

IN CONVERSATION WITH

RANDELL ADJEI

Partnering with Community Through the Arts

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SPEAKERS

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The Human Library

Conversations around Equitable, Anti-Racist, &
Anti-Oppressive Practice

SHAYLE GRAHAM

Hello colleagues and welcome to TDSB Human Library: Conversations Around Equitable, Anti-Racist, and Anti-Oppressive Practice. We are your hosts Shayle Graham and Dr. Stephanie Fearon from the Equity, Anti-Racism, and Anti-Oppression team. We have an insightful conversation in store for you today. Are you ready to talk courageously? Let's get into it.

Hello to all our colleague community out there and welcome to the TDSB Human Library Podcast Series. In this episode, we are going to discuss partnering with community through the arts with author, inspirational speaker, arts educator and community leader, Randell Adjei. Randell is the founder of one of Toronto's largest and longest running youth-led initiatives. Reaching Intelligence Souls everywhere R.I.S.E. edutainment. So, without further ado, please welcome Randell.

RANDELL ADJEI

Hi, Shayle, thank you so much for having me today. I'm really looking forward to this conversation and something I'm really passionate about.

SHAYLE GRAHAM

Alright, so Randell to jumpstart this conversation. Can you tell us what exactly do you do in your role as an arts educator, and what personal experiences feed your passion to work with the community through the arts?

RANDELL ADJEI

What I do, in my role, as an arts educator, really is predicated on the opportunity to help others specifically youth and young people really see themselves through art. We're using art as a tool as a vehicle for them to get towards the process of self-actualization, self-knowledge, and really developing the confidence in terms of who they are.

So, I work primarily with poetry. Poetry has been something that has really saved my life, it's given me an opportunity to learn more about myself, to see my truth, to also offer others the opportunity to see the truth within them. So, some of the activities for example, that I may do are "I am" poems, which are very simple, very basic. I often work with kindergartens, and you know, primary students as well, too. So, this is an opportunity for them to pause and reflect. So, as an educator, my role ranges from different age groups. I've worked with kindergartens, before, I've also worked with seniors before as well, too. But as an art educator, it's also really about leadership. It's about being able to edify what leadership looks like through the arts. And I don't necessarily mean in terms of being on stage and performing. I don't necessarily mean in terms of leading, but I think really about being an example of what it could look like to be an artist that is using art to make the world around them a better place. So that is primarily the work that I do when it comes to how I work in the community.

But as an arts educator, I'm also connected to R.I.S.E. Edutainment, as I am the founder and executive director, as you mentioned a little earlier. And so, we had to explain it like we really use this opportunity through our organization to help artists develop the business acumen, and also the performance skills and the mindset in terms of being an artist. I think it's really important that you, as an artist, have an art form that you can truly hone on to a craft that you can sharpen. But I think it's also important that you understand what happens afterwards. And so, it's important for artists to be able to know how to leverage the art, how to market the art, how to stand out in terms of an oversaturated market. And so these are some of the things that we've been able to communicate by organizing events such as the edutainment summit that offers panels, workshops, and different things.

RANDELL ADJEI

So, as an educator, I really work from an administrative standpoint, I work from a communal standpoint, and also work from an I guess more select a collaborative standpoint with the audience, and with the youth that we work with as well, too. I don't think it's enough to just be an artist or to make art for art's sake, I truly deeply believe in the importance of also edifying of also standing through as a leader. And lastly, I think the importance of allowing others to step into their own creative genius through art.

I guess lastly to some of this question. I also believe that all of us are manifestos. You know, we're all capable of manifesting our hearts and our minds greatest desires. And so, art, for me has always been a tool for me to manifest what's in my mind, and it's beautiful. And there's a quote that says, "Art often allows us to have a conversation, that dialogue doesn't necessarily offer". And so I take these experiences, I take the things I've been through, I take the hardships, the lessons, the wisdom, the knowledge, and I'm able to cultivate and I guess, comprise all of that into a spoken word poem where I can perform on stage and hopefully inspire others to see themselves through it as well too.

But what fuels me is how she was able to edify that process for me, and it fuels me to be able to help another Randell in the future, or another, Dwayne Morgan, in the future, or another Pauline O'Keefe, like these are artists that I know who have gone through things, but poetry was the opportunity for them to create. And so I really, truly want to be able to help others see themselves. Help others heal through arts and specifically poetry. So I would say that's my personal life. That's what fuels my passion, you know, it fuels my passion, then that personal experience is something that I'll never forget. Or, you know, I guess I also think about my work and my facilitation skills, and how that's been able to help other young people, to learn more about themselves to find confidence in themselves, and to realize that what they went through doesn't necessarily have to define them. But truly, it's an opportunity for them to design themselves and see themselves for the pure potential that is really inside of them. So that's a great question. Thank you for asking me. That got me really thinking. Thank you so much.

Some of the experiences that fuel my passion. For the work I do through the community arts is being an actor, like being someone who's a beneficiary of great arts programming, you know. I think about, I think about the incredible mentors and teachers that I've had. And, you know, the first teacher, getting a little emotional here, like the first teacher that ever seen me, for me, the first teacher that didn't judge me that didn't label me, they didn't criticize me for what they heard about me from my past. This is a teacher, I have to say her name, her name is Andrea Smarts issues my grade A teacher. And I also had the opportunity to work with her through the diversity of voices, but she gave me a pen. And she gave me a paper after weeks of asking me who I was, and weeks of taking the time to get to know me and, you know, before recess, and after recess at lunchtime, she just asked me a series of questions that no one ever did before. And I think it really allowed me to see myself in a different light. And so she gave me a pen and paper and said, Randell, tell me your story. And I can tell you the truth Shayle, like how life changing it was, you know, it really allowed me to see my story for the first time. And I realized that not only was my story important and valid, but that I was important and valid that all the different negative stories, stereotypes and stories that I was told about who I was and who I could be, or had the potential to become. This poem literally eradicated it, and I was able to see like, wow, I actually went through a lot at 13 years old. And that I can truly take the time to use poetry as a, as a cathartic process, you know, like artists cathartic. It offers us space and time to reflect, to heal, to grow, to learn to listen to our own thoughts, as well, too. And so thank you, Andrew Smarts.

SHAYLE GRAHAM

Randell, thank you so much for that. You're such an amazing role model for the communities in which you serve. And your passion, it really shines through in how you articulate who you are and what you do. I think one of the most powerful things you mentioned is art being a vehicle to not just conceptualize our realities, but a vehicle to manifest our dreams, and construct better futures, and to capture representations of ourselves in ways that are, that are holistic, and creative and vibrant. And as an educator is just so touching, because I can appreciate that you highlight specific teachers who played a major role in affirming your artistic identity, and your leadership. This homage to educators who impacted your life really hit home for me because a lot of the times we see, you know, a set of students I know in the elementary world for about a year, you know, and we never know how much difference we make in in students lives. Because for many of them, we never see them again.

So, this brings me to my next set of questions like: Why do you think it's important for educators to engage students in the arts? Why do you think it is important for teachers to look beyond the confines of school settings and partner with arts educators within the community?

RANDELL ADJEI

Let's see another great question, Shayle. Why do I think it's important for educators to engage students in the arts? Well, it kind of ties into my first answer. From the first question, and I just feel like there's something about art that offers students outside of academia. Just another way to process another way to critically think, you know, if we're trying to teach students how to critically think, I really feel like it's important for them to recognize that their natural ability to manifest through art making, or through conversation or dialogue, just literally being able to manifest like, there's something powerful about that. There's something powerful about exercising your manifestation skills, also something powerful about just tapping into yourself into the power of self-actualization and self-knowledge of getting to know who you are.

I really do feel like the education system, in a way fails us when it comes to helping us know who we are, you know, we'll learn about parabolas, we'll learn about algebra, we learned about history in terms of people who've done incredible things. But there aren't many opportunities for us to learn about who we are as people. And I think art is literally that vehicle. that tool, as I mentioned, to allow us to get to where we want to get to.

As a society, I feel we are quite afraid to sit with ourselves. It takes a lot to sit with yourself and get to know yourself intimately because of some of the things that may come up. And I know that for 2020, and during the Coronavirus, when people were stuck at home, there was a lot of mental health issues that were coming up. And so, engaging in the arts, it gives young people another tool in terms of how they can deal with their mental health. It gives them a tool, a way to really express like, there's a study of science that talks about the importance of being able to journal like journaling itself is not only is it cathartic, but it also allows us It allows us to have a certain conversation within ourselves that we often don't make room or time to do. So, when you can sit with yourself and question and ask yourself certain questions about who you are, where you are, where you want to go in life. This is a very critical tool that allows for the process of critical thinking to be sped up in a sense. So, it's, it's huge.

And it's really important for educators to engage students in the arts, whatever art speaks to them, right, because we have to understand that art itself is a like, it's hard to even put it into words, sometimes in terms of what art is in and of itself. But it is a very powerful, incredible way of building connection, of communication, of healing.

RANDELL ADJEI

And I think it's important for teachers to look beyond the confines of school settings, to work with arts educators and community because there's just certain things that a teacher may not necessarily be able to offer. Their training and their experience going to teacher's college may not necessarily reflect some of the needs that students have. And so, they say it takes a village. And it literally does take a village in order for us to help the next generation of students get to where they want to get to, and also surpass some of the, I guess the hurdles that we've had to overcome, you know, so this is our way of making it easier for them by connecting with other educators who have lived experiences that may offer them insight, and may offer them opportunities that may not have been presented within the school system or within that educator itself.

I really do think that partnership is huge when it comes to education. I really do think that bringing community educators and arts educators to come into the classroom or just to work with students. It's a very vital thing. And I just think about, for me personally having an organization like R.I.S.E. Edutainment, every time, I've gone into a school, I've promoted R.I.S.E. I've talked about what I've done, and you know, the potential that students have to come apart, come and be a part of what we're doing. And there's still students to this day that are still, you know, a part of our programming that have found like a career and develop the career out of spoken word out of poetry. And this is because I had the opportunity to go into their classroom. So, I think there's something really huge and really incredible about this partnership model.

SHAYLE GRAHAM

So, before I go into my next question, Randell, I really just have to say this. I really appreciate the way that you highlight partnership as something that is absolutely necessary for student success, and wellbeing, and achievement. And we really can't do this in silos. We can't be doing this in isolation. We really need to adopt a more collaborative model where we are looking at alternate modes of teaching in order to be able to reach our students, especially the most vulnerable. So, in support of that, can you recommend three ways schools can be more intentional about leveraging community arts educators in support of students success and achievement?

Yes, another great question. So, I feel three recommendations that I have for schools to be more intentional with leveraging community arts educators in support of students' success and achievement. So, the first thing really would be about how do we develop a collaborative model or methodology that fuses the arts and curriculum? How do we enable students to be entertained while they're learning? And I don't mean entertain in the sense of like performing or in that sense, but how can we create a concept of edutainment?

RANDELL ADJEI

So, you know, KRS-One came up with this concept back in the 90s, called edutainment. And for him, it was about making music that also offered an educational aspect for his listeners. And so I think there's perhaps ways to ensure or to allow students to truly be able to just be stimulated, especially for the creative students who are a bit more creative than they're academic, you know, we want to make it accessible as accessible as possible. And this is, I think, there's a way to add equity into the curriculum or equity into the school system, is to ensure that we're addressing the needs of creative students who just don't get academia who it's just not their strong suit, you know, they prefer to learn through a creative lens, and I think, developing methodologies that infuse those two, so essentially, edutainment would be my first recommendation.

RANDELL ADJEI

My second recommendation is really meeting students where they are. You know, there's something really, really important about working with a student based on where they currently are, and I mean, emotionally, spiritually, mentally, you know, just along those lines of where are they, and how can we get them to where we see the potential in them by starting with where they are at. It's perhaps, for me one of the most successful ways and I've been able to engage with students with the most successfully I've been able to work with you to help them truly achieve and reach their potential. And so, meeting them where they are, is, for me a very, very huge thing. And so using art as a way to do so like I sound like a bit of a broken record, Shayle, but I think it's really about ensuring that we are using just the power that art has, like I mentioned about reflection and catharsis and how they can use art in a way to get to know themselves in a way to, you know, just really develop their self-identity. Because I think when you know more about who you are, it makes it easier for you to learn more about the world around you. But you have to start with where am I? Who am I? What is my purpose, you know, and so these are some things that I found to be really helpful for me, when I was a student, when I got to know who I was better, like, literally, the academics became easier because I'm like, Oh, I know who I am. I know my capacities. I know my weaknesses. I know my strengths. And so, I just remember, like, it was like a full 180 I just remember thinking, Okay, now that I have a better sense of who I am, you know, granted, I was 16/17. And doing some really deep work on myself, even at that age. I think it just made you know, academia a little bit easier for me to navigate.

My third recommendation would be learning to love the problem in order to deeply collaborate with community arts educators, like you got to learn to love the problem, we often want to be able to come up with a solution right away, we want to come up with something that's going to alleviate the problem. And often we don't take the time to really take in how can we love this problem? How can we really truly understand the problem in a very deep way? So, what I mean by this is, who are the stakeholders involved in the problem? Who's perpetuating the problem? Who is affected by the problem? Why does a problem exist? You know, who benefits from the problem even being alive in the first place, and so really taking the time to really see the problem. I feel like if it truly does help inform the solutions that will come up afterwards. And of course, art, again, is one of those great ways to do so. It really offers you the perspective to think critically, to look outside the box, to step into someone else's shoes perhaps and do characterization and personification to do some of those things that, you know, we may not necessarily see. So, I do think these three recommendations speak to me best when it comes to truly ensuring that, you know, we can leverage community arts Education in support of student success and achievement.

SHAYLE GRAHAM

Randell, I just want to thank you so much for sharing your insights and your passions with us. I would love the opportunity to continue this conversation further. But unfortunately for today, we have to go. So on that note, on behalf of the Equity, Anti-Racism, and Anti-Oppression team, we would like to thank you for stopping by and chatting with us and dropping some knowledge on us today. Colleague community, I hope you were taking notes, and that you continue the conversation about the importance of partnering with the communities we serve through the arts.

Okay, colleagues, that's all for today. We look forward to you joining us for our next courageous conversation. If you like this episode, don't forget to share it with a colleague and post it on social media using the hashtag #tdsbtalks. Bye for now.