Disability and Politics

**Welcome to the Graeae and Disability Arts Online Podcast, Disability And… bringing together thoughtful discussion and debate. This month Jodi-Alissa Bickerton talks to Baroness Grey-Thompson and Mandy Colleran about Disability and Politics.**

**This podcast contains some strong language.**

**Intro music:**

Jodi: Welcome to another podcast of Disability And… with Graeae and Disability Arts Online. Today we’re in conversation with the Baroness Grey-Thompson who is a politician, a disability activist, a mother and the winner of 11 gold Paralympic medals. We’re also with Mandy Colleran who is a comic, writer, actress and disability arts activist and also a very proud Scouser.

Jodi: Okay. Mandy and Tanni, tell us something about yourself that we wouldn't know, or the listeners wouldn't know.

Mandy: I own a bent soprano saxophone, and I've been attempting to learn how to play it.

Jodi: OOOOOO

Tanni: I've got a tattoo on my foot, my husband's got a matching one, which was drawn as a morgue tag, which has the word "expired" and a date left blank. And whoever dies first, the other one's going to fill it in with a sharpie pen. (Jodi and Mandy laugh) So it didn't sound as dark when we agreed to have it done, but actually it's not great, is it?

Jodi: So, Mandy, or you starting a band, or is this a solo career?

Mandy: I'd like to think of it as a solo career.

Jodi: Okay.

Mandy: But in reality it probably isn't. I'd just always loved the saxophone. And actually I just thought it was good exercise. To be honest, the breathing-

Tanni: Good for your lungs, yeah

Mandy: -technique, yeah. And it's such a beautiful thing. A few years ago, a long time ago, about 20 years ago, I did this odd job for the BBC. I got this cheque out of the blue, and I was happening to pass a music shop in Denmark Street, and I just thought "If I don't buy one now, I'm never going to have one." And so I did.

Jodi: Brilliant. Okay. So we are here to talk about activism, about disability, about joining bands, becoming empresses and taking over the world. I think we can fairly say that the last eight years have been, well, probably some of the most difficult in our lifetime. Would that be fair to say in terms of austerity, in terms of where we are? Are things as bad as they seem, or is there hope?

Tanni: I think it's a really tough time at the minute, so. For lots of... You know, the welfare reform bill and legal aid and lot of stuff I work on in Parliament was fairly brutal. But then it's the implementation of that as well. And then it coincides with some really negative attitudes about disability and increase in hate crime. And you know what, I get a lot of as an ex-athlete is "Well, 2012 changed the world." And it's like, no it didn't. 2012 was an amazing Olympics and Paralympics, but it's not there to sort out every other crisis, and you know, what it did was it changed the lives of some Paralympian’s, but actually the vast majority of disabled people have a really difficult time.

Tanni: And so yeah, that's the one thing. If ever I hear somebody saying 2012 changed the world, it's usually a non-disabled person, I do want to scream. And it's like, yeah, remember what a good summer it was, but the reality about education and transport... it's really hard. And really, sadly Brexit hasn't helped any of that. And we're going to be doing that for another five years. So I kind of do worry. I'm concerned about what happens next for disabled people.

Jodi: And you're doing a lot of activism around trains at the moment and access on trains and transport?

Tanni: Yeah. So, I mean I sort of came to my activism in sort of a different way. You know, as an athlete, I was really conscious when I was competing that there were lots of disability rights activists that thought I was a sellout because I was an athlete. And that's just fine. You know, it was good and had lots of quite robust discussions about that and, you know, super crip, and you just trying to be non-disabled, and all this sort of stuff. But I was always really interested in wider did disability rights issues, and so as soon as I finished competing I got more involved.

Tanni: I guess a lot of it comes from, I just think the world needs to have moved on. You know, we were promised accessible trains 20 years ago, and it's all be patient, be patient. January the 1st, 2020. It will all be fine. You know, we're going to hit January the 1st and nothing will have... well, bits will have changed, but we're not having step free transport.

Tanni: So I think I just get scrappier as I get older. So you know I'm really lucky. I can do some stuff through Parliament and that way, but also I think the platform being an athlete gave me, which was just to tell the reality of what disabled peoples' lives is like is really important. And I'm also really conscious I get treated way better than most disabled people, because people either know me as a peer or as an ex-athlete and people are kinder to me. And I went to a train station recently and one of the members of staff went "Oh, that's the one who tweets." Said "Oh, how are you? Lovely to meet you." But I think that's really important.

Tanni: So it's important I think to say stuff happened to me, but also just get more people to understand what happens to lots of disabled, and it's really hard. It's hard to fight it, deal with it. If you complain, you got a chip on the shoulder. If you don't complain, you're not changing the world. It's just tiring, and it is exhausting, actually. And I think as I get older I feel it physically and mentally, because stuff is not as easy as it used to be, but also I'm just bored of being patient. I just think we need to do something.

Jodi: Mandy, you're nodding there. And as an activist and influencer and been around sort of the disability movement for a long time, your thoughts on that?

Mandy: Yeah, I think Tanni say something so... In some ways, you know, I think experience makes you not less tolerant, but it just makes you slightly less patient. You know, because we were around when we were promised the changes. You know, they put men on the moon. Men, of course, on the moon in 1968, and it wasn't till about four years ago we could actually have a wee on the train. You know, so I'm not quite sure how that happens. Really, you know, there are reasons why they can put men on the moon but they can't quite toilets accessible on the train. Or they won't, rather. They can, but they won't.

Mandy: And I think you're right, you know. I mean, it's very tricky, isn't it. Because when you get older, one of the things you do have is hindsight. And I think things come in cycles, and I think unfortunately at the moment we're in a down cycle again. You know, it hasn't been helped obviously by the political scenarios we're in at the moment and certainly for the last 12 years. And I think actually since kind of the early 80s and the rise of what they call neoliberalism and Mrs. Thatcher and Ronald Reagan's takes on the world, where we've actually become or become about consumers and individuals rather than communities and societies. But you know, it's made it harder for everybody, actually, to live. Because suddenly people are in competition with each other, and you're treated... everything is about the individual. And so that makes it harder for people to work together and come together.

Mandy: But I think despite that, disability activism has remained and continues, and in some ways there are aspects that have died off, maybe. Then you've also got increased activism around the austerity bill. So you've had the rise of things like Disabled People Against The Cuts. It was such a fantastic and effective campaigning organisation. You've got the rise of Not Dead Yet UK, which is lobbying quite effectively, again, against the kind of right to euthanasia and assisted dying laws. So maybe the activism... the areas in which activism takes place have changed, but I don't think it's gone away, you know. I think it behoves us as people that maybe who are a little bit older and have seen things to actually support those things even more.

Tanni: I think that's really important, because you know I hear some young people say "Oh, it must be better than it used to be." And I think there are some things that are a bit better, and I think there's a whole pile of stuff that's not and that's not improved. And I think a lot I try to be really positive about it, because I just don't want to be this grumpy old cow all the time. But then I'm getting to the point where it's like I'm just going to be a bit of a grumpy old cow about it. And things like euthanasia and trying to get across that stuff that disabled people will be affected by. I had someone say to me recently "Well, you must have thought about killing yourself loads of times." I said "Sorry, I got to travel the world as an athlete, I sit in Parliament. You know, I'm doing alright."

Mandy: Happily married. Yeah.

Tanni: "And your view of me is that you think that that's what I should do." So sometimes I get shocked by it, and then you go okay, no, it's really good to have that kind of point to focus. To say, do you know what... And one of the things that keeps me going in the stuff I do in Parliament is that there's loads of activists and campaigners on the outside who are there to support, and when it's hard someone will pick up the phone and just say keep going. And that kind of community is really, really important.

Mandy: Absolutely. I think that's key. You know, both Tanni and I do see ourselves I think as part of a community, a wider community of other disabled people. It's not the only community I belong to, but it's probably the most significant community in my life at the moment. And you know, that's what sometimes annoys me about representations of disability say in TV. Because if you have a disabled character on TV, you bet your bottom dollar you’re the only one. And it's so unrealistic, because I don't know any disabled person that doesn't know at least one other disabled person. And often has member in their family or has a really strong group of friends and allies, even if it's only people you see regularly at the same clinic. You know, what you have in common is your impairments.

Tanni: I was growing up, and I sort of was talking about this recently. The only two wheelchair users I saw growing up were Sandy Richardson on Cross Roads, who I think they were going to kill off and everyone like him. So it was like "Oh, let's stick him in a wheelchair." And I remember he used to be sitting up at the top of a flight of stairs, and you'd go "How'd he get there? There's no lift." So it wasn't real, I knew it was an actor. And Ironside, and actually thank goodness people have stopped calling me Ironside, because that really annoyed me. So I didn't see people who looked like me growing up. And so the first sort of disabled person I saw in the media, I was like wow, was Chris Hallam doing the London Marathon, who had dyed blond hair and atrocious taste in leopard print body suits. And you know, loved him to bits. He was amazing. And he didn't take nonsense from anybody.

Mandy: Marvellous.

Tanni: But you know, and he just taught people to get lost and worse if they irritated him. So you know, I remember looking at that thinking "Oh wow. There's this kind of route. There's something that I can do." But I think that's really hard, because if there is more representation of disability on TV, it's not real, is it?

Mandy: No.

Tanni: Or it's like, the story is not always about impairment. Or a lot of the time on TV, they try to do it's all about impairment. It's like, actually most disabled people's lives aren't like that.

Mandy: I think that's the problem as well often, because if there are characters, once the story goes off their impairment they never know quite what to do with them.

Tanni: Yeah. You know, why can't you be just a character or... here we go, shows my appalling taste in TV, Chris Tate on Emmerdale Farm, when he became a paraplegic it was all "Well, he deserves it because he was evil." And you're like, really? Yeah, I don't mean to start me on inspiration porn on the coverage of sport, because I think some of that has got worse. You know, there was a point when I got started where it would be like "Oh, did you train?" "Yeah, yeah, quite a lot." And then it got better, and now it's all about you have to have a backstory and you have to be inspirational and you have to something traumatic or dramatic happen in your life, and that's not real for lots of disabled people either.

Mandy: And you also have to be photo friendly as well.

Tanni: Yeah.

Mandy: That's a big thing as well. I think we don't like to talk about... well, you know there are, I think in the same that there is colourism in terms of race representation, I think there is also impairment-tism. You know, there's some people and some impairments much more likely to be put in front of the camera because of the way they look and how they present than other people, and that's an issue.

Mandy: But what I think's quite important to me, one thing that does worry me I think is there are so many more actors out there now, so I think things are changing. You know, things are changing and you've got people like Mandy Redvers-Rowe writing for TV now. You've got Jackie Hagen and writers like him and Matilda Ibini for stage, you know. So the writers are starting to emerge, and there are a lot of actors. You know, obviously we see Liz Carr. We've seen Mat in the new Dark Materials, Mat Fraser. Lisa Hammond was on EastEnders for quite a while. So there's people out there. And they're really important to me.

Mandy: You know, it's important for us as people who've been around a while to see them, but it's really important for young disabled people. And I think one of the things that we need to address slightly, and I'm not saying that inclusive education is a bad thing at all, but there was something about going to a special school and being surrounded by lots of people like you. Because for many of us as disabled people, you don't necessarily grow up with anyone who looks like you. Many of us don't have disabled members in our family, and actually the only time we were with people who were like you was when you went to school. Now I'm not saying those things should be an exclusive, but my worry is that as social media and kind of advertising and things become so strong that how you look and how you show yourself, how you present to the world becomes so much more important. And I think if you're a disabled person in a class of 27 and they're non-disabled people and your impairment means you look slightly differently or you carry out your day to day life in a slightly different way, where do you go to to get that solidarity? Where do you go to to get the sense that actually that's fine to look like you?

Mandy: And that's one thing that does worry me, and that's why the whole thing about representation is so important. Because you know, it comes back to the whole if you see it you can be it, which sounds very trite but actually it's really, really important.

Tanni: The special school system is really good for sports.

Mandy: Yeah.

Tanni: Because you have other people with a similar level of impairment that you could compete against and participate with. And that's changed it quite a lot. And I think, you know I look at the pressure especially young women are under to look a certain way and have your hair straightened and your makeup on and your eyebrows done and your backside implants and like all this stuff, and it's... oh, just going to sound old again, but I kind of worry there's like an increased sexualisation of young women and that you have to wear a short dress and get boob job. You know, there's all this stuff which I didn't feel that kind of pressure growing up. But the social media and the photo shopping and all that kind of stuff I think makes it quite hard. I think if you're disabled it's sometimes how do you fit in with this perfect view of this skimpy dress and high heels and implants everywhere. I just really struggle with that. I think it's a really tough time for young women to be growing up. I think it's a tough time for young disabled people to be growing up.

Mandy: Yeah, I too, as well. And I will say one of the good things. You know, on the negative side, social media has had... you know, unfortunately, has caused the whole spread of kind of image, body image to go viral. But also what's the positive side of that there is to say people have capitalised on social media actually in terms of activism about making connections. Because if you're stuck in your house in Devon without access because you can't get help, you can connect with the world. You can engage in conversations on a national level on Twitter.

Tanni: Yeah.

Mandy: If you want to. I won't say therefore you can or will do, but... And you know, organisations like DPAC look, discussions around austerity. I remember being on Twitter on and off for about 12 years now, and at the very beginning the discussions around austerity were happening on Twitter by groups and individuals of disabled people who were actually talking to journalists at newspapers through Twitter. And those conversations may never have happened as quickly.

Tanni: When I was doing the welfare reform bill, there were groups of activists who were watching the debates in Parliament on Parliament Channel, and then were tweeting me. And so, you know, ask the minister this. Here's a link to something else.

Mandy: Yes.

Tanni: And there was one night where a small group of them started playing snog, marry, kill with members of the government front bench on Twitter and included me in it, and it was like "wooo, oh my god" which was really funny. Yeah, it was totally inappropriate, but really funny. And actually, we had a couple really late nights, and I tweeted "Not had anything to eat. Does anyone know of a take away open?" And I sort of gave the vague area where I live. And I had people say "Oh, you come past my house. Come here for a cup of tea."

Mandy: Ah.

Tanni: Or "You do welfare reform, I can make you a sandwich." Someone offered to bring a pizza to peer's entrance. And then I got back to my flat, I lived in quite a big block at the time, and there was a sandwich outside my door. And you go, aw.

Mandy: That would have been a woman.

Tanni: That is so nice you know, so... and this little message saying "Thank you for doing welfare." And you go oh. And then you kind of go, oh, I just feel positive there's so many nice people out there.

Mandy: Yeah. And I think there is. You know, I think the reality is it's a very different experience being a disabled man then a disabled woman. But I think one of the good things about being a disabled woman is the solidarity. I think generally women, you know, I think because of... I'm not saying men don't have solidarity, I'm just saying that I think because of the way we are generally socialised that women find it easier and have a different sense of what friendship is with other women. And certainly without my disabled female friends, my life would just be not as great at all without them. And I think it's one... and if you look at the disability movement, there are kind of key individual men, but actually when you look at who runs the organisations, who organises campaigns, who does the leg work, the wheel work, the crutch work, yeah, the tough work, it's women. And it's always disabled women.

Tanni: I think that's really important right now, because, you know, I think... I've seen a change in the last year as well where women's voices are being shut down.

Mandy: Absolutely.

Tanni: Women aren't allowed to have an opinion and there's a lot of mansplaining going on. And I get a little bit on social media, but it's like I can't have an opinion on anything.

Mandy: Yeah.

Tanni: And it's like I can have an opinion on feminism and disability. And I can, but that really worries me how stuff gets shut down really quickly and that sort of feels like it's been dialled back a bit on the feminist movement. That we've gone back to "Yeah, you should just be at home and not be out and not be doing things." That kind of worries me. But actually sport gives you the resilience to deal with some of that too, which is good.

Jodi: What have been the moments that have lifted you, Mandy, in talking about things like the Sandwich with Tanni and just giving that kind of lift? What have been the moments for you that have just kind of gone actually things are okay or we need more of that?

Mandy: The most joyous moments for me, and this was quite a while ago and I'd like to see more of it and just for more disabled people to experience it, was actually I was at the original Telethon demo (inaudible), with… and you know it was an iconic moment. You know, everybody talks about it, and I just remember that moment, that feeling of pride, yeah, but actually just that feeling of strength of being part of something that was really significant. Part of... with people who were like me, you know, and people I knew. People I didn't know, knowing how important it was for each individual person to have been there, both politically and just for themselves as well. And it was such a joyous occasion. It really was. And I can never go past the building without thinking about poor Frank Bruno and the shock. Couldn't quite understand why so many disabled people weren't happy.

Mandy: But yeah, no, just that it's the solidarity. I think that's always the joy for me. You know, that feeling of being part of something larger than yourself. And also being on the right side of history. You know, or her story.

Jodi: Yes.

Tanni: I think for me it was... well, there's a kind of moments in sport which are pretty cool, but sports quite selfish. You know, because yeah, you might be doing it for the team, but you're really doing it for yourself because you want to do it. And so I think last time that there was an assisted suicide bill that came to the Lords, and I think it was really brutal, but it was hard. You know, you're trying to make the right decisions and I remember feeling this huge weight of we've got to stop it happening. Because you know, we got to be honest, disabled people will be on the list. You know, it's just terrifying. And loads of protests outside. And it was just amazing. A lot of disabled people turned up, and some really clever and smart... Liz Carr did some really funny protesting.

Mandy: Yes.

Tanni: You know, smart and clever and, you know, very well behaved. And I remember just getting to the end of it and just being completely wiped out and exhausted and very emotional, and I went out, and a couple of campaigners had waited for me to come out.

Mandy: Good.

Tanni: And I remember just going "Thank you for being there." I get quite emotional about it. And one of them bought me ice cream.

Mandy: Aw.

Tanni: And it was just like... do you know what? At that moment in time, it was just the nicest thing. We just sat and had an ice cream outside Parliament. And the other side who wanted to change the legislation, I think one of their campaign was about "There till the end," or something.

Mandy: Yes.

Tanni: And actually they'd left. And yeah, somebody borrowed one of their posters and was like "Yeah, but they weren't, were they?" And I know that's sort of a childish end of it, but yeah, that bit was like thank you for waiting. Knowing that those individuals wouldn't have a particularly easy of getting across London, getting out of London, all that stuff, but being there all day. And they waited. That was a really lovely moment.

Jodi: Think that thing around the emotion and energy that it takes, and I think that's something we worry about for each other. We worry about each other in terms of how much energy is takes to fight. How do we keep up the momentum without draining ourselves, I suppose. It comes back to that solidarity, as well, and allies. How do we keep that momentum? What is the... Who do we need to bring in?

Mandy: I think ultimately it's about balance between... which is a phrase I hate, but I can't think of any other words for it, which is balance between self-care. Because we all know as human beings and as human beings with impairments. You know, one day is a good day, next day is bad. So you need a level of self-care, and I think... and sometimes even when you think of self-care what you actually need is, you need the support around you to be able to have that. Because for many disabled people, they can't do self-care unassisted. You know, sometimes self-care is a hot meal.

Mandy: And it's a balance between that and kind of taking some responsibility for affecting change, I think. Or if it's not taking responsibility, sharing the load with other people, I think, and just doing what you can, even if you're stuck in a house that you can't leave, but you're lobbying your local council for your ramp into your local swimming pool. You know, that's activism. That's no less significant than being outside Downing Street or Westminster, you know, and on Channel Four. You know, being seen publicly. Because some of us are able to do that, and others are not. But the level of activism is no different, and the significance of that activism. And so I think it behoves us to look out for each other, as well as look out for ourselves.

Tanni: I think for me, you know my resilience is up and down, and you have good days and bad days. As I get older physically, I'm changing. You know, when I was training I could do anything. You know, you kind of go "Okay, it's a bit harder to do a few things than it used to be." And that's a bit of a pain in the neck. That's kind of slightly irritating. But I think it's finding friends and allies. So you know, I've got a couple of people on social media that if I do an angry tweet about a train they'll join in and ask me a question to give me a way to respond and talk. You know, really simple stuff, but it lets me have a conversation rather than just a rant. And I've got a really good friend Sue when I first knew her, she said to me how do I manage late nights in Lord's, and I said "Oh, coffee and Haribo." And so, she now buys me bags of sweets and sends them on. And do you know what? That just makes me smile. You know, I have to share them around, because she sends quite a lot of sweets. But so security officers get dibs on it as well.

Tanni: But it's things like that. It's little things. And trying to support other people who are going through different challenges. I guess the bit I get quite a lot and which I feel guilty is I just people expecting I can just fix things and I can change it, and it's why haven't I changed accessible transport and why haven't I changed universal credit and why haven't I stopped PIP? And a lot of time-

Mandy: Yeah, I have watched that.

Tanni: Thank you. And sometimes I'm really good at dealing with it, and then other time. You know, last week, I was being challenge. It was like, I can't fix every... I'm trying. This is the best I can do. And sometimes I find that quite hard. Not, you know. Just moments where it's like okay. And then you come away feeling completely useless. And then the next day I was totally fine again. But it's stuff like that I sometimes just find difficult to deal with. People just think I can click my finger and it will be fine.

Mandy: I think one of the benefits of getting older actually is I think you then... you're not necessarily thinking of what you want anymore, but you know what you don't want. And actually that's as useful. And I think also what you learn is to pick your battles. Because you know when you've got less energy and less time and resources to fight, we can't fight on all fronts. And who wants to? Who wants to be angry all the time. Do you know what I mean? Nobody wants to live a life where they're constantly... People say to "Why aren't you angry?" Why should I be? You be angry. You know, people say, sometimes in situations they say to me "Well, I thought you might have said something." And I'm like "Well, you saw it. Why didn't you say something?" You know, because it's all our responsibility. And you can't... well, you can if you choose to, but I don't choose to live my life in a... I like having a laugh.

Tanni: Yeah.

Mandy: I like a bit of comedy in me life, do you know what I mean? And god knows it's an absurd situation living as a disabled person in a non-disabled world. So you know, there's a lot of laugher to be had, frankly. And it's usually with your disabled mates, as well.

Tanni: Yeah.

Mandy: You know. And that again, that's part of the joy of the community that we belong to. You know, it's that we're able to laugh together. And I think, yeah, so. They're the kind of things we need to think about, because you know, we're getting older now, and it's where are the new young activists going to be coming from? Because, you know, they haven't had necessarily the base that we've had. And again, I'm not advocating for special education, but maybe younger people have not necessarily had access to other disabled people over the years. And so, you know, they don't necessarily have a group of friends or a group of people they know they have certain things in common with.

Mandy: So you know, so how do we build up young disabled people's self-confidence, they're self-images. You know, to let them know, yeah, that's it's okay actually A, to say no, or B, to demand things, actually. There's no need to apologise for being a nuisance. Because you're not a nuisance. Actually, you're just demanding the right to have what everybody else takes for granted, like being able to get on and off a train when you want to. Be able to go on the toilet on that train if you need to. You know, that these are about rights.

Tanni: I was having exactly that conversation with a friend last week who's younger than me and an activist. And we were saying okay, where are the young people? And I think... So I didn't meet a lot of young disabled people when I was young, but my parents were kind of really strong activists in terms of encouraging me to not be treated in a certain way and not take medical treatment I didn't want and to... you know, I remember getting chucked out of the cinema when I was seven and my mum being fuming. And she was like "Right, the next time that happens, you go back and you say 'I've never spontaneously combusted before,'" because they'd said "Oh, you're a fire risk." So my parents were really kind of... they sort of dialled into disability activism really quickly. So I got that support there. And then I met more disabled people who were activists.

Tanni: But you know, I see some, not all but I see some young disabled people who are just bit grateful. You know, it's "Oh, it's okay." No, not it's not okay. And maybe it's like they got to do the stuff that's important to them, but one of the things I wanted to do around the 2012 games was actually just... because being a Paralympian does protect you from a lot of stuff, and I kind of wanted to do some activism training with some young athletes. Because if they're talking about disability rights or they're get asked about it, it's them knowing enough about it to be able... not talk about it, but to give them some of the skills to know how to deal some of that stuff and to explain about social model. It was one of those things that kind of fell by the wayside, unfortunately.

Tanni: But, yeah, if I could have done that, that would have been great. Because I think there's a group of youngsters who want to fit in, and I get that. But you can't forget that you're disabled. That is part of your life, and you can't just wish it all away. So maybe they'll come through. I shouldn't, but I'm kind of conscious when I meet younger disabled people. I try and talk to them and encourage them and find what they're interested in, because it might not be what I'm interested in. But help them find their voice. Actually this is true for all young people. Young people need to find a voice.

Mandy: Absolutely.

Jodi: Tanni, Graeae got a whole group of young people, if ever you want to come in and do that activism training with them. I think that would be brilliant, because I think that's something that I'm always struggling with. What is the advice I can give young people given what we're going through now? It's not the same advice you would give 10 years ago.

Tanni: No.

Jodi: And it is about rights and it's about not being polite and knowing what you can ask for. So I think that's a brilliant initiative.

Tanni: Yeah, I'll come in and have a chat.

Jodi: Thank you.

Tanni: Very sadly, the word "radicalise" has taken on a whole different meaning, isn't it?

Mandy: Yes.

Jodi: Oh, yes.

Tanni: So you can't say it, but I kind of wanted to, you know...

Mandy: Politicise.

Tanni: Politicise, yeah, way better. Thank you. That's a way better word. But you know, just get people to... Because sometimes, I think, unless you've grown up... it's hard to know where to step into it and where to...

Mandy: Yes. Or even that it's okay to say it, as well, and to think it. Because I think that's... you know, I mean even as someone who's always been a disabled person, I mean I've always known I was a disabled person, never denied. In terms of just being able to articulate it in particularly politicised terms, that didn't come for me till I started working in disability arts, you know, and suddenly I met all these disabled people who were talking, having conversations about things that I kind of thought about. I had no access to conversations or, you know. And it was only meeting people like Sian Vasey, Elspeth Morrison, hearing people like Mike Oliver, Vic Finkelstein speaking, reading their writings, and getting involved in disability arts and stuff. It gave me a whole community, but also what it gave me was access to the debate, the language which is on. You know, the debate is ongoing, as it should be. You know, it's a living thing. And I think that's what I'm worried that it gets lost for young disabled people. Where do they go to have those conversations? Where do they go together to have those conversations? Because, you know, how do you raise it amongst a group of your friends if you're the only blind person in the group that there are issues for you?

Tanni: I remember the first time I read about social model, and it was suddenly this light bulb moment. It was like "It's not me." And it was kind of that. I still remember it. I think my dad got it, and yeah, it was just this amazing moment where it kind of made me realise. It kind of helped me realise where I fitted.

Mandy: Yes.

Tanni: And just that there were other people that thought the same as me and didn't want to just kind of accept it. Because, growing up my parents were told you'll never get a job. I'll never get married, I've never have kids. I'll never, never, never. And they just ignored it, which is cool. But also, I saw the young disabled people who didn't grow up in that kind of supportive family and, you know, did tolerate some not great treatment.

Mandy: Yes.

Tanni: But my parents, my mum was always one... my mum always encouraged me to have a fight, which was great.

Mandy: Yeah.

Tanni: Usually with her standing two foot behind going "Go on. Say something. Go on. I'm not saying it for you." So, yeah, I kind of miss that with my parents, but there you go.

Jodi: Is there, and maybe we can wrap this on the website when we put up the transcript, is there anywhere that you would guide young people or any disabled people who aren't feeling like they have that community to go? If there's any websites or maybe groups you're associated with that you would recommend?

Tanni: I kind of try to follow as many disabled people on social media as I can.

Mandy: Yeah.

Tanni: And I'll give you a list. But there's loads of people. And I think it's important too for me to learn from other people's experiences.

Mandy: Absolutely.

Tanni: You know, because my experience as a wheelchair user is different from someone who's blind or visually impaired. And then some of the stuff we share is the same and some of it's not. So yeah, I try to do that. And I think for me that's been really useful. Just getting to know other people's experiences, that's been really helpful for me.

Mandy: Oh yeah, I think similarly to Tanni, really, you know. Well, key organisations like, if people are interested or experiencing the next austerity event, Disabled People Against the Cuts is a really key organisation. Sisters of Frida, which is a disabled women's collective, really important. And then you've got, you know, you've got a whole host of organisations around the arts like Graeae. You know, clear organisations like... and also if you're interested in the arts, you know the National Disability Arts Archive Collection, NDACA, is really significant. Because I think that's what's really important as well. You know, feeding disabled people is to note that there is a history. You know, that there are people out there who fought and who got us to this position, and while things aren't perfect, we can get on the bus now and that's not because of the generosity of bus companies. It's because of the activism of organisations like DAN and people like Barbra Lisicki and others who would chain themselves to buses.

Tanni: I always regret that I never chained myself to... I've never yet chained myself to anything.

Jodi: There’s still time Tanni!

I did join the WASPI women's campaign at the backend of the protest they had this week. And we're campaigning because women's pension ages are really awful, what's happening there. And one of the older women said to me "Oh, you're be fitting in with our age group, won't you? You look kind of 65." Yeah, I'm not there yet, but thank you very... Anyway, no. Yeah, so I quite fancy chaining myself to something.

Jodi: Let's do it.

Mandy: Yeah, and become traditional suffragettes. Traditionally it's definitely a kind of feminist thing to do. I mean, I think it's, you know... I think if there's one thing, as well, in which I do the side of being disabled women is I think it's something that the feminist movement needs to wake up to us as well. Because I think people, women, realise... women's organisations know disabled women exist, and often we're invited to speak or whatever. But what I don't think is, I don't think they see us quite as proper women. Do you know? We're not really proper women. I'm not really sure what that is about, but I think, you know, it's like... You know, for me, I am a feminist. I've always identified as a feminist. And so you know, I go to a lot of women only discussions and events, and you know, for the amount of stuff that's discussed, and so often I get so hacked off because nothing around... you know, people talk about diversity all the time, and yet disability diversity is never mentioned. It's never considered an issue. If it is, it's that there's a ramp and an accessible toilet, and that's about it.

Tanni: It still feels like disability, whichever way you look at it, is like at the bottom. Whether you're talking about pay gap, because we talk about sex pay gap and BAME pay gap, but disability pay gap is not often discussed or disabled people... It always just feels like disabled people are the last and that's insane. You know, it's like if had a game of top trumps, being a disabled woman, you wouldn't get many points, would you?

Mandy: No.

Tanni: I don't see what was mentioned in this report is there's very little difference in terms of how disabled men and women as athletes are treated, which is kind of... I don't know that. So to me that means that they're looking at them as disabled people who are athletes rather than male and female. So I mean, there's probably a PhD studying this, but I'm just saying I kind of think of myself as a feminist, but I don't feel connected to some of the feminist groups in the same way, because I sometimes feel I'm there to tick a box, and when we talk about diversity and inclusion and equality in sport, I went to an event recently and it was like I'm the only visible disabled person there.

Mandy: Yes.

Tanni: It was honestly, it was like did you seriously just stick me on stage because you couldn't find anyone else?

Mandy: Yep.

Tanni: I said that, and it was like ooh. Okay, that was probably a little bit direct.

Mandy: Because somebody knows you as well.

Tanni: Yeah.

Mandy: Oh, get her in.

Tanni: Yeah. You know, I get loads of media, "Ooh, can you do an interview on such and such?" I know nothing about it. "Yeah, but you're disabled." Well, I mean I've got an opinion on everything, but that doesn't mean that that opinion should be public. And you know, there's a whole bunch of stuff I don't know, but just because I'm disabled doesn't mean to say I'm the... and so, yeah I just agree. I think it's quite an odd place, again, for women at the minute. I think it's some really tough times, and it's really important that disabled women are part of that discussion. That we're not just seen as... we're not just not at the bottom of long list of other women.

Mandy: And I think we have a lot to bring around. You know, knowledge about activism, about supporting each other that other groups can learn from actually. You know, so and it's fantastic, you know.

Tanni: A ramp and a vaguely accessible toilet that they're taken the brooms out of is not inclusion.

Mandy: No, or the mop bucket.

Tanni: Yeah.

Mandy: The mop bucket's always a good one.

Tanni: Yeah.

Jodi: Okay. Best thing, to wrap up, the best thing about being disabled, mop buckets aside, Mandy.

Mandy: Best thing about...

Mandy: Other disabled people. Yeah. Generally there's... you know, because it's not the only saving grace, but it's such a significant thing about how you, you know. Being able to get on with your own life knowing that there are other people trying to live their lives in a similar way that you can go to, that you can share perspectives with, you can have a laugh with. Some people that've got your back or your front or whatever, you know. Yeah. So that's what I would say.

Tanni: That's a really hard question. That might be the only thing I've never actually answered.

Jodi: Ring the bell.

Tanni: There you go.

Mandy: Change question.

Tanni: Change question.

Mandy: Yeah, we're bored Jodi.

Jodi: I want that on record that I've asked you a question that no one else has asked you.

Tanni: That I never have been asked that. But you know what? There are loads of good things in terms of, you know, friendship. Actually, me setting my own boundaries. Because there's lots of people who think I can't do stuff, and actually I think I've kind of learnt there's lots of stuff I can do. And I'm not afraid to try stuff, or I'm not afraid to try doing things that slightly scare me, because I've learnt through living with an impairment that there's lots of things I can do.

Mandy: I mean, it's tricky, because I actually don't have a problem. Because I would never have lived the life I lived.

Tanni: Exactly.

Mandy: I would never have had the life I have, you know, and the experience I've had if I wasn't a disabled person.

Tanni: I'd be boring to listen to if I was non-disabled.

Mandy: Yeah. You know, and so. Yeah, so you know it's just who we are and I'm not ashamed to be. You know sometimes it hacks me off, but that's not about me, it's about the way the world is. You know, the way the world doesn't accommodate me or rely on me to contribute in the way I want to or I can.

Tanni: And do you know what? It's not the worst thing in my life.

Mandy: No, exactly.

Tanni: Not even, you know, so. It's like there's plenty of other things that I'd kind of put before being a wheelchair user. There's lots of things that are quite cool as well.

Jodi: So, look up Mandy and Tanni on Twitter. Offer them sweets and sandwiches, and thank you both for being here today.

**Resources**

Disability Arts Online <https://disabilityarts.online/>

Graeae [www.graeae.org](http://www.graeae.org)

DPAC (disabled people against cuts) <https://dpac.uk.net/>

Stop Changes to Access to Work <https://stopchanges2atw.com/>

Sisters of Frida <http://www.sisofrida.org/>

Real [www.real.org.uk](http://www.real.org.uk)

Scope [www.scope.org.uk](http://www.scope.org.uk)

NDACA <https://the-ndaca.org/>

**And on twitter:**  
Tanni Grey-Thompson @Tanni\_GT  
Mandy Colleran @disabilitydiva

Liz Carr @thelizcarr  
Lisa Hammond @lisahammondwhop

Mat Fraser @mat\_fraser

Francesca Martinez @chessmartinez

Tourettes Hero @TourettesHero

Cherylee Houston @cheryleehouston