

Alex Escaja-Heiss is an award winning filmmaker and LGBTQ+ activist. He was also featured on GLAAD's "20 Under 20 Rising Stars." Alex was raised in Vermont, where he discovered his true identity. Growing up, Alex was exposed to activism at a very young age; his mother would take him to protests championing for women's rights. This early exposure to activism was one of the major catalysts for Alex's desire to pursue activism on his own.

One of the first organizations he joined was Outreach Vermont, which champions for LGBTQ+ equity and inclusion in Vermont. In 2016, he was awarded the Vermont Outreach Student Activist of the Year Award, which recognizes a middle or high school student who has made a positive impact on queer related issues within their school.

In 2021, Alex graduated from Vermont University with a degree in Film and Television Studies and also a degree in Gender Sexuality and Women's Studies. Currently, he is pursuing activism and filmmaking.¹

AUSTIN CHRISLEY 0:20

Hi.

ALEX ESCAJA-HEISS 0:21

Hello.

CHRISLEY 0:22

How are you?

ESCAJA-HEISS 0:24

Pretty good, pretty good.

CHRISLEY 0:28

Yeah, I want to let you know that I am recording. That's okay, right?

ESCAJA-HEISS 0:32

Yes, totally fine. I also sent my consent form just now.

CHRISLEY 0:36

All right. So have you been? How are you?

ESCAJA-HEISS 0:40

Pretty good. It's a funny question. I actually found out a couple days ago that I tested positive for COVID(19).

CHRISLEY 0:50

Really?

¹ "Alex Escaja - About." ALEX ESCAJA, n.d. <https://www.alexescaja.com/about>.

ESCAJA-HEISS 0:50

Which sucks. But I'm completely asymptomatic. I was working on a film set. And if I hadn't had to take a PCR test, I really wouldn't have known.² So I'm kind of stuck in my room. I definitely have cabin fever. But that's not great. But everyone in my life who I came close contact with tested negative, so it's a kind of okay situation, and I feel okay, so, I'm okay.

CHRISLEY 1:16

I'm glad you're okay.

ESCAJA-HEISS 1:17

Yeah. So that's how I've been.

CHRISLEY 1:23

That's good, that's good. So I guess we should just go ahead and jump right in. I'm going to start with a pretty big question. But, how did you get involved with activism?

ESCAJA-HEISS 1:30

Ooh, it is a good question. I got involved when I was about 15 or 16 years old. Well, prior to that, I'm lucky enough that I grew up in a household and with parents that- I would consider my mom to be an activist. I grew up going to protests; she's an artist and a professor. And she always organized really amazing, radical stuff, especially surrounding women's rights and feminism. So I kind of got exposed at a young age to that kind of action oriented mindset. But I don't think I personally got involved until I came out when I was about 14, 15, 16.

ESCAJA-HEISS 2:21

I've identified as every letter in the alphabet soup.³ It's been like a beautiful journey. But at the time, I considered myself to be bisexual.⁴ And I was lucky enough to have local resources, there was a local organization called Outright Vermont.⁵ And they were [are] an LGBTQ youth organization.⁶ And when I accessed their services, and went to support groups, went to events. I learned more. I joined a community of queer folks.⁷ And that's when I realized-

ESCAJA-HEISS 3:02

² PCR tests are nose swab tests which diagnose Coronavirus ("PCR Test for COVID-19: What It Is, How Its Done, What the Results Mean." Cleveland Clinic, n.d. <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diagnostics/21462-covid-19-and-pcr-testing>.)

³ Alphabet soup is a colloquial term used to refer letters in the acronym LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) community.

⁴ The term "bisexual" refers to a person who is emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually attracted to more than one gender. The term "demisexual" refers to a person who does not feel sexual or romantic attraction unless after developing a strong emotional bond. The term "pansexual" refers to a person who is attracted to people of any or all genders. ("LGBTIQ+: The Ultimate Dictionary." Kids Helpline, December 1, 2020. <https://kidshelpline.com.au/teens/issues/lgbtiq-ultimate-dictionary/>.)

⁵ "Mission, and Overview, and History (Oh My!)." Outright Vermont, June 30, 2021. <https://www.outrightvt.org/mission-history/>.

⁶ LGBTQ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer.

⁷ Queer is an umbrella term that describes a person's sexual and/or gender identity. It means not straight and/or not identifying with the gender a person is assigned at birth (cisgender).

Oh, I'm sorry, for the notifications. Let me let me turn that off.

CHRISLEY 3:06

Oh, no, you're good.

ESCAJA-HEISS 3:09

But yeah, I think when I started engaging with my community, I become more and more aware of, and then also started living out as a queer person and started experiencing, like, homophobia, transphobia. That's when I was like, "Oh, shit, I want to try to help. I felt a sense of rage, a sense of anger, for sure, and a sense of injustice. And I think the first thing I did was start the- I founded the gender and sexuality alliance club at my high school, and I think that's sort of where everything started.

CHRISLEY 3:48

Right. Wow. I know, you said that your mom was an activist. What was that like growing up? Did you go to protests? How was that?

ESCAJA-HEISS 3:59

It was amazing. I feel really lucky. This is incredible because I think that's why I got radicalized sooner. I knew about systemic injustices since I was a little kid. I think it was easier to participate in activism work when I was younger because I had that support system at home. And I have that kind of person to look up to, that role model, I guess. It definitely would have been harder if I was in an environment that wasn't supportive. That would be an extra roadblock to overcome in engaging with this work. So it was empowering. It was definitely empowering, and I feel really grateful to have a mom like that.

CHRISLEY 4:50

Yeah. What do you suggest for people who aren't necessarily- they don't grow up in that kind of environment that isn't necessarily as welcom[ing], and [that] if they do join queer protests or any movements, they might not be safe, or they might not just can physically go. What do you suggest for people that are in those circumstances?

ESCAJA-HEISS 5:12

Yeah, that's a good question. It can be hard because I think that feelings of guilt might come up, if, for various reasons, you're not able to engage in the work. But it's so important to put your safety first. And there's definitely other ways to get involved. I mean, you know, say what you will about social media and the online world, in the digital sphere. I know there's lots of cons, but I think a wonderful pro is this engagement with community. And I think that would be my biggest advice. Like in any capacity [that] you feel able to find other folks like you.

ESCAJA-HEISS 5:51

Whether it be online, in person, etc. I think online is maybe the safest place to do that. I think that is, in a lot of ways, advocacy or activism: if we're supporting each other and even making- even if it is just friendships, I think that creates a really strong web for us to get shit done. Someone taking care of themselves is activism to begin with. But, yeah, connecting with others in any capacity. And with time and with resources, and the more support you get, hopefully the more open those opportunities would be. But

yeah, also not being too hard on oneself if they're not in environments or positions in life that allow them to be [in activism]. That doesn't mean that they're doing a bad job, or that they're worse.

CHRISLEY 6:48

And I know you mentioned before about community that when you came out, you found an amazing community; you had an amazing support system. What was that like to have people around you? I mean, not even just your mom, but just a family that you built for yourself?

ESCAJA-HEISS 7:04

It's was nothing life saving, and I'm aware of the privilege that I have for having that. I wish- and in that sense, because I was given it, I wanted to create spaces like that for others. Yeah, I mean, I wouldn't be where I am today if it weren't for the community that I had an access to. I don't think I would know myself in the way I do now. I don't think I would have the confidence or the peace. I feel like I live in a lot of peace. I'm lucky to have that. I think it's because I have people that validate me, reassure me, support me, who I can lean on. And I don't have to- and with any marginalized person, when you live in a system that oppresses you, you have to fight every day to prove yourself, to hold space, take up space to ask for basic rights and respect. And that's a really exhausting thing to do. And I'm lucky that, in a lot of ways, I didn't have to fight as hard to access those basic things, like friendship and support and validation. So, yeah, it's made me a stronger person.

CHRISLEY 8:21

Wow. I know, that's very important for a lot of people, you know: growing up in a-- if they don't necessarily grow up in a supportive community-- finding a family that they can build for themselves. It's very important. I know, it was for me whenever I came out: finding a family that accepted me, but veering a little bit away from that. I noticed that you are a filmmaker; you said that you were on set when you tested positive. But how did you discover your passion for filmmaking?

ESCAJA-HEISS 8:52

Oh, it's definitely closely related to my involvement in activism. When I was about like 14, and I had a lot of inner turmoil about my identity. I went on this plane trip, and I watched a film called "My Prairie Home." And it's a Canadian documentary about a non-binary musician.⁸ And that was the first time I ever saw someone like that represented. a) on screen, but just in real life: that it was possible to experience a reality that way. So watching that movie was super life changing. And I think was the- you asked how I got involved with activism- I think that film might have been the first domino in this long chain reaction. And I also felt inspired of wanting to create content like that. And I wanted to create film but also give that kind of representation and empowerment and voice to queer and trans people. So that's how it begun. And I just love it as a medium because conversations are wonderful. And I adore them. Something nice about film is that it is a one way thing. And you sit down and you listen. And sometimes when it comes to advocacy work, people don't want to listen, and it makes conversations harder. And I think having that as a platform, and also, as a space for artistic expression. There's so many amazing ways to communicate an

⁸ Non-binary often refers to a person who does not identify in the male/female binary. ("Understanding Non-Binary People: How to Be Respectful and Supportive." National Center for Transgender Equality, September 4, 2020. <https://transequality.org/issues/resources/understanding-non-binary-people-how-to-be-respectful-and-supportive>.)

experience or a story through a screen. So yeah, I just fell in love with it. And it's something I'm still pursuing today.

CHRISLEY 10:47

Wow, that's amazing. Was it because of filmmaking or something that got you on the GLAADS 20 Under 20?⁹ So what has that been like? Being featured like that?

ESCAJA-HEISS 11:05

It was amazing. Um, yeah, so I mean, I didn't know about the- they hadn't told me about the award. But, I had been doing a lot of work in high school and in college. And in college, I went to LA. I'm actually living in LA now. But that's to be determined where I end up next. But I had an internship at a film festival, and there I met someone who works at GLAAD.¹⁰ And they had a campus ambassador program.¹¹ So for a while, I was a campus ambassador at GLAAD representing the University of Vermont. And that's how I kind of got on their radar. And that's how they learned about the work that I've done, and now included me on this really amazing list with some incredible people. It definitely felt really comforting because it felt sweet to be acknowledged for the work that I'd done as a kid--now I perceive myself as a kid during all that, and I guess I sort of still am a kid. But yeah, it felt very comforting to have someone say "good job. You did that!" You know? Yeah, I did do that.

CHRISLEY 12:14

What's it been like working with GLAAD since you got featured? Or since you became an ambassador? How has that relationship been between you and GLAAD?

ESCAJA-HEISS 12:23

It's been great. I work for GLAAD now. It's really rewarding work. I went to school- I just graduated college a couple months ago. So I've been thrust into the workforce. I work at GLAAD as a transgender representation consultant, and I work in Spanish language and Latin X media. And in college- it's the intersection of all my passions. In college, I studied film and television studies and gender sexuality and Women's Studies. And so I work in trying to make media films, television shows, books, talk shows, [and make] more fans inclusive. I get paid to think about these concepts and to talk about representation. And it's an absolute dream come true. I do really love GLAAD. I think they're a really important organization.

CHRISLEY 13:23

Mm hmm. No, definitely, definitely. You mentioned representation. How, in terms of the representation now that we have of queer, gender queer, non binary people? What do you think about that? Do you think it's as far as it needs to [be]? Do you think it needs to go further? What are your thoughts on that?

ESCAJA-HEISS 13:44

⁹ Kenny, Spencer Harvey & Clare. "Meet 20 LGBTQ Young People Changing the Face of Media and Activism." Teen Vogue. Teen Vogue, June 22, 2020. <https://www.teenvogue.com/gallery/glaad-20-under-20>.

¹⁰ GLAAD is an LGBTQ+ organization. It stands for Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

¹¹ "Campus Ambassadors." GLAAD, September 22, 2020. <https://www.glaad.org/campus#what>.

Yeah, it's a good question. It's amazing how much things have changed within the past four years, five years. From the moment when I watched "My Prairie Home" to now, the amount of, let's say, trans folks- I'll speak directly to trans representation because that's what I know most of, but there's so much more trans representation than before. That being said, it's still incredibly little. I think there's all this talk right now, and all these unfortunate comments, like, "Oh, being trans is a trend, and there's so many more trans people now than there were before when I was younger."

CHRISLEY 14:28

Yeah.

ESCAJA-HEISS 14:29

Yes, there's more. It's wonderful. There's more out trans folks. It's a beautiful thing, and I'm very happy about it. But when it comes to media, we went from having maybe one, if not zero, reoccurring trans characters on TV. So now we maybe have five or ten. But because we're not used to it, it seems like a lot more. And now with streaming services, they're a lot more accessible. So it's like, "Wow, things are perfect and doing so well!" But, no, I definitely think we have more to go. The biggest thing I want to see- it's great that there is more interest in writing trans characters. That's why I was hired because suddenly there's this influx of interest from Hollywood, etc. to have trans representation. But really often, it is cisgender people- straight, cisgender people writing these stories. As we push for things- we say things like: we were trans folks to play trans actors, to play trans characters. Amazing. I also really want trans screenwriters to write trans stories. And that's still something we're kind of missing. There are tons of trans screenwriters out there, not to say there aren't, but they're not given the same opportunities that cisgender or straight people are.¹² So I think that's my next big push. I just would love to see even more content and authentic content and content that's written and authored by trans people. Yeah, I can list some shows, but for the most part, you're not seeing it. And especially in theaters, like movies. You know, TV is doing pretty good. [But] movies are so far behind. And that's something else to think about and consider for any queer representation, you know? Like gay and lesbian representation, bi[sexual] representation. There's so little in theaters. So yeah, that's my longest answer. I could go on.

CHRISLEY 16:30

Do you think it's more of a performative thing that Hollywood is doing? You know, hiring cisgender [people]? I mean not necessarily cisgender people to play non binary people or genderqueer people, but more of hiring straight people to write scripts for trans people. Do you think it's more than just a performative thing? Or do you think it's just how society is structured right now?

ESCAJA-HEISS 16:53

I think a lot of it is a couple of different things. There's the folks that write scripts, and there's folks that buy scripts. I think the cisgender, straight folks that are writing queer stories have good intentions, and just don't realize that this story would be better told by someone else, then perpetuating harmful things. I do think that the production companies that buy these stories really often are being performative. And in some ways, it's like well, I don't mind performativity if it's going to open doors. If it's gonna get me a job, okay! Hire me, you know, diversify, and then I'll try to cause some ruckus. But the intention is still harmful because it's not just about having representation, it's about having good representation. And if we

¹² Cisgender often refers to a person who identifies with their gender assigned at birth.

now have bad representation, sometimes that can even cause more harm than having none at all. So there's this idea that "oh, well, now, it's cool to be woke."¹³ And we're gonna have a non binary character, but we're not going to have their pronouns honored, or we're not gonna do any research about what it's like to be non binary, you know? It's like "Yay! non binary character!" but it's not good. It's not great; it could be better. So, yeah, I think there is some performativity happening, but I don't want to get too cynical about it if that makes sense. And I think we're going in the right direction.

CHRISLEY 18:29

Yeah, no, definitely, definitely. Speaking to that, you know, people that have good intentions that have the right motives; they want to be an ally to queer people. What do you suggest for them so that they're not the center of the movement? Or they're not, you know, the only face of a movement? Or like you said, writing scripts about how trans people should act or not honoring their pronouns. What do you think they should do?

ESCAJA-HEISS 18:59

Yeah, I mean, I think good intention is a wonderful start. It's hard to- in this situation, of these scripts, I think these folks have a bit of a savior complex, where it's like, "Oh, I'm going to help these people." But try to look inward and say, "Am I, perhaps, perceiving queer and trans people as people that need saving, or people that can't tell their own stories, or that I can do a better job than them?" It's kind of taking a step back, I would say. And I listened to earlier, instead of going into an active mode, [go into] more into a passive listening mode, unless you're asked to, but to take a step back and then to look left and right and try to find LGBTQ folks around you to collaborate with, have conversations with, to talk with us. Instead of taking on these initiatives if that makes sense. And especially if you have a position of power. Let's say you are a screenwriter, and you have access to folks who will buy your scripts. Maybe consider, "Hey, maybe, I shouldn't be the author of the story. Let me find a queer or trans person to write this either with me or to write it themselves, and then I can support them in that process." Yeah, we're all comrades, and I think it's wonderful that there is a good intention. But yeah, decentering yourself, I think, would be my- even though that can make you uncomfortable, I think that would be my advice, and to listen and learn.

CHRISLEY 20:37

Yeah, no, definitely. I definitely think having good intentions is important. But I know, lots of times, straight people, cis people tend to become the movement, if you know what I'm saying. And it's not just localized to queer issues: if you think about Black Lives Matter, white people become the face. And I think it's like a reoccurring issue that really needs to be focused on.

ESCAJA-HEISS 21:06

Yeah, definitely. I think it comes from privilege. And I'm also complicit in this. I understand the ways I participated in this. But with privilege comes a sense of comfort and a sense of power that you don't notice. And so the idea of a community that's different to you having authority and power and taking up space without you, like you're not included, I think can frustrate people and make them uncomfortable. It's like, "Well, I'm used to being involved, in having a say, and participating in these things. I'm important too." But in context, your importance is more as a supportive role, and that can be hard to grapple with.

¹³ Woke is considered knowing and acknowledging social justice issues.

CHRISLEY 21:49

I know earlier you said that you had just graduated [from] the University of Vermont. What was it like being a student while also being an activist? How did you juggle all of this? I know, me being a student myself, it's really difficult. So how did you, how did you do it?

ESCAJA-HEISS 22:12

Great question. I don't know. I don't know how I did it. I worked really hard end of middle school, all throughout high school, and then beginning of college- halfway through college, I got burnt out.¹⁴ Especially when the pandemic hit, I didn't have the capacity to continue doing the work that I was doing. When I started college, I was really involved with the Career Student Union; I was the activism committee chair, and I was doing so much work all the time for free. I never got a grade for it, and it was occupying my entire day. And I didn't have free time. And it was really important. It was worth it to me at the time; it was really important, but I got burned out, and I couldn't sustain it.

ESCAJA-HEISS 23:10

And I think that happens to a lot of folks and activism in general. And it's hard. I know that activists also have to balance work if they're not in school. There's always going to be a responsibility that we have to commit to. But yeah, I honestly don't know how. I just had a really rigorous to-do list every day. And I scheduled the hell out of everything. And sometimes I compromised assignments and grades for joining a meeting on gender inclusive bathrooms. It was tricky. I think everyone who is involved in advocacy work has to find a sustainable way to live life. And I'm still trying to figure that out.

CHRISLEY 24:06

Yeah, definitely. And you mentioned that you were getting burnt out. What do you suggest for people who have that feeling? Who are beginning to realize that they themselves are starting to feel burnt out?

ESCAJA-HEISS 24:19

Yeah, that's a good question. Something that was hard for me was delegating. So I felt like if I didn't do something, it wouldn't happen. And I think what was most helpful for me was realizing that if- again, it doesn't relate to a sense of if you are engaged with community, and I knew that I had to trust my fellow queer advocates that they would be able to do work too. And it's a matter of like, "Okay, who needs a break? Who can pick up some of the labor while you rest and then once you're rested, can I take on this assignment while you rest?" It was a matter of delegating, and I'm lucky that it wasn't all on me in certain contexts. We had a campaign to try to have more gender inclusive housing forms. And that was a little moment where it was really getting in the way of my schoolwork and stuff. And I was like, "Y'all, I can't. I need to take a break. I need to not work with this." And it was hard to say that and to kind of like ask for help and ask for support. But then other folks were like, "Okay, we'll do what you needed to do, no problem. I'll work on this; I'll work on that." So if it's possible, delegate the things on your plate and ask for help. And it's okay to take a step back. I was really grappling with guilt when I did that, you know? I was like, "If I don't do this now, then students won't be able to have gender inclusive housing options." And sometimes if it was just me, sometimes it's okay to put yourself first. And to let something go and trust that either you in the future or someone else will be able to pick up where you left off. But, yeah, it can be hard to say no.

¹⁴ This refers to being emotionally and/or physically tired.

CHRISLEY 26:15

That pressure that you felt to get this done, or if you don't, this awful thing could happen, do you think that's something that a lot of youth activists feel especially now because we are really getting into a movement- a more progressive age? Do you think that this is something that's ubiquitous among young people?

ESCAJA-HEISS 26:39

Yeah, I definitely say so. Especially with youth. Again, I was lucky that I had some community, but being a young person can be really isolating in the sense that it's harder to access resources. I know I talked about buying books online and stuff, but when you're living with your parents, and you're kind of stuck in your school environment, like that's your whole world, and maybe you don't have a car to get places and have rely on others, then I feel like your world is smaller, and therefore you have a greater sense of responsibility if you are taking on these things; these pretty big, scary problems because you care. And therefore, I think that in some ways, youth are more burden than adults are when it comes to activism. Just because of the lack of being able to access resources, and because of a smaller community, [and] having more weight on their shoulders that if you don't do this, then it might not happen at all.

CHRISLEY 27:41

Right. Yeah, no, definitely definitely. And I noticed that online that your history with activism started [in] middle school into high school, your mom, you said your mom was a big activist. How did you- not necessarily juggle because I know you said you were getting burnt out. But how did you deal with that at such a young age, like these pressing issues of queer people getting attacked? Or not having the same rights. How did you understand this and grapple with this at such a young age?

ESCAJA-HEISS 28:32

Yeah, that question makes me a little sad, because I wish I wouldn't have had to. And I think a lot of marginalized folks are put in those positions where they have to, and especially as a kid. In a lot of ways I didn't plan to be an activist. Maybe it was my choice to engage with that kind of stuff, but at the same time, I sort of felt like I didn't have a choice. And maybe that's because I was empathetic, and I had a sense of injustice. And I couldn't believe, in a lot of ways, that this is the world that we live in. So the only way I knew how to cope with that sense of despair, kind of, is to do my best to make some kind of difference, even if it is in my classroom, or with my friends or in my school, in my local community. But it's hard; it's definitely depressing, and I still, I think, grapple with the sense of sadness that I have to do this work or that we live in this world. But also, I adore my community, and I adore the people that I met through the work. And every time I did have some kind of achievement or some kind of success, I should say, It was a sense of relief, like, "Okay, maybe there is some hope for the future." But yeah, I think I cope with the realities of the world by trying to do something about it. But it was hard, and I wish that none of us had to do that or think about that. And I especially wish that you didn't have to worry about that: about these systemic issues and also local issues. And, yeah, I don't think I was in therapy at the time, but it would have been amazing. Ideally, if all youth could be given therapy, that would have been great. But yeah, I hope I answered the question.

CHRISLEY 30:45

Yeah, no, definitely. Talking about mental health, how pressing of an issue do you think it is for young people to have access to mental health resources and the things that they need in order to live a healthy life and to be happy? Because today, most adults say that you're making it up, or it's not real. What do you suggest? How do you think we should move forward?

ESCAJA-HEISS 31:16

Yeah, I mean mental health services are so important, especially because we live in, in my opinion, a pretty horrendous system. You could argue, but either way, we live in a world where racism exists, homophobia exists, transphobia exists, etc. And, especially for youth, I think youth are kind of have-dependending on on your history, but you, at some point in your young life, you have an awakening to this world. And I think all teenagers are trying to cope. And if they're not given tools to understand these things, or cope in healthy ways, then it can be really detrimental. And in general, we also live in a society of denial. We're always saying everything's fine, everything's fine. Don't worry. And then if kids express that they're going through something difficult, then usually the consensus is, "Oh, it's in your head," or "You're just young; you're going through puberty. Everything's dramatic." Dismissive, you know? And that shit can fuck us up for the rest of our lives. So it's really important that young people are given mental health services and access to resources. Because, yeah, how else would you know?

CHRISLEY 32:47

Yeah, I'm going back to what you're talking about, about the adults being dismissive. I've always thought of this adultism, where adults try to tell young people, "You don't know what you're talking about. You're too young. As you get older, your views will change." I grew up in South Carolina, so I heard that all the time. If I disagree[d] with someone, they were like, "Oh, it's just because you're a teenager. Wait until you actually start working." What do you suggest for kids who have to hear this whenever they tried to just voice their opinions? If they're just too young?

ESCAJA-HEISS 33:22

So annoying! You ask great questions that connects perfectly to the previous one you asked. But, yeah, so frustrating. Also something that definitely youth activists deal with all the time. I've also heard stuff like that. And I mean, a) it's just, it's not true. [Laughs] It's not true. Just because the amount of years you spent on the Earth is less than somebody else doesn't mean that your wants and desires and opinions aren't meaningful or make sense or that you're not smart. You absolutely have the ability to comprehend the world. And in a lot of ways, there are generational differences: the people, the adults telling you these things have experienced a life that you haven't. They don't know who you are, and they've never been you. There's no reason why they would know what your thoughts are, what the correct thoughts are, and what your thoughts will be in the future. And yeah, it's because we're scared of change. And I think youth are inherently changemakers because they're new human beings on this planet. And so I think that's really threatening to adults. And so, saying that the argument that you're too young is a strong, dismissive argument that isn't there. Yeah, we're the future, and the smart adults listen to youth, the smart adults cherish youth opinions and get them involved in these things. Yeah.

CHRISLEY 35:13

No, I definitely agree with what you said. That adults are scared of change. They grew up in a world that was- people who are now 60 grew up in a world that was much different than the one we live in. And I

think seeing change for them, especially if they have the privilege. They're a straight, white person in society, they have the privilege. They've never faced anything. They love to just deny and keep their privilege. Yeah, yeah, no, definitely.

ESCAJA-HEISS 35:44

Yeah. And I also still experience ageism in my job and just in the work that I do, too. It's something that I wonder when I'll stop dealing with. I wonder when I'll be old enough. But yeah, lots of dismissal like you wouldn't know. Because you're 20, you know? Yeah, definitely.

CHRISLEY 36:07

Oh, I've never heard ageism in that context. Usually, when you hear about- Usually, it's about old people. You know what I mean? That they're being pushed out to retire or whatever.

ESCAJA-HEISS 36:20

Which is a problem. But I think ageism can also apply to youth. It's a prejudice against someone based on their age.

CHRISLEY 36:30

Yeah, definitely, definitely. What are some things that you wish that you would have known before you got into this big movement of activism?

ESCAJA-HEISS 36:39

Oh, that's a good question. You know, this might be too specific. I would say- Okay, I would say one: you don't owe anyone anything. I mean, I got involved in these things, because I cared and because it was meaningful to me. But sometimes I would over commit to things. And, and yeah, knowing that it's okay to prioritize my well being able to say no and no one should be upset at me. I think, unfortunately, because I was so kind and understanding at a young age, I think I was sometimes used by adults and allies to do a lot of labor, a lot of educational labor, emotional labor, you know? And I just didn't really understand that, oh, actually, I don't owe them anything; it's okay to say no to things. And the second one is specific, but if possible, I can also ask for compensation. If sometimes the work that I did- the organizations that would hire me or would ask me to volunteer my time have means to pay me. Again, that stuff is hard to ask for. And especially as a young- I feel like youth are taken, sometimes taken advantage of, because of this idea that like, "Oh, they're young. This needs to be a learning experience." But yeah, I know that's hard. That's easier said than done. But if I could tell myself something looking back at the work they did as a kid, yeah, standing up for myself a bit more, knowing my my boundaries, and also if possible, asking to be paid.

CHRISLEY 38:39

No, definitely, definitely. I was listening to the podcast, "Getting Curious With Jonathan Van Ness" just a couple of days ago, and he had an episode with ALOK on with him. And they were talking about queer people getting used and ALOK specifically said that the queer people, specifically, get used because they're too nice. They try to compensate for growing up different than everyone else. And I thought that was such an important point that they made.

ESCAJA-HEISS 39:17

Ooh, yeah. Yeah.

CHRISLEY 39:20

But I want to touch base about something you you brushed over- well not brushed over, but just like briefly hit a while ago about the intersectionality within this movement, within the queer movement. I think [that] when you think of queer people, or the queer movement, usually a white face comes comes to your mind, whether that be a man or a woman, but nonetheless a white person. Do you think that intersectionality within the queer movement is an issue and needs to be addressed?

ESCAJA-HEISS 39:53

Yeah, I'd say it's definitely an issue, and the older I get, the more I grapple with these questions. I think that's something- youth, as we know, I'm still youthful, are very smart. They're very smart. And I'm also so impressed by the middle schoolers and high schoolers of today. When I was your age, it's so long ago. [Laughs] I was completely different. I did not have the same access to language and concepts. But what I'm trying to say is I wasn't really thinking about intersectionality when I was doing activism work as a teenager. And now I try to be more self reflective, and I wonder- I ask myself questions as a white slash white passing person: "Do I want to be holding the space?" Or "How can they bring other people in?" And I think that kind of self reflection is not happening enough; I'm still working on it. But activism can be really empowering. But it can be hard to actually take- as I said before, take us back and invite other people in. I think intersectionality is how we're going to achieve any kind of social justice. And so I think there needs to be a collaborative effort among all activism work. And the more centering we have of racial issues, issues surrounding disability rights, gender issues, the the more we'll get done. So it's definitely still a struggle. And I think again, it has to do with discomfort. As ALOK said, allies will listen to us, or people with power will listen to us, they will take us more seriously if they can see themselves in activism, if that makes sense? As in like, "Okay, you might be trans, but you're a fellow masculine person, so I'm more likely to listen to you." You might be queer, but you're cisgender, so I'm more likely to listen to you. And I think that happens with whiteness, too. It's another layer of discomfort that people don't want to grapple with. And that's not a good thing. We shouldn't be letting that happen. So yeah, I think there definitely needs to be more intersectional work and self awareness, and taking extra steps to make spaces diverse and integrate other voices in positions of leadership in particular.

CHRISLEY 42:42

Definitely. I catch myself as a cisgender, white man within the queer movement- I catch myself thinking sometimes how am I- Am I overpowering someone else who doesn't have the same privileges as me, but obviously, I don't do it enough, because I still have that privilege. And, I don't know, I think it's just something that we all need to really think about and start to internalize in a way.

ESCAJA-HEISS 43:13

And I think we all need to grapple with our own internal thoughts on the matter. And it's tricky because it's just about finding a balance. You also don't want to be too scared where you don't do anything. But then you also don't want to take up too much space either. So it's about finding a balance, and that's okay. I've learned with time- but also not to take it too personally; it's just a matter of "How can this be the most

effective- the most effective activism work?" It's more effective, and it's better if we have more voices, and we have folks that are underrepresented in activist spaces, so yeah. It's definitely a journey.

CHRISLEY 43:53

Yeah, no, definitely. Okay, I'm just going to ask one more question. I don't want to keep you too long.

ESCAJA-HEISS 43:58

Oh, no problem.

CHRISLEY 43:59

I feel like I could talk to you forever.

ESCAJA-HEISS 44:01

Yeah, same. I love talking about this stuff.

CHRISLEY 44:06

What obstacles have you had to overcome? And how have you overcome them?

ESCAJA-HEISS 44:11

Yeah, that's a good question. Because I feel like there are lots, but there's also few. I have been really lucky. And I think that has led me to where I am today. And I try to be mindful of that. The biggest obstacle I would say is finding confidence. And I know people have life obstacles where things were hard, or people weren't understanding. But I also acknowledge that I've had a lot of privileges: I've had financial stability; I've had access to community; I've supportive parents; but in a lot of ways, I still feel so small in the world in the sense of I've internalized a lot of the transphobia in this society. And deconstructing internalized transphobia is exhausting and hard. And I have to constantly remind myself that I do deserve happiness, joy, that I deserve human rights. That I deserve something as simple as correcting people about my pronouns. That's still something that I still can't do, which doesn't make sense; I don't know why I can't do it, but just finding self worth, I guess. It's hard. And even with all the privileges I've had, and all the community and resources I've had access to, that's still an exhausting, every day thing to grapple with. And I wish none of us had to, and I think the answer- what has helped is finding the community, finding other trans folks that go through the same thing, and accessing. I use social media as a form of self care, and I know that doesn't- I know some folks would get mad by that statement, but by following others- I've shifted my own bubble- I now have my own bubble of representation. That's healing. So I have this shitty representation bombarded at me by all- by everything in the real world. It can be books, ads, human beings, but in my own little world, and in my own online space, I have followed incredible queer creators, therapists, activists, artists, musicians, and that makes me feel like I belong, and that I am worthy. And I think that's how I cope with this. And I think we all, in a lot of ways, especially if you have some kind of marginalized identity. Yeah. Still trying to build, despite it all, totally still trying to build confidence.

CHRISLEY 47:16

Yeah, no, I definitely think that's such an issue for any marginalized group like you said. But speaking specifically to queer people, accepting yourself and finding that confidence, because I feel like society

thinks that once you're out, then you're out, you know? You don't have to deal with that anymore. You've come to accept yourself. But it's a daily thing where you have to live with- especially people who don't grow up in supportive environments; they have to struggle every day to accept themselves, but I feel like it's something that's not really noticed by people, because they think once you're out, you're proud, you know what I mean?

ESCAJA-HEISS 47:55

Exactly, yes.

CHRISLEY 47:59

Thank you so much for doing this.

ESCAJA-HEISS 48:02

No, thank you.

CHRISLEY 48:04

This was an amazing conversation. And once I get it transcribed, I'll send it to you, let you review it, and then I'll email you whenever it's published in the archive.

ESCAJA-HEISS 48:16

That sounds amazing. Thank you so much. That meant a lot.

CHRISLEY 48:20

Is there anything else that you want to say?

ESCAJA-HEISS 48:24

No, I don't think so. I mean, I'm also a very optimistic person, and I love my people. And I think archives are amazing. So I feel really grateful to be able to be a part of this. Thank you for continuing to send me emails. I know I kind of dropped the ball in my response to this. But it means a lot to be a part of this. And I know that this is- I know my story- one of the reasons I love archives is because they're evidence of a greater history that I am only one tiny speck a part of. But I find that to be comforting. That we've been here forever, and we're gonna stay here. And there's evidence of our stories and our lives throughout time. When it comes to confidence, that thought gives me comfort and confidence.

CHRISLEY 49:14

Yeah, no definitely, especially for big institutions like Duke. There are like archival silences where queer people, especially young queer people, there's not that much representation in the archive, and I think doing everything we can to make sure that there is representation in there. Not just for young people, but also for historians and future archivists that want to view any young trans or queer or activist; [that] they have the opportunity to.

ESCAJA-HEISS 49:52

Yeah, absolutely, yeah, thanks for finding me and considering me.

CHRISLEY 49:56

Yes, thank you so much for doing this. I'll let you go now, but once again, thank you.

ESCAJA-HEISS 50:02

Yeah, no problem. Have a good day.

CHRISLEY 50:04

You too.

ESCAJA-HEISS 50:05

Bye bye.