowdfunding to 'let's bring ABA to these countries.'

It's something that makes me think about a question I really wanted to ask you because I was happy to see that the fund has an amazing resource [page](#) on your website. It's always being updated and it includes resources for example en Español, in Spanish, it extends beyond the U.S. and Canada. So it's international resources in at least Spanish and probably some other languages are coming. I was wondering what your thoughts are, as autistic people continue to... we're starting to find each other more across the borders and our movement is becoming more



international.

In Canada, I know here we're really, really excited about connecting with people from outside of Canada and the U.S. to do this work because you can see the global impact. For example, the autism industry versus the global power of the Neurodiversity Movement, if we start to find each other and respect each other and listen to each other. I'm wondering when you look at the international focus that the fund is having, what do you think autistic advocacy and activism could look like with this international lens say in like say 3 years, or 5 years, or 10 years?

**Finn:** What I hope is that there's going to be more collaboration across countries and continents. That there's going to be a wider conversation about justice for autistic people that is not just limited to North America, that isn't just limited to the United States or Canada or Western Europe. Because there's the entire world out there and although there are differences in the way different countries handle policy and practice, there are a lot of similarities. There are a lot of things we have in common and I think there are opportunities for us as an organization. There are opportunities for us as a broader community to make sure that these conversations are happening.

Because right now, I think a lot of autism and disability advocacy in general is very much focused on what it means to be autistic in the United States, what it means to be autistic in Canada, what it means to be autistic in Great Britain or something. But, we're not talking about what it means to be autistic in India, what it means to be autistic as an Indigenous person from Russia's far east or in Japan. We're not talking about that. We are talking specifically at what it means to be autistic in the west. And often the affluent west where we have an embarrassment of resources compared with people in other countries in the Global South or Eastern Europe. You need to have these conversations about disability and race that are international.

**Anne:** Even within our own countries. I think in Canada, the North for example, there's almost no kind of the crucial kind of dialogues that we need to be having in Canada with the people that live in the North, and Indigenous people that live in the North. It's like another country within our country. It is colonized nations within our country. And so, getting those conversations going is really, really important and that should be, in my opinion, central towards the future vision. It really can't be U.S.-centric or North America centric. It has to be global, right?

**Finn:** Absolutely.

**Anne:** I'm wondering about donations because I think a lot of people listening are hopefully going to think about going to your website and making a donation to the fund which, as you mentioned is kind of a mutual aid fund. I was wondering, first, if you could explain a little bit

more – maybe a couple of examples of micro-grants that people have applied for and what they've gotten in their lives from receiving a micro-grant that your organization provides?

**Finn:** We've done quite a bit. Our funds can be used for anything the applicant wants within reason. By that I mean *not* ABA. But, if you need help with rent or housing, art projects, books, clothing, you name it – we will probably help.

And people have been thrilled to get support from us. People are glad that there is an organization out there that is ready to help them especially when they're in crisis. We have a separate emergency fund application for people whose housing is in jeopardy, who have just lost their jobs, who are currently struggling with domestic violence or other things that require immediate help. And we tend to respond to emergency applicants' applications more quickly than our standard application.

**Anne:** Mm-hmm.

**Finn:** And- and so we make sure that we have those resources available cause often it's very hard to get them with a lot of these grant programs other than ours, they're geared toward parents.

**Anne:** Mm-hmm.

**Finn:** And, they are often focused on ABA or finding support for young children as opposed to teenagers or adults who also need support but are often neglected by mainstream granting programs that are laser-focused on kids.

**Anne:** Yeah, it could completely change somebody's life, I'm sure. Even not a very large amount of money, when someone is really in need and you see this with mutual aid, \$500 can completely transform- get somebody something that they really, really need to...

**Finn:** Exactly.

**Anne:** Yeah.

**Finn:** Yeah, somebody could get an iPad to help them with communicating if they are non-speaking or need Alternative and Augmentative Communication. \$500 could buy a lot of groceries, it could make sure that somebody has enough money to pay the rent when they're short and they're at risk of being evicted. There is so much... \$500 can go a long way.

And, if you want to donate to us, it's easy. Just go to <https://awnnetwork.org/apoc/>

**Anne:** That's great. I'll also put it on the blog for the podcast. I want to make clear too that this doesn't have to be a big donation.

What do things look like for the Autistic People of Color Fund through the rest of 2023 and into 2024 and 2025? What kind of work are you going to be doing?

**Finn:** We have a lot planned, we plan on continuing our policy advocacy work across the United States--and I hope elsewhere but right now, our team is U.S. based. We're focussing on the laws that we're dealing with over here. But we plan on expanding the fund. We just were able to get some more grant funding, so we're able to expand our reach. We've added like Policy Fellows, we have some more people on our team than we had last year. We are able to expand a lot of what we've been doing. We've been involved in more advocacy meetings. We've been trying to sort of make the organization more and more effective – more and more influential in making sure that Autistic People of Color are being heard, that we are getting the support we need.

I hope that in the next few years that we are even bigger, that we're able to give larger grants, that we're able to support as many people as possible, that we get closer and closer and closer to fulfilling our mission.

**Anne:** That's amazing. It's going to be amazing to see how things grow and people can be a part of it by supporting, promoting it, learning about it and people that can afford to by donating. And there are different ways that anyone listening to this podcast can support the Autistic People of Color fund. Can we hear the website again for the fund?

**Finn:** Our website is <https://autismandrace.com/>. And, if you want to donate to us, again our donation page is on <https://awnnetwork.org/apoc/>

**Anne:** Thank you so much. Finn Gardiner, it was just great speaking with you. Again, Finn joined the Autistic People of Color Fund as Director of Policy and Advocacy in 2022 and I believe he's speaking to us from Boston. It's been wonderful speaking with you, Finn. Thank you again!

**Finn:** Thank you!

[Outro music: Jazzy synth pop music]

**Anne:** 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.