**Down to the Struts**

Season 5, Episode 4: Change Makers

Host: Qudsiya Naqui

Guest: Lou Panniccioli

Transcript by Qudsiya Naqui

For more information:[www.downtothestruts.com](http://www.downtothestruts.com)

**Introduction**

“just having those unfortunate encounters really led me to the question of okay, what can I do about this? How can I solve this problem? I know I'm not the only one. There are others that are like me, and we all should have an obligation to help each other to alleviate the discriminatory burdens that we face.”

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui. And welcome to another episode of down to the struts, the podcast about disability design and intersectionality. Today, we'll listen in on my conversation with Lou Panniccioli. Lou is an Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies fellow, secretary of the Young Democrats of America Disability Issues Caucus, and vice chair of the New York Young Democrats Disability Issues Caucus. Like precious Perez in episode one, Lou is a youth activist dedicated to advocating for the rights of disabled people. We talked about his journey to political activism as his chosen tool to affect social change and the role models that have guided him along that path. Okay, let's get down to it.

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thank you, Lou, for joining me on the podcast today. I'm really delighted to have you.

Lou Panniccioli:

My pleasure.

Qudsiya Naqui:

So I wanted to start off by asking you to share a little bit about yourself, and you are a young activist in the Disability Justice Movement. And I'd love to hear more about your story. And, you know, what about your background and your childhood made you interested in activism from a very young age?

Lou Panniccioli:

All right. So for me, it was always my life has never been like a straight A straight line, so to speak. When I was born, and I was born, you know, kind of premature. So at the beginning, it was a fight, you know, just from the beginning. So that kind of grew in me, so to speak, it kind of manifested itself. And then I was when I was going to, you know, the medical system to get all of this stuff. And when I was going through, I don't know the education system. It was my mother, who was my biggest advocate. So I learned how to advocate for myself and for others from watching her, my own parent became that role model that I needed to do my advocacy. And if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have been as successful advocate as I am today. So God bless her. I mean, she's still here, but you know, she's, yeah, so as far as my activism, I have encountered, you know, ableism, whether it be in the world of trying to get, you know, work or in the education system, or a lot of varieties, if I could tell you how many times I encountered ableism, it would take take need to take at least two episodes, but just having those unfortunate encounters really led me to the question of, okay, what can I do about this? How can I solve this problem? I know, I'm not the only one. There are others that are like me, and some that are not like me, but we're all going through the same thing. And we all should have an obligation to help each other to alleviate the discriminatory burdens that we face. Okay, from a combination of advocacy and mark, and moral, you know, that combination that when you asked me that I needed to actually think why did I get into it. But now I figured it out, I felt I had a moral obligation to help other people like myself, not to be some kind of like savior, but just to do my part in helping others the alleviation of ableism. And just discriminatory practices and behaviors against people with disabilities will be my reward when we no longer have to deal with any ableism in our society, which is obviously going to be for a long time after either of us are still here. But you know, at least we played our parts.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yeah. Are there particular experiences that you had that you can look back on that really triggered that for you that where you were put in a position where you had to advocate for yourself or for someone else that you can remember?

Lou Panniccioli:

a lot. I mean, there were incidents, you know, when I was a little, little boy in the hospital, but those you know, my mom being my advocate, obviously, you know, when you're a little kid, you really can't advocate but as I got older, you know, in the education system, I remember this one particular incident when I had a professor in a science class, who wouldn't allow me to use my recorder to take notes and he had dismissed my note taker and stuff, so I had to really get on him and it was just not The nicest person, so, but I was able to really advocate for myself. And in the end, he ended up giving me what I wanted, because he was forced to, but I just didn't like his, the way he was going about it. Like if it was being, you know, one of those, so I just ended up, you know, I didn't end up having astronomy for the rest of the winter. But you know, it, it's ignorant individuals like that, that make people you know, want to advocate because we should not have to encounter that level of ignorance in our lives, you know, from others, because we all have something to deal with, at the end of the day, the least we can do is treat each other with love.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's so true. So you mentioned education, as you were kind of growing into your activism and advocacy and, and, you know, the sort of sense of responsibility you described to help yourself and to help others. What were some of the issues you started gravitating towards? And how did you put your activism kind of into action as you became a young adult,

Lou Panniccioli:

I actually gravitated towards the relation between disability and you know, disability, race, gender, such just different groups, but all the concept of intersectionality and diversity, because we usually identify, you know, I this or that, or I'm only this or I'm only that, but at the end of the day, we are more than one person, I'm more than just persona disability, I am a man, I am biracial. I am I don't know, left handed, or whatever, you know, and so there are more aspects of our identity. And we need to combine those aspects to really get an intersectional. Alliance when doing our advocacy and our activism. Because the stronger we are, the more united we are, the more effective we are

Qudsiya Naqui:

how did you first get involved in politics?

Lou Panniccioli:

I first got involved in politics when I walked into a this sounds like a running joke. I walked into actually Googled about a political organization on Staten Island. And I was like, okay, you know, I don't know anyone, what can I do? So I found this organization called the Young Democrats of Richmond County, I now the secretary of that I didn't, I was like, which, what's this club? Which this restaurant, so I walked into the restaurant, and I was like, Okay, hello, my name is so and so. And I was like, and, you know, they told me who they were at that time, I just started majoring in political science, ironically. So it just went hand in hand and that spark, underneath me just lit, start doing really political activism. But as far as the Disability Rights portion, AAPD, which is the American Association of People with Disabilities, I wanted to find a internship opportunity that highlighted the disability community, and politics that really correlated and when I saw that, I was like, yes, yes, I finally have this and then, you know, Corona. So there's that aspect of just having to be within a community that correlates my passion for politics, my love of social justice, and the community that I've been a lifelong part about, and will be that way until like, I don't know, I'm like, 100, or whatever. I don't know.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Can you tell us more about some of the work you did when you were with AAPD, that really had an impact on you?

Lou Panniccioli:

Absolutely. I did a, both a policy memo and a group project about the barriers to employment or the lack of, in my particular case, in New York, we, most agencies or organizations, they will receive, you know, money to, you know, to help people with disabilities get jobs, but they will restrict those to four industries, which are maintenance, retail, culinary, and, you know, janitors, which are not bad professions, don't get me wrong, but what if you don't want to work any of those, you know, it's almost like you're being forced to something, you know, I'm saying, they're not giving you a choice. And even if you would like to work in one of those professions, they, they don't have a room for a ladder for advancement. So they're gonna stick you out at entry level jobs is the right, just when the funding season comes around, and they're doing their job, that's not fair to do to the population that they're servicing. And that's a big thing in New York, I hope, you know, that it has changed for the better, but that was a, a policy memo that I did the elected official whom I presented it to at the moment had liked it, but I don't know what what became of it wanted to enter the New York State Legislature. I also did a project that was very important to me, that the social security income or for most people who are on SSI, myself, will include it I'm trying to get off but at the moment, they will restrict you to I don't know, $800 a month, which we obviously both know, you cannot live off of $800 a month, it is not feasible, it is not humanly possible. And anything that counts against you, it's almost like they're forcing you to sacrifice your quality of your life for the quantity of life. And it shouldn't be that way people with disabilities should not have to live below the poverty line or at the poverty line, we should have the same economic playing field as every single group that is out there. Regardless of whether they have don't have disability, we all have, we should all have equal opportunity to succeed.

Qudsiya Naqui:

And what are some of the policy solutions that you proposed in your, in your research around SSI?

Lou Panniccioli:

I, I actually proposed a lot I proposed the increasing the, which has been a lot increasing the stuff like make it like don't make it 100 Make it I don't know, like $20,000 a year or something, you know, just I'm not talking to make people disabilities, billionaires, although that would be awesome, I would definitely do. But, you know, just give us something that is live, give us something where we can economically sustain ourselves, maintain a good, solid, beautiful quality of life, and advance. That's all that we ask for. That's all we've ever asked for. And it should not be ludicrous. When we ask for more. It shouldn't be ludicrous to a another individual. When we ask for more, and they're looking at us like we have three heads that why aren't we happy with what we're getting? Because what we're getting is not adequate, look what we want in the first place.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yeah, and often with these benefits, you're penalized if you seek employment. And if you earn over a certain amount, then your benefits are cut off. But the truth is, you kind of you need both and you should be able to have access to both employment, gainful employment and additional support.

Lour Panniccioli:

Absolutely. And then it's that lack of access, and that termination of the benefits that we need to sustain ourselves. I know a lot of other people need medical benefits, as well. So you're now you now you've got to add a burden on top of another burden, because you force another person to choose between the money that they need to live and advancing the quality of their life. So, you know, what are they what did they do? And you know, what I'm saying? What is the people who are in charge doing? And I don't care what political affiliation that you're part of, you know, we all need to every person with a disability and we need to help out the disability community.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Absolutely. What have been some of your greatest influences as you have advanced in your, in your activism, and your advocacy work.

Lou Panniccioli:

One of my some of my greatest influences, I've always been a history buff. So my greatest influences have been the classic people like Gandhi, like MLK, like, Bayard Rustin, like John Lewis, and those people really exemplified, you know, what we can do, through the power of love and to the Power of unity. If we set aside our differences, and come together as one, along with, you know, then you get the classic and locate the disability community, Judy Heumann. And but then you have the other activists that are not really exemplified such as a, an individual whom I was introduced to while I was in a few individuals whom I would introduce, to whom I would like to share. One of those individuals was my mentor, just my mentor at the time, JusticeShorter. So from nd RN, National Disability Rights Network, I don't know if you had the opportunity to speak with her.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Oh, I know Justice very well, Justice was on the podcast Previously, she's a friend of the pod. So Mad Love to Justice.

Unknown Speaker 13:57

Yes, Justice really, really helped me establish those connections that I need to continue and grow my work and activism. So shout out to her and she really opened my eyes to a lot of other dimensions of disability rights because I only knew disability rights just as being the ADA. And you know, that struggle. I didn't know how it was so complex, it really got like disability and race, disability and gender, disability and sexuality. You know, I only knew that through that Ada thing. And I shouldn't be called an ADA thing because that is the very thing that gives me rights Americans with Disabilities Act. That's the only way I knew it. And through that, she was able to connect me with another individual by the name of, Zan Thornton, from Georgia adapt. And when I connected with sin, and her colleague, Butch, they really took me under their wing of activism and advocacy, and they still do they still do I still collaborate with them from time to time. So when I started with them, it was really started. Learning how to do what how do I get people? How do I reach out? How do I organize how to win, they really showed me the ropes. And I got a chance to demonstrate that during the 2020 election because I played a role in compiling a list of different disability organizations throughout the state of Georgia. So I provided the contact the network that was needed to do the outreach, the electoral outreach for both the 2020 elections, and 2020 Georgia Senate runoffs so I played I in direct role in electing the president and vice president of the United States through my work and disabilities, right so it's one of my proudest accomplishments, even though I'm kind of a small fish in a big pond but just being a part of that is rewarding in and of itself.

Qudsiya Naqui:

And it just goes to show you every every little bit is important and we all have different roles, roles to play, whether that's compiling a contact list or whatever it may be and it's important to important to engage in the act of engagement is is sometimes even the most important.

Unknown Speaker 16:05

Absolutely. The amount of phone calls I had to make the disability different disability rights activists and amount of emails that they shoot over and and that would be like, Who is this and then I would have to give them a whole spiel Hey, I'm working with so and so from and then I would have to you know, convince them and convinced a lot of other people you know, to get on board to be all be on the same page. So it was a lot of active listening a lot of public speaking in a lot of persuasion.

Qudsiya Naqui:

You talked a little bit about your your biracial background, and I wondered how both the your disability identity and your identity as someone who is biracial, you mentioned earlier, and when we were speaking that you're half Italian, half Trinidadian, how have those two identities kind of come together and informed how you approach politics and activism.

Lou Panniccioli:

I, I approach it from a progressive and well being lens, my dad's side, not so much. I see them when I see them. I still love them. But you know, my mom's side, the Trinidadian side, I always like to say, it was women who made me the man I am today, it was my mother and her sisters who instilled in me the characteristics and morals and values that I hold dear and composed who I am to this day. So going to my mom's country is really opened up your eyes haven't had my own experiences. Look what my aunts are going through, look what my cousins are going through, look at what Trinidad itself is going through, you know, it's crazy. And here we are the richest country in the world biggest military. And yet, look on our stuff we're still going through because we can’t get it straight. Being half Italian and half Trinidadian allows me to see both sides, my father's side and my mother's side. If I wasn't have the mixture that I had, I wouldn't be able to see it from both a white side and the browns. I'd only be able to see it from one side. So having that diversity has been crucial to why I'm able to look at disability rights and other issues the way I do see it from both sides of the coin, not just one or the other.

Qudsiya Naqui:

So Lou, what advice would you have for young disabled people and their allies who want to be change agents?

Lou Panniccioli:

the advice I have for young disabled people and their allies who want to be change agents is follow your passion. Pursue your passion and pursue that passion and relentlessly pursue it relentlessly. Don't let anyone tell you whether it be I don't know, your friend or significant other, your parents or whomever tell you that you cannot do something because of so and so. And so believe it within your heart and soul that you can do it and go for it.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thank you for that. Can you offer some ideas of how our listeners can take action and get involved in the movements for disability rights and disability justice from your perspective?

Lou Panniccioli:

Absolutely. I would definitely recommend some of the organizations that I've worked with Georgia adapt being one of them. The American Association of People of people with disabilities has a wonderful, amazing internship program where they take you to Washington for 10 weeks and they give you different placements in different aspects of politics based upon your interests. So I would definitely look at those two sources along with other disability rights organizations as well. So I would start there and I would also go through just you know, your local political clubs, as well if you're interested in the political aspects and just start you know, simple by volunteering by helping people just by putting yourself out there and really having a good having that determination. To succeed,

Qudsiya Naqui:

thank you so much, Lou. And it's been such a pleasure speaking with you. I wish you all the best in everything that you do. And I'm just really grateful to know you. So thank you for joining us.

Lou Panniccioli:

It's my pleasure.

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thanks for joining us for this episode of Down to the Struts. This podcast would not be possible without the energy and creativity of our audio producer Ilana Nevins and our social media manager, Avery Anapol. Special thanks to Claire Shanley, for designing our logo and to Eiffel gangsta Beats for our theme music. You can become part of our Facebook group, Down to the Struts Podcast to join our growing community. You can also find us on Twitter and Instagram at Down to the Struts. And finally, don't forget to subscribe rate and review the podcast at Apple podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher or wherever you love to listen. Thank you again for your support. And stay tuned for our next episode so we can get back down to it