

Russell Lehmann Podcast Transcript: Adulthood on the Spectrum

Eileen Lamb

Welcome to "Adulthood on the Spectrum," in this podcast, we want to highlight the real voices of autistic adults, not just inspirational stories, but people like us talking about their day to day life. Basically, we want to give a voice to a variety of autistic people. I'm Eileen Lamb, an autistic author and photographer and I co-host this podcast with Andrew Komarow. Hi, Andrew.

Andrew Komarow

Hi, Eileen. I'm Andrew Komarow, an autistic entrepreneur and founder of the neurodiversity index. Today, our guest is Russell Lehmann. Russell is an award winning and an internationally recognized motivational speaker, poet, author, advocate who happens to have autism. We always like to start off our podcast with identity language, how someone prefers, and not he, her, she, him, but as far as person with autism, autistic, on the spectrum, and I know and your bio said, who happens to have autism? Is that your preference? Or do you have another one?

I have no preference. I just use them interchangeably. So feel free to use whatever you want.

Eileen Lamb

Awesome. Can you tell us a little bit about your diagnosis journey? How old were you? Do you remember anything? What did you feel like after being diagnosed if you were able to remember all of that?

Russell Lehmann

Yeah, for sure. So I was diagnosed with autism at age 12. I basically took 12 years to get a diagnosis I struggled since the day I was born. Around the age of six, I really started to be overcome with severe OCD, disturbing graphic intrusive thoughts, lots of phobias, such as bugs, open spaces, really just loud noises. Again, we didn't really know why this was all occurring. I was having panic attacks. And so from the age of six to 12, specifically, it was a six long years of tumultuous struggles without really getting any answers. I ultimately dropped out of public school in the fifth grade at age 11, due to my struggles, and due to just a severe lack of accommodations by the school district. And also, I wanted to attend school, but I was just so I couldn't function to the level of even getting out of bed, basically, because every waking hour specifically due to my OCD, intrusive thoughts, were just too painful to be for me to be awake. So I took on my classes. And later that year, at age 11, I was admitted to a psychiatric ward for five and a half weeks up in the Seattle area where I grew up, which was extremely traumatic. You know, I voluntarily went in there, I made the decision with my parents to go in there because we all wanted answers. We were kind of, you know, my struggles were getting exacerbated by the fact that there were no answers being given us while I was struggling. So we went in there hoping, you know, this hospital stay would be accommodating would be individualized, you know, it'd be person centered. And it was very old school, it was being like in the 1950s. You know, psych ward, it was it was very dramatic, a lot of just really indecent practices. So I was discharged after five naff weeks, with no diagnosis, basically, you know, they just had enough of me needed room for a new patient, I was picking up a bed. So they just basically said good luck to me. And then, about six months after that, I saw my pediatrician and my mom was relaying to him the hospital experience. And my pediatrician brought up Oh, have you ever

thought about autism? And so he referred us to the University of Washington's Autism Center where after about two days of testing, I was diagnosed with autism, which came as a very, you know, I was glad to have something tangible to hold on to some closure as to why I was struggling so much. So we very much welcomed the diagnosis, because we felt like we finally could have a game plan of sorts.

Andrew Komarow

And did that help? Who's getting accommodation at school? Like, did you go back to school after that?

Russell Lehmann

I'll answer the first part. No, it did not help at all. I tried to go back to school, I had an IEP now. But this was at a middle school that I had yet to attend since I dropped out of elementary school. And again, just, you know, I was that stereotypical autistic kid, I was in the corner, they put me in the classroom, I was in the corner of the room, I had my hood on, I wasn't making eye contact, I was sucking my thumb. And I wouldn't talk to anybody because I was so afraid to speak to anybody other than my parents. And so they didn't know what to do with me, you know, I was basically shut down. I was like a computer that was unplugged. And so I was not there. You know, the Greek etymology behind the word autism is basically a state of self. And that was very much how I would describe myself I was very much a prisoner inside my own body, basically, due to just being so overstimulated and scared of the outside world. So I had an IEP, you know, my parents really demanded a lot of requests, very simple requests, you know, such as, you know, just extra time to do my work, gradually moving me into the room instead of just forcing me to be in the classroom right away. But again, it was like the teachers, they basically just had an IEP meeting just because they had to, there was no real intention to help me and ultimately, they decided to just stick me in the principal's office, which, you know, I welcomed because I didn't want to be in the classroom because kids were coming up to me asking me questions like I was a caged animal, and I didn't have the wherewithal or the courage to be respond. So I've welcomed me into the principal's office because I was by myself but then a teacher would walk by and see this kid with his hood on in the principal's office sleeping because I was heavily sedated. I didn't get the right medication. So they just sedated the hell out of me. And there's a pile of work in front of me, I was sleeping and the random teacher would walk by see that kid, you know, see me in there and think I got in trouble for something and wake me up and berate me asking me what I did wrong to get there, get into the principal's office. And again, I've just bit by bit I just suddenly degraded every day as a human and as an individual. And I didn't again, stand up for myself because I was already so scared. So six months of that, just staying in the principal's office. And then after that we just had enough and you know, we pulled me out of the public school system started taking online classes at home and then and then after year, after year, I did spent two years in a specialty school, which helped a lot you know, I was the first time I could really trust felt like a trusted teacher. I mean, they met me where I was, I remember the first day I went there, I got stuck in the hallway, I was holding on my mom's side for dear life, I was so anxious. And the teacher came out to meet me in the hallway and just her doing that, you know, kind of coming into my world that showed me that, you know, she genuinely and sincerely wanted to help me. So that was a great experience. Ultimately, I tried to mainstream back into public school after that, again, went horribly wrong, very traumatic. And so from the age of 14 Onward, I just took online classes and really lost contact with the outside world.

Andrew Komarow

Obviously, you seem to be successful. Now you got somewhere right? Once it like got figured out, many people see their autism as a gift. Do you see yours as a gift?

Russell Lehmann

I mean, I also see the silver lining and everything, you know, thank God, I'm an optimist. And I can do that. Otherwise, I probably would have given up I don't, I see I say autism as a gift that is extremely difficult to unwrap, I'm still trying to unwrap it. It's just you know, it's very, and sometimes I don't like this gift, right? Sometimes I'm poor for having autism. But I still feel that it's a gift. Much like the ugly sweater you get from your aunt. Even if you don't like it, it's still a gift, right? So I fully believe in my life. No matter if I like it or not. I believe life is a gift for each and every one of us. That doesn't mean I wake up every day proud to be autistic. I mean, I'm proud to be Russell, I'm proud to be human. I'm proud of myself. But autism has been a source of great pain and trauma in my life. So some days, I love it when I'm on top of the world. And then there are other days where I'm in the depths of autistic hell. And you know, I really adore it. So it's an ever, it's an ongoing challenge for me to accept that part of me, that still reminds me every now and then tackles me from behind and says Russell, don't forget, I'm still here. And I, you know, I'm going to be hard to get rid of and I won't get rid of it. But it's I definitely don't think of autism as a gift and nothing else by any means.

Eileen Lamb

And we were just talking before we started recording about traveling because you travel a lot. And that's something difficult for many autistic people, myself included. I know Andrew has some struggles too. And you've had some really great experiences and some not so great experiences while traveling. I know because I follow you on social media. And I've read about a few of those. So can you tell us like maybe one time where things went wrong? And someone stepped up? And was there and one time when nobody was there?

Russell Lehmann

Yeah, for sure. Yeah, I mean, travel. I mean, travel is stressful for anybody. Right. And so specifically, you know, if you're on the spectrum, I mean, my gosh, it's just the struggle is exacerbated. And obviously, you know, being a public speaker, I travel a lot for work. And when I first started traveling, for my speaking engagements, probably about five years ago, I was just, you know, I'm 32 So I was like 26 I was 27 and I've really never even flown on a plane by myself before. So I was really jumping in headfirst here. And you know, I got one of my very first speeches was in Cincinnati and I get to the airport. I'm excited. You know, I'm, I'm feeling like, oh my gosh, I finally have something going for me in life and I went from somehow not being heard and now people inviting me to actually listen to me and And so I felt really good. And then I get on the plane and we were just sitting on the tarmac for like two hours. And you know, I was gonna miss my connection. And ultimately, I was gonna miss my speech in Cincinnati because I was going to be think I was apparently supposed to get stuck in Chicago overnight. So I was just starting to just lose it, to say the least. And so we're still on the tarmac, you know, they're not letting anybody off the plane. But once I found out I wasn't gonna make my speech I started having a meltdown and being in an enclosed tube with a bunch of people is not the best place for me to be.

And so I you know, I got my luggage and I said, Can I please get off the plane? I have autism and I'm starting to have a meltdown and I can't stay in this enclosed space. And the flight attendant is very coldly and bluntly said no sit down. And that just triggered me so I you know I I punched the lavatory door because I was like, that really triggered me, especially from my childhood with teachers the way they used to talk to me. And I screamed a cuss word, I will admit that. But then she said, Okay, you're gonna have to get off the plane. So I was like, Okay, thank you. So I get off the plane. And then I just have the worst meltdown that I had yet to experience. I threw my bags behind the empty gate, and I just crawled behind that gate, the ticket counter, and I just crawled into a ball, sweating profusely, and just bawling my eyes out. And about five minutes later, this gentleman who worked for American Airlines, his name was David, he walked up to me, I was on the floor, he crouched down to be at eye level with me. And he just said, Hey, bud it looks like you're having a rough time. Is there something I can do for you? And just that, you know, just that little validation. I was like, thank because I was inside. I'm hoping just somebody, please help me here. Because, you know, people walk by and act like I'm invisible or look like I'm crazy, because I'm an adult male crying. So David, he walked up to me, and basically just asked that simple question. And I said, Yes, I'm autistic, and I'm having a meltdown. And he didn't know what that meant. But he did ask me what I needed. And I told him, You know, I was on the phone with my mom at the time. So I basically just gave him the phone to talk to my mom so she could explain what was going on. And then he just he, he went to all lengths and efforts to make me not only feel better, and to recalibrate, but also to make me it helped me get to my speech on time, what he did is he rerouted my ticket. So I was going to fly through Dallas, instead of Chicago to get to Cincinnati on time, he had the plane, the plane was already at the gate. And he let me be the first one to board he introduced me to the pilots, he introduced me to the everybody and other the flight attendants. The plane was not full. So he rearranged the seats. Everybody had similar seats, but he rearranged them to the point where I had a row to myself. I mean, he just went to all these lengths, just to simply help the stranger that he came across who's struggling. And yeah, I wrote about that. And it just went viral. I mean, we're on NPR. I mean, it's just not. I was back, you know, when I used to use Facebook a lot, and it just exploded on Facebook. And, yeah, I mean, we could even give him an award by the airport and American Airlines, because I really wanted to show people how easy it is to be a decent human. And that's what David did. I mean, it's like, again, he didn't even know anything about autism. He just saw another human struggling and asked what he could do to help. And then he did what he what I what my mom told him could help. So it was just an unbelievable experience, made even more more unbelievable by the fact that he didn't know anything about autism. And yeah, I mean, I think about him all the time. He's retired now, I believe, but I used to see him at the airport all the time, I would always go up and say hi, but it was, you know, and then, you know, I gave a hell of a speech in Cincinnati after that, because one of the pilots when I got introduced to the pilot, he said, Russell use this experience this very painful experience as material for your presentation. And so I used that in my speech, you know, and it was a very raw, passionate presentation that I gave in Cincinnati, and just goes to show you that, you know, a very unpleasant, painful experience can you know, when you look back on it, and hindsight can really make you warm and fulfilled on the inside that you know, there are people out there that are willing to help a stranger in need.

Eileen Lamb

Oh, that was incredible. I mean, it's like, straight from a Hallmark movie, right?

Russell Lehmann

Yeah. Right. I know.

Eileen Lamb

Such an amazing story. And the fact that it happened right after that guy was rude to you. And I totally understand being triggered by him, like just telling you like to sit down because I don't know, it's almost like people think that you're you're faking or, I don't know about to me, like, when you said that, like I felt it. Like I felt like what you felt, I think it's,

Russell Lehmann

I know.

Eileen Lamb

It's just like telling you like just the fact that when I flew two weeks ago, like they were yelling at me, because I didn't take off my hat. I mean, it's just like, I'm already like struggling trying to keep it together, going through security was my first time flying since COVID. Everything has changed. I'm not supposed to take your laptop out of your bag and everything. I'm wearing the sunflower lanyard, which is supposed to like be that revolutionary thing for airports to indicate that you have an invisible disability. And just like it's so so rude, just because I forget to take off my hat, which, obviously, I should have done it but like, can you just say please, can you take off your hat, you know, it's like cost nothing to just change your tone of voice, especially when you see that the person is wearing the freaking lanyard,

Russell Lehmann

Especially if you're in any kind of, you know, customer service industry, right. I mean, like, that's the job you sign up for is to treat people with sincerity and decency. And so yeah, it frustrates me that people don't do those little things because we are our actions have a ripple effect whether we know it or not, for better or worse. Everything we do out there has a ripple effect and that's why I always no matter because I always ask to this very harsh world for such compassion. A big ask apparently but I know I'm asking that it's a two way road. So for me like, when I'm having a horrible day, I will still, you know, try to smile at a stranger at the grocery store, even though I that's the last place I want to be. Because I know those little things helped me. And that's what I try to do to pay it forward. Because you never know what kind of struggles somebody's going through, you know, everybody struggles. So you know, everybody deserves a smile and a gentle tone when they're talking to you.

Eileen Lamb

That's true. You know, I just realized that I do that to like, I try not to make eye contact with people. Well, if I accidentally do I'm gonna smile just because yeah, I would want that from, from people. You know, it's reassuring. And I don't know why there's something about people looking at you when they don't have any facial expression that is so anxiety inducing to me, I'm sure they are not thinking anything bad? I'm probably not. But is this really hard to not know.

Russell Lehmann

And that's a good point. Yeah. And I share similar sentiments, because, again, I it's probably due to my past trauma, again, from the school district and being a kid that was kind of misunderstood and talked down upon. But yeah, when people just look at me with kind of a blank stare, or they don't have any effect on their face, I assume the worst. And I feel like I'm in trouble. I feel like, you know, I'm walking on eggshells. So yeah, it's a smile goes a long way.

Eileen Lamb

So what are you trying to achieve through your speaking engagements and your writing? Is it what you were just speaking about, like spreading kindness and talking about these things?

Russell Lehmann

Yeah, I mean, my mission is a pretty simple one, you know, to kind of re-humanize autism and mental health and disabilities and, and to kind of wake society up and realize, like, we can do better, like, we all have moral obligations as members of society, like, we can't just take take, take and not give back. Right. And by giving back, you know, it's this very simple things that we too often forget. And so, you know, my mission is that as well as using my hindsight, and my insight and my lived experience for others to develop foresight, so other kids don't go through the rough childhood experiences I went through, and, you know, again, to I'm very raw and authentic, and I bared my soul, because I want people to know, how severe the difficulties can be, even for somebody deemed high functioning. Like me, you know, again, with autism, autism is a gateway to psychological disturbance, there is a high rate of dual diagnoses when it comes to mental illness and autism. And there's, that makes for a very complex mind. And unfortunately, a complex mind is not one that is taken the time to society doesn't take the time to understand complex minds, unfortunately. So I just, I want to make society uncomfortable, I always try to with my presentations, I want to make the crowd uncomfortable, because I want them to reexamine their perspectives and their preconceived notions on how people should act and behave and to realize that it's not just behavior at face value, there is always a reason for behavior, right? It's not like I'm crying in the corner of an airport, because I want to do that. There's a reason behind that. Right. But too often we focus just says what I see. And we forget that sometimes, it's what we do not see that is much more important than what we do. See,

I had a lot of similarities. Again, growing up, I was diagnosed, not until, you know, my late 20s. But you know, very similar, got a GED, then went to college, right? It was, you know, the traditional path, just, you know, didn't work that well for me, but once I found something that I enjoyed doing, so what tips if you have an ear, like, let's say, I mean, this is adulting on the spectrum. So I mean, I guess we probably have younger people listening to it, or let's say that we have parents, like what what advice would you give your 13 year old self today or your teenage self today that others could take away?

Oh, man, it's a great question. Yeah, and that's actually because I'm a poet too. And I do a lot of spoken word poetry in my presentations. And one, probably my most popular poem I do is, dear Russell, and it's a letter to my younger self. And in that poem, I mean, I would recite it, but it's a long poem. It's like three and a half minutes, but, uh, I, I told my younger self in that poem to, to not give **up, but which**, which I didn't do, of course, but there are times where I really wanted to give up, you know, you know, if I knew what suicide was, you know, at that age, I would have contemplated it for sure. Because being alive was not not fun at all. Sleep was the only escape I could get from this life. So I would, you know, I would, honestly, you know, if I could see that 12, that 13 year old boy, that seven year old boy that whatever that younger version of me, I don't know if I would say anything other than just to give him a huge hug, just to give him a huge reassuring hug, that everything's gonna be okay. Because, you know, my mom was, by my side, the entire journey, you know, but outside of that, you know, every time I needed a helping hand, that hand slapped me in the face, and that made me very scared to trust this world, something I still struggle with to this day. It's very difficult, difficult for me to trust people just because of the lack of compassion I've encountered throughout my life. So I would just, you know, give myself a hug and maybe a whisper in my ear that it's going to be alright, you know, it's going to be a tough road. As I say it's going to be a very painful road. But at some point, Russell, you're gonna look back and be very proud that you have traversed this road, and that you are paving a new road for a more kinder, gentler world.

Eileen Lamb

Thank you for opening up. You know, I think there are a lot of wonderful advocates, on social media and in real life, but there are not many people who are vulnerable enough to share those hard truths, I think. And it's max those going through what you went through, feel more alone, because I didn't go through exactly what you went through about through similar things. And because nobody was talking about it, I thought I was the only one and I felt alone, which made me feel worse, thinking like, What is wrong with me? You know, why is nobody talking about these things? Why am I feeling this way? And people, like, don't seem to be feeling that, you know, like, just, like, stupid example. But like, for me, like going to the grocery store to like, buy like a pack of cookies gallon of milk, like that's really, really difficult. And then I see people like, you know, going to target for fun. And I'm like, What am I missing here? You know, like, so I've always felt like that disconnect, because of how a little people up and up about the struggle. So I really appreciate that you're sharing that with our audience, because I think it's gonna help a lot of people. And, you know, maybe you are just what they needed to hear in that moment.

Russell Lehmann

Yeah, and I mean, I, I just about two months ago, about a month and a half ago, had a very horrible I was supposed to go to Malaysia to Keno a big conference I was looking for forward to for two years, and the travel agent for the conference mess of my documents. So I got stuck in Washington, DC. And it was just like, the rug got totally pulled out from under me. And I had one of the, I will say, the worst meltdown of my life. And I was so devastated that I you know, I again, I writing is, you know, my outlet, I write prose and poetry, but I made a post called the dark side of autism, and I even showed a 32nd clip of that meltdown, which is trigger warning, it's very painful to watch. But it just blew up. And to this day, I'm still getting 10s of messages a day or comments on the post saying, Russell, you put into words, this this pain that I was never able to express because I never felt that anybody ever experienced it other than me. And so when I open up, not only do I help others feel less alone, but then they tell me I'm not allowed to. And that is a huge intimate moment of realizing we, we might feel alone, but we have to remember, know that we're not, it's okay to feel alone. But just remember **that you're not. And it is** always astounded me because I was very isolated throughout the large majority of my life. So in my isolation, I was able to kind of observe the outside world and society. And it just confounds me to this day that, you know, perhaps the one thing all humans have in common is the experience of suffering, like life is a struggle, right. But it's also the one thing we choose not to talk about with one another. So we're missing this huge bonding opportunity to come together through our shared struggles. And but just because nobody talks about it, we all in our own way, feel completely alone and cut off. And so yeah, I take pride in talking about what's not talking about, you know, I going to Wisconsin next week to do a breakout on the dark side of autism. You know, it's, I want to show people that, you know, in the darkest of times, that's really, when you find out how light, how bright you can have deep shine.

Eileen Lamb

I love this. Yeah. And I feel the same through my social media, like I love making people feel less alone. But when they tell me my words, make them feel less alone, it's what you're saying, then I feel less alone, too. And that's why we need to keep spreading, like just keep talking about things, even if it's hard to be vulnerable. I mean, it's, it's needed, especially since it's rare.

Andrew Komarow

And it gets easy. Like I will say to anybody who, who may want to be vulnerable, but is scared to do it. Take baby steps, you know, don't, don't go expose yourself all I want to do maybe one little thing that you normally wouldn't tell somebody. But once you start doing it, and you start getting incredible feedback and people's willingness to hear you. It's incredibly validating it's incredibly cathartic and healing. And it's very empowering. So I would just, you know, invoke emotional vulnerability is good for any human, not just if you have autism or not. So I would, I would just let everybody know that take that risk and be vulnerable today with somebody you trust.

Eileen Lamb

Yeah. And it's true that it does get easier at first, you feel like you're naked right in front of a crowd, and then you get used to it. Yeah, yeah. So I wanted to ask you, because you're on so many boards, the National ark of the United States, Autism Society of America and many others. Can you tell us what you see with advocacy? Versus what many see online? Like what are the differences?

Andrew Komarow

Um, yeah, well, I mean, yeah, there's a there's obviously a whole lot of advocates online. And then there are also a lot of advocates who are not online and you know, do a lot of grassroots works. And then there's some people like you and me who are kind of on both right. But I really enjoy it. Like, I don't like the internet, honestly, like if I, if I was on public speaker, I would not be on social media whatsoever, because I just I don't like it, it's very fake. And just again, that's why I try to be as real as I can. But I, you know, the grassroots advocacy is where it's at for me, because you know, it's, it's society isn't going to change from the top down, it's going to change from the bottom up, it's always been that way. And as a marginalized community, you know, it's important that we really act behind **what we speak on, like, I can't, I can't just like voice my opinion on social media, and then not do anything about it in real life, right.** I mean, that would be very hollow of me. So through my activities with like the Autism Society of America, I'm co chairing their national safety task force, which we're putting together the first national curriculum to train police officers on how to interact with individuals on the spectrum, which is a great pride of mine, because I've had many close calls, again, having meltdowns in public spaces, I've had many close calls with police officers, just because I don't look disabled, right, I don't look autistic. So when I have a meltdown, and I'm triggered, luckily, a colleague of mine has been there to save the day. Otherwise, I don't know what would have happened, you know, one of my fears in life is getting shot by police. So it's very rewarding work to be able to train police officers and co chair that state national safety task force with arc of the US I mean, I'm a lead member of their access to accessibility and equity, accessibility Equity and Inclusion Committee, which, you know, is kind of the foundation of a lot of nonprofits. We're developing this strategies to make the workplace more inclusive and equitable, right and accessible. And it's, again, it's, it's not that hard, it's very simple, but it's oftentimes very overlooked, because it's so simple. So a lot of my work is behind the scenes, you know, I have a lot of meetings and do a lot of trial for boards, you know, I'm on the board for the legal reform for the intellectually and developmentally disabled. Because unfortunately, a lot of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities get locked up in our criminal justice system, just because the not knowing what the social rules are, right. So you know, my advocacy is just, you know, I know what it's like to go and hurt, I know what it's like to feel cast aside by society and not wanted. And I want to give those people a voice until they're heard I want to, I want to be their voice for them until society finally starts listening to them. Because there are just so many people out there that, you know, are just like me, you know, there's those versions of me whether age 1115 2025, or 30, to the age I am now, there are all those versions of me out there stuck, still feeling lost and feeling rejected by society. And so I'm not just going to post online about what autism is or stats or facts about autism, but I really want to do the grassroots advocacy so that things change. And that's not all talk, but it's actually action, implementable action that we can use to move forward and again, create a more gentler world for everybody.

Andrew Komarow

There were so many good things there that I was like, I was like trying to keep track of like some points and it's like, oh, man, so actually, I haven't spoken about it in a while. But my favorite book on autism was from anxiety to meltdown. Men from your I don't know if you've read it, probably. So she wrote a book for first responders as well was involved with the Autism Society of Maine. So that's why I thought maybe why, you know, horrible looking front cover of her holding a raccoon. But it's absolutely incredible. And it started with her going to emergency rooms best you should. There was a lot there. Please read it. And let me know what you think, too, by Deborah Lipski. So I'm pretty sure she's dropped off the face of the earth since I've actually we have some mutual connections. So I noticed you're on a lot of I'm on I was on the next advisor as well. But I noticed a few others and bridgid ran kowski knows you, right or knows of you. You guys serve on some things together.

Eileen Lamb

So I noticed you're a consultant for the US Department of Justice. Can you tell me more about that work and how you help restructure our criminal justice system?

Russell Lehmann

Yeah, again, that's probably one of I don't say the biggest passion, but definitely up there. I mean, again, just leading back to my close calls with police in the past, and, and then I've always been passionate from a very young age about social justice, you know, and just all the inequities in society, because again, with autism, those on the spectrum tend to be very pure individuals, right? Like, we want we're very kind tend to be right. And so like, from an early age, I was like, why is this world so harsh? And treating? Why do we have marginalized communities? And none of that makes sense to me. So, yeah, so for the Department of Justice, I review grants that have that help implement societal restructuring and local communities when it comes to mental health and autism and interaction with law enforcement or the criminal justice system. So I will review grants to see if they're worthy of getting moved to the front of the line for acceptance with the DOJ. And we do a lot of webinars too, we do a lot of webinars on locative technology on wandering, you know, there's huge drowning risk for small children on the spectrum. So to use located technologies, which is somewhat controversial, right, kind of weed through that area, open up that discourse on these webinars. And then again, just the police officer training, but also training for lawyers for you know, parole officers, for, for people who work into prisons, I mean, every step of the way, it's not just like police officers that need training, they still hold every step of the criminal justice system. So I've been you know, I connected with the DOJ through my work with the arc of the US. And yeah, because arc has the Justice Center. Just want to plug that we do a lot of work with the with the US Department of Justice, and it's very fulfilling work again, to be able to work with basically the national government and the people in national government who, who want to make things right for, again, people who are just treated unfairly by society, just simply due to a lack of awareness and understanding.

Eileen Lamb

I love that you're not just doing you know, social media advocacy, but you're actually like, getting things done, because Oh, yeah.

Andrew Komarow

All right. If you had to, you know, pick one, it doesn't have to be one thing. But, you know, I'm gonna say one thing that you would want like, people who do spend a lot of time on social media following Eileen, who think that social media advocacy is the only advocacy out there. You know, what, what would you like? You? Is there anything that you'd like, like to share to help them realize that there's something that's like, you know, different or concise? Or not concise? I don't know. Any words, any words of wisdom for the people who the only advocacy they've seen is people screaming at Eileen on social media?

Russell Lehmann

Yeah, I know. And that's unfortunate. I mean, I would say I mean, if you don't want to do anything, like in your own community, or maybe you do want to do it, or and you maybe you have anxiety, or just you're not ready to take that step yet, you can still use online for massive amounts of good, right, and actionable pragmatic practices, like you can always like, see, so I saw a commercial the other day from DirecTV. And they're basically making fun of a weird neighbor of this guy, you know, I'm not gonna go to hell commercial, but I called them out, you know, I tweeted at them, and I sent them an **email, sent the** email to their department, their dei department, diversity and inclusion apart, because I was like, why are you making fun of someone on national television. So I mean, you can do things like that, that's, you know, not just screaming into a void, but calling people out and calling organizations out when there might not be doing the most generous thing. And there are a lot of again, there are a lot of support groups online, like, like, if you're really wanting to get out there and speak about autism, and you're not ready to do it in the real world. You know, there are a lot of support groups that could you know, use your voice and your guidance, or if you want to be part of a support group for it to be a two way road. I mean, there's just so many things we can do, I would, I will say, it's not going to happen on Instagram. It's not gonna happen on Instagram, but it can happen on email, it can happen on the phone, it can happen, you know, in other on Zoom calls, right? But Instagram in and of itself, you know, it, it's, there's not a whole lot that comes out of it, right. So I would just maybe take five minutes out of your day to, you know, even connect with a local organization and connect with their dei team, and see, you know, how can I help, you know, I have autism, or I'm the mother or father of a person with autism, I want to share my experiences to help my local community, whether it be via email, or in person, but I mean, there's opportunities all around and you just have to look for them.

Eileen Lamb

That's, that's great advice. And I think, you know, what's important, not important, everything is important, but the best advice you can give people or advice they can actually follow. And I like that what you shared is actually accessible, you know, because some things in advocacy or like, honestly difficult to do, you know, so yeah, that's, that's great. I feel like we should have an episode about like, little things people can do, you know, to advocate locally, and because, yeah,

Russell Lehmann

Yeah, I mean, I will just say, there's so much to be done. And again, smiling at strangers is a form of advocacy, you're advocating for kindness, again, it's you can be very small things. If you want to share your your experience, and you want to make this world a better place. You know, it starts in your day to day life, you don't have to be waiting around to have a huge, huge meeting or have a speaking engagement, it can be at the grocery store. It can even being you know, texting that friend you haven't spoken to in a month, just say hi, I'm thinking about you, right, that's a form of advocacy as well, because we have to look out for one another. And too often we get caught up in our own lives and forget that.

Eileen Lamb

Kind of that's such a nice way to to end this and wrap this up. I do have to ask you some quickfire questions. But first, let me ask you, where can people find you on social media?

Russell Lehmann

Social media, they can find me? Are you ssl.co on Instagram and Facebook? And not on Twitter? Really? I am but I really don't use it. But yeah, Russell dot codes are USS Ross. And then l.co Has my website to russell.co. Are you ssl.co. And yeah, we should look up that and yeah, that's where everybody can find me.

Eileen Lamb

And we'll put the links in the description so they can find you. But I'm, I'm gonna ask you some quickfire questions right now. So basically, you tell me the first thing that comes to your mind. You're ready. Yeah. Who's your favorite poet?

Russell Lehmann

Grandpa

Eileen Lamb

Favorite TV show?

Russell Lehmann

Jeopardy.

Russell Lehmann

Favorite book

Russell Lehmann

The monk, it's an old 17th Century Gothic novel.

Eileen Lamb

Do you have a favorite autism advocate autistic advocate?

Russell Lehmann

I do not.

Eileen Lamb

And favorite color.

Russell Lehmann

Yellow.

Eileen Lamb

Awesome. Well, thank you so much for coming. That was amazing. One of my favorite episodes like for real? And I hope we follow through on another podcast between us.

Russell Lehmann

Yeah, I will hold you hold your guys's feet to the fire on that. It's been. I really appreciate you reaching out to me.

Andrew Komarow

Thank you. Thank you for coming. Thank you for all you do.

Russell Lehmann

Thank you, Andrew. It's been a pleasure getting to know you on here.

Eileen Lamb

Have a good one, guys. Bye bye. Thank you.