E06: Not All Wheelchair Users… ft. Vanessa Cantu (Transcription)

00:00
Intro (Marcia): This is Disabled Girls Who Lift. We are reclaiming what's rightfully ours one podcast at a time. It's Marybeth, Chloe, and Marcia bringing you the thoughts and unpopular topics to you get out of that ableist comfort zone.

00:15
Music Jingle

00:24
Marybeth: Good morning good morning, welcome back to our show. You've supported us so much by listening to our raw truths, unique stories, and unapologetic language. Helped us spread the message of existence, and for that, we appreciate you. On this episode we'll discuss Spinal Cord Injury Awareness and Activism, the Adaptive Training Foundation, and Adaptive Crossfit for Wheelchair Users. We've got just one Disabled Girls Who Lift host joining us today… That's me, Marybeth, from sunny but currently cold and rainy California. But we have a guest--a lovely guest--joining me today from Grand Prairie, Texas. She was the runner up for 2018's Fittest Seated Female in Crossfit, recently competed in Wodapalooza 2019, all while recovering from 8 abdominal surgeries and a spinal cord injury. She started The Disabled Truth Podcast which I absolutely love. Vanessa Cantu is a mother to a beautiful daughter, and overall an unstoppable force. Vanessa, thank you for joining us.

01:34
Vanessa: Of course, I'm excited.

01:36
Marybeth: I'm excited, I'm just hoping we can fit it all into one episode! There's so much to unpack when it comes to SCI awareness, wheelchair users, and differently-abled athletes as everyone's story is unique, their healing and coping processes differ, the active recovery and physical therapy, you know, getting your normal life back, and making those goals for yourself whether it means getting into sports, dancing, what, playing an instrument, or going outside. Well, tell us a little more about yourself.

02:09
Vanessa: Okay, awesome. So my story. My story starts back at 15 years old, which is in 1998. So if you remember what being a teenager is like it's all about, you know, figuring out who you are, feeling yourself, starting to really just get to know yourself. So, but you're also very, very--a lot of this comes from like your friendships and what you're involved in that helps, right, figure all this out--and so it's a really prime, crucial age, and a very sensitive age as a teenager. And so being 15 I was involved in you know all sports, I came from a- I was in a little bitty high school, but I did have a very active childhood and a very active parents, and so like moving around and doing things, like, we were never the type to just sit at home and watch TV, really. And so Easter Sunday 1998, my mom and my stepdad, we leave my grandma's house and it's my stepdad driving, my mom's in the passenger seat, I'm sitting behind the driver's seat, and my little sister who's three years younger than me is with me in the car also, and she's, you know, sitting right next to me in the backseat, and my stepdad does what we all do every single day which is he leaned over to tell my mom something and took the wheel with him without realizing that he was doing that. And so we're on a highway--like a back highway, it wasn't like a main highway--but it was a back highway to where when he took the wheel with him, we got off of the highway, went into like some grass, and he was gonna try and auto correct and get back on the highway but he didn't see a big ditch. And so we basically went head-on into this ditch and just came to a complete stop and--very quickly--and alert throughout the entire thing, and my seatbelt didn't work. Basically I had a defected

seatbelt, the lap part locked and the shoulder part did not lock, so if you know every time you brake in a car you know you can feel your shoulder part lock.

04:25
Marybeth: That tug

04:26
Vanessa: Yeah, mine never held the tug, it was just loose. And so on impact I hit the seat in front of me, and that force of hitting the seat in front of me basically the only part that helped me in was the lap belt, and that caused all of my injuries because the lap belt pushed such a force into my abdominal stomach. It ruptured all of my internal organs and then nothing in my back--on my back--fractured because nothing supported my spine from the shoulder part. So on impact it basically felt like I was drowning in a swimming pool just trying to catch my breath, and I couldn't because I was bleeding internally. And so right then and there it was like lights out in a matter of like--I don't know the real life time--but for me it felt like you know minutes of just like, “I can't breathe, I can't breathe,” and then I wake up two months later. And so it's almost like, ‘Okay well, this is what death feels like.’ It- you don't- you're not like worrying about your family, you're not worrying about anything else, like you're not even thinking about how much pain you're in, it just- it happened so quickly. And- and so from that moment, everything else that happened from that moment on was basically told to me by family. I know CareFlight picked me up and saved my life twice. I died twice because of all the internal blood loss, and so once I actually got to the hospital they did emergency surgery, removed my intestines, my kidney, my spleen, a large part of intestines, and then I had a colostomy bag for a while. And then my spinal cord injury was like secondary to everything, so I like- completely paralyzed and in an induced coma so I wouldn't move--because you know spinal cord injuries, they don't ever want to move you while your back is still not stable, right. They need to make sure that your spine has either had appropriate surgery or whatever they need to do, but you don't move somebody right after an accident that has a potential spinal cord injury. So for me it was like a month of not moving in a hospital bed until my stomach was well enough to where they could do an eight-hour surgery on my stomach to do my back. And so it was like after a month of recovering for my stomach to get well enough, it was like, “Okay now let's use your spine.” So it was major surgeries just back-to-back the first couple of months, and then the recovery process actually started and that's where the reality kind of hit home of like, “Okay, like, I have no idea what just happened. I have no idea what I'm even dealing with right now, and this sucks.” And none of my family knew how to take it either so it was not good.

07:11
Marybeth: Right. Wow. And not only that, like, being the only one to suffer from such a major injury from an accident that you all were in, that must have been hard for your- for your family too.

07:25
Vanessa: It tears your family apart. I'm actually more passionate, and there's not a lot of research or anything out there when it comes to how the family copes and how my siblings cope. If you look at research or you do anything, it's all on the person that's been disabled. And so I learned so much from how much my family fell apart after the accident that I pursued my Bachelor's and my Master's in Sociology and Psychology, and my focus of research and my studies were on the family dynamics and what happens to the family, really with focus on the siblings when something like this happens. And so that's my passion and my love, but I learned so much on my own and I just felt so bad for my sisters that lost a large quality of their own life because of what, you know, I was dealing with.

08:17
Marybeth: Yeah, well I mean it's still amazing that you're able to think of it from the other perspective, but still, the amount that you've had to you know go through in the last--how many years now? How long have you been-

08:30

Vanessa: So what, that was in ‘98? I've been disabled longer now than I was walking--which to me was crazy--so I think it's been 20 years, 21, I have to think about it, but yeah I know it's been about 20 years. ‘98, yeah. So it's- I didn't actually start accepting everything until 5-6 years ago when I turned thirty. So from 15 to 30, I- I lo- I was a lost cause, and because I hadn't accepted what happened to me, I hated who I was, I had no self-esteem, I was heavily involved in drug use. At the age of like 16, started using heavy drugs until 30 years old, until I got pregnant, and that's when I was forced to sober up. Once I finally had to be sober I was like, “Okay, now I have to deal and accept that this is not really gonna change ever,” you know and so like now it was like, ‘How strong can you be in this body that you now have and it's not gonna change,’ you know, and so that- that hit hard for me when I got pregnant. And- but that was when I learned a lot of cool new life lessons that I wish I would have learned way early on. It's just- what we have now with- this podcast wasn't around, and you know social media wasn't around where I could go and Google and be like you know, ‘What’s out there now?’ I felt all alone.

09:57

Marybeth: Like, who else is going through this shit? There's so many people out there but we couldn't- right, it's not- they're not in our backyard. We were always the only one in our classroom and you were 15, you know, like going back to middle school, high school, that's that's tough after recovery.

Vanessa: Oh yeah

Marybeth: And so you were in the hospital for a few months, and then did you also take some time off to go through physical therapy?

10:27

Vanessa: That became like second nature, physical therapy. So that just right after, I went back to school. That was in April so I was out, you know, all of the summer which kind of worked out perfectly as far as school is concerned, and I know I went back in August probably sometime the following year as a sophomore, but it was very different because I was going back in a wheelchair. I was trying to walk in a walker with like literally leg braces that Forrest Gump wore, so like I couldn't- I couldn't bend my knees, I just walked like swung my hips around, somehow to figure out how to carry my books, how to do everything. Luckily I went to a really small high school--when I say small like my high school was one hallway--and I had 25 people in my class.

Marybeth: Jesus christ

Vanessa: So it was very small which was very fortunate for me because you know I didn't have that many people that I had to worry about, 25 people was it.

11:24

Marybeth: Everybody knew everything about you.

11:26

Vanessa: And they never had a disabled person in that school setting ever, and that school setting had been there forever so ADA had to come in and make it compliant so I could just get into the gym, so I could get into the bathroom in a wheelchair, because nothing was accessible for me.

Marybeth: Oh my god

Vanessa: It was- it was really really tough, and so that school became ADA compliant as a result, but a lot of people learn lessons as well as myself. So yes, I would go to school, and then when I would get out I used to do softball practice and golf, you know whatever with my girlfriends. Well it was like, now you got to drive to go to physical therapy and I hated it, so you know so I was now not able to do what my friends are doing, and they tried to keep me involved. They're like, “You can still be our water girl, you can still be here and there.” I was like, “I don't- no. Uh-uh.

If I can't- if I can't play and do the things that y'all want to do and- and it makes me really jealous that y'all can still run and I can't, I don't want to even be around," and I wasn't, and that's where I took a real hard left turn because I was around people that didn't do sports, that weren't doing anything with their lives, and I was like, "I can kind of connect with y'all," you know what I mean, "'cause you're- you're just chillin, not you know, partying," and I was like, "I can- I can still party." So like I started to do that, but I was going to physical therapy all through high school, they were trying to get me to start walking again and get out of my chair, and I mean I always had friends and somebody with me by my side. I was never by myself but that was, you know, I didn't want to do it by myself. It was- it sucked.

12:58
Marybeth: Yeah. And just a disclaimer for any like able-bodied folks listening. Well what people often don't realize is wheelchair users don't always use wheelchairs, so a lot of people with CFS, chronic fatigue syndrome, or spinal cord injuries, either use wheelchairs for a good majority of their day, and then either walk or use prosthetics, leg braces, other orthotics, but if you see them standing, or you know, not in a wheelchair, that's completely normal.

13:30
Vanessa: You know what it is and I'm glad you brought that up because there's- when you have a spinal cord injury, no spinal cord injury is the same. So you either have a complete paralysis where nerves you know your spine is completely broke, is broken I guess you could say, so disconnection- complete disconnect, and partial paralysis is you still have some connection that are being made through the nerves, so I was incomplete. So there's complete and incomplete, and so when you see somebody that is getting out of their chair and walking with leg braces or crutches or a cane or a limp, it's because they're an incomplete. And so just because you can walk for a little bit doesn't mean that you can walk all the time, you know. It's just, you kind of do what works best for you, so I'm glad you brought that up.

14:18
Marybeth: Yeah totally. I feel like it's necessary. So has it been the last six years since your activism and advocacy in getting people more aware of a SCI, or what- what has that entailed?

14:36
Vanessa: So my remember I said my sister was in the car accident with me, right, and so she didn't acquire any severe injuries but she saw everything kind of going on. So she was like the- on the outside looking in, and so she pursued her education- she wanted to be a physical therapist as a result of everything, but she um- [talks to her daughter]
Marybeth: Oh hi! Our second guest…

15:04
Vanessa: Right? Isabella. [talks to daughter] So my sister- my sister was in the accident with me, she pursued- to become a recreational therapist as opposed to a physical therapist, and when she went to school she was all about helping people with disabilities and got really involved in that, and she had married my brother-in-law who's in a wheelchair. They got married, she met him through like wheelchair rugby, and my sister- he owned a CrossFit gym in Spring Texas, one of the first ones to actually- not only co-own a CrossFit gym but he also was one of the first ones that was bringing in people in wheelchairs to train. I hadn't really ever heard of that, but this is how the connection started. And so I remember there was a CrossFit competition--let's see about five- six years ago--and they- they thought I was Crystal Cantu. They mistaken me for Crystal Cantu, which happens, and so they contacted-

16:16
Marybeth: Completely different disabilities by the way

16:18

Vanessa: Right, exactly. Completely different, same last name, both Hispanic, both from Cali, but no. And so they were like, “Hey can we interview you? You know, we have this competition coming up,” and I was like, “Well you have the wrong person, but I would love to do a competition. Would you like to know about me?”
Marybeth: Hell yeah

16:36
Vanessa: And so I told him like- I introduced myself and I really had no idea what this competition was about, but it was a CrossFit competition. My sister, my brother-in-law, kind of encouraged me to pursue it. And so I hadn't even started doing Crossfit yet I just signed up for the competition, and I was like, “Well I guess this is my time to like start training.” So I trained for a few months and it was a real reality check for me because at this competition was when my whole world changed. It was here in the Dallas area and at that competition I met Crystal Cantu, Kendra Bailey, Zack Ruhl, Chris Stoutenberg, all of them, you know.
Marybeth: Wow

17:16
Vanessa: At this one competition. And this was like one of the first CrossFit- adaptive CrossFit competitions, and so this is where I met all of them. This is where I realize like this sport’s really hard but I really want to do more because it was the first time I had seen young people with disabilities that looked hella strong, that were doing incredible stuff, and I was like, “Dude, I can do this. Like I can relate to these people finally,” right. So that's when everything changed for me, and I was like, “Okay I'm gonna do this also,” and at that time that's when Wheelwod had just started. About a year after that, Stouty was talking about Wheelwod about at that time and then created it shortly after. That's also where I met David Vobora with ATF. He came to check out the competition, introduced himself to me, and so simultaneously both of those things happened for me at the same time at that competition. By taking myself out of a comfort zone, not even realizing [what] I was getting into, this is what it takes and so I just went all for it. So I met up with David a week later, he- you know, started working out with him, also started doing Crossfit, Wheelwod started shortly at the same time, and that growth for me just- it all happened at the same time.

18:40
Marybeth: That's amazing. Honestly all of those worlds all coming together at one place, plus your sister and your brother-in-law was involved and actually owned that gym, that's amazing. Holy crap. And then like the motivation you might have garnered from that day too, like had you picked up a-

19:04
Vanessa: [talks to her daughter]

19:20
Marybeth: Sweetie. They start missing you when you're gone but when you're there it's like… [laughter]
Vanessa: Exactly. Exactly.

19:30
Vanessa: Kind of where everything started, that’s how I got motivated, and this was when I realized there isn’t a lot of females out there in adaptive CrossFit.

19:40
Marybeth: Yeah and had you picked up a barbell or anything before that day, or knew anything about CrossFit?

19:46

Vanessa: Like I said I started training when I signed up for that competition, and so I only trained for like two or three months prior to the competition. And no, I had not picked up a barbell, I hadn't picked up dumbbells, like everything prior to that was physical therapy, whatever I did in the gym on my own, and it was like always I'm just trying to walk and I'm just trying to like- do you know- walk again, but no I had never done that. And then the gyms that I went to had never had somebody with a disability before, so it was like you know the coach that I finally found at the CrossFit gym that I went to, he had never trained somebody with a significant injury like I had, and I had never been in that type of setting to even tell you how to do this. So he would tell me you know, "Come into my gym before any classes, come in early in the mornings. I'll start- we'll start learning together," he said, and for like a year I started- I trained with him for like two months prior to competition. After competition I was like, 'I want to continue to do this,' so he was teaching me the lingo of CrossFit. He- we were learning how to modify workouts, and so again this was all before we had like Wheelwod and all of that. That was growing at the same time, but this is also something else that I learned along the way that was lacking. There's a lot of coaches have never had somebody with a disability in their gym, and there's not a lot of athletes out there to represent us on a competition floor doing crossfit, especially females. So my first major competition--that was a small one--but my first big major competition was probably wo- Working Wounded Games, and that was my first major one, and then I want to say I did Wodapalooza, and then I did the Games in Canada with Stouty. And so I did that leading up to the years after I did that first competition, but when I first did the first competition for females, there was probably like 10 people in my division or less. And it was like the first two years it was like the same females, and at that time like we- you- you didn't just all have spinal cord injuries. You could have a spinal cord injury, but if you had like a condition of your hip, or you had you know any condition that just you didn't feel comfortable competing standing, you were in the seated division. It's not like it's broken down now, so it was like we were all just grouped together, you know. If you can't stand and do a workout and you feel better sitting, then you sit. And for me, like you- it felt unfair because you know if you don't [have a] spinal cord injury competing against people that don't have spinal cord injuries, it's a lot harder but that was just part of the growing pains. It's always like, well somebody has to represent. We have to stay in this, we have to document it, we have to showcase it online, we have to show all of everything so it can grow, because if there was 20 men there was like 10 women, and the next year 30 men 15 women. And so I felt like I said obligated to see this momentum grow and- and it- and it certainly has grown, and at the same time ATF--when I was at the Adaptive Training Foundation--they, you know, they were helping me also train to compete and- and supporting me at these competitions as well.

23:14
Marybeth: Yeah totally. So I mean, two questions based on that. One, I mean I feel like every one of us who have come to Disabled Girls Who Lift, or is part of the community, we are always the first of our coaches kind. So lots of adaptations, lots of different modifications, and it's- and it's amazing because people want to help us out and they want to be you know that force to keep us going. But now do you see CrossFit coaches learn or get trained on I guess Wheelwod or adaptive fitness? Is it- because it's a lot more common now, I know Strongman--this is a question from Marcia by the way--Strongman has you know the adaptive divisions, they have static monsters, they have seated competitions, and since a lot of CrossFit is also seated, like, is that required or do they have to go out of their way, do you know?

24:09
Vanessa: To these competitions?

24:10
Marybeth: For a CrossFit coach, like is it required for them to learn about Wheelwod or adaptive fitness?

24:16

Vanessa: No. No, it’s not required, I mean no. It’s completely- it’s- you would hope that they- these coached would want to because it is becoming more mainstream. A lot of them don’t know where to look, they don’t know- they hadn’t ever had someone with a disability in their gym, but they are not becoming aware of the CrossFit Adaptive Certification that's out, right. So CrossFit has come up- they've teamed with Stouty and Ogar and some of the guys to create a seminar for the Adaptive Crossfit Seminar. And so what it is is they're teaching coaches now, “Hey, if you- if you're an- if you’re a CrossFit coach, you might want to take this course because you know you are- this is a growing sport in this division,” so yes, there's a lot more coaches that are more wanting to. It's just a matter of like, you know, ‘When am I gonna get that first person in my gym that's gonna require it, or am I ever?’ you know, and it's not required. It's definitely like I said, you hope that they do, but that's another passion was just--for me personally here in the DFW area--I was like, ‘I'm gonna personally go to every CrossFit gym here in the Dallas Fort Worth area and I'm gonna be that person to be like, “Hey, so how would you modify- I want to- I want to drop in at your gym, and what's your workout?” you know, and this is what it is. Okay, so I'm going to do the workout, I'm gonna do it the way I know how to adapt it, and then at the end we can talk about it,’ and you know, and so from there that's where I would introduce Wheelwod, that’s where I would introduce adaptive CrossFit, because they would want to know more and I would tell them, “Well, here's where you can go, so when somebody does come in, or if I want to refer somebody to your gym, you know, I wanna feel comfortable that you are comfortable to accept someone with a disability.” So they are definitely more inclined and wanting to because, like you said, it's becoming more mainstream. Do they have to? No, and if they don't want to, I’d say don't go to that gym, go to a different one.

26:25
Marybeth: Exactly. And it’s constant education on your part, but you're paving the way for others who have never tried it before and are interested in starting. Rather than being sent to, you know, go complete a puzzle or read a book or whatever, we can be active if we want to. There- people just need to know what the resources are, and the fact that CrossFit even has a certification, like I applaud them for that. Like, powerlifting where are you at? There- we have- we still have to fight to like prove our worth on a platform or show them what our- our lifting tools and modifications are. So what are your major modifications, like what have you done that's worked for you and coaches?

27:09
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27:43
Vanessa: A lot of them are- you know if they’re doing like handstand walks, or they’re doing squats, or they’re doing double unders, you know, it’s like well, “I have no idea, what are you gonna do?” And so I’m like well, “Try and think of it as your arms are your legs.” Right, so like, “What movement are you doing with your legs, what can I do to mimic something similar,” so like double unders now of course they have the- the--I forget what they’re called--they’re like

individual weights basically, weighted. And so you are you know--and I'm so sorry for the company that developed these that I can't even think of their name--if you go to Wheelwod though, you'll look and you'll find them there, but they're individual ropes, and so they're weighted on the ends, and so this is what you can do for double unders or ropes, and at competitions you're going to see them in there. They're real good burners. But like box jumps, we might do slam balls, you know, or burpees. I know for burpees we'll get down on the ground and we'll do--they now require you to get out of chairs. So a lot of times coaches see somebody in a wheelchair, and they're like, they think that they can only stay in a wheelchair, and we're like, "No no no, get them out of the chair," you know, "because they need to be getting out of the chair to work on transferring, getting in and out of the chair quickly," because that's like a life necessity. You should be able to get in and out of your chair quickly. If you fall on the ground, you should get right back up. And so a lot of people though in chairs don't feel comfortable and don't get out of their chair, so you're maintaining a certain- you're not getting stronger, you're inhibiting growth, because you're relying on your back, you know, your cushion, the back of your chair to hold you up for posture and everything, and then if you remove that and sit on the ground you're like, "I have no control of my core, my back." That's the point, right. So a lot of times we encourage "Get out of the chair and do workouts such as crawling," such as you know, they do weighted crawls so that might be like for handstand walks. They might do something where you will do a weighted crawl, you might do plyo push-ups, you know, but trying to keep the same type of heart rate and pace that you can, so you're gonna try and find a movement that you can do to keep up that kind of pace or heart rate. So it's like, a lot of stuff that we'll do is burpees. We'll get on the ground and rather than jumping up will come up on our knees, right, and go from the floor to our knees and do a push-up, or you know, but we come up on our knees so we're just not jumping up on our feet. Or like I said, handstand walk, sometimes they'll get in the wheelchair--and I don't know if you've seen this yet--but they'll get in the wheelchair and they will stack plates on the ground. And so you just stack a bunch of plates on the ground, you'll get in your wheelchair, and you'll wheel up on them, and then you'll try and hold a wheelie. You don't come down, you hold a wheelie the entire time, and so you pop up on these plates, and it's an uneven surface which makes it way more difficult, but you're holding a wheelie while going over the stacked plates and then hopping down. So that for us is challenging because you're using your core to maintain that wheelie, that's like a handstand walk for somebody that is able-bodied, you know. So those are like- some of the biggest modifications I think is just learning- like I said if someone's doing box jumps or something, I might do slam balls or dips, but it's arms arms arms arms arms. So you know, people are like, "I'm so sorry you have to do all arms," I'm like, "Well, you use your legs all the time, same thing." You know, it's like you just get used to it. So they have now required you to swim a lot of times. I had never swam before since my accident--I hadn't done a lot of things before my accident until I started competing, which is why I would encourage anybody to do one or two competitions because you're gonna realize that you can do a lot more than you couldn't. So like for example, swimming not just in the swimming pool, out in the ocean, and so you know it was like, for me swimming I had never done and getting out in the ocean in Miami for Wodapalooza or in Canada was like insane because I don't even remember- I only knew how to play swim before my accident, you know, and my legs don't really help me much in the water but you were forced to learn. So I got a trainer and a coach, and I was like, "Can you help me learn how to swim?" You know, it was like just learning how to swim, using wet suits, wet suit shorts, or like a wet suit kind of provides the buoyancy so you float a little bit, so I would wear those and I learned how to swim, and before you know it we're out swimming in the ocean, you know.

32:34
Marybeth: Holy crap, that's amazing.

32:36
Vanessa: People with disabilities are out swimming in the ocean so it really pushes you to- and it builds confidence when you're doing these kinds of things and realizing your potential, your confidence just builds, you know, competition by competition and at the same time you can beat yourself up a lot because you're not doing what the person next to you is able to do that has maybe a similar injury, so that can be also discouraging. And that's something I

learned along the way of competing is you know when it becomes not fun, you're comparing yourself, or you're stressing yourself out, it's time to take a little step back. And you know, I had to do that and be realistic with myself and what I had going on in my life, and that's kind of why I've come to a stopping point in my career as far as competing at that level in CrossFit, but I had to you know I had to put myself in check and that's something a lot of us should do. Once you build that confidence and get there, then you have to like reevaluate you know, on what's next.

33:36
Marybeth: Yeah. I mean it's amazing that there was a sport that pulled you out of your comfort zone in so many ways, like you said like other people who are not comfortable getting out of their chair, not realizing how strong in their upper body they are, and how crawls and swimming is a possibility, that's- that's great. But did you ever feel unsafe in any of those situations or you- you always had somebody “spotting” you, coaching you, like by your side?

34:05
Vanessa: Oh yeah, I mean you always had--as far as coaching you, yes I had someone helping, as far as being out there in competition floor, yes we had somebody that was nearby that was actually watching, had to give cues. They tell you, “raise a hand or something if you don't feel safe,” and you don't have to- if you just don't want to do it because you don't feel comfortable you don't have to do it. You might lose some points, but you know what if you can make up for it in another- at the next WOD, then you better bust your butt in the next WOD if you’re not going to do it in this one. But so you’re not-

34:39
Marybeth: And being out in the ocean though, oh my god.

34:44
Vanessa: It’s scary, but you know what anybody that has a disability, you're already a fighter, right. Every single day just getting out of the house and going in public to do like grocery shopping or whatever, when everybody's staring at you anyways, you're- you're there to prove people wrong, right. So same thing in competing like you're there to prove to yourself and other people that you can do it, so like the whole like, “I'm scared I don't want to do it,” no it's like I'm gonna- okay I've never done- so many times I've told Stouty, “I know I've never done this, I don't know if I can do it,” and he's like, “Trust me, you can do it. Just try,” you know, and so sure enough every single time you can do it, and I’d be like, “Thank you so much, like I couldn't even believe that I could do that,” you know. And so if you're in the position of like signing up for a competition with your disability, you're up for a challenge. So like you've already taken the most- biggest step and it's like whatever, bring it on. I want to try it all.

35:43
Marybeth: Yeah, and well like you said just people like stepping out of their house, people are gonna stare anyway, so give them something to stare at, you know.

35:50
Vanessa: Yeah, right exactly. Give them something to really remember you by, right?

35:55
Marybeth: Yeah, okay great. And you mentioned ATF a lot--Adaptive Training Foundation--what- what kind of resources do they provide? How do they help you in- in your sport?

36:08

Vanessa: So the Adaptive Training Foundation is- it's an amazing organization. It’s a good way to like I said- it's also to kickstart your recovery, and they give you all the tools and everything that you need. So what they do basically is if you go to their website, you can apply to the program, and say for example you just got out of outpatient rehab or inpatient rehab and you're now like in physical therapy and you've exhausted physical therapy, you can apply to ATF and the Adaptive Training Foundation, and it's a nine--a free--nine-week course that when you apply you basically go through nine weeks of intense training. They do what physical therapy didn't do or stop- you know, like physical therapy shows you how to live in everyday life, right, how to maneuver, how to get out of your car, how to cook, pick yourself up if you fall. ATF, it's like, ‘Okay so like what's your biggest fear and what's your biggest goal?’ you know like, I want to be able to walk without two crutches, I want to walk with one cane so I can hold my daughter's hand. And it's like, “Okay well if that's your biggest goal like let's do that,” and so in the nine weeks they'll assign you a trainer--so you get your own trainer--and- and so you get like a trainer, maybe two trainers--one is the trainer and the other one that is somebody has gone through the class with a similar disability that will help you also. And so they're alumni, and so they engage by doing that. And so you go through the nine weeks, they make you very uncomfortable, and they make you reach your goals in that nine weeks because they make you do things out of your comfort zone almost immediately. And so they are really showing you the tools, also mentally, they have a class also for--it's like mind, body, and spirit basically--and so they'll teach you how to cope mentally, they teach you breathing techniques, they teach you coping mechanisms, and then they throw you on the floor and physically show you what you're capable of doing. During this nine weeks you have, you are training for a trip at the end of the nine weeks, so for example, the class might go like to Utah to go skiing or to go somewhere and do a physical activity that you might not have done, so you're training not only for something, you're training to go on this trip, they equip you to know what you need to do to go on this trip. At the end of the nine weeks, you have a graduation, and then after that you can stay plugged in. The biggest thing is community. The Adaptive Training Foundation provides the community, it provides a way for you to stay connected with people with similar abilities, it gives you- you’re acquiring confidence without even realizing it, and then after being there for so long you're like, “Okay, I got this,” and so you basically go out on your own and figure out what it is that you want to do after you built that courage, and anytime you have a setback or a surgery and have new goals, you can go back there and reapply. So it's a really amazing foundation, for sure.

39:10
Marybeth: That's beautiful, and these are professionals that you're working with that either have a disability themselves or work with many many many people with disabilities so-

39:19
Vanessa: Exactly, they all have various backgrounds, you know, therapists, physical therapists, personal trainers. They all have similar backgrounds but they've all been hand-selected for a reason. And so a lot of people want to be volunteers there, and you can volunteer your time there, but you know, you have to prove that you're capable of working with this type of community and so they hand-select everybody strategically for sure.

39:43
Marybeth: That's- that's amazing, and they really truly make it a community and have a graduation after nine weeks too, that's-

39:51
Vanessa: Oh yeah, they have a graduation and it’s like the most beautiful thing to experience, and for the families to experience. They just created ATF Battle Buddies, so they've got a kids program now that has finally started for kids. You know before, they weren't accepting kids because it was growth, you know, ATF was still growing. They- they do have now what's called ATF Battle Buddies, so any kids want to apply or be a part of it they have a program now that is being built for that as well.

40:21
Marybeth: Wow, that's am- and Marcia wants to know if you've ever met an Emma at ATF, she used to treat her in the past, she's a physical therapist also, and she's gone there recently.

40:30
Vanessa: Emma is a- so she’s a physical therapist?

40:33
Marybeth: Sorry, Marcia was a physical therapist, and she was her patient.

40:37
Vanessa: Oh, Emma was a patient. What was her injury, do you remember?

40:40
Marybeth: Mmm, I'll have to have her ask you.

40:44
Vanessa: I wanna say I know that name and last name, but I don't recall. I would have to see her face to really remember.

40:52
Marybeth: Okay. Yeah, no problem. And you mentioned, you know, wanting to get out of crutches or your- your braces to be able to use a cane. Has that- has that happened?

41:07
Vanessa: Oh yeah. Yeah, so I definitely walk with one crutch or a cane. I- my goals have been accomplished, you know, well I've always wanted to walk without anything, and just to be able to run again, and I don't think that will ever leave me, but I don't dwell on it and I don't compare anymore, you know for what that used to be. Now I'm just like, you know, I am grateful that I can- I've accomplished my major goal which was walking on a cane. I will say this: I've been disabled now for almost twenty--like I said--almost a little over 20 years. You learn a lot of things, okay, when you have acquired an injury, you go through a lot of phases, and I'm now at that phase in my life--I'm 36 years old, about to be 37--I'm about- I'm at that phase of my life where I'm like okay, longevity, right. You should always be thinking about, ‘Can I continue to do what I'm doing ‘til I'm 70?’ right, and with a disability, or a lot of times using things incorrectly, you're moving in ways that's hurting other parts of your body. You have to constantly be in check and aligned with that, and that requires a lot of time going back to the basics. Like, back on the ground doing PT stuff, you know, because if you're hurting one thing for the sake of just like, ‘I want to walk on one cane,’ you're- you're not being smart about it. And we all go through these phases. I went through a phase for a long time where I was like, “When I'm done with my wheelchair, I'm chunking it over a bridge,” and I did. When I was like 16 years old, I threw the first wheelchair I had over a bridge. When I got done with leg braces, I threw ‘em over a bridge. When I got done with a walker, I threw it over a bridge. Anything I- it was a party and a celebration for my friends, like, “I don't need that no more,” and so like I celebrated that back then, but I was like really hurting my body along the way by how I was walking because I wasn't wearing the leg braces, because I wasn't taking advantage of the wheelchair. And so right now, you know they always say--and I don't want to scare anybody but--you just have to be mindful. Like, I could have double knee replacements because I decided like even though I don't have- I don't walk correctly because I don't have the muscle tone that I need to prevent hyperextension of my knees. Every time I walk, I'm hyper-extending my knees, or I'm doing something that's tearing me apart in the long run to where it might need these major surgeries later. I don't

want major surgeries, I don't want any setbacks, so that's a part of me that had to reflect. I was like, “Okay, you can't be stubborn. Who cares what people think, like, you know you have to do basic things again.” And so for me, I have a wheelchair, I have a scooter--which I never use, like, but it's there--I have a wheelchair, scooter, I have crutches, I have a cane, and I have my leg braces. At any moment in time, depending on the circumstance I'm gonna decide what I need to use. So like, my- my car is like a- is like a medical supply store because I- whatever you want, like, I just know what I need. So it's like, if I'm gonna go really long distance, I'm gonna use my wheelchair. If I'm gonna go out and drink, and I want to look hot and pretty, yeah of course, but if I'm gonna drink, I don't want to fall--you know cuz I already have balance issues--I'm gonna use my chair, right. But like if I'm gonna walk a long distance and I want to push myself, like, I'll use my crutches. It's a situational thing, you know, like if I'm gonna compete, it's probably smartest that I do it in a chair if I want to go fast or be quick or whatever. So that would be like my biggest thing that I learned over the course of being disabled for so long is, yes you're gonna get to a point where you’re gonna want to push your- push yourself, and you're gonna want to see how far you can push yourself, but be smart. Think about long-term, and you know if you want to be able to--for me--I want to be able to walk long-term, I want to be able to do things without major surgeries, so I had to start incorporating things that I thought I was done with a long time ago back into my life. But now, I just own them and I’m not like, “Oh my god, look at me, I’m in a chair.”

45:14
Marybeth: Yeah, totally. And it's so funny just like picturing your- your van or whatever that you-

45:21
Vanessa: I have an SUV!

45:22
Marybeth: An SUV? [laughter] But like picturing you pulling every single one of those out of the river or wherever you threw it over the bridge like, “Oh wait, I need the wheelchair, I need the crutches.”

45:35
Vanessa: Exactly. And it was so expensive, that was so dumb of me to do. Like, now I realize insurance only covers so much for my medical supplies. I- I mean, my wheelchair, my sports chair that I have right now, like that's from the community. Like I had to do a GoFundMe because like that stuff is expensive, so I wasn't thinking back then as a kid, but yeah, don’t do that.

45:58
Marybeth: You were 16, nobody blames you. And there's- there's- you know, especially growing up and growing up as a woman, like the differences between independence and dependence, and how like okay we have to be as a disabled person to be dependent on things like this or a caretaker or our wheelchair or anything. And like you said, we don't want to work harder necessarily, we want to work smarter and long-term, so whatever gets us to live to a hundred, shit.

46:35
Vanessa: Mm-hmm. Use your chair! Bling it out, whatever makes you feel better, but I wouldn’t have been to that point had I not gone through the organizations that I did, with ATF, had I not competed and done what I did. All of that helped build and, you know, that confidence within myself to just realize potential because like I said, had I not done those things, I would have never known that I could go out and swim, you know, in the ocean. I would have just been sitting back on the sidelines watching and wishing, right, or like just so many things that I would have held back on in life, I think, going forward had I not had that part of my life. So it is very important part of your life, it's very important to get connected and plugged in for sure, and then it's really important for you to realize what you've learned from that,

and that you don't need to hold on- hold hands, you know like you can't- to these organizations. You have to learn what you learn, and go do it on your own, right, and own it on your own. So that's- it's all a phase, it's all very necessary, too.

47:37
Marybeth: Yeah and what you have to applaud yourself, too, for the last 20 years is the mental strength that you've developed. Like even in your hardest moments, your darkest moments, your mental strength was always there. Like, you know it's sad that there is depression and anxiety that comes with, you know, having a disability or- or- you know being hit with a- an accident that kind of chooses where you'll go in life, but the mental strength of, you know, pushing forward, realizing that you're a mother now, you're taking care of a child and--on top of taking care of yourself--that's, wow.

48:23
Vanessa: Yeah, people- people all the time are like, you know, they freak out. They’re like, “Wow, you have a kid? And you work?” Society is still so behind on people with disabilities, even though we’re- it’s becoming more mainstream on social media and everything, like you still meet those people every day where they- they're amazed that you get out of your house. You know, and you work, and you have a kid, and this and that. It just amazes me, but yeah.

48:48
Marybeth: And it's something that we struggle with a lot too, and you know, as- as an athlete ever- you're everyone's inspiration and that's what we try to strive so far away from. Like you should be your own inspiration, everybody's going through their own different process, and, like you said, even others who are- who have suffered different injuries or are going through different you know things in their life, one might be five steps ahead of the other and comparing yourself isn't going to help. And able-bodied folks who are comparing themselves to us and how-

49:24
Vanessa: Same thing

49:25
Marybeth: Yeah, exactly, the same thing. Like, “Oh she can do it, I can too.” Well [laughter] funny, you’re handle’s actually, ‘if you can…

49:34
Vanessa: @ificanucantu. Catchy, isn’t it? It’s so applicable though, it’s true. Yeah.

49:44
Marybeth: So I mean let's talk a little bit about how this kind of intertwines with parenting moments, you know, we're out in public a lot. You take her to school, you take her to the park, and just out grocery shopping. Do you experience any regular ableism or sexism on a given day?

50:04
Vanessa: Mmm, explain when you say like regular ableism, what do you mean?

50:09
Marybeth: Well like you said, people make comments even though it's- they are like, “Oh, you can do that? Wow,” or “How do you do it?”

50:22

Vanessa: Yeah, so it all makes a difference in how you carry yourself. I don't get that a lot because I don't- I'm very like, I don’t know how to say this. How you carry yourself, so I'm very like on a mission, right, I'm very confident, I'm very, like, “Get out of my way, I got this,” but not- and I'm smiling. I'm not rude or mean about it, but like you know and so there'll be the common things like, “Oh, can I hold the door for you?” but I think because of how I carry myself I don't get that all the time where people are like, “Oh you got it? Let me help you, let me do-.” I get a lot of like, “You seem like you're very strong and you probably don't want the help, but I want to help you anyway,” type of thing. So it's not- I don't get that all the time. You know, in the grocery store or something like I'm gonna be the person like, “Hey, can I have help getting something?” or I might tell my daughter, “Hey, climb on top of my wheelchair, climb the shelf, get that thing at the top,” you know, or we’ll ask somebody. But no, I don't get that that often. I will get it if I'm getting in the car, and they see me loading my groceries, and then they also see my wheelchair that needs to be loaded, and then somebody might ask you know, “Can I- can I help you?” But it's not that bad. It's very rare that I'll have the jerk that sees me walking somewhere and they just stare at me and then they go the step further and they're like, “You poor thing, what happened to you?” It’s like, “Poor thing, you! I’m fine. What’s wrong with you?” You know, and that happened at the bank not long ago. Jeez.

51:58
Marybeth: At the bank?

51:59
Vanessa: Yes, but I do have conversations where they started out with, “I'm inspired. You're admirable,” or “What happened?” To me this happens most at the nail salon and you know, they’re like, “What happened to you?” And then I’d tell them and they’ve be like, “Oh you poor thing. You have a baby?” You know, like yes. They're just blown away by me, you know, and I'm like okay, yes I have a kid, yes I still work. Like that's where I feel like I have that conversation the most, is at the nail salon. But as far as like being a parent with a disability I will say that your kids are very- they adapt just as much as you do to the situation, and so for them that might be the only thing that they know and it's not until they go to school that it becomes hard because they start comparing. And so I'll never forget when I picked up my daughter one day from school, we had never really had that conversation yet. She came outside and she saw a parent pick up their kid, and they swung the little girl around in circles, and then my daughter looked at me and she's like, “You're never be able to do that with me, right mom?” and I was like, “Not like that, but like we could do it differently this way in the chair,” you know, I was like, “no, yeah.” That was a moment where I've been waiting- like that moment I knew I was gonna come at some point in time. And then you know when I go to her school to eat with her sometimes, you know, she will say you know, “My friend, you know, wanted to know what happened to you and I told her you're in a chair and you were in a car accident.” She loves telling the whole story now, but you know it's- it's one of those things where when I go to her school you see a lot of the kids are like, “Wow!” They either want to help or they're like taken [a]back by it, and it took me a while to like go in, just roll with it, explain it, be okay with it, which leads me to my next point. It's very important, and it's something that Wesley, my friend, does a lot and it's something that I would love to do. These schools, especially elementary, need to see people with disabilities coming in and speaking to them because it is mainstream, it is something that's gonna happen, it is the inevitable. They need to know how to act towards it, how not to be scared towards it, they also need to know that when that point in their life happens, that they have something to remember and recollect, “Oh I remember Miss Vanessa came and talked to us in a wheelchair, and she was fine and she did this a lot ,” to where they don't have a stigma associated with it when something happens to them when they're 18, 19, 20, later on in life. They have something positive to relate it to, so I think getting into schools is very important and I realize that. And you know now they're more comfortable with me, but it was really hard at first, you know, like you have to be okay with all of the stares, and all the kids like wanting to touch, and doing this or that, you know. But parenting hasn't been as hard as I thought it was. My daughter has adapted. I think getting your kids out in an environment- a lot of people bring their kids to the Adaptive Training Foundation, you know, able-bodied people will bring their kids, or trainers will bring their kids to ATF, and it's so good because

they don't see disabilities anymore. They are the kids when you go to school and there's another kid with a disability, my daughter will be probably one of the first ones to befriend them or say you know, “I like your brace,” and not be afraid of it. You know, so it's very important I think that kids somehow are what's it called- like-

55:36

Marybeth: Yes, yeah just taught at a young age, and- and like cultural competence in general is just so important at a young age, and I don't think it's taught in, you know, elementary/grade school, but seeing that there are so many other people that are different from you, and they exist. You know, someone who's a different race, a different like size, differently-abled… I will never forget though, like it's funny like you saying, you know bringing disabled people in to speak to the schools or speak to the students just to know that, like, we are normal, like everybody else. But in elementary school I was actually brought around to all of the classrooms by my school nurse, and it was--luckily, you know, again like we are brought in with a lot of confidence, and I was a very confident child and I didn't have any issues with it--but she had me stand in front of every class and be like, “Look, she's different than you, look at her hand. If any of you make fun of her you, will get expelled or you know- you know, there will be some consequences,” and I think back at it and I'm like, ‘Damn, I was put on the spot and I was you know, luckily I loved who I was as a kid,’ It wasn't until later that I started hiding it, caring about what people thought of me in middle school/high school. But yeah, showcasing one of us you know?

57:13

Vanessa: How did that make you feel as a kid? Were you really happy to do that, or were you like, “This is really awkward and embarrassing?”

57:18

Marybeth: Well, it didn't seem like a problem with me because my family treated me like, you know, very normal. They said I was lucky and I was smart and I had all these like you know special talents, but the nurse you know doing that was kind of the first moment for me realizing that I was different from everyone else, and I am something to pick fun at, and I didn't understand it at first until I was picked fun at. So there was actually an incident like a few months later where like three or four groups of other kids--I think they're in a younger grade--they were just laughing while I played handball. I played all the sports, too, you know, and they wouldn't stop. And I'm like, “What the hell? Like what-” and so I think I ended up crying to my teacher and they got--I don't know what happened to them--they had to come and apologize to me.

58:19

Vanessa: Good. Yeah. Good. But it’s important, like, it is. Because kids can be mean, and they just don't understand. And I mean, yeah a little girl made a comment to this past weekend when we were at my daughter's friend's birthday party, and she didn't mean it in any harm. She just says--you know they were playing a dance machine--and she was like, “I feel sorry for you because you can't get up and dance with us,” and I said, “Don't feel sorry for me, like I'm fine,” you know I mean I was like, “I don't even really want to do that stupid dance machine anyway.” No, you know, I was like, “I’m fine, there’s nothing wrong. I can do pretty much everything I want to,” you know, and she was like, “Okay.” She wanted to make sure I was fine, you know, she was like, “Okay.” You know what I mean because she was one of the ones that wanted to help push me around, and do this and that, and so they really just- they just don't know. Like we just have to be the ones to get out there and expose that and teach them and- but parenting for me, like I said my daughter's very independent. She's very very like protective. A lady came and asked me the other day getting in the car, my daughter is very- a lady asked me in the car, she goes, she rolled down her window and like made me roll down my window sitting next to her and my daughter sit in the backseat and the lady goes, “What happened to you? How did you hurt your knees like that?” You know because I have my leg braces on, and I was like, “I was in a car accident but I'm fine now,” you know I was like, “So I'm gonna go ahead and go.” And so like Izzy--thank goodness I rolled down the window--because she was like, “Mom, why is that lady all in your business? Don’t people know not to be in other people’s business? Nobody could be in your business but me and Derek,” you know, which is my boyfriend, and I was like, “You're right, Izzy, and some people are curious and they want to know.” So you know, but she doesn't- she's very protective over it, and she will speak up for other people and it's like it hasn’t been as hard as I thought it was gonna be, you know. Like, it’s taught her some very valuable lessons, and so I don't see it like you know-

60:19
Marybeth: No, and kids were always like the hardest for- for me too. You know, like seeing someone missing a hand, or meeting someone for the first time, like the stares are inevitable, but they're also filled with such like curiosity and- and amusement, you know. I mean all totally fine, but there was always explaining that had to be involved.

60:48
Vanessa: Oh yeah, oh yeah. I definitely want to get into schools, talking to schools. I just may get my foot in the door and figure out you know, when, and how to go about doing that but totally necessary, for sure.

61:01
Marybeth: Yeah. All right, well I want to end this with a little, like, can you give us some advice for new wheelchair users or newly injured SCI people that are in your situation, either non-athletes or athletes? You've already pointed out some amazing resources, which we're gonna add to our website because we want people to- to find them in their area, nationwide, but a piece of advice?

61:34
Vanessa: I would say, get plugged into a community as soon as possible after your injury. Start looking online, through social media, for you know friends, and then start following other friends and not might not be your friends to be encouraged because it's so easy to be very very depressed and discouraged right after an injury. It's totally normal too, like you need to go through all those feelings, but when you stay home and you are feeding into that sadness and then you- one thing can lead to another like I did for self-medicating and then just before you know it years pass of not making yourself any better, I would say it's very very important to plug in and look for at least one person to be a mentor to you. And then look for something that you used to like to do that you can continue to do, and it's out there, but you don't know until you start looking. And then when you find something that you want to do, show up. Completely just go out of your comfort zone and just show up because you have to take that risk to grow and to move forward. And- and then once you show up, be a part of it, get active somehow, but you need to get into something as soon as possible would be my biggest advice. And find a mentor, somebody to talk to as soon as possible that is you know your age or whatever, and then that speeds up the amount of mental recovery that it can take and allows less time to just get into a really really dark hole for a really long time.

63:21
Marybeth: Definitely, thank you for that. And when we say mentor, we don't mean like fitspirations that you find online, super popular like CrossFitters, powerlifters, what-have-you, but people that truly care about your growth and your commitment to your goals, whether they've- they've experienced- they have experience in people with disabilities or not. Amazing, uh well thank you so much, it was a wealth of information that you provided to a lot of new athletes that might be joining your sport. It was so much fun having you, I can't wait to hear about, you know, a return of your podcast or- because these conversations have to be normalized, you know. We have to be seen as everyone else, and thank you for continuing that.

64:20

Vanessa: Yeah, my honor. It was- I love it and I'm- it's awesome that you all are doing the same thing, and like I said don't- it's encouraging whenever you see more people that are just tuning in in their own unique way, and so it was a pleasure being on your podcast as well, and I will be sure to share the information with friends and family as well.

64:41
Marybeth: Yay, yay. And what's next for you, just so people know to look out?

64:46
Vanessa: What's next for me? Well right now, I've had a lot of focus on family, like I said, I'm kind of re-evaluating a lot of stuff. I would love to start writing, I would love to start just mentoring more on the backend of upcoming, like I said, athletes and really just- really just-

65:10
Marybeth: Educating the people!

65:11
Vanessa: Continuing to educate through, like I said, through just close friends. The podcast with Wesley, I mean there's all sorts of ideas out there, so it's really just- I'll- I'll keep you all posted if you follow my social media @ificanucantu. That's where you'll most likely see where- what direction I'm going. Right now, it's everyday life. It's you know, my boyfriend, it's my daughter, it's my family, and embracing that, and so, but yeah we'll- stay tuned. We'll see where it's going.

65:44
Marybeth: Beautiful. Thank you so much, Vanessa. Vanessa Cantu, you guys.

65:48
Vanessa: Bye.
Marybeth: Bye. Disabled girls out!

End.

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65:52

Outro 1 (Marybeth): Thanks for listening to Disabled Girls Who Lift!
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