

**Teal Talk, S2:E4 – Navigating Disability Pride in an Ableist World with  
Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams and Jody Michele of Indiana Disability Justice**

**Taylr Ucker-Lauderman 00:08**

Welcome to Teal Talk, a podcast brought to you by the Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence – that’s OAESV for short. We’re your hosts, Taylr

**Laurie Hamame 00:17**

and Laurie

**Taylr Ucker-Lauderman 00:18**

and each episode, we speak with professionals in the field to dive deep into the intersectional issues that affect survivors in Ohio.

**Laurie Hamame 00:24**

Before we begin, we want to give a content warning that we will be discussing sexual violence and other issues that may be upsetting and triggering. If you need help, please feel free to call our resource line at 888.886.8388 during regular business hours, or the Ohio Sexual Violence Helpline 24/7 at 844.644.6435. Please take care of yourself.

**Taylr Ucker-Lauderman 00:52**

Hello everyone and welcome to our fourth episode. Very exciting! My name is Taylr Ucker-Lauderman (she/her/hers) and I'm the Chief Officer of Communications & Engagement at OAESV.

**Laurie Hamame 01:20**

Hi everyone. I'm Laurie Hamame (she/her/hers). I'm the Communications & Content Coordinator at OAESV and I'm so excited to be back for our fourth episode. July is Disability Pride Month. Disability Pride Month celebrates disabled persons, honors their inherent dignity and inalienable rights, promotes their visibility, and applauds their achievements. So, Disability Pride initially started as a day of celebration in 1990, the year that the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law. In that same year, Boston held the very first Disability Pride Day. So now it has shifted into this entire month being a powerful reminder about the importance of disability rights and why we fight for them. And it felt like the perfect time to bring on our friends from Indiana Disability Justice to chat about disability pride month and what that means. So, I'd love, Taylr, if you could introduce our first guest.

**Taylr Ucker-Lauderman 02:29**

Thank you. Our first guest is Cierra. Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams, MA (ney ee or she/her/hers) is a Prevention Specialist at Indiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence (ICADV) whose work focuses on advancing disability justice through the primary prevention of violence. Ney ee is a fat queer thoyewa (disabled) Nisenan Miwok assa (woman) named after her home lands in now-California. Cierra is a survivor of poly-violence. After 17 years as a

victim's advocate who also coordinated prevention efforts for local shelters in Oregon and Indiana, Cierra joined the ICADV prevention team in 2015. Ms. Thomas-Williams works collaboratively with the ICADV prevention team to develop, implement, evaluate, and report on strategies supporting Indiana's sexual violence prevention plan. In 2018, Cierra co-founded and co-leads Indiana Disability Justice (IDJ) along with four other neurodivergent and disabled people, and people with disabilities. IDJ provides training and technical assistance across the country to advocates and preventionists interested in exploring the intersection of disability and violence prevention. In 2022, Indiana Coalition to End Sexual Assault and Human Trafficking recognized Cierra's outstanding prevention services at the ICESAHT statewide conference. Cierra is an avid flower gardener and a Pearl Jam superfan who has attended every tour possible for the last 30 years. That's awesome!

**Laurie Hamame** 04:03

You had me at avid flower gardener because I have a big backyard now that I've moved, and I'm trying to learn how to cultivate my green thumb.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams** 04:13

Yes, yes. You find the ones that you don't kill and then you get a lot of those. Yes, that's the strategy.

**Laurie Hamame** 04:22

I love that.

**Taylr Ucker-Lauderman** 04:23

Hostas.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams** 04:24

I love hostas. I would recommend coneflowers they're my absolute favorite. They're so cute and the birds love them.

**Laurie Hamame** 04:32

Noted. Well, we also have a second guest with us today. So, I'd love to start by introducing Jody Michelle. So, Jody is an independent consultant for the Indiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence, where she serves on the leadership committee of Indiana Disability Justice. She is the Communication and Website Coordinator for IDJ. Jody is also a licensed Christian minister, whose faith motivates her to promote the human dignity of all people. She views embracing our humanness as a path to violence prevention. Jody has cerebral palsy with visual and speech impairments. She also deals with PTSD, depression, and anxiety. She uses a power chair for mobility. Jody likes to try new things, corny jokes, and meditating in nature.

**Jody Michele** 05:30

Hi. It's good to be here. Because I have a speech impediment, Cierra is going to help me communicate.

**Laurie Hamame** 05:52

Jody, I need to hear your favorite corny joke.

**Jody Michele** 05:56

Oh, my goodness. I was not prepared for that question. I don't retain them, but when I hear them, I laugh my head off. And then the people around me roll their eyes.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams** 06:32

Jody, I would say that you are a dad joke connoisseur?

**Jody Michele** 06:39

Yes.

**Laurie Hamame** 06:40

I feel the same way. It's like when people ask you, what's your favorite movie and you forget every movie you've ever watched.

**Jody Michele** 06:47

Mhmm.

**Taylr Ucker-Lauderman** 06:49

So why don't y'all tell us a little bit about how long you've been in this work? And maybe what makes you passionate about it?

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams** 06:57

Go for it. Jody.

**Jody Michele** 07:07

Well, I've been in disability advocacy since I was in elementary school. I had to because I had to fight for my right to learn, even as a little kid. And whenever I had to do a report or a presentation, it was always about disability issues. And my work with Cierra began in 2016. And it really is my passion to prevent violence against people with disabilities. So IDJ and I were a great fit.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams** 08:42

Thanks, Jody. So, I have this new thing now where I like to say that I have been in this field for a quarter of a century. So that's 25 years. I just I'm -- I love and a good extreme. It's true, though. Anyway. So, I have been in this field for 25 years. And I started as an activist on a college campus, as many of us do. And I was passionate about supporting survivors because I had experienced sexual assault while I was in college, but I am also a survivor of child maltreatment and child sexual abuse. So, it was always something that I felt like I needed to get into to help support other survivors. So, I became a rape crisis advocate. I really didn't understand the dynamics of this violence until I got involved like that. And really, I didn't know that there were shelters. I didn't know anything about that. And so, it just made me really excited that there was a whole infrastructure set up for survivors. And today I recognize that that setup is only for some survivors. And so that really fuels a lot of what I

do now with my work. So, I became passionate I learned about primary prevention in 2005. And there was no turning back, I did not know that this was a thing that people did. And so, I got involved as a volunteer. And that is what kicked off my – I think I now have 18 years of experience in the public health approach to sexual violence prevention. I still at that point, when I was practicing in 2005, I had no idea that when I was in a classroom, there were a whole bunch of students who were not in that classroom together with me intentionally, and those were students with disabilities. And so, when I did get a job in a local rape crisis center in Bloomington, Indiana, that's when I had the opportunity to start working with people with cognitive and developmental disabilities. And it just really my interest in working solely with people with disabilities took off at that time, and there was no turning back. When I think about the fact that people with disabilities are three to five times higher than non-disabled people to experience any form of violence. And then knowing on top of that, that only 13% of survivors with disabilities get victim services, like that lights are real fire under my ass to get something done about this. It's not okay. And that is what gets me going is like I recognize my part in that and try to then influence sort of what is going on around me in my you know, sphere of influence. So, anger, anger is underneath all of it.

**Taylr Ucker-Lauderman 12:10**

That is so real and I think you're not alone in that for sure. Thank you both for sharing those pieces of yourself and your stories with us. I appreciate that and just I'm so grateful that you're doing this important work. Something that stuck out to me is how you said the setup is only for some survivors. Sounds like that not only goes for services for survivors but school, like public schooling, and it's only for some students, right? And the programming happening there, so.

**Jody Michele 12:53**

There was a time in my life where I needed to get away from a relationship; however, the structures were not prepared to meet my needs. So, I had nowhere to go. I was unable to go to my friend or family members because most homes are inaccessible to people who use wheelchairs. And my story is not uncommon. We hear all the time that people with disabilities are left in harmful situations because we don't have anywhere to go because of lack of access. And many of us are fearful of being placed in a nursing home because of not having any other alternatives. And that is a huge problem. Nursing homes are no place for people with disabilities to live. And I'm so happy that I'm able to say this during pride month because we don't talk about it enough. We must do better for disabled people and older people.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams 15:58**

This is Cierra. I actually just looked up this statistic and there are only .03 houses in America that are accessible to people in wheelchairs. .03 in the entirety of America. I don't know why I'm laughing That's like hysterical laughter from being so upset.

**Jody Michele 16:20**

Yeah.

**Taylr Ucker-Lauderman 16:21**

Yeah. Like a laughter out of it being ridiculous.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams** 16:23

Yeah.

**Jody Michele** 16:24

Yes.

**Taylr Ucker-Lauderman** 16:24

Yeah. Thank you both for that. And, like, I think these things that you're bringing up like the students not being in the classroom for programming, like nursing homes, being a place of fear and not being homes for people with disabilities and older people, the .03% of houses not being accessible -- these are things that a lot of people that don't have disabilities are not thinking about. And that includes people working in this field of anti-sexual violence work, right? Is there other information like that that you want to share? I'm sure this could be you know, this is your entirety of your work so I don't want to diminish it to such a short period of time, but are there other little tidbits of information that you want to be sure that we get in here and share with people.

**Jody Michele** 17:13

I would love to share something. I hear all the time that non-disabled people are unaware of disability issues. However, we cannot use that excuse anymore. And that is because we went through COVID-19. Most people were in lockdown for a year or more, and now we know how horrible it is to be isolated from one another, and not being able to do what we need or want to do. So that is how people with disabilities live most of our lives. We have to deal with barriers that keep us from being with one another. And I am so disappointed that non-disabled people had this experience and they're not doing anything about it now that they have their freedom back, but people with disabilities are still isolated. We are still unable to do what we want. So, it's not okay for non-disabled people to experience that, but we allow that for disabled people. And that is not okay. Forgive me for being heavy, but it is something we need to talk about more. Thank you.

**Laurie Hamame** 20:46

Jody, I think the heaviness is understandable. You mentioned you've been doing this work since you were in elementary school, and Cierra, for a quarter of a century. I can imagine doing this type of work for that long and then seeing other people say things like, "I don't know what issues people with disability face" can be very frustrating, because you're like, well, I've been experiencing this and seeing this and surrounded by this for 25+ years. You know, it seems very obvious. So, I think your frustration is totally valid.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams** 21:21

This is Cierra. Absolutely. And Jody, actually, I almost want to say don't apologize, because things, like, at this point, there are no more apologies to make around this. You know, like, we are, we've been at a reckoning point. And, and yet, and yet, our programs and coalition's feel like we are inclusive, feel like we are accessible, and we are not. Like those who strongly feel like they are accessible, I have my doubts. You know, the reason why I say that is because I have felt that way. And I have thought those things. Oh, we have a ramp, you know? Okay. Good for you. But do you have doorknobs? Or do you have levers? Where are your doorknobs? Where is your camera? If you are in a rape crisis center and your camera is adjusted for standing height? Do you have obstacles in your bathrooms? A lot of people put garbage cans in their bathrooms, and that can really impede

the way a power chair will move around. So, one of the things that I discovered, because Jody was there to help me discover, is our accessible stall in our building where we hold events is actually an inaccessible stall. And here is a place that prides themselves on the work that we do around disability and disability justice. And so, I am absolutely not exempting myself from this. This is urgent. And this is more than just about giving access to people who use our services, and people who we want to impact with our prevention. This is about creating a context where people's basic needs are met. Even the people who work at the places, we cannot assume that the people we work with do not have disabilities. I think we do, especially if they're not visible, all of this assumption is going on. And I think that that is really what's behind a lot of the discrimination that people are experiencing.

**Taylr Ucker-Lauderman 23:41**

Yeah, that makes sense. I think sometimes people are like, "Oh, well, I'm not gonna worry about that thing. Because it's not affecting, like the people in my circle, or like the people that I care about." Maybe, but it very likely is and maybe you just don't know about it. Like you don't deserve to know everything about everyone. So, we need to assume actually that people do need different accommodations and support to participate in spaces together. We think that we like get to know things about other people's bodies and personal lives and it's like, probably not

**Jody Michele 24:19**

And people with disabilities deal with that even more. People assume they have a right to know about our lives. We have the same right to privacy as other people.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams 24:46**

This is Cierra, I would say some of the things that I've seen with regard to that is assuming that you can touch someone or their power chair with the idea that you're wanting to help or that, people need help. And I would say that people with disabilities will ask for help when they need it. Most likely, yeah. Jody, may I tell a story about the first time we went out to lunch together?

**Jody Michele 25:17**

Yes.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams 25:18**

Jodi, and I were up in Indianapolis at a conference, I believe. And we went out to dinner for the first time. We ordered our drinks and whatnot. And the server brought Jody a child cup with a lid and a straw. This is so characteristic of Jody and this is part of why I love her. She looked straight at the server and said, "Why did you do this?" This person froze and did not know how to answer Jody.

**Jody Michele 25:52**

I asked this person if they do this with other customers, because I noticed he didn't do it with Cierra. And when I asked him that, he did freeze. He just assumed that I needed that. Yeah, and stuff like that happens all the time.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams 26:03**

Yeah, this last time, the server wanted me to order for everybody at the table. You know, in these situations, I'll admit, I freeze. I think, do I stand up for my friends? You know, so we all have growth. We all need some growth here around how we understand to relate with other people.

**Jody Michele** 27:15

And we also have to be mindful that we are all in this together. This server did not intend to be ableist. I knew that and I wanted to bring it up to him. When you open up these things for communication, it's a way to open up dialogue. It's not meant to put down one another with. We just need to talk about these things.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams** 28:27

Thank you, Jody. That's a good reminder. Jody, you're really great at meeting people where they're at. And that is something that I admire about you so much. And yet Jody has this way of being very pointed without hurting people. It's a really interesting and phenomenal skill. And one of the reasons why I am so privileged to be friends and work partners with Jody.

**Jody Michele** 29:03

I feel the same way about you.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams** 29:05

Hugs. Love so much love. Hearts everywhere.

**Jody Michele** 29:11

Yes!

**Taylr Ucker-Lauderman** 29:13

I love that. Well, actually, in some of the stories that you're telling, you touched on some things that we were wanting to ask you about anyways. And so, one of those was if you would be willing to give your definition of ableism.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams** 29:27

Jody, I'd love it if you would talk about this.

**Jody Michele** 29:30

At the foundation of ableism is the belief that being non-disabled is better than being disabled. And this causes people not to consider our needs and our wants. And I really do not believe this is conscious, but it's so ingrained in us that it's so natural for us to have a pecking order, where people with disabilities are near the bottom. know, for me, I had to own my own ableism. I believed for many years that I was better than people with cognitive disabilities. People would assume that I had a cognitive disability, and I was so offended by that, because I wasn't one of those people. And then I realized that there's nothing wrong with having a cognitive disability. People with cognitive disabilities experience life in a different way than other people. However, people with cognitive disabilities are just as valuable, important, and human. So, I share this because we have to

be brave enough to own our ableism. It was hard for me to admit my own ableism but when I realized this, I was able to deal with my own ableism. If we don't admit our prejudice, we won't be able to work through them.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams** 33:51

This is Cierra. Ableism, to me, is entirely about power over -- to control. And this appears in our thoughts and our feelings and our behaviors. And it comes out in practices, in relationships, in policies. It's built into the structures that we have around us. I think it's interesting that Jody says that she doesn't think it's intentional that the practices on the individual level of ableism may not be intentional. I actually think that structural ableism is intentional. And that makes it really easy for people to behave in an ableist manner, to implement ableist policies. I suppose when I think about what ableism means, for me, it's hard to really define other than saying it's a system of power over that's baked into the way we relate to each other and how organizations develop their practices and policies and things like that.

**Jody Michele** 35:07

I agree with Cierra. I think structural ableism is intentional because it makes it possible for non-disabled people to not have to deal with people with disabilities. For example, many jobs require a driver's license, even though driving is not a main part of the job. That cuts out a lot of people who are blind and visually impaired. If you cut them out, you don't have to worry about all the other accommodations that you might need in order to be productive at work. And that's just one example. I think people know what they're doing when they create policies. They know how to keep certain people out. But I don't believe that on an individual level, we intend to hurt people.

**Laurie Hamame** 37:17

What you both have been saying has brought this concept to my mind called the breaking of charity.

**Jody Michele** 37:24

Yes!

**Laurie Hamame** 37:25

Yeah. For those who don't know, it's this concept that dates back to the Salem witch trials. That refers to this moment where two members of the same group break apart and become different tribes. So, in Salem this occurred when some people in the group started accusing others of being witches. And I feel like in this concept, it's viewing people with disability as other or not human at all. And Jody, you made that point that people with disabilities are human.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams** 37:54

Can I maybe add something Laurie? I've been thinking about how the way that prevention practitioners are expected to do their work also gets caught up in this system. So, I'm thinking about the public health approach, where there's this idea that there is a before the violence. So, with primary prevention, the definition includes preventing violence before it happens. But if we think about people with disabilities, they have for eons, been oppressed. And so, where do you find that before the violence and that the public health approach uses this idea that there is an ideal way of being in the world and that there is this ideal environment and everything else



is set up against that and that's how that other is created. It's one of the things that, I think sometimes prevents us from thinking and doing prevention outside of prescriptive or inherited programs. I mean, I think sometimes we inherit our prevention strategy and then are not supported by our organizations to think about what it might look like if we were to increase inclusion. I'm just... I lost my train of thought!

**Laurie Hamame** 39:18

Well, you know, the saying goes 'time flies when you're having fun' while time also flies when you're talking about things that you really feel passionately about. I'm feeling like we might need a part two of this episode sometime in the future but I would love to end by your circling back and touching base on this month being Disability Pride Month and I'd love to know what would it look like to be truly celebrate, not just this month but forever. What does Disability Pride mean to you?

**Jody Michele** 40:05

For me, disability pride means knowing that my needs and wants are just as important as non-disabled people. It means that I'm okay with the fact that I have to do things differently. It means I don't compare myself and my body and my mind to this idea that we made up of how a human should be. It means being able to embrace all of the emotions that I have around being a person with a disability and not having a mask them. Some days, I believe my disability sucks, and other days, I really appreciate it for how it made me the person I am. So often, I used to believe that I needed to have a happy face on all the time because I didn't want people to pity me even more than what they did. But Disability Pride is about owning it all. Yeah, that's what it means for me.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams** 42:22

For me, Disability Pride is an avenue to safety. What I mean by that is, when I feel prideful about all of who I am, I don't have the mean self-talk on the inside that is so destructive and has been destructive to me, throughout my life. And I haven't always had access to that. I didn't always know I was a person with a disability. I just sort of assumed that I was living in a different world, like in my head. I thought I was weird. Nobody told me that the things that I was experiencing are part of a cognitive disability. And so, when I think about disability pride, I think about being out. And because I am a person with non-visible disabilities -- I don't... I don't actually like that phrasing. I am a person with non-apparent disabilities. My disabilities are there all of the time. And so, they're not invisible, but they might be non-apparent to you. And so, what that means is I have an enormous amount of privilege walking in or coming into any space. And so, for me, disability pride is about creating that safety for other people by being very out about who I am. So, when I introduce myself, in presentations and group settings, I say that I am a person with a disability. And what I have noticed is that other people come out as disabled in that meeting, and then things become okay. For other people, other things become okay to talk about. And so that's what I mean by disability pride being a pathway to safety. And I actually think it's a pathway to safety for others. I can't say that I create safety for someone but I can say that I try to create the conditions that make it safe enough for a person to be authentically themselves.

**Taylr Ucker-Lauderman** 44:46

Thank you both. Those are two absolutely beautiful answers. I love that and respect it so much. There was so much more to be talked about. If we ever get the opportunity for another episode, I would love that, and it would just be great to hear more from you both.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams** 45:01

We're always down!

**Taylr Ucker-Lauderman** 45:03

Good. If people want to learn more about IDJ or the Indiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence, or any of the organizations that you work with, what are maybe some websites or social media handles or things like that, that they can go and learn more.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams** 45:20

We have a wonderful website. It's called the Disability Justice and Violence Prevention Resource Hub. And we would love it if you would visit. The URL is [indisabilityjustice.org](http://indisabilityjustice.org). That website is a clearinghouse of everything that we do together to prevent violence. But it's also a place to collect the voices and stories of disabled people. We have art, creative writing, photography, poetry, all created by people with disabilities, some of whom are survivors of violence. And so that is one place that I would really suggest people checking out. Also follow us on Instagram [@indisabilityjustice](https://www.instagram.com/indisabilityjustice), we would love that. We also are on Facebook at [@indisabilityjustice](https://www.facebook.com/indisabilityjustice). And so please follow us on all the things; it helps with grant deliverables, but also, we're awesome. Also, if you'd like to check out Indiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence, I would go to the URL, [icadvinc.org](http://icadvinc.org) And also you can email Jodi and I at [indisabilityjustice@gmail.com](mailto:indisabilityjustice@gmail.com). Was that right, Jody?

**Jody Michele** 46:57

Yeah.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams** 46:59

I was like "Oh god, what is our Gmail?"

**Laurie Hamame** 47:03

I need, "This helps with grant deliverables, but also were awesome" like, on a tote bag.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams** 47:09

Yes! That's great! We should have that merch.

**Laurie Hamame** 47:15

Thank you to so much for being here today and chatting with us and sharing so many amazing things and for being vulnerable. And thank you for getting heavy.

**Taylr Ucker-Lauderman** 47:27

Yeah.

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams** 47:28

Yes. My pleasure.

**Taylr Ucker-Lauderman** 47:30

Thank you so much,

**Jody Michele** 47:35

Thank you. It was an honor.

**Laurie Hamame** 47:38

Before we end, Jody, I have to share a corny dad joke.

**Jody Michele** 47:42

Oh yay!

**Laurie Hamame** 47:45

I was at a wedding this weekend and the father of the bride shared this joked because the couple getting married are both dentists. So, he said, "Why did two dentists get married? Because they were *enameled* with each other."

**Cierra Olivia Thomas-Williams** 48:01

Oh my god that's perfect!

**Laurie Hamame** 47:46

Thanks for listening to Teal Talk. We hope you enjoyed our deep dive into intersectional issues affecting survivors in Ohio. If you like what you heard, subscribe and leave us a five-star rating and review. recommend us to a friend, and follow us on Instagram and Facebook @oaesv and Twitter @OhioAllianceESV. If you'd like to learn more about us and the services we offer, sign up for our email list, or read a transcript of this episode, visit [oaesv.org](http://oaesv.org)

**Taylr Ucker-Lauderman** 48:16

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