

Ep. 1: *Can Humor Heal?*

September 6, 2021

Benjamin Swift: Hey! I'm Benjamin.

Trisha Mukherjee: And this is Trisha.

BS: Thank you so much for tuning in to the first ever episode of People Place Power. We're so excited to bring you this new show!

TM: So since this is our first episode, we thought we'd take a minute to introduce ourselves. We've been friends for five years now, and over the past few years, we've found ourselves talking a lot about how people change the world. Their methods, their identities, and their stories.

BS: So we decided to make a podcast about it! And that's what you're listening to now.

TM: Over the past few months, we've been interviewing changemakers from all around the world to explore big questions about activism. Like how do people use their bodies to protest? Or how do you create change by just observing the world around you?

BS: In this episode, we'll learn how one woman is taking the stage for her community.

TM: Quick note that this episode has brief mentions of rape. Benjamin reported this episode, so I'll let him take it from here. We hope you enjoy the show, and don't forget to follow us for more stories coming soon!

BS: So today's story is about a comedian: Adrienne Chalepah. I was talking with her, and at the end of our conversation I asked her to tell me a joke.

AC: And so, hmmm.

TM: Don't you know that comedians hate it when you ask them to tell you a joke on command!?

BS: Yeah, well that's what I found out.

AC: Hmm hmm hmm.

TM: Yeah, that's not really how comedy works.

AC: Oh man, this is awful.

BS: Yeah, I guess I learned my lesson.

TM: Yeah.

BS: But in my defense Adrienne did eventually come up with a joke for me.

AC: I got to meet Michelle Obama... I put it on my resume, cuz, duh.

BS: So, Adrienne opened for Michelle Obama at a campaign event, and after, she got to meet Michelle... one-on-one.

AC: I was dressed in like a traditional dress and moccasins, I looked really cute, she came in the room, she was amazing, her hair was blowing, we were inside.

BS: Adrienne goes in for a handshake.

AC: And she doesn't shake my hand so instead she grabs me and she hugs me. And she gives me the best hug of my life to this day. I left my body. And I was also in Michelle Obama's guns. Like just cozy.

TM: Being cozy in Michelle Obama's guns sounds like the dream.

BS: Right???

AC: But the behind the scenes, the real story of what happened, was so shameful. I got so flustered, from how *amazing* she looked that my intelligence left my body... And I was left with like this fan girl, valley girl version of myself.

BS: Oh my gosh.

TM: Oh my gosh.

AC: My wit, my grace, my intelligence, gone. All I was able to say to her was "you're so pretty." And then I left.

TM: I mean, I feel like I would've done the exact same thing.

BS: Yeah, I don't think I would've had anything smart to say either. And if *this* had happened to either of *us*, we would've just moved on and been embarrassed about this moment for the rest of our lives. But for Adrienne, that's just the beginning of this story. She's turned this moment into a skit that she now performs for hundreds of people.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHTER]

AC: *And then I left.*

[AUDIENCE LAUGHTER]

AC: *That was it! And to this day, I can't forgive myself because it's like, I had the opportunity to say so many things. Instead she got "you're so pretty!"*

[AUDIENCE LAUGHTER]

BS: So all Adrienne could think to say when she met Michelle Obama was "you're so pretty". She felt like it was a letdown, but that's probably what a lot of us would say. And whether she means to or not, that's where Adrienne shines. She's so human, she's so relatable, and that's why her comedy works.

BS: Because her comedy is about where she's from - she's an indigenous American living in a country that killed her people and stole their land. And a *lot* of her comedy has to do with trauma and genocide and horrible stuff most people want to sweep under the rug, much less joke about. Adrienne can find humor in her most embarrassing moments. As a Native comedian, this skill also helps her to find humor in trauma. That's done a lot of good for people. And it begs the question: when something unspeakable happens, something so bad it's hard to think about - does it help... to laugh about it?

[MUSIC]

TM: Welcome to People, Place, Power, where we explore big questions around activism through the eyes of changemakers around the world. I'm Trisha Mukherjee.

BS: And I'm Benjamin Swift.

AC: Sorry, those of you who may not know what IHS is, it stands for "Indian Health Services." We would trade it for our land back any day, it sucks.

[CHEERS]

AC: They're like, "Here's some ibuprofen, for your cancer, good luck with that, update your chart."

BS: I mean, seems reasonable - she'd rather have her People's land back than a crappy government run healthcare provider. Just like in her skit about her lackluster meeting with Michelle, Adrienne's jokes are really real. Sometimes painfully so. I've always thought of comedy as something fun, but... not essential. But Adrienne changed that for me.

AC: Haw, kee own day daw. Adrienne Chalepah ah khaun. My name is Adrienne Chalepah. I am a comedian and writer and occasional baby maker. I am from the Kiowa and Apache tribes of Oklahoma. Yeah, I have fun.

BS: So Adrienne Chalepah grew up on a reservation in Oklahoma. Growing up Kiowa and Apache comes with a complicated history: when white settlers came, they killed ninety percent of Native people in the Americas. At that time, that was a full ten percent of the world's population. Native people are still being killed today, though - just in a different form. Take that skit about getting prescribed ibuprofen for cancer.

AC: I'd rather have IHS than nothing, but I will say, IHS is the only place that you can walk out more injured than when you walked in.

BS: It's poking fun at the Federal government's Indian Health Service, which is known for its kind of terrible healthcare.

BS: It might seem surprising that out of these deep injustices, Adrienne found comedy. But for Adrienne and her community, comedy isn't just for fun. It's a way to work through trauma, together. She described the importance of humor to heal from tragedy.

AC: So at a lot of our funerals, and wakes and services and ceremonies, you will always find a couple of clowns in that mix, who refuse to be sad, and, and are making people laugh.

BS: And, Adrienne is one of those clowns.

AC: They gave me a shot in my cheek and they gave me a shot in my arm and I walked out of IHS with my, my pulled muscle and all just like "see you guys later!" I love IHS.

[MUSIC]

B: So how did Adrienne become a comedian? Coming from rural Oklahoma, it wasn't exactly the standard career path.

AC: I grew up swimming in the creeks with, like, catfish and water moccasins. And so I don't have a fear for very many things.

BS: Her dad's Kiowa-Apache, and her mom is white.

AC: I grew up with a lot of awareness of who I was, and where I came from. My dad, who's Kiowa Apache drilled it into me what my identity was at a young age.

BS: Adrienne loved a lot of things about where she grew up. But she struggled to find productive outlets for her energy.

AC: Yes, I ran away a lot. I kind of got involved with a rough crowd, which ... the only crowd you could run with in Oklahoma is a rough crowd.

BS: So she started doing what teenagers do without many resources and role models. She took up heavy drinking and rebelled by sabotaging her own education.

AC: At the public school I went to, it was all white staff. And then the students were probably about 60-40, like 60% white, and like about 40% native. So there were a lot of natives that went to school there. But they didn't have any political or social power.

BS: Teachers at Adrienne's public school didn't value the experiences of Native students. Adrienne tried to push back, but... it didn't go well.

AC: So a good example would be where I come from. Being indigenous, I was being told the Kiowa and Apache version of events, which is very much creation stories centered around the fact that we're from here, we don't have unique languages for nothing. And that was being

contradicted at school where they're like, you guys are basically Asians. And we were like, no, that doesn't make sense. So I would question it, and then I would get in trouble.

BS: So every time a teacher said something harmful or that didn't make sense, Adrienne would question it. Eventually, she got in so much trouble that she was kicked out of school in ninth grade. Her mom made a deal with the school: they only let Adrienne back in after spanking her with a wooden paddle. After that, she didn't stay much longer, and ended up transferring to a Native American boarding school run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

[MUSIC]

BS: It was at this new school that Adrienne finally found supportive mentors who were also Native. It was also where she began to understand the brutal history of these types of schools.

[CHILDREN SINGING]: "One little, two little, three little Indians, four little, five little, six little Indians, seven little, eight little, nine little Indians, ten little Indian boys."

BS: "One little, two little, three little Indians." Yep, the song is referring to the number of dead Native people displaced from their land. Those are Native kids, in boarding school, singing that song. In the United States, Native American boarding schools have an awful history of assimilating Native kids to white culture.

[ARCHIVAL] "The government schools are constantly being built and hospitals added. We bring them in, clean them up, and start them on their way to civilization."

BS: That's a boarding school official speaking in the 1800s. Starting in 1869, boarding schools forcibly took Native kids from their families. They moved kids hundreds of miles away from home to quote-unquote "Christianize" or "civilize" them. They forced kids to cut their hair, wear western uniforms, and change their names to English names. They weren't even allowed to speak their Native languages.

[ARCHIVAL] "Yet, through the agencies of the government, they are being rapidly brought from their comparative state of savagery and barbarism to one of civilization."

BS: In 1891, the commissioner of Indian Affairs said that "it's cheaper to educate Indians than to kill them." Yep: He considered assimilation to be cheaper than slaughter. Today, many of these schools are closed thanks to Indigenous activism during the civil rights movement. The schools that do still exist are mostly run by Native people. Adrienne went to one of these boarding schools. Her school was funded and run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, but the school administration itself was mostly staffed by Native people. This meant that her experience was way different from that of generations of Native kids before her.

AC: So the boarding school I went to, was really helpful in helping to get me through school, because for the first time, I was around 100% Natives. And they were all there for similar reasons as me. The reservation life can be bleak, and it can be downright depressing. And if you can't see past that reservation line, then it can be almost hopeless. So I credit the government for helping get me through school, which is ironic, because now, like, I have all these criticisms.

BS: Now, at a supportive school, she wasn't constantly in trouble. She was just a normal kid, and a good student.

AC: I went back to a straight A student, I joined all the clubs, I got really involved. And it was a great experience. That was not the case at public school for me. Public school was very much "sit down, shut up, do what you're told," and I honestly don't think I would have made it, because there were no mentors.

BS: The most important part of this new school was that her teachers were also Native.

AC: I had teachers that were Native who weren't trying to get the native out of me, they were actively embracing their Nativeness, so I saw teachers who weren't intimidated by my mouth, they were not intimidated by me at all, actually.

[MUSIC]

BS: So Native boarding school helped Adrienne understand her identity and create a more structured life path for herself. Finally, she was thriving, and she started making goals for her future.

AC: And one was make, make it to eighteen without getting pregnant, and then graduate high school, and then go to college, and all those things happened but not, of course, without a lot of struggle.

BS: Eventually, Adrienne made it to college in Colorado. There, she realized that what she *had* seen as her weakness--that heckling personality that got her into trouble in school--was actually her biggest asset.

AC: By then I had learned how to kind of control my mouth where I wasn't getting in trouble anymore. It was starting to turn into an empowering tool.

BS: One night, a friend held an open mic on campus. Adrienne had always had a big mouth, so she thought, why not try it out? She had a little bit of stage fright, but it was worth it. She loved performing too much to care.

AC: It was just so much fun. So once I tried it once, it was like a drug. I just like I had to keep doing it. it's almost like you're chasing after that natural high of the first time again and again. And so I just kept doing it.

BS: And performing comedy wasn't just addictive. It was empowering.

AC: If I didn't have comedy, I would definitely be pouring blood on a statue somewhere right now. Like, I would be like, destroying stuff. I don't know. I just think I've taken that energy and that angst of like, having a lot of criticisms towards society, and bottled it into like, a package that was consumable, instead of pushing people away from me.

BS: Adrienne followed this natural high: she started doing some open mics, got a great response, and fell in love with it. Eventually, she started performing all over the country - and she got that gig opening for Michelle Obama.

AC: I would have never imagined that I would be in New York City just like doing whatever I wanted, because I wanted to.

B: After the break: how Adrienne began to use her humor to heal.

[MUSIC]

[ADVERTISEMENT]

BS: So for these ad series, we're doing some small business highlights. I brought my friends Brittany and Cristian into the studio to tell us about Nosebest Candles. Cristian, what makes Nosebest different from other candle companies?

Cristian Luca: Yeah, so Nosebest is a cheeky candle company that creates enchanting fragrance blends for sophisticated seekers. And so we've accomplished that through candles like Bitch Goddess, which is a lemon verbena cactus flower, and Big Spoon, which is a lavender white sage. And I think they're pretty badass candles.

Brittany Furnari: And we also have so much more to offer than just our amazing scents. Each candle has a Spotify playlist on the bottom, and it's curated to be the mood and vibe for that candle. And then also, this year we are also going to be promoting cocktail lists that go along with the scents and the taste so you can have an all in experience with Nosebest.

BS: And you can buy Nosebest candles online at www.nosebestcandles.com right?

BF: Yes.

CL: Yes, that is where we are at.

BS: And also, if you use the code PEOPLE, you'll get two candles for \$35.

CL: And then when you get that candle, all you have to do is burn at your own enjoyment. It's gonna be real good.

BS: Now, back to Adrienne. Here's a skit she performed in California to a mostly Native audience.

AC: I'm Kiowa-Apache, on my Dad's side, from Oklahoma.

[AUDIENCE CHEERS]

AC: Thank you, that's about right, yeah. And on my Mom's side, she actually comes from a very rich heritage as well, she's, she's, she's white, so, trying to get to know her culture too.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

AC: It is, it's weird, because like around Thanksgiving time, you know I always get conflicted, what am I, "am I Pilgrim, am I Indian?" I'm over there thanking and giving, catchin' diseases and givin' them, you know?

BS: Performing comedy has allowed Adrienne to channel that same energy that got her spanked in high school to get her audiences to belly laugh now. She's also becoming the role model that she didn't have until late in high school.

AC: I think that we are all in Indian Country healing. Like, we're all actively healing. Some people are further along in their healing journey than others, but we're definitely healing. And, um, part of that healing has to do with confronting the damage and trauma that has happened to us over, you know, the last 400 years, to our bodies, to our sexualities. And especially as native women, our bodies have been just literally stolen and raped, and then our stories have been replaced, and erased. And so I think as a result, my generation doesn't hear about strong and powerful Indigenous women.

[MUSIC]

BS: So *how is* Adrienne's comedy helping her community process all this damage and trauma? How is her humor helping her community heal? I asked one of her audience members.

Ginger Martin: I am from the Gila River Indian community representing the Pima tribe, also known as Akimel O'otham.

BS: That's Ginger Sunbird Martin. She hasn't met Adrienne, but she loves watching Native comedians like Adrienne perform.

GM: comedy definitely allows us to reclaim our stories and we get to tell our story, we get to author it, and we get to tell our version. And that's so important than somebody else telling it. And you'll find most of the comedians in Indian country have had some sort of trauma in their life. You know, growing up in Indian Country, it can be very traumatic for many, especially during certain generations.

And so I think those ladies of comedy really do a great job at taking something that was so horrific and making it funny.

BS: Ladies of Native Comedy, by the way, is one of the comedy groups that Adrienne is a part of. So Adrienne's comedy is really important to her community, but it's not just Native comics that are important. When I discussed this with Trisha, she said that she related to Adrienne's comedy in a different way.

[MUSIC]

BS: I've been having so much fun in the studio. I feel like with this episode, I just get to laugh a lot.

TM: Yeah, I agree, Adrienne's so funny.

BS: So what have you been thinking of her comedy?

TM: I mean, I love Adrienne's comedy. I think part of the reason is because it reminds me of my own family and our love for comedy. And it wasn't something that we always had. My parents immigrated to the US from India and a few years ago my family discovered South Asian comedians and we just got so quickly obsessed with them. Like over dinner, we would watch Hasan Minhaj or Russell Peters and all these other South Asian comedians. And I don't think my parents really see it from this lens because they just analyze it a little bit less. But I think for them, they had to struggle so much to make it in this country, and to hear those same difficult experiences told back to them in a funny way, and laughing at it with their kids was just really nice for them.

BS: Right, yeah. I think that in the media a lot of groups like immigrants and Native people are portrayed as, sort of, victims. But when I listen to Adrienne's comedy, I think it's clear that the experience is a lot more than just that.

TM: Yeah, exactly. I think there are a lot of difficult parts of being an immigrant or being a Native person in the US, but there's also a lot of joy. It's an experience of both difficulty and of joy, and I think what Adrienne's comedy does is fuse those two together and show that you can create community in the process.

[MUSIC]

BS: And to top it all off, comedy can help us understand each other. Help us communicate through difference. Adrienne thinks that's one of the best parts of performing.

AC: When you make someone laugh, essentially, when they laugh, whether they agree with you or not, they are relating. They're like, I get it. I get you. I understand you.

[MUSIC]

BS: Alright, so Adrienne's pretty amazing. I mean, opening for Michelle Obama? One can only dream. None of these accomplishments have come easily, though. Adrienne is the first person in her family to own a home, and making sure her kids have stable housing has been limiting in an industry where it's normal to pick up and move across the country to a big city. It's also hard to build her brand with a last name that a lot of people don't make the effort to pronounce right.

AC: And I've had people say, "Well, why don't you just change your name?" And I'm like, "because I'm tired of changing for this country." And I feel like my people have done enough assimilating. It's not gonna hurt Americans to assimilate to me a little bit, say my name.

BS: Adrienne's comedy helps her talk about hard things. And, it got me thinking about something that's hard for me to talk about. Comedy seems to work for Adrienne, so I wanted to give it a shot myself. I decided to go on stage and make jokes to strangers about something I haven't told many people. Something I really don't like to talk about.

[COMEDIAN PERFORMING SKIT]

BS: So, on a rainy Tuesday night, I rode my bike down to an open mic at a cafe on the lower East side of Manhattan. When I got there, a little part of me hoped that maybe this open mic would be cancelled because of the rain - I'd been so nervous and putting this thing off for two weeks. But I had no such luck.

BS: I'm so nervous, this was like such a horrible idea. I'm not a comedian, I'm not Adrienne. This is outrageous.

BS: Trisha brought me a strong drink, I regretted ever having this crazy idea, and then I headed up to the stage.

*Announcer: But now, please come to the stage, Benjamin Swift.
Benjamin Swift, yeah!!*

[CHEERING]

BS: Yeah, thank you!

BS: Alright, hello NYC let's make some noise!

[CLAPPING]

BS: Oh my gosh, that was actually some noise!

BS: When I came out to my parents I had to think about how to do it for a really long time, cuz I was like...

BS: And I did this rambling skit about how I came out to my parents by writing a message on a block of wood.

BS: And my plan was to paint it with, like, watercolors and rainbows and... and all of that was great, except I almost, like, chopped off my hand off in the process. I was just so angsty and nervous, and it was... anyways, I gave it to my parents, we had our moment, it was great, it was cute...

BS: This story brings back a lot of anxiety, and it's still something I still haven't told some of my close friends. I mean, listening back to this still makes my heart palpitate and my palms sweat. Then, I rambled on about some other stuff, doing my very best to get at least a few laughs. I'll be generous and say, my attempts were met with... varying levels of success.

BS: ...I moved to New York City to pursue my professional career as a comedian

[CHEERS]

BS: That was a joke.

BS: The tagline of that night's open mic was "bombing builds character." I built a lot of character in that five minutes.

B: Um, all right, that's all for me tonight.

[CHEERS]

BS: After I performed, Trisha and I left and talked over a slice of pie.

TM: Did it feel good?

BS: Yeah, I guess so. It feels good to just talk about it openly and make jokes about it with complete strangers. Because it's like only the type of thing I'd normally tell to someone who I really trust and even then it's like a big step to take kind of.

TM: Did it feel good that, like, strangers were nice about it and non-judgemental about it, and laughed?

BS: Yeah... and the fact that people laughed about it and like seemed to enjoy it was really nice, and made it feel like it doesn't have to be someone that I really deeply trust that I'm telling about this thing, because anyone can relate to these things, even if they feel so inner just to my own life experience.

BS: So where does that leave us? I don't know. That skit was scary, and I don't know if it'll make it easier for me to talk about hard things going forward. I guess we'll see. But I do know that Adrienne is onto something with her comedy - she's definitely more than I was onto something with my first skit. Because if you're ever gonna deal with something hard, you might as well laugh a little along the way.

[MUSIC]

[MUSIC: "Still Can't Get Rite," The Southern Boyz]

TM: And now for our credits.

BS: This podcast was created on Lenape land in New York. The music you hear now is by the Southern Boyz, a drum group from the Great Plains of Oklahoma that Adrienne recommended to us.

TM: Andrew Dewey composed our theme music.

BS: Otis Gray gave us feedback as our editorial advisor and mentor.

TM: Jessie Sheldon designed our cover art, and Nik Bluebird Lane designed our episode art.

BS: Naina Durga designed our website, and Metzli Nieves administered our social media.

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TM: I'm Trisha Mukherjee.

BS: I'm Benjamin Swift.

TM: And thank you for listening to People Place Power. If you liked what you heard today, be sure to follow and rate the show. You can also follow us on Instagram @peopleplacepower and email us your thoughts at hello@peopleplacepower.com. See you in two weeks with our next episode.