

SHELVIS PONDS: In this episode, we sit with Jen Fry of the Undergraduate Research Support Office at Duke University, to discuss the meaning of identity and the benefits of more fully living into one's identity, regardless of the opposition that one may face. We hope you enjoy episode two in Season 2's Just Space Podcast.

Okay, so Jen we've been thinking about identity and identity work this season on the podcast. Particularly identity means to you, identities that are salient, potentially times when you felt like your identities conflicted with one another and how you've negotiated your identities in spaces that perhaps were not always just and then what do you have to say to people who have identities in spaces that they feel like they cannot be themselves and the space is not fully just for them? So that gives you the lay of the land of what we'll be talking about. So just to jump in, what does identity mean to you, Jen?

JEN FRY: So that's interesting and to give the people listening an idea, I'm a black woman, I have a big afro, I have a nose ring, I have a full tattoo sleeve on one arm and I have a tattoo on the right arm, which everyone who doesn't have tattoos ask me when I'm gonna get the other arm sleeve. It's kind of interesting if they want to they can do a GoFundMe, I'm completely okay with that. But identity to me is what you believe you are, I mean all aspects of it. Racially, you know, I have a white mom, but I have a Black dad, but when people talk to me, I'm Black. Yes, I can say I'm biracial and what comes with that, but for me, I walk around in this world Blackity-Black. Everything, I do is through a Black female lense. There's nothing that I do is through a multiracial lense, I just look at everything as a Black woman because that's how I am perceived in America and we can talk about even worldwide, and we can talk about social lenses and how people socialize and what they believe and we can talk about all of that, but I walk through the world as a Black female. When I travel overseas, I've had people in China to go and try and bear me as a Black female. They're not like "Oh, she's multiracial, she's cool!". This woman tried to keep hugging me to get a picture with me. I walk through this as a Black female, so to me identity is who you are, who you believe you are through all of your lived experiences. I think a lot of times people want to decide other people's identities for them and they say, "No well, you're this person" and it's like I believe who I am and I might work through this world as something, but this is who I believe I am. So I think for me, identity is so fluid because if you had asked a Jen Fry who she was at

17, 18, 19, 20, 25 it's completely different from the Jen Fry at 38 and that difference has lost friends because I went "Black Jen" to "Black Jen" on the side of being radical like that has lost friends and I'm okay with that because that identity shift has made me realize who I am, who I want to be and who I want to surround myself with and I think those are some of the important things that people don't want to think about because we're so worried about the loss of friends who've been in our lives forever, and who we've grown up and then we see that there's that tug-and-pull because we're having this new identity and they want the old and that's how it was when I was at coach for fifteen years and the coach Jen that people knew is completely different from the Jen now. So there's people who are like, "I'm just want the happy-go-lucky Jen" well no you're getting the happy-go-lucky radical Jen and if you can't work with that, that's cool, but we can't be on that level. For me, identity is so much, how we're viewed and how we view the world.

SHELVIS PONDS: So this is really interesting because it sounds to me that there was a point in time where you always been a Black female, and it seems that there was a point in time where that identity became really salient for you. What was happening in your context to where you went from "Black Jen" to "Black Jen"?

JEN FRY: You know it's interesting because there was nothing that like hit me because I was actually coaching Elon and I was starting to pay more attention to race stuff. Can I give you a family dynamic? I was born in Canada, I was actually undocumented and my mom took me across the border and raised me in Arizona for twelve years - the only good thing that Reagan did is he did that law that if you've lived here for x amount of years you can get a path to citizenship and so I was undocumented living in Yuma, Arizona so five minutes from the Mexican border and there was probably at any given time 30% of my school's that were undocumented students would come across the border, go to school, go back. It was a very normal movement. We grew up with lettuce pickers, fruit pickers and that immigration is where I lived, so I'm not the right person to talk to about Border talk: a. I was undocumented b. I lived right there in the mix of it, so I'm probably not the person people want to get in conversations with. So I have all of these different experiences, I grew up in a majority minority town where white was a small population, but they still ran everything, so it's what you see in South Africa, it's

what you see in the South, they were a small population, but they still ran - they were all the farmers, they ran everything, they had all the money. So I had that experience and I played sports, so I was never the only person of color on the team, I was always very lucky. I had all female coaches through all my college and high school, which was very rare - my high school coach was a Black female, like just very aware of things occurring. I've been all over the world and when I got to Elon, I just after a few years started paying attention to race and being involved in committees and it's kind of once that Pandora's box is open, you can't shut it, you can't put any type of tape and I started paying more attention and I realized this is where I need to be, this is what I need to start doing. So I actually just decided to quit coaching, I literally was like, "I'm resigning in two weeks, and my mom was like, "You ain't got a job", "I know, let's see what's going to happen! Let me travel and figure it out!". I was super lucky and I think one thing I tell people who want to take a chance, take a chance and a parachute is going to jump. A parachute will be right there. Parachute will be right there and some people are like, "I don't know what's going to happen with this". I owned three houses at the time, and I just jumped, literally just closed eyes and sailed off a cliff, but luckily with the network, I was able to land a temporary job at the Diversity Center at Elon and that job ended and I travelled the world a lot more and ended here at Duke, but once I left I knew I had to get involved into race and at that point I jumped in fully, I did all the workshops, I really soaked myself in doing this because I knew I wanted to do the work and it's interesting because my mom is white and Jewish and the white side of my family is very wealthy, very, very wealthy. My mom's always known she had a "Black daughter" but not really a "Black daughter" and I realized it happened probably two years ago and I'm talking to her and I travel the world by myself and I travel the world by myself all the time and at this point maybe I've just been to Cuba, and she mentioned how people always ask her is she worried about her daughter travelling by herself, and she said, "You know what? I'm more worried that a cop if going to have a bad day" and that made me realize she's starting to get it. So we talk a lot about race now, we talk a lot about identity and those things. She sends me stuff, I told her I got pulled over, she told me "Did you record it? Are you okay?". She's starting to see that now through my experience and there wasn't like one thing, but it was like the realization that I need to do this work, I do diversity and consulting with athletics and I see that this is a space that's not just about diversity, it's about social justice education. We need to educate from the top down, the admin

need to be doing the workshops just as much as the student-athletes, because what we tend to see across all the universities is that they want to give money to departments, to student-athletes - "Go and do the work!" - but they're not doing it and what people in top levels and in athletic departments and athletic directors they don't realize that we see them. We see that they're not side-by-side with us at Pride 101 or Trans 101, we see that they're not side-by-side with us with at RAI, and it doesn't matter if you're doing the work together, you need to do it with us. I need to see you at AD as uncomfortable with this topic as I am and so that's the work I do is really doing social justice education through athletics.

SHELVIS PONDS: Wow, Jen. That's really insightful. As it sounds to me you came to a point where you got to take a stand on your identities as being as free as they can be in a space. You mentioned earlier that some people left, you lost some friends. What do you tell a person who has an identity which carries with it a level of shame or oppression or they feel as though they can't be themselves inside of a space?

JEN FRY: You know I think that's tough, I think it depends on the space it is and can you leave it? For me, I have a full tattoo sleeve. When I was interviewing for jobs, every job interview I went to on campus I wore a short-sleeved shirt. I made sure they saw the afro, the sleeve, there was never going to be a 9am talk, "Well, Jen, we love your tattoos". Uh uh. I want to make sure that every space that I was in they saw my sleeve tattoo. So do you have the opportunity to leave that space, that's the real question. Do you have a real opportunity? Because sometimes people will not like the opportunities they have to take to leave that space. They might have to take the small pay cut, they might have to move, but I think the thing at the end of the line is what is your self-worth worth? Because I had a friend who didn't want to leave a bad situation because she had to take a big pay cut, and now she regrets that because she realized her self-worth and self-mental health is worth that. So I think you have to think about what is your self-worth worth and are you going to have to hustle to make some extra money, but to be in a healthier situation. I think that's just the biggest thing and I think the toughest thing is that I don't think I can fully speak to LGBTI identities because you're talking about a different safe, being able to have a job, being able to marry who you want, being able to adopt kids, being able to feel safe using a bathroom. There's that video of that trans girl

up in Wisconsin and people breaking in. Like how are those teachers not getting busted noses? This trans female is on the toilet and they break into her stall. They literally had a wire to break in, so I can't speak to that because that's a whole different level of safety and inclusion that I just don't know anything about. But what I can do is try and use my privilege as much as possible and create those safe spaces. So if I gotta break some noses, I gotta break some noses for some folks. If I gotta use my voices to say, "We're not thinking about these identities or these people, we need to be more conscious about how we're helping them" and that's the biggest thing about the position I'm in right now working with the Undergraduate Research Support Office, what identities am I missing that aren't being able to think that they can do research or publish research and how can I get them involved in saying, "Yes, your research is valuable and we want to make sure that you a. Know that there is money available and b. That there's opportunities to publish. So it's like there's stuff that I can't speak to, but what I can do is use my privilege to knock some heads and use my voice.

SHELVIS PONDS: Thank you for that. I really like that. That's true advocacy. Freedom is a constant struggle and so perhaps my last question slash my last point of reflection with you, Jen is what do you tell those who are beginning to do the work and who are beginning to do the fight, what can they look forward to in terms of struggle, in terms of how the process looks?

JEN FRY: I want to say people who get involved, you will lose friends, but you will gain amazing friends and the people that I have gained in the moving to the struggle have been phenomenal and that I think has been amazing. A. people who maybe I've been cordial with they have just changed and we are going on this journey together and that's been amazing and also seeing my friends change with me. My best friend is a blonde-hair blue-eyed head volleyball coach and we talk about race all the time, and the stuff I'm doing with athletics, she's helping implement and seeing what works in her athletic department and she is doing that. The people I know are having those conversation, so people are riding with me and I think that people don't realize how many will ride with them, they just got to start going and people are going to jump on. I think you're going to have so many people pushing against you all the time, you're going to have tears, fragility, you're a racist, you're always going to hear that. That's

essentially what happens when you call white people on what's going on, maybe they're not just as woke as they think they are and the language that they're using or the support that they're giving you and instead of them just saying, "I understand" you get the cries of "I have Black friends, I have a Black Lives Matter flag!" they start to break down because they don't want you to go at them, they want to be able to say, "We're in this together", but not that they have work still to do. So you're going to lose some white friends that don't agree with what you're saying or doing because they lose Black people and that's going to be okay and I have white friends who I first started doing this who pushed pushed and pushed against me and the more I just talked and now they're riding with me and I see some of the stuff that they're talking about and I'm like they're riding with me. So you're going to get some push, I think the biggest thing is that you're always learning. We start reading stuff on "We understand", you don't! I am taking a Teaching Social Justice class that has blown my mind, we learn different theories and pedagogies every week, and it's made me realize how much I don't know about Queer pedagogy, critical performance pedagogy, Hip Hop pedagogy, like all these things that can help marginalized groups that I didn't know about I'm learning about and it's been phenomenal. So it's like don't ever stop learning, and I have to come to this place as if I don't know anything because then I'm going to learn a lot more versus versus I think I know something, but I really don't know anything.

SHELVIS PONDS: Well, there you have it. You've heard it. Jen Fry, it's been a pleasure to sit and chat with you and perhaps I may have one more {question}.

What would the Jen Fry of today tell the 18-year-old Jen Fry about activism, diversity and social justice work?

JEN FRY: I think that's a good question. There's a website where you can send yourself a letter that you'll be sent in five or six years and I like doing that stuff to see the place that I was in when I was like 30, 31 to reading about and thinking about your problems and issues and I think would be to really - that Jen Fry of 18 I have a bunch of piercings - is to fully own yourself because when I was 18 or 19 I was raised in a single-family home, so I was buying clothes that had the logos on it, I was trying so hard to fit in, and to fully own yourself and to understand that it will turn out fine because you're so

worried about clothing, boys, just fully own yourself and I was trying to fight with my identity to figure out who I was so I think “Man, it’s going to be okay” just like fully own it. And I think it’s interesting in Arizona, we didn’t even have MLK Day until 1999, like we are so behind I think it was like - I look back and I didn’t see any social justice stuff and I wish I had of because if I would have gotten involved, I know I would have a mom that would bail me out like I think some people don’t have that support because if I go to jail, my mom was always like look, “If you’re going to jail, I ain’t bailing you out”. But I thing if I did it for the right thing, because she’s always been about that like always having a voice for people, she believed audio tapes to the blind, she worked at a library to help poor people, she’s always been an advocate in her way, she helps foster foster kids right now, she’s a Casa advocate for kids and she does her own advocacy and I think had I seen the little segway of what this is, I would have jumped fully in and understand that there’s going to be some carnage of some friends and ideas but keep going because the people you’re going to meet on the other side - the people i know now who do this work that we found each other and do it together it’s absolutely phenomenal people and I’m so glad they’re able to do that.

SHELVIS PONDS: Wow, Jen, thank you so much. Is there anything else you’d like to share with us?

JEN FRY: Yeah, I would love for you to follow me on my social media. My website is JenFryTalk.com. Social media - all aspects is JenFryTalks, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram Snapchat being that I don’t really Snapchat because I’m 38 since that’s kind of difficult and kind of weird as well. But I’m on that IG, Facebook and trying to be better with Twitter. So follow me, read my articles, I have a lot of articles on athletes, the kneeling athletes, race and recruiting, and just how to change the landscape of athletics from looking at diversity but also looking at social justice education.

SHELVIS PONDS: Thank you, Jen Fry. There you have it! JenFryTalks.com. Thanks for your time, Jen.

Jen is interviewed by Shelvis Ponds. All editing for this episode has been done by Kyle Kubovic. And the outreach coordinator for this episode is Esra Uzun Mason. Today’s

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