

The Hum Podcast

Episode 27: "I Persevered And Here I Am"

[Theme music fades in]

Spencer: When you tell your story, then you unconsciously allow other people to feel comfortable to do the same and for them to be comfortable. And so what I hope that, at the end of the day by talking about my sexuality and my disability and the work that I do is that other people can identify themselves and realize that they have the capacity to do and experience some of the same things that I have, to give other people hope or this idea that like, listen, this was tough for me, but I persevered and here I am and you can do the same thing.

[Music increases in volume]

Speaker: You're listening to The Hum.

[Music decreases in volume]

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Simona: I am so incredibly excited to have one of my best friends on with us this morning. Motivational speaker, author and vocal advocate for the LGBTQ and those living with disabilities. My best friend Spencer lost both his legs at the age of five due to a genetic disorder that caused the muscles in his legs to stop growing. But whether it's mesmerizing audiences in stadiums around the world or leading volunteer excursions for youth and adults, Spencer's words and actions have encouraged millions to stand up, face challenges and embrace change. So welcome today, the love of my life. Thanks so much for joining us today.

Spencer: Oh my God. Thank you for having me.

Gilad: We are so honored that you're here. As you can tell by some of those eight intros that you won't hear on the edited version.

Spencer: Right. No, she did take a few, but you know what? Simona and I became friends over friendship bracelets.

Simona: Yeah, yeah.

Gilad: Maybe that's a thing that's causing us not to get along.

Simona: I told you I wanted to do like, Greco Roman wrestling in the alley or bare knuckle boxing, but you're never open to my suggestions.

Gilad: I'm more into the WWE wrestling, but Greco.

Simona: So not wrestling. Oh, so the Oscars of wrestling, where they're not really acting. Yeah. That's real sports.

Spencer: Fake news.

Gilad: Oh gosh.

Simona: So let's just kind of address the question that I'm sure everyone always asks you the first time. The first thing that they see when they meet you is, how the fuck are your eyebrows so on fleek?

Spencer: Listen, if you could actually see them, they're not that great right now. They're a little long. But yeah, listen, I make sure that they're groomed. I used to, my first like real job as an adult, I worked at a salon and that's where I really learned the importance of like taking care of your face.

Gilad: Yes.

Spencer: Not just your hair. And so brows were one of them. I'm Italian and I would have one.

Gilad: My eyebrows are out of control and Britta, my wife, looks at me and resents my face often because of these eyebrows.

Simona: She's struggled.

Gilad: Can you guide me a little bit through eyebrow grooming?

Spencer: Gilad, they're not that bad to be honest. Like you just need a little cleanup on the underneath there, but like you actually have really nice eyebrows.

Gilad: That's very, very kind.

Simona: Let's address one of the big questions is that you don't have legs, so can you just ...

Spencer: What?

Simona: Can you just let us or share a bit of your story about kind of, where you grew up, kind of how you've become an adult who's done so many amazing things without having legs?

Spencer: Yeah, yeah.

Simona: You legless hero.

Gilad: With beautiful eyebrows.

Spencer: Thank you. Yeah, so listen, I was born to young parents. My mom was like 21 and that would've made my dad like 25. They were ready to have a baby, but they weren't prepared to have like a baby with a disability. And so they didn't realize anything was wrong with me until I was born. If my memory is correct, I was breached and I was born C section. And when I was born, the doctor realized something was wrong, my legs looked a bit odd, and they'd sort of look like frog legs the way they were positioned. And so shortly after I was born, we went to the nearby city, which is Salt Lake City, which is like two hours away from Wyoming where I grew up, to like see a bunch of doctors. And that's when they realized that I had a really rare genetic disease called sacral agenesis, which caused the muscles in my legs not to work.

Spencer: So the first course of action was like, let's remove them at the knee and hopes that he can use like artificial legs or for prosthetic legs and get around that way. And so we tried that, but it didn't work. So then at the age of five, just before I went to kindergarten, they removed them just below my pelvis so I could get around better. And my parents weren't financially set up to like, have their child have two major surgeries. So thanks to the Shriners Hospital, like all of my medical care was free, which was amazing and I'm really grateful for them. And nowadays like, that's Justin Timberlake's charity of choice so like, you're welcome.

Simona: But okay, so you mentioned you grew up in Wyoming. So for some of us who may not know kind of some of the backstory about Wyoming, it is a very

conservative state. When I say conservative, I mean like real red. They have not voted for a Democratic president since 1964, so they did not jump on the Obama Bandwagon. They went straight, they just continually vote Republican. So what was it like growing up with a disability in that space, but then kind of you also are gay and you knew you were gay for quite some time in a conservative state. What was that like for you?

Spencer: Yeah, I mean for context. And, so if we're thinking like geographically for just a second, so if, I'm sure most of you are in Canada, so we all know where the province of Alberta is, under Alberta is Montana and then under Montana is Wyoming.

Gilad: Actually all of our listeners are in Wyoming, so be nice.

Simona: Yeah. It's just really right wing, just, we have so many right wing fans.

Spencer: It's literally just my mom.

Simona: Hey Tana.

Spencer: Yeah. So geographically where we are is an interesting space because Wyoming, the Rockies run through Wyoming and it's also an outdoors hunting, fishing, live off the land kind of state. We still have like the old wild west, people come to Wyoming to live the old wild west experience. And so there was two folds in Wyoming, I did like growing up there because of the small knit community and knowing everyone, but that was also like the hard part as well. So growing up in Wyoming had its challenges. Definitely looking different was a challenge in itself, but I feel like that one was actually easier to overcome, because that was more physical things that I had control over. It was realizing eventually that I was gay and then living through the trauma of Matthew Shepard being murdered when I was in high school in my home state. And realizing that hate does exist in a very extreme way. Now we can't obviously lump everybody into that category, but suddenly my state was known as the state of hate, and it was a scary place to be a high school student and to be gay. And that was one of the reasons that I was afraid to come out in the beginning. With a whole slew of other things, growing up in the Catholic Church and all of that, I felt a lot of guilt.

Spencer: And so it was difficult, but on the flip side, I've made some of the best friends that are still my best friends today. My best friend John, who is also gay, we like had this and we didn't know it at the, I think we did know it at the time, we never discussed it until after we left. So it was nice to have those, those allies as well. So, although I really, and I really appreciated growing up in a place that was so small, it was really hard to grow up in a place where you didn't feel like you fit

in or belonged or could be murdered for being who you were. So that was really challenging for sure.

Gilad: We're just right now like the, the day after, or a few days after that shooting in New Zealand and something that just comes to mind is in moments of pure hatred, you mentioned Matthew Shepherd. How do you maintain hope when, when you feel like there are just people out there who hate you so much that they're willing to, you know, destroy you or destroy others who believe in the same things that you do? How do you maintain that hope?

Spencer: Look, to be candid, it's hard to do that right in the beginning because you're like, fuck, this was awful. And that could have been me, and that could have been a whole slew of other people as well. And so in the beginning it's a little scary. And so I think it's important to you that you feel those emotions, but I don't know, innately I just have this sense that like things will always get better in some way.

Spencer: There's this great quote from, I'm dating myself a little bit, but Queer As Folk was this amazing, the first like LGBTQ show that I saw that represented gay men in a way that they were sexual, they weren't just like your hairdresser or you're funny best friend. It was like all the complexities of the gay community and they had this like incredible archetype woman who ran this, worked at this diner and she had the best quote, she said, "Sometimes you just have to hang on until the scenery changes, but the scenery will always change," and so I think that's what I always keep in in the back of my head. When we see things like this, like this is awful. We obviously have a lot of work to do and but we just have to hang on together because the scenery will eventually change.

Gilad: Much of living is done is done through public speaking, right? You're very outspoken. You're an advocate for a lot of things. When it comes to themes or stories, especially around your sexuality or disability, what are things you're A, tired of talking about, annoyed of being asked about, and what are some things that excite you to talk about? And also a third question, not to make it too complicated, but what are some stigmas that need to be dispelled around those subjects?

Spencer: Yeah, I mean I think, I want to be very clear and transparent in that I'm just navigating the LGBTQ space now. I've been out since I was 21 but I didn't come out publicly until like two years ago. So I'm trying to figure out where I fit into that. I'm actually doing my first LGBTQ, like I'm doing a fireside chat at this incredible conference called Out Shine in Fredericton in May. And so that'll be my first. So I haven't formally done other than, so I worked for an organization called WE in this year I've been telling my coming out story on the WE Day stage, which has been awesome. So this is sort of my first entrance into that public space. I've always talked about my disability because it's the first thing that you

see and so I have to address it. As far as like what am I excited about and what am I tired of talking about? I mean my whole career is built around telling my story, so I just have to be okay with that. But I have control of like changing it and like telling it in a different way or adding different touch points to it.

Spencer: But I think for me, the thing that I'm most frustrated about all of the time is people always want to know, do I have a penis? It happens at every speech. It happens all the time, whether it's on a dating app or whether it's, literally I started addressing it at the beginning of my speech because I would talk for an entire hour and at the end, inevitably every single time someone raised their hand and say, but how do you go to the bathroom? And they heard nothing else. That's all they could think about the entire speech. And I was like, why does my dick interest you at all? Like what happens is in the disability community, people automatically think that it's okay to ask a lot of personal questions. And I struggle with this because on one side of the coin, I want them to because that's how we learn and that's how we understand, that's how we educate people. But then the other hand I'm like, I don't come to your school and ask you about your vagina. That is something that I get super annoyed about.

Gilad: It's so interesting that a stranger could feel just that they could take it from like zero to one million.

Spencer: Yeah.

Gilad: Right there.

Spencer: Yeah. I mean we joke that I'm gonna like subtly just like leak a nude photo so we can finally get it over with. Like here it is, take a look. Can we all move on?

Simona: It's on the cover of People magazine.

Gilad: Just have it set out during your next public presentation.

Simona: Oh no!

Gilad: Have it peeking out the side of your ...

Simona: How did that get there?

Spencer: Yeah, my Janet Jackson moment.

Gilad: What excites you most? I mean, when you're discussing your sexuality or your disability, what, what are the things that excites you the most to open up about?

Spencer: I mean, I think, I really believe in this idea of when you tell your story, then you unconsciously allow other people to feel comfortable to do the same, and for them to be comfortable. And so what I hope, that at the end of the day by talking about my sexuality and my disability and the work that I do is that other people can identify themselves and realize that they have the capacity to do and experience some of the same things that I have and to be one more face in the crowd, to be like, I'm one too. And you are not alone. I remember when Ellen DeGeneres came out, like it was so impactful and it's always hard to put into words, but just knowing that there was someone else that was a public figure was so empowering that I hope that I can do that in some smaller way. That to give other people hope or this idea that like, listen, this was tough for me but I persevered and here I am and you can do the same thing is the idea.

Gilad: And speaking of no small feats ...

Spencer: Is that a leg joke?

Gilad: It's known that you've climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. I'm curious to know A, why did you do it? B, what kind of mental and physical preparation did you have to go through? And I know you didn't do it on your own, so how important was it to have the people around you do that hike as well?

Spencer: Yeah, I mean listen, my job is to empower young people to change the world. And I was doing that for quite a few years and then I was like, I feel really awful because I haven't done it myself. And how would it look that this person is telling these young people, this is what you need to do and I had never done it. But I didn't know what that looked like or how to do it. And I was traveling with our founder Craig Kielburger for a speech and he just in passing said, have you ever thought about climbing Kilimanjaro? And I was like, "Have you lost your goddamn mind? No, I don't want to climb a mountain."

Gilad: That goes for people with legs.

Spencer: I know, I know. It's for everyone.

Simona: Yeah. No one wants to.

Spencer: Yeah. And then a week later I was like, yeah, I want to do it. But I was like, I want to create a campaign around it. And so that's what we did. We created a campaign and I thought, well, this is going to be the hardest thing that I've ever done. And what's really difficult about my job is that I spend about 200 days on the road and the thing that fuels me and helps me recharge is spending time with my friends. And it just wasn't happening. So I thought, how can I find a way to spend time with my friends, but also work and give back at the same time,

and Kilimanjaro was the answer for that. I asked my two best friends, David and Alex to come. And then we set on a journey for a year of working with a personal trainer and I campaigned everywhere that I went.

Spencer: But the piece that I loved the most about it is that it was guaranteed, we had to hang out, we had to hang out to go to the gym. We had to hang out to learn about how we were going to climb the mountain. We had to hang out to go to MEC and buy all of our gear. It was guaranteed that this was something that we had to do. And then it came time to climb the mountain. And it was awful. I mean, it was terrible. It was so hard. I hate camping. Like the washroom situation was so difficult for me. There's all of these things that came into play, but that's why they came. They were amazing at supporting me physically and emotionally.

Spencer: And then what I didn't expect is when we got to the top on summit day, they got altitude sickness and I didn't. And suddenly they needed my support and I didn't expect that. And so it was this beautiful exchange back and forth of those two things. And ultimately, the whole reason we did it was to have a cool adventure, to raise a bunch of money for clean water and to show the world and these young people that I talk to that this is possible, regardless of whatever issues you're facing now, not everybody can climb Kilimanjaro, but there are other things that you can do. So that was the idea.

Simona: So you have been living in Toronto for ten years. So we met, we started working at WE together in 2008, like two or three months apart.

Spencer: Yeah.

Simona: So you moved from Wyoming literally within a summer, to Toronto to like create this new life. So what is Toronto for you? Like, you know, what, as an American, as a gay man, as someone with a disability, like what does Toronto look like for you and feel like for you?

Spencer: Yeah, I mean, so I moved from, from Phoenix, Arizona to Toronto, because that's where I was living at the time, I was living in Phoenix and working there. Toronto for me, And it was the same, the first time that I went to New York City, it was possibility. You know, I came from a small state, which as we said earlier, it was awesome and also had its challenges. But there wasn't a lot of opportunity for me there. And Toronto was this like my emerald city, so to speak. It was like, this is the land of opportunity. This is a place where there's a lot for me to be involved in. There's a lot for me to do and it's very diversity.

Spencer: And so for me it was very exciting to come to a place cause I always wanted to live in New York City, but I never had a reason to and I couldn't just move there on my own. It's just far too expensive and so when this job came around I was

like, yes, this is what I have been looking for because the possibilities are so much more, it seems like, available than where I had come from. So that's what Toronto means to me is this place of like I launched my career here, I built a home here. I, you know, always talk about there's a family that you're born into and the family that you choose. I'm really grateful that the family I'm born into is incredible, but the family that I chose is on the same level, and Toronto has represented all of those things, which I didn't think was possible.

Gilad: Yeah, the sense of community in Toronto is amazing. That's always something I hear from when new people are moving here. And I felt it, like when I moved here in 2008 just how quickly I was able to immerse myself and build that community.

Spencer: Oh, we're the same, same year.

Gilad: Yes, it's an eleven year history.

Spencer: Yeah.

Gilad: That is amazing. I'm curious to know though, what is it like navigating around Toronto in a wheelchair and having a disability, like how welcoming is the city in that way? What more could be done to accommodate or to support others living in wheelchairs too?

Spencer: Yeah. I mean Toronto is super inaccessible. There's effort being put in, but it's not enough. You know, we're just now getting to the - it's 2019, we're just now getting to the point where streetcars are accessible. Like the subway, I've only taken the subway once.

Gilad: And by streetcars, you mean like one out of every ten, maybe.

Simona: Yeah, like on Spadina or like, King Street.

Spencer: Yeah. They just put the new streetcars on Queen Street. But it's not all of them yet. So I've never taken a streetcar by myself 'cause it's just not possible. The subway isn't accessible. Most buildings aren't accessible. For me, like the privilege that I have is that I can get out of my wheelchair and walk on my hands and I'm strong enough that I can lift my wheelchair up a few stairs. That's no problem. The barriers that I face are washrooms. A lot of washrooms in buildings here are like in the basement and A, I don't want to have to walk on my hands and be, would you want to touch your penis after you've walked on your bare hands on the bathroom floor?

Simona: Gilad, can you answer for that?

Gilad: 30% of the time, it depends on the situation.

Spencer: Yeah. So I think Toronto has a long way to go, but there has been some amazing strides had, I mean look at Stop Gap. Stop Gap is this incredible organization that is trying to fight this because the city isn't doing enough and working fast enough. So then you've got amazing people, there's this amazing woman named Maya and I can never remember her last name. She's created this app called Access Now, I think, where it gives you all the places that are accessible and she's taking this global too. It's a really incredible app. So then, there's people that now are feeling empowered to like fix some of these situations. So it's hard. I have a car so I can get around that way, but accessibility is hard in this city and everywhere else in the world.

Simona: Kind of like, going a bit deeper with that, you know, Toronto you mentioned, it has been about possibility. So like dating in Toronto, just navigating that world is like a challenge in itself, to just be someone with a disability and gay, but then also just like walk us through that and then walk us through like, thinking about going out and meeting someone on a date and that you have to bring out, well it needs to be accessible. And do you get into your head about, "Oh I'm being too needy. Like I don't want to," you know?

Spencer: Yeah. So listen, like dating is hard in general and then dating as someone who identifies as gay and has a disability has a whole different slew of challenges. I actually just did a BuzzFeed video about this, talking about online dating and my experience. It's super challenging. I want to back up for a second. Even before we like do the dating apps, like me trying to meet someone at a bar is very challenging. It's just not something that I can do. So like the few times that I've gone out, it's crowded so I have to stick to one location. I'm not going to walk on my hands because no one is paying attention, so I need to stay in my wheelchair so we have to like stick to one corner.

Spencer: It's not as if I can walk up to someone and be like, "Hi," because number one, I'm short and they're super tall. It's usually loud. They're going to have to bend down. I'm going to have to yell in their ear. The whole experience is not set up for me, so trying to just meet someone at a bar is not going to happen. I'm sure there might be a creative way, but I'm exhausted and I'm like, that's not working for me. Then there's a whole thing of online dating, well online dating is I feel like I have to come out twice. You, everyone knows when you're on there that you're gay. But then I have to explain my disability and sometimes people block me. Sometimes people are like, "Oh I'm not into this." Sometimes people fetishize me and are only interested in me because they want that experience of sleeping with someone disability or without legs.

Spencer: So it's hard to find like a genuine connection in that space. It happens for sure, but it's few and far between. And so dating in general has always been very hard for me. And it's interesting because my mom said to me a long time ago, and in a very supportive and loving way, because I was getting so focused on, I need to find someone. And she was like, it might take you a little bit longer, but I think I've held on to that for too long and that might've gotten in my way a little bit. 'Cause then I'm afraid to like get out there and put myself out there. But then what do you do? Cause those are the barriers that I face, I don't know what the answer is.

Gilad: We've had two other folks in wheelchairs on our podcast. We've had Luke Anderson, the founder of Stop Gap.

Spencer: Yeah.

Gilad: As well as Scott Jones, who you're familiar with.

Spencer: Yeah I am.

Gilad: And so we sort of threw that same question at them as well. And it's interesting cause it's the same, it's the same responses and both of them are also dealing with disability in a different way as well. But both came back saying the same thing. So there obviously is more of a need to build those connections, but it's hard enough as it is. Like we talk about how hard dating is in general.

Simona: Yeah, and especially with the online dating piece, it's so easy to just write it off so you don't have to get to know somebody with a disability, right?

Spencer: Yeah.

Simona: It's just like the fetishization piece about it, like what does that look like? What is the conversations?

Spencer: It usually manifests in, someone feels very eager to get to know you, which you know, can be, oh this is kind of nice. And then very slowly you start to realize they want like a nude photo and then they want like, well how would this work and, what position would be best? And then usually it manifests into, this is something that I've always wanted to try and I'm like, well I'm not going to be your person because that's not what I'm looking for. It hasn't happened as much for me as maybe it has to other people. It's only happened a couple of times. Like I had one guy once and be like, can you, it's so weird.

Simona: Tell us.

Spencer: He was like, "Can you send me a video of you walking?" I was like, what?

Gilad: With a sepia filter in slow motion?

Spencer: Yeah.

Gilad: And please wear red.

Spencer: Yeah. No, no ...

Simona: And lipstick.

Spencer: Nude was the request and I was like, no. That's been my experience. That's what it's looked like for me in particular.

Gilad: Simona was mentioning earlier that you mentioned at some point that this was your year of courageous conversations. Is that correct?

Spencer: Yeah, this year I wanted, I labeled this year "be brave." The last two years, I was just struggling with work. I was working too much. I was suffering from like pretty intense anxiety that I started seeing a therapist to sort of deal with all the things. And it turns out I was just working way too hard and I wasn't making enough space for myself. And so I set a bunch of stuff up over the last couple of years to get myself ready for this year to just like enjoy. And so this year is this idea of being brave and doing things outside of my comfort zone. So an example was New Year's Eve, a friend of mine was like, "Hey, a friend of mine is hosting a gay house party, do you want to come?"

Spencer: And normally I'd be like, no, that's too much for me. And I was like, no, you know what, I'm going to go. And so I went and I knew only knew one person and it was awesome. And a lot of my friends, you included, are incredible, but you're heterosexual. And so there are sometimes things that we just won't be able to identify with and to be in a room full of gay men, instantly there was a connection on a different level that I'd forgotten existed. And so that was a really nice piece. I mean, I left by 11:30 so I can be in bed by midnight, but like I was there for an hour.

Gilad: We are in our thirties.

Spencer: Yeah. That's it.

Gilad: Simona's almost in her forties.

Simona: You did a full hour? Good for you.

Spencer: Yeah. I did. So I'm, I'm trying to do those types of things and trying to embrace things that scare me. So that was the first one.

Gilad: Has it been easier or harder than you thought?

Spencer: It's hard. It's super hard, but what I'm addicted to right now is the feeling afterwards of like, fuck yeah, I did that. And like, okay, cause I had gotten complacent and lazy and it's easy to just go to work and come home. So yeah, I think it's awesome.

Simona: You are such a confident person in my life. Like when I think of resilience, when I think of confidence, when I think of just constantly getting out of someone's comfort zone, I think of you, like completely.

Spencer: Really?

Simona: Completely.

Spencer: Wow.

Simona: Because, well you travel all over the world, you know, yes you have a support person that's like helping you, but like you have a very independent life and I haven't really seen you frustrated about your situation, I would say over ten years. You know like there's always, you always make like something work.

Gilad: We've even been to the cottage together where I get frustrated about the washroom outside.

Simona: Yeah. And I have to say this like, cause the cottage that we go to is very rustic. It's very outdoorsy.

Gilad: Yeah.

Simona: It's a beautiful space in the summer, but there's an outhouse. But you always make it work. Like you always do your part to be part of the group, right? Is there any points that you just feel frustrated with like your community that of able-bodied people that they still mess up about language, or they don't always recognize that we need to be accessible. And do you ever think like fuck, I just wish I had legs in this moment?

Spencer: It's funny, I don't think I ever, thank you for saying that's really nice because it's so interesting what you exude and what you actually feel, cause I don't feel super confident. So for you to say that I'm like wow, that's really nice. Cause I don't know if I see myself that way. I'm actually working on that. But as I get

older, I'm starting to find that things are bothering me a bit more. Before it was like, well this is the world we live in and it's still that way a little bit of like. I don't have a choice, I have to figure out how to navigate it. So in some instances it's like, why get angry? Because this is how it is. And so you have to be okay with that to some degree.

Spencer: But then there are some instances that it is difficult, I think, and I've said this so I don't feel guilty saying it, like the cottage is a very good example of something that I struggle with because, and it's not intentional so I want to say that out loud, but it has always been this is what we're doing. So come and figure it out for yourself or don't come, but your entire friend group is just going to go. That sucks. That sucks that I'm the person that has to make it work. But like this is the world we live in, so I have to figure it out. But yeah, like as our friend group, I was just talking about this last night with my friend Sally. As our friend group, sometimes it would be nice to be like, let's go to a place where they have an accessible washroom. That's the thing that bothers me the most when we go out in public, because I can only have one drink and then I usually have to go because if I have to pee, I'm going to have to find somewhere to go.

Gilad: It's so tough how unaccommodating the city can be. And Scott, who we mentioned earlier has, has recently become a good friend of mine and I've got to say he's probably the first good friend I have who is living his life using a wheelchair. And so we went to a movie a couple months ago, probably about now six months ago, and we're trying to find a place to eat. And so this is never something that crosses my mind, but where can we go that A, has a ramp? Because Toronto, to build on what you were saying earlier, is built in this stupid way where there's this like one or two unnecessary steps to get into ...

Spencer: Always.

Gilad: A place.

Spencer: Yeah.

Gilad: Which stops or hinders the ability for everybody to be able to use it. So we go to, and I'm going to shout them out because I'm getting frustrated, General Assembly Pizza, which is this amazing pizza spot just right behind our office here on Adelaide near Peter. They make great pizza and I love it there. But what frustrates me is they had that step, and so we couldn't get in. And so I get in touch with the owner and I say, listen, I have this friend. We really want to come to your establishment, I'm a loyal customer. Can you consider putting in this ramp? And so he comes up with an excuse saying, you know, it's a heritage building and the owners don't want to do it. So then I contact the owners and they're like, we want to do it, I don't know where he's coming up with this. And

then I actually contact the city and then they're like, there's no heritage rule. You could put in a ramp anywhere. So then I get them in touch with Stop Gap. Anyway, here we are six months later and there's still no fucking ramp outside. Six months. This is not just, this is a for-profit business. The purpose of your company is to make money. How much would it cost for you to put a little ramp in that would actually probably end up making you more money, you know, in the long term anyway, because more people will be able to come in?

Spencer: Yeah.

Simona: And they have a legal obligation to do that under the AODA in Ontario, which is the something something disabilities act.

Spencer: Yeah.

Simona: You know, so Accessible Ontario Disabilities Act, where every business has to be retrofitted to allow for it to be accessible. But there are still, you know, even just getting a Stop Gap ramp in the interim before you have actually a fully designed one that fits the aesthetic of your building, I understand that. But like your choice not to do anything speaks volumes.

Gilad: And it's not just for folks in wheelchairs. I mean it's, it's mothers and fathers with strollers. I actually saw a delivery guy delivering food to that place and he has to bring his own ramp to be able to deliver stuff inside the store. And so it's being mindful of all those things, but for me it happens in a hiccup, like it's something that I, as part of my privilege, don't have to deal with all the time.

Spencer: Yeah. And that's the thing and I think you start to hit on it is, in the grand scheme of things, it's not going to be as costly as people assume it will be. It might be for that like instance, in that moment, but like you said in the long term, you're opening yourself up to a whole different community that could come and enjoy your establishment. I will say on the flip side though, I recently, this past summer, I was with my friend Dean and we went to a new restaurant and I can't remember what it was called, but we sat down and the manager on duty came over and she knelt down. She was like, guys, I'm so sorry. And we thought she was going to tell us we had to like move tables or something. She looked at me and she was like, our accessible washroom isn't working and I feel really awful, but I've talked to the restaurant next door and they are totally fine with you coming in and using their washroom over there.

Spencer: That's the first time that's ever happened. So there are people that are thinking about it and that are cognizant and are trying to create a space. It's not enough, but they're out there. But I think what you hit on Gilad is that everyone needs to experience this. I would love to do a day where everyone has to be in a

wheelchair or experience some sort of physical disability and navigate the city, just for a day, just to see what it's like.

Gilad: How do we organize that? That'd be ...

Simona: Yeah that'd be great, actually.

Gilad: An incredible campaign.

Spencer: Yeah.

Gilad: Honestly, anyone who's listening, please join me by the way, in boycotting General Assembly Pizza until they do get that ramp, it's been six months.

Simona: Yeah please.

Gilad: Do not give them your business until that ramp is put up.

Simona: And call them to let them know that you've heard this podcast and share, like, and subscribe to this podcast as well.

Gilad: Yeah, that would be ...

Spencer: Do you know what's also interesting too, and I need to be a bit more brave about doing this. One of the barber shops that I go to has a sign when you walk in, if you are homophobic, trans phobic or an asshole, come back later. But there's three stairs to get into the barber shop.

Simona: Yeah.

Spencer: And I'm like ...

Simona: It's great if you have that kind of sentiment, but it's not inclusive. Right?

Spencer: Yeah.

Simona: You don't want that. But ...

Spencer: Yeah.

Simona: There's also other people, like, doing your fucking work.

Spencer: Yeah, where's that? Yeah.

Simona: Yeah.

Gilad: And some people might argue, you know, while we're 75% there, but that 75% still means 0% to other people like you who still can't access this space.

Spencer: Yeah exactly.

Gilad: Which is just fucking terrible.

Spencer: Yeah.

Gilad: I want to go back to one thing. You know, confidence, like when I think of you, you exude confidence. Honestly, I look at you as a source of inspiration in a lot of the work that I do because it's not always easy for me. I wanted to ask you, in moments when you're feeling anxious, and I've been much more open lately about living with anxiety, it's something that I've been dealing with on and off for about two years now. What grounds you and how do you, like you did mention more time for yourself, but how do you strike that balance where you can wake up and be, you know, the best version of yourself? Where do you find that peace?

Spencer: I mean, talking to a therapist has been extremely helpful in that regard. And coming up with some tools that I can use for my own situation. I'm learning how to recognize my feelings in my body and where they are and trying to identify what they are. And so like, you know, a few months ago I was at a party for work and I was feeling super overwhelmed, so I just excused myself. And I went to the washroom for five minutes and I just took a couple deep breaths and I felt better and then I went back out. But I'm still learning how to figure out what those things are. I don't always know. So I'm trying to be better at expressing my feelings and this is why I'm feeling what I'm feeling in this moment and I need support and I need help.

Spencer: And for me it's also like sitting down with my friends and just being, not worrying about anything, like watching Netflix or even just hanging out with you guys today. I knew that I was going to be super relaxed and super comfortable cause I haven't seen either of you in a long time. So that's sort of what I'm doing. But for me it's been professional help. I needed it, I couldn't handle it on my own.

Spencer: And I heard Elizabeth Gilbert has this, she did like a Ted talk and she talked about ... Maybe it's her Ted talk or it was her book, I can't remember. But she talked about how she was starting to have control over her emotions. She was struggling with the same thing. And basically she said, I'm in charge, sadness, you're here but I don't need you right now, so go to sleep. When I'm ready for you, then you can wake. And I liked that idea of taking control of that a little bit. It's easier said than done, but that really helped me figure out, okay, anxiety I know that you're there, but I need you to go to sleep right now because I can't

address you in this moment, but I will. Give me an hour and I'll come back and we'll figure out what this is.

Gilad: It's a nice analogy.

Spencer: Yeah.

Gilad: It's almost like in my head, I'm visualizing like it's a passenger in the car with you and rather than trying to kick it out, just acknowledging that it's there but not giving it so much space.

Spencer: Yeah, yeah. You will eventually need to, but in that moment maybe you can't.

Simona: Put it in the trunk.

Spencer: That's it, shimmy out of this trunk.

Gilad: And on that note, thank you.

Spencer: Yeah.

Gilad: Put it in the trunk. Thank you so much, Spencer. Sim, are you good?

[Theme music fades in]

Simona: Yeah, I had a great time. I love you.

Spencer: Thank you.

Gilad: My name's Gilad Cohen.

Simona: And I'm Simona Ramkisson.

Gilad: This podcast is edited and produced by Brandon Fragamani and Alex Castellani. Our associate producer is Ron Ma.

Simona: This is an initiative of JAYU, a charity that shares human rights stories through the arts.

[Music fades out]

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