

PODCAST Episode 347

 Tue, Aug 22, 2023 9:53AM  1:10:55


SUMMARY KEYWORDS

blind, people, mario, called, assistive technology, music, worked, milk, find, learn, listen, play, glee, auditioned, chocolate, put, r&b, braille, grandmother, accessibility


SPEAKERS


Lis Malone, Steve Barclay, Ryan Fleury, Mario Bonds, Rob Mineault


 **Rob Mineault** 00:24
Hey and welcome to another episode of AT Banter.

 **Steve Barclay** 00:29
Banter, banter.

 **Rob Mineault** 00:31
The sweet sound of that banter, banter. Hey, this is of course the podcast where we talk with advocates and members of the disability community to educate and inspire better conversation about disability. Hey, my name is Rob Mineault. And joining us today, Mr. Steve Barclay.

 **Steve Barclay** 00:50
Sponsored by Domino's. no I'm not it's just a it's just a dream.

 **Rob Mineault** 00:55
Just the tree Well listen, we may have a new show sponsor but we'll tell you about that later. Hey, also here is is Mr. Ryan Fleury.

 **Ryan Fleury** 01:04
Hey everyone.



Rob Mineault 01:07

And of course the lovely the talented, she didn't pay me to say that, Miss Lis Malone.



Lis Malone 01:15

I don't believe them when they say that Cauliflower Crust is only made of cauliflower. I just want to point that out. Yeah, that's my big spoiler for this week for the next topic for next month.



Ryan Fleury 01:28

That's that's a little bit scandalous. Like Subway saying there is tuna in their subs.



Rob Mineault 01:34

there isn't? Well, we ever have a Cauliflower Crust Pizza



Lis Malone 01:40

drops like I'm a descendant of Hansel and Gretel. So never



Steve Barclay 01:48

my people died for gingerbread house. That's true.



Rob Mineault 01:52

That's true. Ah, hey, so yeah, Steve. So you've been away for a few weeks. You've been on out on vacation. How's that been going?



Steve Barclay 02:00

It's been going great. I was over in beautiful Ecluelet British Columbia, spell that if you can. And spent the last two weeks going out every day and fishing for salmon, halibut and whatever else we could find. And I now have a freezer full of fish and I'm very happy. Yeah.



Rob Mineault 02:21

Wow. Yeah.

S

Steve Barclay 02:23

I'm here for another couple of days and then I pack up and head off on family camping trip for another week in beautiful Golden Ears British Columbia, where it is just outside of cell range. It's very relaxing when nobody can get you.

R

Rob Mineault 02:45

Isn't it weird now that because everywhere you go like there's there's obviously a you know, fire bans everywhere. So you can't really have a campfire. Is kind of weird to camp and not be able to have a campfire? Well, we've got one of those propane rings, you know, the campfire rings. So we take that out with us. We're always prepared for there being a fire ban. It does good enough. The only thing you don't want to do on those things is probably roast your marshmallows. You're doing it directly overtop of fossil fuels. Oh, see, I would totally have done that. Yeah.

S

Steve Barclay 03:18

I'm sure you can do it five, six times before you get cancer.

R

Rob Mineault 03:22

Great, perfect. This is why my people were not long lived. Hey, so does anybody want to apologize to the audience for last week's episode?

R

Ryan Fleury 03:41

No. It was awesome. It was fantastic. I listened to it a second time and still blew Malk out of my nose. It was hilarious. Hilarious. Everybody go and listen to it now.

R

Rob Mineault 03:55

Okay, well, whatever. Well, we have one fan.

R

Ryan Fleury 03:58


Absolutely.


R


Rob Mineault 03:59


One fan. We doubled our downloads because you've listened to it twice.


 **Ryan Fleury** 04:05
Our analytics are off the charts. It's rare that I laugh that hard.


 **Steve Barclay** 04:11
I gotta listen to this thing.


 **Rob Mineault** 04:13
We're gonna triple our downloads now. All right, enough nonsense. Hey, let's find out what the heck we're doing today. Hey, Ryan.


 **Ryan Fleury** 04:37
Yeah, Rob?

 **Rob Mineault** 04:38
What the heck are we doing today?

 **Ryan Fleury** 04:40
Today we are joined by singers, songwriter, author, motivational speaker and father Mario Bonds from mabspeaks.com. Welcome Mario.

 **Mario Bonds** 04:51
Thank you. Thank you for the invite and thank you for the welcome.

 **Ryan Fleury** 04:55
Glad to have you.

 **Rob Mineault** 04:57
Yeah, we are very excited to have you. Where to start? You are a man of many talents, sir. But maybe we can just start with giving us just a brief bit of background about yourself. and we'll start from there.

Sounds good. Well, yeah, I am Mario Bonds I am a jack of all trades, if you will, or you could say that I am a man of many personalities. I am totally blind having have gone totally blind by the age of nine. So I was born with a very rare eye disease called Morning Glory Syndrome. And I have a rare form of it in the sense that I have it in both eyes. So I went blind in my right eye when I was age five. And for four years, I had my left eye as my best friend. And everyone was on the the project, as I call it, to "prepare Mario for total blindness because total blindness is inevitable". Morning Glory Syndrome deteriorates the optic nerve and attaches the retinas. And there's, they really didn't know what they were doing in the 90s. You know with me being a 90s baby. And so, long story short, after several failed surgeries, I was left totally blind at the age of nine. And with that followed three years of a lot of rebellion because I was convinced in my world that all these sighted people that decided called right those who are left in it, were responsible for me being blind. There's no real humble way for a kid to, you know, lose the ability to do what we would call typical rites of passage, like I was used to riding bikes and playing video games and you know, watching The Simpsons and pretending I was the Green Power Ranger, much to my grandmother's chagrin, I went to the hospital a few times for doing that, honestly. But from age 9 to age 12, I hated school, I hated everything. I hated Braille, I hated pains, I hated anything that had to do with with, you know, being blind. I would still will myself to see, at least I thought that's what I was doing until I would end up having a lot of injuries or falling over desk, etc. And then at some point, there were some teachers who in Fairfax County, Virginia turned my life around and you know, showed me that, you know, my family's destitution and the abusive turbulence I had at home and being totally blind, etc. were not excuses to fail. They were handing me survival tools, and then I should grab on to them if I was ever going to be an independent human being. One day I quickly discovered the technology was a language I understood. And I fell in love with it with it. Fell in love with education, right? And so much so that you know, you go from being a kid that's rebellious and doesn't want to do anything from being blind to learning assistive technology, and then the school system using you to teach other blind kids how to use assistive technology with no paycheck. I need to get some retroactive pay from Fairfax County. But with that being said, I made it to high school, I went to George Mason University and received a degree in Journalism and worked for the US government for a bit before being able to fall into what was my second love. I believe music has healing powers, and I fell into music was casted for a reality show called The Glee Project. And after that, I was signed by the American Program Bureau as a motivational speaker. It was a very humbling experience because you guys are under understand this as a blind person. I hardly ever see Braille these days because all the devices talk and becoming a motivational speaker, I remember my first event was with Gulfstream Aerospace, and they make business jets. And then they said, we have a student leadership program for at risk youth and we'd like for you to come and talk to 600 high schoolers about how they should hold on and at 24/25 years old, I had, you know, I was nervous, right, because I didn't I didn't see Braille that often. So to be able to read Braille and sound extemporaneous and deliver a message and let alone you know, keep 600 high school students interested in what you're talking about was it was a difficult experience. But I bring this up to say the following. I believe there should be purpose and all we do. After that event, a 16 year old boy came up to me and who had witnessed his father murder his mother. And he told me that you know, listening to my story, which you know, I think this kid, just in that one description that experience far worse than I ever went through. I went through homelessness, abandonment, abuse and going blind but hearing my story, despite the horror that he had lived through, was enough to inspire him to keep going. And that's when I realized that I had absolute purpose.

And there's no better purpose in life than to be that type of escapism for somebody else. So that in a nutshell is Mario Bonds, though there's a lot more to it, but that is a that is a general introductory of who I am and why I am.

R

Rob Mineault 10:27

We hear stories all the time about people who have gone through that sort of vision loss journey, and how it's, it's, it's so very different for for every person, almost always, for as negative as it may be for for a time period, it usually always is a transformative one that puts you on a path that you'd never would have expected.

M

Mario Bonds 10:52

Yeah, yeah. And I honestly and I think that's the that's the gift of it. Sure, I if I had, you know, the option I would love to be able to see. People say, well, how do you you know, find, you know, to have a great smile, right? Because blindness is only one thing in the in the card of adversities that life might have thrown thrown at you. But I find just that right, it is the hand that I've been dealt, and I realized that, you know, with the help of these individuals, that I have to play the hell out of the hand that I've gotten because being miserable takes too much energy.

R

Rob Mineault 11:32

There are a lot of blind people that would say I would never trade my blindness for sightedness, you know, if I had the choice.

M

Mario Bonds 11:39

You know what, I It's funny you say that because I'm totally blind. But you know, the reverse of that is I have a lot of sighted people who tell me that they're glad I can't see myself because I'd be conceited and saying, well, I don't know if that's like a reverse of the same thing. Kinda like, what the hell you mean by that? Well, I feel like that if you could see, as you would say, you guys can't sit with me. I'm a wonderful guy, you know, that that kind of thing. So I think it's interesting, but no, to your point. I wouldn't trade the experience. And, you know, I You guys mentioned in the, in the intro about me - being an author is interesting. The book called Without Sight, But Full of Vision that was that started off as a two year journal that I was doing, because it was cathartic. I needed to get over pains of my father abandoning me. It took me two years to write it, I needed to get over the death of, you know, not having a mother, being raised by a grandmother, you know, permitted aunts and uncles to abuse us, you know, I there were a lot of things that I had to come to terms with. And then once it was over, I realized that it did not read as a laundry list of look at all of the horrible things that were done to Mario, but instead, the blindness included, read that these are the things that were, if you will, obstacles in my way. And here I stand despite. And so that's when it turned into, you know, the idea to say, you know, without sight, but for the vision. Because I still have visions to have a purpose. And that's what I try to encourage other people to do with this at the same time. Now, I'm pretty sure you guys have come across other blind people where it's like, oh, man, what

happened? You're not like the rest of us. You should believe in yourself and keep going. You know, you come across it all. But for me, they come from the rebellious blind person who, you know, I, I'll tell you guys, this. I remember, I still had a little bit of vision. I was nine years old. And so I had a little bit of vision, the blindness switch hadn't clicked on yet. And I had this gym instructor. You know, mobile mobility instructor walks in the room. Her name was Miss Barnes. She had this cool accent, right? Because I always love the accent. She goes, Well, Mario, I got a special instrument for you that I want to introduce you to today. And I love the music. So I'm like, a special instrument! This is wonderful, you know, what is it going to be? And then she pulls out a cane. I really didn't know what it was yet. Although I could see that it was like, you know, several two long shaped things folded together with this sort of black thing that I didn't know whether it was rubber or what and she handed it to me. And it dawned on me that this wasn't an instrument. And so it's on my school record that at nine years old, I threw it back at her. I was too stubborn for my own good. I don't throw things at people today, quite frankly. That was just that showed you that transformative piece that you're talking about, that it was like I didn't want anything that had to do with the representation of being blind. And now I'm like, look, we blind people can do anything. I don't necessarily appreciate a Lyft driver congratulating me for being able to open the door on my own, but it was transformative. I feel like anger is a very natural response to the beginning of that journey. Yeah, yeah, honestly, it was even on the process of prepare Mario for total blindness. I didn't care that I was writing outside of the lines on large paper, you know, large print paper. I mean, at least it was still legible. You guys could see what I was, you know, what I was writing my own O&M instructor would show up. And, you know, I would know she's there because I still had a little bit of vision and she's yelling, why are you walking around holding on the arms of the other students, you should be practicing using your cane. And I'm like, well, you just please quit. Quit me, but quit your job, please. I don't want to use that cane. The anger piece of it is we can call it anger. Steve, Ryan, Lis, Rob. But it's also it's also cloaked in a deep, deep seated denial as well. Disbelief, issue with acceptance, right? That's why I said that I tried to will myself because still see, right? And I remember in willing myself to see, you know, I was so sure I saw my seat. And then I, you know, fell over a desk, and then, you know, the whole classroom, you know, broke into laughter, that kind of thing, you know, but because I was so desperately trying to will myself into a reality that didn't exist for me anymore.

L

Lis Malone 16:44

Well, you know, that situation that you described, it sounds horrifically painful as as a child. And what's interesting is that I'm even just thinking about my own situation, when my vision started to go, that it happened as an adult. And it's, it's really crappy that adults can be just as cruel as other kids. The treating you like a child treating you like you're, you know, you'd now you're now you're completely useless in this world. You know, losing all confidence in you, having that be your identity, kind of whispering behind your back and thinking that you know, that you're, you're, you're all of a sudden, completely unaware of things that are happening around you. And so it's the people that you're surrounded with, plays such a huge part, in that process of the acceptance, and being able to start to learn to, to adapt.

M

Mario Bonds 17:49

Yeah, and I look at things and thank you for that. Because I'll be honest, I say this to people all the time. I actually think God all the time that I went blind at the age that I did specifically be, you know, because of individuals that are in your case, I as a blind person, I'm always filled with

a deeper a deeper sense of empathy, because I feel like losing it later in life as an adult, I feel like there's a greater sense of loss experience than say that, albeit what I lost as a child was monumental to me, and it was paramount. But there's a greater sense of loss considering that there's a greater degree of independence that shifts when you lose it as an adult. I didn't have to, you know, lose the experience of driving a car, etc. I wish I could drive one now. And those self driving cars they need to be on the market for 25 years before I get one. "Investigators say a blind person in his car has 495 shut down" and that won't be me. I am full of empathy. You know, when I when I when I look at that, you know, because again, I see it as a as a greater sense of loss. And definitely I think community. Community is really important. Because you have people. The point I was going to go to like, you know, I think about my grandmother in terms of how important community is. And acceptance. My grandmother was the oldest of 17. And she had to stay home and work on the farm. And so she dropped out of school and then eighth grade. So her education wasn't deep. But when the I live in Prince George's County, Maryland, that's where we lived. And when the school system came to her and said, look, you know, Mario's a mess, you know, he's a troublemaker. And that's what they have me labeled as, and he's not going to be successful in life unless you send him to a School for the Blind. And this, this gets into the advocacy piece of it. And my grandmother who didn't have that DC education and wasn't an eloquent woman. But she said, No, I don't want to do that. I want him to stay in the classroom. That's how grandma talked. I want him to stay in the classroom with regular folk. And y'all give him what he needs right there. You know, grandma had the you know, the DEI thing down in the 90s. Right? You know this diversity inclusion and equity, and being inclusive etc. And they pushed back and said, you know, his grandmother is going to be a detriment to him, they were labeled as neglectful because she wouldn't support me going to a school for the blind. And then eventually, they as I said, earlier, we moved to Fairfax County, Virginia and met some teachers who really, you know, who really dug into me, but long story made short, my grandmother turned out to be right, she pushed and pushed and pushed and pushed and make sure that the assistive technology was given to me, in place, you know, in mainstream schooling to where, you know, I did well, and I went to college, etc. And Grandma was right. And the specialists in this particular case were wrong. So I look at that, just to get back to your point, Lis, you know, that acceptance and how deeply important community is.

R

Rob Mineault 21:02

So why don't we let's talk a little bit about assistive technology, because we're most of us are a bit of a assistive technology geeks...

L

Lis Malone 21:09

Some bigger geeks and other just saying sorry, it's true.

R

Rob Mineault 21:16

But you so can you give us a few examples of things that you sort of discovered as a kid, that kind of really blew your mind, because what we often find with assistive technology is that nobody really knows anything about assistive technology until the day they need it. And even then, it can take a while to actually discover what's out there and what's available. So yeah, kind of walk us through that journey for you early on.

M Mario Bonds 21:41
So in 1998, when I was introduced to the drumroll, please. The Braille & Speak...

R Ryan Fleury 21:51
I still have one that works.

S Steve Barclay 21:52
I used to repair them.

M Mario Bonds 22:01
I'm 35. But now even just saying that I'm like, Oh, wow, that's a lifetime ago in the technology world.

S Steve Barclay 22:15
I have partied with both Dean and Brian Blasie.

M Mario Bonds 22:20
So I'll tell you, you know, being 11 and 12 years old and being you know, introduced to that and being able to write with it, and then have what I what I what I've written reproduced in either print or Braille, I think was absolutely amazing, right. And that's when I realized that, oh, this is this is cool, there might be a world that exist outside of you guys. So it's like, yeah, system technology is definitely a step up from that. And then I was, as I said earlier, my family was had bouts of major destitution. So there were times where we were living in roach infested motels. And so the school knew that. And in a way to sort of "set Mario on this path" once once I woke up and I had a thirst for knowledge. They set me up to learn how to use JAWS to learn how to word process and you know, do some minimal emailing and minimal, you know, web searches are what was available down in 2000. And I started with, drumroll please ... Jaws 3.7. 3.2 here. I started with 1.0. I got like four hours at a time of just one on one training. And then, you know, I what I find is that with being introduced to assistive technology and realizing that technology was a language I understood and that could provide opportunities for me as a way to escape the abuse that was around me and the destitution when I became a teenager. My favorite pastime was to just aimlessly learn how the Internet worked. So I would be studying HTML just for the heck of it. So To learn how the Internet worked, and I had no idea that in years later, you know, outside of Hollywood, that all of that training I did and learning I did in teaching myself and studying HTML would come into play. And then I had a whole career as as an accessibility specialist. you know, obviously, being able to ascertain issues with applications and websites, and, you know, telling them telling developers what to do and how to remediate

things, and all that type of stuff. So I feel like all of that, you know, this whole theme of this conversation still goes back to the whole, transformative the experience could be, you know, what I mean, technology led to all of that.

R

Rob Mineault 25:40

I feel like - and Ryan and Steve can jump in here and correct me if I'm wrong - but I really feel like that that period in the 90s was, was a real period of growth in terms of assistive technology, mainly just because technology was growing quite a bit.

S

Steve Barclay 25:56

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, we had to. I mean, the growth in the 90s was driven by the fact that things were changing so quickly. You know, Windows 3.1 came out, everybody had been using DOS previously, and, and for a long time, people were saying oh, this will never be accessible. There's just no way to make this accessible. I heard it from numerous programmers who were who were in the accessibility field. And then somebody did, and it's like, oh, well, okay, maybe it could be accessible. So, yes, painful time.

M

Mario Bonds 26:27

Yeah, I look at that, and then look all the way to now to where, you know, I love Apple, right? I don't know why, you know, their screen reader system is just so much more complicated than the others. It's like, you know, they didn't have to do it that way. But it's like, yeah, let's you know, let's do a four key combination for something only takes two presses but it is what it is. But because of assistive technology, we can do amazing things. You know, I'll tell you recently, you know, I am an independent artist, and I've done pop inspirational music forever. But for a while, everyone said, Well, why don't you go into R&B you want to do an R&B song? You know, it's interesting. They say you can be it could be a play on the fact that you workout all the time. You look like a Greek god, you know? Well, I'll take your word for it. So why don't you just do R&B, I said, well, that's kind of gimmicky. But you know, do R&B, right. Because you can write you write music, you love it. And I do love R&B. And so I actually, this year, you know, as to why I love love opportunity and love accessibility and love assistive technology so much. I was able to learn - there are two audio production software's and I'm pretty sure you guys are obviously you're aware of all of this there that are pretty popular in the industry. But look at Pro Tools we look at, you know, Logic, and there are several others out there. But Logic and Pro Tools has been two top contenders obviously. So I was able to learn Logic, through and through, right? And while in so doing was able to, you know, end for the first time independently, record, mix engineer, master my song completely by myself, right. And, you know, all of these things as a blind person, right? I wear it as a badge of honor. Because anytime we can show some degree of independence, it's great. So I sent that when I was done, I sent the song to, you know, the people I work with in Hollywood who are you know, who have always been doing my mixing and stuff for years. And they got jealous and said, wow, this this is this is an incredible mix. You know, you went somewhere else, where do you go? And I said, I did it. And I said really? And then so when we met up for a studio session, you know, this is a what is this software you're talking about? I said, you have a Mac, let's pull it up. We pulled it up. And they say to me in the studio, they go, oh, man, this is incredible. They were blown away with and they said, honestly,

when you said you did that yourself. It sounded so incredible that we thought you were bullshitting. Like, no, no, I mentioned that to say one of the things that we do as advocates and is we always work hard to defy diminished expectations. Because you guys know, for us there's nothing worse than having a chorus of naysayers say, oh, you can't do that. And blind people can't do this and shouldn't do that and etc. And you always feel like there's like this, this. We always feel like we're undoing right preconceived notions, etc, or tearing down barriers, etc. So being able to destroy diminished expectations is one of the things that I that I that I love doing and that's me through and through.

R

Rob Mineault 29:59

Yeah, so interesting, you know, this whole idea of tearing down barriers, because the really ironic thing is that you only have to tear down the barriers because you built the thing with a barrier in the first place. It just goes to show you that anything can be accessible, you just have to think about accessibility when you're building it is really what it comes down to a lot of times when something a piece of software or an app is, quote, inaccessible, it's just because that's the way it's been built. You know, we scream from the rooftops all the time that you know, the really the key to true accessibility is just getting developers on board and getting them to understand how to build something that's accessible.

L

Lis Malone 30:46

I think the makers of Logic and Pro Tools should should give us free copies so that we can test it out for ourselves.

M

Mario Bonds 30:52

Right? Yeah, absolutely. That's what I would hope but but you're definitely on to something, it's something Rob has said, I always say, you know, we've got this wonderful phrase Universal Design, right? It's in how can you take that from just being a phrase, and it just being a default operative in development, period, you know what I mean? So it actually means something where something is universally designed, where it's going to address the needs of all audiences, without having to, you know, make caveat for this and caveat for that.

R

Rob Mineault 31:31

That's right. I mean, and really, all of this, all of these concepts are still fairly new. I mean, it's really easy to forget that, you know, what it was 2009, the first generation of the iPhone came out, and for two years, they it was completely inaccessible. And in fact, you know, we were looking at it and going, how can somebody who's blind ever use this, this thing? It's completely inaccessible. But then, you know, two years later, they, you know, they, they put their thinking caps on, they went back to the drawing board, and they built in all that accessibility, and that really, sort of innovated the entire industry going forward.

M

Mario Bonds 32:10

MARIO BONDS 34:00

I was scared, though, because when my other blind friends told me they had and I told I, you know, I told them, I said, you're an idiot, why do you have that? You know, you can talk to your friends like that. I refused to get one. I said, No, you're an idiot, why would I get an iPhone? I like my buttons and being sure of, you know, what I'm doing and etc. And then it was done. So when I got one, I never looked back. When you think about the touchscreen experiences was originally developed to help those with, with mobility disabilities, obviously, but it's something that is mainstream that helps everyone and you know, the iPhone, you know, because of its accessibility, I mean, it's, like, people find it so shocking that as blind people, we practically do everything that they do. I mean, my family just found out, you just found out, you know - I held my hand, I held my phone in front of my face last week, because I was trying to do the face ID to, you know, the Authenticate for the app store or something like that. And my sister goes, what are you doing? Oh, I thought you were about to take a selfie, I forgot you're blind. And I said, actually, I can take a selfie. What do you mean? I said, oh, yeah. Voiceover if I go into the camera it will announce the facial positioning to me. So I can know whether my face is in frame are not. And of course, they were stunned. And these guys have been around me as a computer geek forever. But I look at things like that, you know what I mean? We talking about the innovation, innovation of technology. Now granted, even though it does that I still don't take my own selfies because we need to make sure the lighting is good and that people know that, um, you know, you know that chocolate brown, right?

R

Rob Mineault 34:04

Ya know, but it's true like for a lot of people and then you to quote mainstream you, they have no idea that you know, someone who's blind can navigate through computer just as well as they can. And they have been able to do that for many, many years.

M

Mario Bonds 34:19

I look at this, because it what that reminds me of is that when I started at the US Department of Transportation right after leaving George Mason, I was placed in charge of a small scale technology help desk. So I was in charge of payroll and I was in charge of, you know, assigning tickets to staff and tracking their ability etc. I was working for the Civil Rights Office in the US Department of Transportation. And in this office, everybody was mortified that a 23 year old blind man was put in charge of their payroll and was asking them questions and following their work product etc. And it'slike, yeah, the technology is allowing me to do it.

R

Rob Mineault 35:04

So okay, well, let's talk a little bit about music. Because I'm really curious to know how you sort of got into that. And how your vision maybe contributed to that, that passion that you you sort of grew?

M

Mario Bonds 35:19

Well, honestly, that is, that's a great question. So before I went blind, I was really good at drawing. Yeah, so drawing was such a great pastime for me, and a talent that I you know, as

7,8,9 years old, I was winning national awards, etc. And I think one of the, you know, we talking about my father, one of the most painful memories I have was, you know, winning money from the National Playhouse for a painting I had done and in my father and one of his rare visits, he took that painting. And then he took the winnings the the money that I won as well, and used it for drugs, right, as opposed to this, you know, hopeful blind eight year old who just wanted trucks, right? But when I went blind, obviously, I couldn't draw anymore. We can do some abstract stuff. And you can take wicky sticks, you guys remember, wicky sticks? And use those to shape things, but I couldn't see anymore. And so I feel like what was a visual art, then translated into an auditory art. And that's when really an obsession with music started. Now, I don't know if it's because I had vision before, but sound has color to me. write songs have a mood. And that mood translates to a color. The piano has a color, every every sound has a translates to a color to me. And so my mind's eye, if you will, is always painting pictures based on what I hear. And so first I fell in love with the piano than the guitar than the drums. And at 12 years old as a blind kid, I was playing the drums for the gospel choir at my church, and then I auditioned for a performing arts high school, in Maryland, called Suitland High School for the Visual and Performing Arts. And get my mother and father had two sets of twins to single born children and a set of triplets. I'm in the triplets. So there's two girls and me. Which is, you know, one of the reasons why I was tortured watching you having to listen to the Real World as a blind kid growing up. But don't tell my sisters. My sisters were really good singers. All three of us auditioned for Suitland, and we got in and at Suitland. I was a piano major. My sisters were vocal majors. I wasn't singing, I wasn't doing that at all. I didn't know I could sing. I only I only played the piano and that might help my older brother who was in into music etc. And when I started like writing when I started writing songs and trying to play with singing, I would put together put together these tracks on his Triton keyboard and he would go in and quantize them and you know, get all the timing right, make them perfect. I mean, we talked about this today the songs were awful. And I said to him, why didn't you tell me that those songs were awful? He said I just wanted to encourage you. And now that I'm older and I've done professional songwriting etc, I say it again I really do believe that music has had healing power. So I discovered that I could sing when I was in college. When I you know do events at that churches or inspirational events at my college and you know people were crying you know, once I was sure that they were crying because they liked the sound and it wasn't because they were hoping I shut up then that I realized that I was that I was on to something. Mario, I have no idea of what you're saying. You have this velvety tenor voice that you were absolutely born with it. But really, like you never sing in the shower like no one said holy cow like you have an amazing voice? As a teenager, when I would do stuff like that they would tell me to shut up and it's really funny. It's really funny that now my brother comes to me all the time and he's the music teacher at Eastern High School, which is just for now in high school in DC. And I wrote a song called Steel, because I believe that you know, you if you look at yourself like steel, you can never be destroyed, right? And self empowerment is important. He liked that song so much that he turned it into a graduation song for the seniors at his school and they used it for graduation for three years. It was a very humbling experience. But he came to me and says to me, how'd you become a singer in the family because it was supposed to be my sisters. And now that I can, you know, I can build and, you know, do vocal runs and do all of this stuff. It's like, I don't know where this stuff came from. But I'll be honest with you, I see it as a gift, right, I see it as a gift. And I don't know what I would do, if I didn't have, you know, the ability to sing because I now granted anyone who lives with a singer they might not they might not say the same thing, because honestly, we're always singing. It music is playing, we're always harmonizing with it or rewriting it. But I ran the run of the shows, right? I've tried to audition for this, that and the other thing. You know, American Idol, The Voice, you name it. And then I auditioned for The Glee Project in 2012. And they ended up casting me. Now again, we talked about those barriers, being casted for that, you know, I was so sure that they were just that

they just had two blind people in the casting special because they were just trying to show that they were paying attention to the ADA. Because the two things that they wanted the things that they did not associate with blind people is the ability to dance. And so I have never forget this. I talked about this in speeches where you know, the professional choreographer to be on this show. You had to be able to sing, you have to be able to act and you had to be able to dance. The professional choreographer took me in the other blind guy and taught us the dance, but it turned out to be 1% of the dance. Right, step forward, step back, snap your finger step forward, you know, but I'm an ambitious guy. Once I was told that I did not know the dance, I sought out another hopeful who probably to this day regrets what I do regret what he did. And I asked him to teach me the real dance, right all the spins, the dips, the you know, I wanted to know the entire choreography, and I worked hard all night long. And the next day when it was time to audition, the actual dance piece of it. I did the routine with everyone else at the same time and stuff, in character and everything. And so it was like one of those things where I worked my ass off to say okay, can he sing, check can he act, maybe. But can he dance, that was a category where there was supposed to be a no, but now there had to be some degree of reconsideration because now it was going to be good TV for this blind person that can dance. So again, that goes back to my my theme of the diminished expectations, etc. And so after the Glee Project, that's when I ended up in this, you know, the sort of pop inspirational type thing that I've been doing. And the single that we just released at the beginning of July is called Chocolate. Let me explain that. So I am an African American, I am a very dark skinned individual. My complexion is generally described as chocolate but as a kid, you know, not the key is if kids don't have enough to contend with, as a kid, I was bullied, right? I was bullied for being dark skin, I was bullied for being blind, I was bullied for being articulate, right? And so and being bullied for being dark skin. And this came from the black community, right mostly came from the black community of you know, being being bullied for being a darker skinned individual. So with the push to go into R&B however, temporarily, I thought that it would be an interesting play on I was bullied for being dark skin and then as an older adult, you know, as a teenager and older adult, the very same thing I was bullied for is the number one thing that people find uniquely attractive about me. So going into R&B so you know what, I'm going to write a titillating bold song called Chocolate that celebrates that in my own sexuality of being proud of being chocolate and saying Yep, I'm blind and I'm chocolate you want it. So and that's the song that I you know recorded with on Logic and the music video for it just hit a million views on Facebook. I'm shocked. No, it hit a million views on Facebook and I'm very humbled, humbled by that. But you guys probably picked up that I'm a message guy. So as far as like, you just say go into R&B and a guy writes a love ballad still finds there to be a deep seated message behind it. But that's what I did.

R

Rob Mineault 45:14

Well, hey, well, so listen, we spent 40 minutes last week talking about a macadamia nut, milk milk substitute? Our new sponsor may be Malk? So maybe we can collaborate and, and create a song called Chocolate Malk. So can you can you talk to us a little bit about that, that experience like The Glee Project specifically, and sort of what was it like,

M

Mario Bonds 45:47

It was gruesome. I'll be honest, it was like, it was almost like Hollywood jail, because it was a reality show. I realized that, you know, it's, you know, the whole point. Reality TV is that you have to, you have to have some talent, yes, for that show. But the other piece of it is you want

to get people in a state of emotional hypersensitivity, so that you can get good TV, and there's we're all, you know, competing against each other, but we're supposed to be friends, building friendships, as well, etc. And you can't communicate you with your family, right? We couldn't communicate with our family, save for one phone call a week, while you're in Hollywood, essentially, working hard day and night to put the best sense of yourself out there in hopes that you'll win a competition so that someone can be inspired to write a part about you. That was going to be the reward that if you won the Glee Project, you'd have this seven episode arc on Glee when it was on the air, etc. And it's interesting that I said to myself, you know, this is supposed to be 12 episodes, I'm going to stick around for at least six episodes, and at least I will have been in front of America for six weeks. I was not one of those guys that would say, or could say how high when they would say jump. Right? Now the experience of it was amazing, as well, because to be a totally blind person, they're on a Hollywood set. And I am like, just like a sighted individual, where in my private time or the time I'm supposed to be using, I'm going over dance steps and dance counts, and all that sort of stuff and learning the choreography faster than the other sighted individuals that were there. And that was not something that might, you know, struggling in the competition for dancing was not something that that I struggled with as a blind person. And it wasn't because I was blind and they were given me a pass it was because of what I proved during that casting special. So I found the experience empowering for the most part. And I also found it to be a confirmation of, of my talent that I was thankful that the world took me seriously. I think that we do live in a sighted world. We do live in a sighted world of gimmicks, and we do live in a sighted world of the superficial. I find it ridiculous when people you know, say oh, he was only on The Glee Project because he was blind and he was cute. I don't like that. I don't like things like like that. But those when they got it, realized I was a talented individual who got on the Glee Project who happened to be blind. That's the way we would prefer right? That's the way you make sure that you keep the human aspect to it you know what I'm saying? It was a it was a myriad of of emotions and an experience during The Glee Project. I first called it Hollywood jail because it was you think about you can't talk to your family but once a week for 10 minutes at that, you know it but if you had you know had your support network to debrief. It was interesting, and I'll tell you I'll tell you guys this. I'll tell you this in terms of what they live for, for the supersensitivity. You know, on the Glee Project, there was another girl there from Michigan who wasn't doing well with the being away from home etc. And she was a bit of a bully. And I'm a very I'm a very sweet guy. I'm not a bully, but and I'm like kind of like can we all just get along and you know sort of be nice to each other. And I made a comment that oh, geez, she should stop bullying everyone could because the directors can see that and that's gonna ruin her chances. Now she didn't like that Mario gave his two cents. And so when we got back to the casting house, this girl, I mean, she went off on me, she was screaming and going off. And I couldn't believe that I had worked so hard to get to Hollywood and I was on a Hollywood set and a cast house and I was being screamed at like, I was some guy in the street. And I have feelings, too. So I said to her, I said, I worked too damn hard to get to Hollywood then to be treated like this by a second rate diva. That was wrong thing to say to her, but it came up because I'm human too. It was. It was the wrong thing to say. She actually came after me physically. And yeah, she you know, I'm in the boys castling room. I heard her rushing down the hallway and me as a blind guy. I stood up and started putting on my shoes because I'm like, I'm, you know, I'm having to calculate what am I gonna have to do if she comes around the door? I'm gonna have to grab her and put her through this wall. Yeah, I didn't know what to do, I was very scared. She was it's definitely some mental stuff going on. Right? And I was like, whoa, I get I was just stuck on our work. You know, I'd have been rejected from American Idol and I've rejected from this like a lot of people are - like I work too damn hard to get to Hollywood. And so that's why I say that it was it was an experience some people are cut out for that hypersensitive inducing experience like this fish out of water. You know, the other the other shows they make sure that you're you know, full of

spirits, right, but not on this show. But it was just still that fish out of water thing to get good TV. Oh, God. So those are some of the things that stuck out to me about the project. And actually, I've never talked about this story publicly.

R Ryan Fleury 52:11

Second rate diva if you're out there, send us an email, let us know.

M Mario Bonds 52:17

I said I'm human too. Like I shouldn't have said it. But I'm like, what?

L Lis Malone 52:22

Like, that was like the big rule on the reality shows is that you guys can fight and cry and scream but no one can lay a finger on another contestant.

M Mario Bonds 52:34

Yeah, you're not supposed to. I was thankful this part didn't make it to air they kind of you know, they got they sent her home after that. And on air. They made it look like she had you know, it was you know, she called her mom and said she was homesick and its competition is too much or whatever. But it was still traumatizing for me, which is why I'm finally talking about that my first Hollywood experience. You know, if I can say it in the way a comedian would, my first Hollywood experience almost ended with me getting my ass kicked.

R Ryan Fleury 53:13

There's worse ways to be in Hollywood, right?

L Lis Malone 53:17

Hey, listen, Mario, just think about how what wonders it did for Chris Rock's career, you know.

R Ryan Fleury 53:25

Here we go.

R Rob Mineault 53:33

So, you know, given all of these experiences that you've had, how do you kind of roll all of that together in terms of you know, when you speak to kids or you speak to other people? What's

kind of the overarching message that you sort of try to give out.

M

Mario Bonds 53:53

in honestly, every event is very personal to me it usually you know. Usually when you're requested to come and do a speech or do a keynote, and my agent and I we should have rebranded things because my my keynotes have always been different from everyone else's. We realized that interestingly been productions if you will. Because it's always been it's a keynote, but it's unique because i i intersperse music into it. So I might begin with a music number and then there's, you know, their script, and a music number and then script and then you know, a finale music number, maybe some videos in the middle, that kind of thing. I say that to say that the messages are always personalized, depending on what the client's theme is. But what has been a reoccurring theme or if you will. Recurring Keynote or motivational speaking topics for me are, overcoming adversity to putting odds in your favor, life's box of chocolate, diversity, equity and inclusion. A play on my childhood memoir, without sight but full of vision and what that means. Redefining what it means to have a disability. Or, you know, because I'm, you know, a father, who - we could talk about another time- a father who is crazy enough to adopt 4 kids. Yes, I adopt adopted two older ones and two younger ones. And the two older ones think I know everything. The two older ones don't think I know anything. I'm an unmitigated idiot. And the younger ones think I know everything. Which means that since I'm stuck between those two worlds, I'm doing a good job. So legally at 35, I have a 21 year old son, a 19 year old son, a 13 year old son and a 10 year old son. And so some of the speaking engagements I do for foster care agencies and nonprofit social services, etc. It sort of runs the gamut.

R

Rob Mineault 56:06

I do love all those messages. It's so important to impart to people, especially in the disability community that don't never let anybody tell you that you can't do something. I think the most poignant sort of message that somebody ever said here on the show, everybody has their own mountain to climb. And it's I love that.

L

Lis Malone 56:29

Yeah, it's actually Summit.

R

Rob Mineault 56:33

Yes. You know, I think that sometimes we feel like disability has to be painted in a way of oh, this person, you know, did all these incredible, amazing things, despite them having a disability. And that's, that can be I can see that being intimidating because for somebody who's just maybe doesn't feel like they have a talent. That doesn't matter it. Whatever they're passionate about, if it's, you know, overcoming your fear to just take the bus and go grocery shopping on your own for the first time. Hell, that's just as valuable.

M

Mario Bonds 57:09

Yeah, and I can tell you, the reverse of that is too much of that can actually feel dehumanizing to us as disabled individuals. It really can. Because, you know, I'll be honest, I left LA Fitness this morning after a swim. And you know, there was a guy where, you know, we appreciate we appreciate the sentiments that people give, but there's a point when it becomes excessive. But there's this guy that he sent it for these, like, I don't see this, I don't see this, I go to a lot of gyms and I don't see this man. So God bless you for being out here. Man, you putting us all to shame. Like, I don't see this. I go to a lot of gyms. And it's still just like, you're literally out here. And you're literally doing this. And I'm like, well, man, thank you. I appreciate that. He goes on and on and on and on not to at some point to the disabled person, it becomes a what am I saying thank you for? Yeah, right, you lose sight of really what you're supposed to be saying thank you for. Now granted, you know, we appreciate that maybe he was going through something, the fact that he's seen a disabled person, you know, living and living their best life with maybe if he was in the same case, he wouldn't have, you know, we can get that. But still, I think it's just a tough, it's a tough place to find to try and find some middle road because like I said, too much of it could be demonizing. But right after that, the Lyft driver pulls up, he yells out the window, Lyft for Mario? And I said yes, yes, it's for me. And you know, I listened to the car engine to judge where he was facing, I walked around the car because I'm listening to the engine. So I can go to the door that's on the opposite side of the driver, because that's why I prefer to sit, the opposite passenger side in the back. I felt for the door handle opened it and you know, the driver goes, you did good. You did really good. Opening the door, you know. And it's just one of those things where it's like, you know, I don't think I deserve a badge of honor because I was able to open a car door. But it's just, you know, it's just it's just hard. It's just really hard to find. Because even though we know people don't mean it, it can sometimes be a little bit human dehumanizing.

R

Rob Mineault 59:25

We've had people on this that have talked about that very thing, you know, and you're absolutely right, it can be dehumanizing, because really, what we want to do is treat everybody the same. Because everybody's human. And you know what, sometimes you just want to get from point A to point B and you don't want to have to be somebody's motivation, or somebody's inspiration that particular day. You just want to get home and take a shower.

M

Mario Bonds 59:49

Yeah, that I think I think that that says it all right. It's like I just broke up with my girlfriend. I don't feel like answering questions about how blind people shampoo their hair.

R

Rob Mineault 59:58

That's right. I just want to go cry in my jello like everybody else.

S

Steve Barclay 1:00:06

Yeah, exactly.

M

Mario Bonds 1:00:09

So, you know, I'll get I'll get people that are amazed that I that I say, oh, the elevators over here. So I'm fine taking the stairs. Really? Well, God damn, he actually walked down stairs. And I'm like, you know, I've done cooler stuff than walk down the stairs. It was awkward.

L

Lis Malone 1:00:38

Well, you know, and that's in like, you were saying there is that fine line that we don't really know exactly where it is, and how best to approach it as a community at large because it you know, maybe that person who saw you go down the stairs is now that their perception is now changed after that interaction. And they're like, well, no, I never thought it because like, maybe they don't run into a lot of blind people. But I've, I've even had the reverse situation where I got out of a car and took out my cane. So you know, get into the store and I actually had someone yell from a passing car, that you're not blind. I just saw you get out of that car you got out of there no problem. You ain't blind. And I was like, wow. I hate that. So it's like, okay, wait, so one minute you're too blind to do anything. And then next minute, you're not blind enough. So it's, it goes both ways. And you feel like you know, either way, you just can't win.

M

Mario Bonds 1:01:37

How about this shallow piece - that there's no way I can be totally blind because because I'm so fit.

L

Lis Malone 1:01:51

I'm sorry, Mario, that is just an excuse for strange women to put their hands on you. I need to feel these muscles for myself. You know? Well, my upline

M

Mario Bonds 1:02:03

I can be naive, sometimes. Super naive sometime. So yeah, probably probably so well, although they've told me that in times where it's like I've been I've been walking with my cane and talking on the phone. I'm like, I'm laughing and having a really good time. And then And then someone will stop me and say I'm sorry. Do you need any help? And I'm like, I'm laughing and talking on the phone -- do I look lost? Well, thank you guys so much. If you get a chance check out Chocolate. I'd love to know what you guys think about it.

R

Rob Mineault 1:02:36

Most definitely. And listen, please come back anytime we're happy to see me we do we feel like we could talk to you for another hour easily. Where can people find you online? Where can they find your music? Plug away, sir.

M Mario Bonds 1:02:49
Absolutely. Well, the music is available everywhere you can stream Chocolate by Mario Bonds. You can follow me on Facebook and YouTube. So thank you so much. I'd love to know what you guys think of Chocolate when you hear it.

R Rob Mineault 1:03:27
Fantastic. Well, we will do we will we will be in touch and thanks.

R Ryan Fleury 1:03:34
Thanks, sir.

L Lis Malone 1:03:35
Thanks, Mario.

R Rob Mineault 1:03:36
Chocolate Malk, man. It's gonna be a big the next big hit.

R Ryan Fleury 1:03:41
Malk malk.

R Rob Mineault 1:03:43
No, I'm serious. Yeah, I think you should just send a link of that episode and be like, hey, give us free stuff. Listen, you can have all the free Malk that they send us. very least you can have mine.

L Lis Malone 1:04:03
I don't want Malk. I want cash.

R Rob Mineault 1:04:13
Well, they're not gonna give you cash. What do you think they're gonna give his cash? Well, okay, maybe they will. I can be bought can be bought

okay, maybe they will. I can be bought can be bought

L Lis Malone 1:04:23

All of a sudden you're gonna become a fan after a week.

R Rob Mineault 1:04:26

I'm Rob Mineault of the AT Banter Podcast and right now I'm enjoying a big steaming glass of Malk.

L Lis Malone 1:04:36

We're gonna we're gonna do like pictures where we all have like milk mustaches.

R Rob Mineault 1:04:40

Yeah, exactly. Got Malk?

R Ryan Fleury 1:04:51

I'm down with a milkshake.

R Rob Mineault 1:04:52

You pay me, I'll drink anything. strawberry milkshake. Yeah. Anyways, Everybody go check out Mario online. We really enjoyed having multitalented people on. Not sure when the guy sleeps, I can't believe he adopted four kids. Where does he get the energy? Must drink a lot of Malk.

R Ryan Fleury 1:06:28


All right, let's get out of here.

R Rob Mineault 1:06:32


Hey Lis.


L Lis Malone 1:06:35


Yeah, Rob.

 Rob Mineault 1:06:39
Where can people find us?

 Lis Malone 1:06:43
www.atbanter.com

 Rob Mineault 1:06:49
They can also drops an email if they so desire at cowbell@atbanter.com.

 Ryan Fleury 1:06:59
And they can find is on Instagram and Twitter and Mastodon and sometimes on YouTube. And that's about it for now.

 Rob Mineault 1:07:21
All right, let's get out of here. Ah, that is going to about do it for us this week. Big thanks, of course to Mario for joining us and we will see everybody next week.