



Empowerment Through Storytelling: A Talk with Aaron Wolf

Lauren Clouser:

Welcome to The LDA podcast, a series by the Learning Disabilities Association of America. Our podcast is dedicated to exploring topics of interest to educators, individuals with learning disabilities, parents, and professionals to work towards our goal of creating a more equitable world. Hi, everyone. Welcome to the LDA podcast. I'm here today with Aaron Wolf. Aaron Wolf is a neurodiversity advocate, an actor, director, media host, and a cofounder of the film production company Howling Wolf Productions. And also very exciting, Aaron is the founder of I Am Able, a nonprofit dedicated to neurodiversity awareness, which I can't wait to talk about. So, Aaron, thank you so much for being here.

Aaron Wolf:

Thank you for having me, Lauren. It's great to be talking about all things creative and all things also neurodiverse because this is an ever changing world in the neurodiversity world.

Lauren Clouser:

Yeah. Well, to start off, could you tell us a little bit about yourself? And, also, I just wanna go over some of the impressive highlights that Howling Wolf Productions has done and and just your career highlights too. You've done a lot of impressive work.

Aaron Wolf:

Thank you. I feel very honored and excited for what we're doing, what we've done, and what we continue to do, both with the production company and with Howling Wolf Productions and being able to work in the creative space and in film and TV and to be making things from horror movies, to documentaries to TV shows, to talk shows to like, all the different stuff that we've gotten to do and I've gotten to do is all the stuff that I've dreamt of doing my whole life. So to be able to be doing what I've always wanted to do is incredible and also to be neurodiverse. I quickly thought when I started getting hired to do the work that I love to do, I really wanna be an advocate for other neurodiverse people because everyone should get a chance to be able to rise above the education system in some of the places where we're told no. We're told no. We can't. No. We're not going to.

No. It's not gonna happen for us. Or you're different. You're disabled. You have something wrong with you. And I'm like, no. No. No.

No. We do not. We do not have something wrong with us. We are all able. So then I thought of this concept of I am able, the I Am Able Foundation because all of us, whether you're

neurodiverse, not neurodiverse, in the middle, you're not sure, I don't care who you are. We are all able to do wonderful things in our journey. And I hate the idea that some people are discounted more than others when we all should be lifted up.

Lauren Clouser:

Absolutely. Well, that's a great message. A lot of the people that we've had on the show have had similar experiences of either hearing that there's a ceiling or a limit to what they're able to achieve because they have a learning disability or because they're neurodiverse. And LDA and I Am Able are both working to crash that ceiling for other people to let them know that somebody with LD is capable of achieving anything. So, Aaron, you're a great example of this.

Aaron Wolf:

Yeah. That's what I Am Able, what I wanted to do is combine the media space with the neurodiverse space because I think there's no better way to communicate messages of possibility, hope, and what people can do than by showing it through media. And so if you go to lamablefoundation.org or see the things we do, it's all through telling stories and showing what people can do and getting people together who are neurodiverse and non neurodiverse to talk about these things and talk about different ways we learn because I don't believe any one way is better than another way. It's just different skill sets and different ways that people come at the world and their creativity or their work or their life.

Lauren Clouser:

Yeah. Well and could you tell us a little bit more about your experience with neurodiversity? How did it impact you growing up, and how does it still impact you today?

Aaron Wolf:

It's fascinating. Growing up neurodiverse in school, school was never my cup of tea. In starting in second grade, I had a chair outside the classroom called the Aaron chair because I was kind of a class clown. I couldn't pay attention for long. And so the teacher would always say, Aaron, out. Go to your Aaron chair. And so I'd be in the hallway by myself, which was a lonely place to be. And I've thought of how many people might have that Aaron chair, either literally or figuratively, when they're going through the school system and in their own education.

And I've just thought, man, we've gotta stop having Aaron chairs, and we have to start having inclusive rooms for all people. So that my journey became a lot about, okay, how do I conform and how do I become a part of how I'm supposed to be versus being an individual. What was weird is once I went into college and ended up at the NYU Tisch School for Film and Acting, which was a fascinating experience because then all of a sudden, there and beyond, and then afterwards, it was all about being an individual. It was about how much of an individual can you be. So that became, Lauren, very quickly, very confusing to me. But then I quickly thought, okay. I think there's something going on here. I think there's a message.

Because why was I being told I have to go out of the classroom and go to the Aaron chair, and I

didn't fit in in this school system? But then now I'm being told the more of an individual you are and the more you come up with and create new ideas, the better you're gonna do. So then I thought, well, maybe we need to start promoting people's differences as positive and not be telling people if you're different, it's wrong or you're bad. And so that's how, yeah. I think that's a sort of long winded, medium winded answer to part of my journey, and there's lots of specifics. But also there were a bunch of times during high school, middle school where I would try to do things differently and then, you know, get shot down, get shunned for it. But then when I was making some films, doing some acting, then there were certain things where okay. But that's okay. You did that well.

And then, I guess, one time when it really worked being different was actually to get into college, as we all know, you have to write, like, an essay or some sort of thing, and I, like, hate writing essays. Hate it. I haven't done one in a while. And so to get into NYU, there was this old show that I watched as a kid called Inside the Actor's Studio. And it was about, like, this guy would interview, James Lipton was his name, and he'd interview these people who'd had long successful careers in the entertainment industry. So instead of writing an essay to get into NYU, I was like, you know what I'm gonna do? I'm gonna Photoshop a picture of me on that show with this guy and with that picture on the front. And then I'm gonna do an interview as though he's interviewing me with some of the things that I hope to accomplish in my career as though I've already done them. So that's the essay I did because I was like, I'm not an essay guy, but I could do something and wanna do something creative.

And I thought this is probably gonna totally fail. Like, I was like, sure. This is probably the stupidest thing in the world, but at least it's showing that it's me. It's who I am. And it worked. I got in. And it, like, it ended up being a great thing. So that was, also confirming that maybe trying things be because they ring true to who you are, not because a system maybe is telling you this is how you have to be.

Maybe that's the way to go going forward.

Lauren Clouser:

Yeah. I I really like what you said about how the different environments that you were in, you were either, quote, unquote, approved of or unapproved of. Your differences were allowed to shine or you were punished for them. So I think a lot of that is just it depends on the system. It's not the individual at fault. I mean, it's just whatever systems you're able to thrive in or what systems you can't. So I think that was a really interesting point to bring up.

Aaron Wolf:

Exactly. And we need more of that, and we continue to need more of that. And every time I feel there's a bunch of steps going forward, then there's a lot of steps going backward. And so a lot of the work that we're doing with I Am Able Foundation in particular is about really showing and highlighting those wonderful stories and strengths and, and people who are difference makers who have also gone through the system thinking totally differently and learning totally differently

than how they're being told they're supposed to be.

Lauren Clouser:

Right. Well, and I wanted to ask on this basis of, finding strength and finding an area that's allowed to celebrate your differences. What led you to discover your strength and creativity?

Aaron Wolf:

That's just who I've always been. So it wasn't really like some people, everyone has different strengths. For me, as a little kid, like, playing in the playground, but I was, you know, like, making as though I was on a in a movie, like, on an adventure, being, like, I don't know, Indiana Jones or, like, I'm on you know, you're, like, these superhero like, I was just always thinking that's just how my brain works. So it wasn't as much as this let me try to figure out what I'm gonna do. It's more just this is who I am. And then when I started to realize, alright, this is who I am, okay, what falls into this, what are the things I'm interested in? What falls into this category? What are the things that I like to do? And I quickly realized that certain things like science for me, I'm amazed at scientists. I'm amazed at people who are great at science. I quickly realized this was not something that was a strength for me.

But then things in the creative field, visual and then I started to realize, it took a while, but I realized I'm a visual learner and thinker. So I visualize everything. And I see things. Like, I won't maybe won't remember the name of a place, but I'll remember where everything is and what it all looked like. And so then I can kinda create. I can think of like, for a movie, I can kind of envision what the movie will look like and what the scenes will look like, and who will be where, and what it'll all look like before we even start, like, before we've even begun anything. I see it in my head. And so while that's not in the school system may be thought of or talked about as a talent, I at least think it's something that I can do.

So let me at least try to do it by playing around with the camera and making stuff.

Lauren Clouser:

Yeah. So it sounds like a really natural process for you to just like, you never really had to discover it. It was just kind of a next natural step.

Aaron Wolf:

Next natural step, but it's also always learning, and I'm constantly learning. So to say that I you know, then it was, alright. Let me try to teach myself how to edit, and then let me teach myself how to use a camera and ask for help too. Like, I'd say to my dad, like, alright. How does this work? What does this, how do you do this? I mean, it was his camera. So I was like, how does this work? And stuff like that. So and then from there, it's always learning.

Every day is a new learning experience. There's always something new. And another big thing I learned early, a learning curve of how important it is for collaboration. I believe that collaboration should be a class that's taught in school where you have to collaborate with others. And in the

film world and in the film industry, when you're making something, it's all about collaboration. And it's all about knowing what you're good at and also knowing, even more importantly, what you're not good at so other people can lift you up so that your strengths can shine that much more.

Lauren Clouser:

Definitely. Well, I wanted to switch gears a little bit to talk a little bit more about I Am Able. So it's a great organization that has some empowerment groups for neurodiverse learners. You have some awareness campaigns going on. If I'm missing anything, Maybe you can tell us in your own words some of the great things that I Am Able is doing. But I wanted to ask too, how does your own experience shape how you built I Am Able?

Aaron Wolf:

So I'll start with that, and then I can talk a little about what we were doing. I Am Able I started before I Am Able even came about. I gave some speeches and talks about learning differently, thinking differently, being neurodiverse, and doing what I do. And I just realized how many people I feel aren't getting lifted up and getting told that they are able. And so then we toyed with some of this stuff, before COVID, but then during COVID, I really saw it as a problem. And, like, I remember I've given a couple, like, speeches, commencement speeches or, like, speeches to different schools or classes, and I started giving them on Zoom in, at the beginning of COVID. And I just was like, oh my goodness.

If I was a student during COVID and I'm learning on Zoom, like, forget about it. It's hard enough in the classroom, but really forget about it. Like, this is just so hard to connect to anything. And it was that much harder. So I just thought it's that much more important to try to do something about it. We have our production company, Howling Wolf Productions, so we're constantly making stuff. So how can we transition those talents and also do stuff to give back and help others? So then I thought and also I thought, like, what's the easiest way to empower people in the fewest letters? Because a lot of people who we're trying to empower, maybe they're not great readers. Maybe certain things aren't their strengths.

So what are the fewest letters to empower people? Well, I am able. That feels good, and that's seven letters. And it's small words. So anyone can see it, and maybe if they post it or hashtag it or put it on their feed, they can feel empowered and maybe empower other people as to why they feel they're able and what they feel they're able and good at. And then it developed into some of the media campaigns we've done. We've done something called We All Learn Differently, which has gone into schools. And, you can see there's a link on the I Am Able Foundation website. But that's all about we took a bunch of, I think, seventh graders who have learning differences and really highlighted what their talents are.

And then we have a playbook that goes with that and all this other stuff that can go into a school, people who have learning disabilities and people who don't have learning disabilities can engage in conversation so that everyone can try to understand one another. And that also led to

doing, or before that, we also were doing empowerment groups, which are where groups come together in all kinds of settings, whether it's the school, whether it's high school, middle school, college, the work environment, who learn differently, and talk about their struggles, but also what they're succeeding at. And it gives people communities so that they know they're not alone because too many people who learn and think differently than how society tells us to think, I think feel alone. I know I've felt alone in the past at times. Still do sometimes, honestly. I still do sometimes feel alone because there are different ways I think than others. And when you're in a situation where people aren't understanding you or understanding me, it can be frustrating. And so we're doing that.

And then another thing we're doing is We All Work Differently. So if you see, there's a pattern here. It's like everything grows on one another, which is, a new thing where you're gonna be seeing more about it soon, which is about in the workplace. How you might be sitting next to someone at your company, corporation, wherever you may work, who has never told a soul about their struggles, about learning differently, yet they're your workmate. So, to me, it's like it goes to every facet of life.

Lauren Clouser:

Right. I mean, your neurodiversity follows you throughout life. So it's so cool that you have this broken down into different stages that you can just kinda keep going to whatever stage of life you're at at that time. That's really exciting, and we'll definitely be looking forward to the work empowerment group.

Aaron Wolf:

And, honestly, Lauren, a dream of mine is that we get to a point where everyone is just empowering one another. And our system to me is so backwards in how it's designed for this median group of people and learners based on a system that people designed, like, a hundred or a hundred and fifty years ago? Like, what else in society works like that? But for some reason, our education system works like that. It just doesn't make any logical sense to me. And I look forward to the day when people who learn differently, it's just, oh, cool. You learn differently. Like, if anything prop you up because most of the people, many of the people who learn differently and think differently are neurodiverse, if they can get through the system

Yeah. Become some of the foremost leaders in our society, from Albert Einstein to Steve Jobs to Steven Spielberg, all these different people who are neurodiverse, they got through. We also have a problem where 70% of the prison population is neurodiverse. So a lot of people don't get through. And I don't think it's the neurodiversity causing it. I think it's society.

Lauren Clouser:

Yeah.

Aaron Wolf:

Yeah. We have a lot of work to do still, and we're also people, like LDA and I Am Able. We're

doing some of the lifting to make sure that everyone gets empowered.

Lauren Clouser:

Would you be able to tell us about the power of sharing stories about neurodiverse experiences? That's something you've done both in Howling Wolf Productions, and with I Am Able. What is the power in people who are neurodiverse sharing their lived experiences?

Aaron Wolf:

So sharing the lived experiences to me is empowering to both the person telling the story and the person listening to the story. And I didn't realize this for a while. I was ashamed to talk about my neurodiverse life and world. I didn't wanna talk about it. And then maybe in college, I started to write, like I started to make some films about it. They were funny. They were comedies, because it is funny how neurodiverse people and not neurodiverse people for that matter, but we're talking about neurodiverse people make mistakes, spell things backwards, do things that are funny, but then also have these talents. So then sharing those experiences, laughing about it, but in a positive manner because also highlighting the positive positive aspects of it, I think is a very honest approach to life and to ourselves so that we don't say that we're good at some things and not good at some things.

So then sharing these lived experiences and empowering other people to do the same only makes other people then feel empowered to do it back. And I'll give an example. In our We All Work Differently campaign, there's one guy, and this is not even out yet, but it will be, named Don Hahn, who's a huge Hollywood Producer. He's produced The Lion King and Maleficent and, Hunchback of Notre Dame, and the list is huge. Don, I don't know his age exactly, but, again, he's done all this stuff. And only about a year ago, he started to wanna investigate. He knew something was different about him, and he wanted to go investigate it. I'm talking to him.

I've known him for a bit. We kind of collaborate. It's like anyway, we've just known each other for a while, and I was talking about what we're doing with I Am Able. And he's like, you know, the last year, I realized I have learning differences in the last year. So this guy's already done everything possible in this industry, and he's just now realizing it. So now with We All Work Differently, he shared his story. We've filmed it. It hasn't come out yet.

But he shared his story. And I can only imagine, and I hope, that when people hear, they think of this guy who has made all these huge movies. And now they're seeing, wow. In the last year, he realized he's also had all these struggles throughout this and had to fight against them. And I'm not gonna tell his story for him, but fighting against them to get all this stuff done that he's done and all the creativity and organizing and running, you know, sets of hundreds and all kinds of stuff like that. So that's an example to me of a real unique one where it's someone who didn't even find out about it or realize it until recently, and now he's sharing his story through what we're doing. And, hopefully, that empowers people to say, like, look. If he can, I can.

Lauren Clouser:

Yeah.

Aaron Wolf:

And, damn, he didn't even realize it until, he's already you know, he's been in this industry, I think, for, I think, like, forty years.

Lauren Clouser:

Wow. That's so impressive. Well, I'm excited for that to come out.

Aaron Wolf:

So I think you're talking about sharing stories. I just think it's scary. I call it coming out of the closet with your learning difference, because it's scary at times because it's vulnerable. And it's scary to be vulnerable. It can be scary to be vulnerable. But once you do it, it can feel really good. And, also, it makes people understand me, understand you, understand the people who learn differently, who think differently.

And then it's amazing what they end up saying to you because you've been vulnerable, and then they might say something about something they struggle with or something they're proud of that they did in spite of. And that's a great feeling too.

Lauren Clouser:

I like what you said about it being empowering for both sides. That's a really good point. So just to wrap up here, I wanted to ask if there was anything coming down the pipeline, for Howling Wolf Productions that you're able to talk about or for I am Able? I know we discussed We All Work Differently. Is there anything that we should be keeping our eye on?

Aaron Wolf:

I do a podcast too that I think is, could be, very fun called The Hopeless Show. We've been doing it for about five years. So if you look up The Hopeless Show on any podcast app and sometimes we talk about neurodiversity we talk about every kind of subject possible. It's about bringing hope to all things hopeless. So a lot of people feel a lack of hope these days, and so we try to find the funny side and the hopeful side. And so we're doing that. Going to film in Brazil in a couple months, so that project will be cool when that comes out. And then, yeah, just really follow along.

Like, if you just follow my socials, if you're interested, I'm @theAaronWolf on all socials. With Howling Wolf Productions. And I Am Able is iamablefoundation.org. With Howling Wolf Productions, it's story first. It's all about telling stories. I feel that that is the most important thing with creativity, whatever you might be doing. Telling a good story that people can relate to is the most important, and it's what we always strive to do and what we're gonna continue to be doing in our coming projects that I'm really excited about. There's one thing we're doing with a bunch of these Imagineers who create the rides for Disney.

So I'll if you're interested in that, there's gonna be more coming out about that, very soon.

Lauren Clouser:

Wow. That sounds really interesting. That's fantastic. Well, before I let you go, I just wanted to ask, is there anything that I didn't bring up that you wanted to talk about?

Aaron Wolf:

You know, I just think, you said something very important that I want to reiterate, is you said that going forward, it's gonna be the people like LDA, like I Am Able, the people like Lauren, the people like me, the people like anyone listening who's interested in this subject or in these topics or in progress in education, progress in the workplace, progress in all kinds of things related to neurodiversity. It's gonna be us. We collectively, not just you and me talking, but we collectively are the leaders, and we're gonna be the difference makers going forward. And so in 2025, it's more important than ever to continue to know that we are the leaders in this topic and subject and thing that we find so important. And if you want your voice heard or feel it should be heard, there are places for it, like I Am Able, like LDA, and so many others, and you are not alone. And even though some of these systems might be getting a little weird coming up, there are people doing things outside of the system to make sure that you feel included and you feel like you are not screwed or alone, whether you're a parent or a student or whatever you might be.

Lauren Clouser:

Yeah. I think that's such a great note to wrap up on and such a hopeful one too. So Aaron, thank you so much for being on the show. I really appreciated getting to hear your story, and for you sharing all the great work that I Am Able is doing.

Aaron Wolf:

Thank you so much for having me, and look forward to more, more to come.

Lauren Clouser:

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