

Episode 40: Isaac

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This transcript is non-verbatim.

F:

What does it mean to be Isaac? In this episode, Isaac shares his stories of growing up and living without arms and short legs, and his reflections on addressing various issues over time, from disability and mental health, to race-related issues.

I'm Fumi, this is #OUR_racism, and this is the story of Isaac.

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I:

I'm Isaac, born with a disability called pelvic hypoplasia, which means I have no arms and short legs. I've got scoliosis which is the curvature of the spine, but that's been corrected by metalwork. And on top of all of that, I have reflux, which is stomach problems. But day to day, I just get on with it and achieve what I can.

F:

Isaac shares his experiences growing up.

I:

So growing up, family, especially my mom, made sure I went to a mainstream school. She's always treated me like everybody else. And because of that, it's allowed me to have the mindset of overcoming obstacles and being around people. She really did push for me to go to mainstream school. It was a bit of a fight to do that. But because of that pushing and the people that I've met during this time, that's how I feel I've not really seen the race thing, because I've just been built to just, I guess you could call it quote-unquote "normal", to just live a normal life.

Obviously, it's come with its challenges. But I think the times I've found where I've kind of not felt "normal", is, you know, for the beginning part of my life not being able to go on the bus because it wasn't accessible, or going on a train because I had to let them know 48 hours in advance. You know, that was... sometimes we don't know if I'm going to be travelling in 48 hours. But back then, you had to let them know in that time, and if not, you wouldn't get assistance, you couldn't go up and ask for that. So in that aspect, I did feel a lot different. Being able to access things, being able to travel, it was a lot more difficult, and I did feel excluded.

Even, you know, primary school and secondary school, having to get a school bus pick me up instead of just walking with other students, that also made me feel different during school. And having learning support systems, which was great help, but everyone else was writing their own things and I had to tell someone my answers, you know. So there were aspects where I did feel out of place. But on the other hand, it did make me feel included in some of these aspects. It's an interesting thing to think about because... so in my school, there was a department for people with disabilities. And there are loads of learning support assistants who would assist us during class or make us eat... make us "eat" (laugh), help us eat during dinner times, and support us with the whole school day. But with that came... it was kinda like, as much as they helped us during class which was mixed and during break time and all that kind of stuff, there were times where... well, it was everyday, that when we came to school...

So yeah, we all came on three different buses. So all the people with disabilities came on the bus, so we were together then. Then, when we got in, we went into the place called the "medical center" where we would get people to get our coats off and stuff. So again, all the people with a disability were together then. Then, when it came to lunchtime, we all sat around the table because it was easier for the learning support assistants to help us. So you know, in that aspect, we were kind of excluded from everybody else. It had a great intention and they wanted to give us the best of support, but we were excluded from everyone. I think there were some people who did have an opportunity to say, "Look, I want to sit with my friends." But we kind of just all sat together, all the wheelchair users kind of sat together, and that was like the thing to do. So yeah, it was kind of like inclusive exclusion, in some ways. Because even sports activities, we would have days out to go participate against other schools, also with disabilities, which, you know, it was great that we could have competitive sports. But again, it was like, "Oh, you're only doing it within a disability part of the space rather than doing it together." Like I said, great experiences, but looking back at it, it was kind of inclusive... yeah, it was good and bad. But more good, I would say, though.

I think groups and spaces like that are good because people can have an opportunity to work with others, an opportunity to feel like they can do stuff together. Because you know, the world's not being built for all people with disabilities. So that's why groups are important. That's why charities are doing certain "disabilities are important as well" kind of work. But I think, ultimately, it's about allyship and understanding each other beyond those groups, and really talking about it. Because for example, me, yeah, I might have a disability, but I didn't know much about disability till I joined LinkedIn because I've only seen it from the lens of an electric wheelchair user. But being on LinkedIn, I've connected with someone with visual impairment, and I've learned about web accessibility and the importance of alt text and image descriptions. And you know, people who are deaf and adding captions on videos [for them]. These are things I never thought about and how much of an impact it was making on people not included in the conversation. So you know, I've taken a huge learning curve in the disability community. And it's great when we can learn and educate from each other, and that's how we can really go forward.

F:

Isaac reflects on the importance of lived experiences for allyship.

I:

I had a mixture of friends. And they were supportive. And you know, one thing I think that's really beneficial when I am put in a class with many people without a disability, is them to just help me naturally is only going to help them have skills for the future of understanding accessibility and inclusion a lot better because I'm a true believer [of]: If you're not put into a situation, how are you meant to know something? Obviously, that's when you ask questions, but you know, sometimes people just don't know if they're not being put in that situation. So to have my classmates and friends at the time to have experiences with me, they may not think it has given an impact, but subconsciously they will be more ahead of the game when it comes to inclusion and working with people with disabilities. And that's how they can take into real-life experiences.

F:

Isaac would grow to become a vlogger, inspiring persons with disabilities. He shares how his journey began.

I:

After secondary school, I've always had a creative mind. And I was like, you know, I want to do my own thing. I don't want to do the nine to five... school was getting a bit too much for me after sixth form, so I was like, no, I want to do my own thing. So I did media in school. And I really liked the concept of video editing. And YouTube was a new thing back then. So I thought, you know what, I want to film

content and do YouTube and things and vlog my journey, because you know, I've been doing things like holding the Olympic torch back then and other things that would come up and what I would get involved in.

So I left school. And at the time, I was also an ambassador for a charity called the *Dream Factory*. And they go out to grant dreams for underprivileged children. And they had given me a dream before leaving school. And after... so they were doing a promo video, and they wanted to get some of their dream recipients to talk about their experiences. So they asked me to talk about my dream, which was going up in a helicopter, and I was happy to do that. And we did the filming, spoke about my experiences. And then me and the film guy really got on and I was telling him about doing vlogging and doing YouTube and things like that. And he said, "Oh, what camera would you like to get if you could start doing that?" And I said, "Oh, you know, I've looked at cameras and I think a GoPro would be good because it's..." Because I've gone out with so many different people, GoPro was the easiest to really get people to understand. It's literally two buttons. So I was like, "You know, a GoPro camera would be good, and I hope to get that soon."

So a couple of months went by and it was Christmas 2012. And I got a present under the tree from this filmmaker, and he ended up buying me a GoPro, which was really... I didn't expect it, really. So I was very grateful to him. And that's how it allowed me to start my YouTube journey, and I'll just film adventures that would show my skiing, my skydive, all types of different activities that I never knew existed, but I ended up just pushing and pushing the boundaries and showing what can be done with a disability. And at this time, friends and family would always say to me, you know, "You should really talk about disability in your videos, you could really educate people." And I thought, "Why do I need to do that for?" I'm just having fun making videos. But they kept saying, "No, no, you need to do it. You need to do it." And I thought, "Why should I do that for?" So I ended up continuing doing the videos and kind of ignoring what friends and family were saying.

And then, I was given an opportunity to do a talk up north about overcoming obstacles and disability. So I thought, "Okay, I'll do that." So I ended up doing this talk. And then afterwards, this thing just always stuck with me: A woman came up to me, and she said, "You know, I get a lot of pains in my legs. And I'm always complaining about it. But after hearing your story, it's really changed my perspective on things." And that was kind of like the first time I'd heard the impact I was making, not from a friend or family member. So I was like, "Okay. Maybe I can start incorporating that into the videos," which I did. And a lot of people were finding it really insightful and really liked that I was talking about it.

F:

Isaac continued to make videos, and in 2017, won a vlogging competition. This success, while having its benefits, did not come without new challenges.

I:

From that win, I was given an opportunity to go onto television, I was in the newspapers, I was given a one-to-one mentor from Youtube... you know, back then my mindset was like, "Okay, now I'm gonna get a million followers, I'm gonna have a successful YouTube channel, I'm gonna be an influencer, I'm gonna be amazing," and all that kind of stuff, right? And then months went by and that didn't really happen. So that really took a toll on my mental health. And I really got unmotivated at the time. And I was like, at the beginning, I enjoyed doing videos, but then I was like, "I'm putting all these hours in and I'm not getting the viewership, I'm not getting this and that." So I kind of got very demotivated and it was making an impact on my mental health.

As this was happening, I also thought to be happy in life, you have to be in a relationship. So even though I was doing all of these cool things like skiing, skydiving, tour ship sailing, all of that, internally, I wasn't happy. And I thought the only way to get that happiness was to be in a relationship. So I was

blinded by all the cool things I was doing. Obviously, I was grateful for what I was doing, and I was happy at the time. But internally, I wasn't. So, I was like, okay, the obvious thing is to get into a relationship, that's what's gonna make me happy. So I kind of was more focused on that than anything else that I was doing. And it became quite dangerous because there were times when girls would be nice to me and I ultimately thought that they just liked me. And when I found out that they didn't like me, it would make me feel quite down and bad, and then I'd be one of those people who'd share my feelings online and say, "Oh, this person's done this to me again." And then the person would end up seeing it and then they'll say, "Oh, no, it wasn't that," and, "How dare you write kind of things like that." And that will make me feel even worse because I wasn't in the right mental capacity. So that was happening.

And then I eventually did end up getting a girlfriend. And we went out for a couple of weeks and then I realized I still wasn't happy internally. And I thought, "Why am I still not happy? I finally got what I've always wanted." So I became quite selfish. I was like, "I finally got what I wanted. So I'm going to make sure I'm happy now." And obviously, being selfish in a relationship, that doesn't work. So it didn't really last long. So that and the video kind of came together. And it just got to a breaking point.

Oh, actually, before that, there was a third thing actually as well. The third thing was, as I was talking about disability and advocacy and stuff, I only thought, looking at other influencers, they only show good sides of things. So how can I... and I wasn't feeling great, but I thought, "If I talk about bad stuff, no one wants to hear that. And I wouldn't be seen as this inspirational person or someone who's really motivating them. I can only talk about good things." So, you know I wasn't openly happy to speak about it because I thought I'd be disappointing people. So yeah, so that was the third thing. And literally, all things came together and got to a breaking point, and I was like, "Okay, I really need to understand why I'm not happy."

And that's when I took a step back and took it upon myself to learn about the mind. And the first thing which came to my mind, and I don't know if you've seen the film called *Lucy*, it's a film where a woman uses more than 10% of her brain. And I don't know why it just popped into my head. It did. And I thought, "Is that fantasy or is it reality?" And I searched it on YouTube, *Ten Percent of Your Brain*. And that's when I came across a guy called Bob Proctor, and he was talking about the law of attraction, and how we think influences the reality that we create. I was really fascinated by this that I kept on learning about it. And I became quite honest... well, yeah, I became more honest and understanding of how I was actually feeling and being more open or speaking about it. And I came out of that feeling, "Right, I gotta just be positive about my life. That's the only way forward. I'm going to be fully positive on things."

Then I learned about meditation, something I mocked for quite a while, I was like, "How can you breathe and feel better about your life?" It didn't make sense to me. But I ended up doing it and I was like, "Okay, I understand now, it does make sense." So, yeah, I did that for a whole year. And I was like, "Okay, I'm in a much better place now. I don't need to do any more meditation. I don't need to do any more learning. I'm in a much better place now."

Two weeks later, back to rock bottom, I was like, "How did that happen?" I never thought that would ever happen. And that's when I realized it's a journey rather than an end destination. And to keep practicing and keep on learning about it. And to have a realistic mindset rather than just a positive one. Because being realistic prepares you for negative and positive situations. So yeah, that's been my mental health journey and I'm more openly talking about it. I talk about it on LinkedIn and all my sources more openly, and people really appreciate because it's human. And, you know, being honest with myself is not only helping me, but it's helping others.



F:

Isaac identifies himself as a Black man. However, he said that it was not until recently that he started to see issues related to race and representation. He shares a talk he had with a Black colleague.

I:

The topic of race came up. And I started off by saying, "You know, as a Black man, I don't really see race." And the first thing she said was, "Oh, that's not good. You know, that's really..." I guess you could say she said it was quite harmful saying that from someone like my caliber. But she didn't allow me to finish my story. Because I was talking about an opportunity when I went up north to a conference for young people at my church. It was a conference for young people where they make decisions for the church. And when I first went, it was mainly all White individuals, White young people. And I was the first person with a disability who had ever gone to the conference as well. So I was explaining this experience, and you know, I didn't really feel too uncomfortable about it because as I said to her, "I didn't really see race. I just see people as people."

So we went to the conference, and then they learned a lot about access because the train station wasn't accessible, so they had to change train stations for people with disabilities. They ended up doing a ramp in the station a couple of years onwards, and then they started bringing more people with race in, which was good. But again, you know, I just saw people as people. And then one year when it was a lot more mixed with race afterwards, there was a photographer taking pictures. And then every year they produce a magazine which comes out. And most of the pictures chosen were of just White young people. And I didn't really notice it at the time. But another advocate, the wife of our former church's minister who is very strongly about race and makes sure everyone's represented, emailed me with this very strongly worded email saying, "Have you seen this magazine? There's not much representation..." and all this kind of stuff.

And actually, that was kind of the first time I'd really seen it [lack of representation in pictures], and how people weren't represented. And it was from that email and talking onwards that I now make sure when, you know whenever – because I do video editing and I use stock imagery and stock videos – that I make sure that it's a mixture of everybody represented. Because you know, we live in a diverse world, so everyone should be represented. So I'm more clued up with it now and I make sure that I can make the best of representation in my content. And after I told the woman that in our conversation, she was like, "Okay, now I understand."

F:

Isaac says that after noticing the lack of representation in media, he's become more attentive to this issue in his creative work.

I:

One way I am doing that through my creativity is using stock imagery which is showcasing everyone. So that's definitely something I *really* make sure, and I do notice a lot more when they're not in videos. So I make sure that is in all the videos that I produce at least, that people are represented. And you know, there are times when finding that footage takes forever. But I really do make sure that I get it. I do get to show people, and I think most people who see themselves in that video will be like, "Okay, you know, I might be interested in what's going on or what's been advertised", and things like that. So yeah, just... I'm more consciously mindful of that when I do videos, because even like, I went on one stock footage website, and it was mainly just White faces. And I was like, "I can't use this." And they didn't really have much [stock footage] with disability either, so I was like, "No, I need to find something else." And I found better places now that has a wider mix of people and I make sure I use that in my videos.

F:

Isaac talks about the double-edged nature of power derived from people's influences on social media.

I:

I want to talk about power because it's very... even myself, I got a huge influence on LinkedIn and I could say anything, and sadly, people could believe it, right? But I've seen people with bigger influences than me in the disability space saying some things, and it's like, you know, you're making all the allies believe that [in what you say], when in reality, it shouldn't be said like that. Someone was talking about language, and they were saying, "You've got to say this, otherwise, none of the disability community are going to speak with you" or something along those lines. And I thought, "Well, no, actually. The reality is, you should always speak to someone about language and what they would prefer to be called as." Because I think everyone has a right to label themselves as however they would feel comfortable. And that's why we should speak to people, like having conversations like this are really good.

But, you know, saying so boldly about that, and then you see comments saying, "Oh, yeah, okay. I have an understanding now. I'll make sure to say it like that." And it's like, you're teaching them the wrong things. Because whatever that one person says, now an ally is going to say something to someone, and they'd [that someone] be like, "Ah no, I don't like to be referred to as that." And then they [the ally] say, "Ah no, but this person said that," and then they... that's when the uncomfortable situations happen, and it's like, that could have been avoided if they told the allies the right information. So yeah, I think the infighting and... like, they're good at what they're doing but they just gotta be careful with how they say it. Like, great power comes great responsibility. So you've got to be very mindful of what you say.

And that's why, you know, with what I put out online, I only share my lived experience mainly. I don't really comment on big issues that often, because I feel no one can be against my lived experience because it's my lived experience. I've started to talk more on wider aspects, but again, it's always coming from *my* opinion. And I say it's *my* opinion, and I hope it's something that allows people to think differently, not to just base what I'm saying as "the truth". I just like to bring the topic out in discussion and allow others to think otherwise. You know, I think that's how we should really be doing it, educating and allowing people to have different opinions on things. Not say, "This is the right way of doing things." I've got loads of people say that's why they like my posts because I'm just saying it from *my* story. And that's something I love doing and I will probably be continuing for awhile. But yeah, I think that's how it should really be done. And obviously, there are times where if it's a total injustice, yeah, there's always a right and wrong way you should do things. But in the scheme of things, we should get people in the conversation rather than telling them.

F:

Isaac is first and foremost a disability and mental health advocate. However, he has been entering more spaces to engage on race-related issues. He shares a recurring observation in all the spaces he navigates.

I:

To put it in a nutshell, we just live in a crazy world, really. The more I've been involved in these communities, the more I see... I see two sides of a coin. Either people are in it together and they really want to make a difference and they're all doing it for the right reasons, or the other side, where they seem to be doing it for the right reasons, but they're doing it selfishly for individual gain. And again, like we mentioned about the infighting, you know, I think every community, every behind-the-scenes that I've seen, it's just... it's just crazy, really. I just... I come out thinking, "How did I get myself in this position?" 'Cause I'm not someone for confrontation. I call people out if... you know, there's a time and place for calling people out, I don't just do it for fun, you know, there's a time and place for everything.

But I've just seen a lot of... just things that just shouldn't happen in these spaces. For example, the fashion industry, already a crazy world, you know, people are certain sized models and all of that and there are now people making the change, and I've been to very inclusive fashion shows where race, gender, culture, every community's represented on the catwalk and I think that's such a great thing. And I've been blown away by what people are doing. On the face of it, it's amazing. But when you look behind the scenes, it's like, was that actually adaptive clothing, or was that person actually represented in the right way? It's behind the scenes, which I've just found crazy within the communities. But when people do it right and everyone has great intentions, yeah, it's amazing. But sometimes it's just... yeah, they're just doing it for personal gain, and I think that's wrong.

But also, one thing which always seems to confuse me, and that is: Why have we still not got to a point where accessibility is not at the forefront of every conversation? Because accessibility is one of those things that can affect everybody. For example, making an entrance accessible is, everyone can go in, it's not just a person with a disability. And anyone can have an accident, anyone can have a health condition which may make them have a disability, so why wouldn't you want to make that the forefront of every conversation when it's affecting everyone? It's a human thing to make things accessible. So yeah, that's a really difficult one.

F:
Despite his increased focus on race and other societal issues, Isaac says he feels most comfortable talking about disability.

I:
I've always had the lens of disability. And because of that, I've always felt as if that's been my biggest discrimination, when I'm not able to do things, you know, not being able to access a bus because he prioritizes a buggy over me or train stations not being accessible. I've always had the disability lens, and I've always felt more comfortable talking about disability because, you know, that is my day-to-day life. So is race. But I've always felt more comfortable with talking about disability. And throughout this journey, I've really connected with those in the disability community, and I feel like I'm making a difference in changing people's perspectives in that area.

F:
Against the background of his experiences, Isaac shares his take on what it takes to be an ally for all issues.

I:
You know, in regard to disability and the spaces that I've gotten myself into, it's just about talking and realizing there's a lot more in common between each other than we know, and just talking with each other, having conversations like these openly. And as long as your intention is right, then don't worry about what you say. Because you could tell between a genuine and not genuine person. So yeah, just have these conversations, ask questions, and learn and educate from each other. And also, I do want to say: And within those conversations, I feel it's a responsibility for those educating not to say, "They should have known that," because not everyone knows everything. So you should educate. And then for people on the receiving end to listen and learn. So yeah, it's a two-way street. I think you just gotta take that leap and learn, really. I mean, like I said, I've learned so much from the disability space and race space and LGBTQ community. There's so much to learn. And why not? You know, why not learn? It's only helping us grow together.



F:

You can find more information about Isaac’s creative work, as well as other articles, books and videos he recommends people to take a look at on disability, mental health, and racism, on our website, www.ourcontexts.org.

You can also find the transcript of this episode on our website in English, French, German and Italian.

If you have a personal story to share, reach out to us on our website, Instagram or Twitter – you can find us by typing in #our_racism.

This is Fumi and #OUR_racism. See you after summer break, on September 6th!

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This episode was produced and edited by me, Fumi.

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