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Hadley Presents

Bold Blind Beauty

Presented by Ricky Enger

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, Stephanae McCoy, founder of Bold Blind Beauty, joins us to share tips on moving through the world with confidence and style. Welcome to the show.

Stephanae McCoy: Hi, Ricky. Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited for this discussion today.

Ricky Enger: So am I. I have actually followed the Bold Blind Beauty blog for years now, and so it's almost like a oh my goodness, I get to interview Steph. You have a lot going on. There's a blog, you're doing a podcast now, you have merchandise, all sorts of stuff. But for people who don't know anything about Bold Blind Beauty, why don't you just give us a quick intro, and tell us about that, and just a bit about yourself as well.

Stephanae McCoy: I'm an intensely focused, introverted creative. I am, and I always have been very passionate about social justice. I'm also a mom to three adult sons and a Gigi to two young grandchildren, with a third one on the way. When I lost my sight later in my life, my confidence level dropped, and I really struggled to come to terms with my life as a blind woman. During that time, I was working at Deloitte, it was one of the big four accounting firms. I got promoted, married, I bought a home. And quite frankly, blindness didn't fit into my plans. It scared me nearly to death.

Fast forward a little bit past the very early days, I noticed that people just didn't understand when I became comfortable using my white cane. They just weren't understanding why, because I looked like I can see.

I created Bold Blind Beauty, I created it for several reasons, but mainly to empower women who are blind or who have low vision, to embrace their beauty, to increase their confidence, claim their power and to boldly break barriers. And today, the site features stories of people across the blindness spectrum, from all walks of life, to further our mission of improving humanity by changing the way we've perceive one another.

The really cool thing about this is that each of the people that have been featured, they all have unmatched strength and resilience. Every story is different, as we walk separate paths, yet the one thing we share in common is a shift in our perspectives.

Ricky Enger: Wow, I love this so, so much. I'm just giving a huge thumbs up. It's something that's really important to hear for people who are struggling with that feeling of, I'm just not confident anymore. I feel like blindness came out of nowhere and how do I deal with that? Along with just moving through the world and what do I even look like now? Having a place where people can express that, along with just, hey you're still strong, you're still amazing, what a wonderful thing you've done to found Bold Blind Beauty. That link is going to, of course, be in our show notes, so that people can go and check that out.

In the intro, I mentioned style. That is a subject that does come up on the blog from time to time. But I think before we can talk about style, we have to be on the same page about what it is. How do we define style? Is it the same as fashion? Is there a difference? What would you say style is?

Stephanae McCoy: I believe that style is unique to each individual. My definition, my personal definition is this: Style, like art, is a form of self-expression and communication, which encompasses the whole person. It's an extension of one's self. It begins on the inside, with our personality, our lifestyle, values, likes, dislikes, mannerisms, and it permeates all areas of life.

I've always believed that style is quite different than fashion because fashion is more of a cultural what's on trend, follow the pack type thing. But style on the other hand, is being unapologetically who you are. It's how you carry yourself, it's how you live your life, and it's really not worrying about the latest fads. I think that style goes way beyond apparel, accessories, and makeup.

Ricky Enger: There's definitely more to style than just, this is how things look. Are there examples of somebody expressing their style in a way that isn't necessarily visual, but still very much says something about, hey this is who I am?

Stephanae McCoy: Yes. I mean, when I think about some of the stylish people that I know and their personality, I hope you can hear the smile in my face, because I'm thinking of one person in particular. He has such unique style, and it just exudes beyond anything that you can imagine. I mean, just talking to him on the phone, it's just like you just start smiling because you can picture him. And it's not a visual thing, but it's just his personality and he's so confident. I love that.

I do believe that there is a visual aspect to style, but I don't think that that's all there is to it. I think it's so much more than simply appearance. I think it's a way of being. It's confidence, even when you might not feel confident because you're being yourself and nobody can be better at being you than you.

When I think back on my style, I think what stood out most, was my innate self-awareness. Being an introvert helped me to develop that because I felt like an outsider. I never really felt like I fit in. A little childhood trauma also added to that and it played a role in helping me to find my individual style because I had to be self-reliant.

Ricky Enger: Yeah, and all of that, you're right, comes across in: how do you walk, how do you speak? All of those things are a part of who you are and represent your style. There still are visual characteristics about what we do and how we present ourselves to the world, and that can be a challenge if you are not able to glance in the mirror as you walk by now, or you're getting older and changes are happening that you may not even be aware of, like is my foundation actually enhancing my wrinkles, instead of hiding things? Do I need a touch up if I'm coloring my hair? That kind of thing. How can you remain confident in what it is that you are presenting to the world? Are there practical tips for just gathering some of this information that you're used to getting visually and you can't get it that way anymore?

Stephanae McCoy: That is one thing that I really struggled with in the early days of my sight loss, specifically as it relates to makeup because as I said, I was working for this big four accounting firm and I had a certain look that felt comfortable to me, and I used certain products that I relied on for of years. And now because of my eye condition, I had to let go of some things and I had to make some changes.

At first, it was hard because it's like, "Oh my God, what am I going to do? What are people going to think?" Then it was like look, you can only do the best you can. Liquid eyeliner, for example, I had to let go of it, so I just didn't wear it. I wore my pencil eyeliner on my bottom lids, but I let go of the liquid, and I just went about my business and just did the best I can. I did a lot of positive self-talk to keep myself focused on what was really important and not so concerned about things that I could not control.

My first tip is practicing good hygiene and grooming. These are very essential elements to help us feel good about ourselves. If you do that, you'll automatically feel better about yourself because you're clean, you're fresh, you're sparkling, your hair is groomed.

And then, making sure that clothing adequately fits your body. Clothing is far more flattering on your body when it fits you. No matter what your size or shape, as long as it fits well and flatters your body, you will look good. Ensuring that your clothing is clean and wrinkle free and also following the manufacturer instructions on the care. I think that's important because it adds to the longevity of the clothing. Investing in quality clothing, versus fast fashion. It's the clothing that you get at some of these less expensive stores. I mean, they're changing the fashion so quickly. It used to be months, but now it's a matter of weeks. They're producing so much of it, that it's almost like disposable clothing. What I like about investing in quality clothing, you don't have spend a fortune on it. I love going to previously loved clothing stores and a lot of times, I find stuff that still has tags on it at a very minimal cost.

When trying to determine your personal style, I would recommend seeking guidance from a friend or a family member. If you can't do that, perhaps a stylist or an image consultant. You might want to check around with department stores because many of them offer those types of consultations as part of their service. You just want to check ahead to make sure that's something that they offer, and they can help you figure out what works for you.

I'm a great believer in keeping things simple, so when I began losing my sight, I can't tell you how instrumental that was in helping me to be able to structure my wardrobe, my makeup. Everything was just so much easier for me to use because I had paired down what was no longer essential for me, so keeping things simple. And that's not for everyone, but it worked for me.

And then finally, I think just being a good person, being a kind person, and being a person who puts others first, while still being true to yourself, I think that's really important. That's one of the things that we don't talk about when we talk about fashion, and style, and beauty, we don't talk about the inner person and that's one of the things that Bold Bind Beauty really dives into.

Ricky Enger: I love that point. I think it's easy to get caught up in, well this is how I look, and it matters tremendously. And certainly, it does, but we tend to beat up on ourselves a bit and maybe if we were a little kinder to ourselves, just let that kindness spread out to other people as well, all of that comes through. You talk about hearing a smile in somebody's voice or something like that, it's all a part of the package and it's super important.

Back, I guess then, to some of the visual aspects of style. And if you're trying to figure out: who am I, what is it that I want to express to the world? A lot of people maybe flip through magazines in the waiting room, or they just look around at what people are wearing out in public, that you would just naturally pick up as you're looking at what people are wearing, how do they look? What are their hairstyles? Is there a way that people can still gather that information without having just that instantaneous I looked around and I saw something?

Stephanae McCoy: I think today, with the internet and social media platforms, it's made it so much easier to gather this information. On Facebook, for example, there's a group run by Sassy Outwater. We actually featured her on our podcast last year. It's called Acsexyble Runway, and it's spelled A-C-S-E-X-Y-B-L-E. It's a play on the words accessible and sexy because we can be sexy as people with disabilities, and I think that's very important to remember. What she's done, is created this group and as it's a place for people with disabilities to come together to talk about their fashion challenges and they help one another. They also even go deeper into discussion and talk about dating and just various things that affect our community.

Then there's a huge movement in the adaptive clothing industry. Many of these small company are coming together to spread the message of diversity includes disability. My personal friends, Alexa Jovanovic, she's the founder of Aille Design. She makes beautiful clothing with fully legible braille. And then my other friend, Alex Herold, she's the founder of Patti + Ricky, the adaptive fashion marketplace, she serves adults and kids with disabilities, chronic conditions, patients, seniors, and caregivers.

There's just so many brands on Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook, where people across the disability spectrum can engage, ask questions, get answers, and truly be involved in a process, even helping to create accessible clothing. These companies are interested in gathering that feedback and input to make their products better for the community.

There's another company called Stitch Fix and it's my understanding they've improved the accessibility on their website. I haven't been out there in years, but they are a good resource because they ask a lot of real in-depth questions to get a handle on your likes and dislikes, in order to send you outfits that would suit your style.

Ricky Enger: Yeah, interestingly enough, that is one of the things that I was going to say, is that Stitch Fix does this kind of thing. There are not as many sites as I would like, but there are some sites that are really getting into giving good descriptions of what the clothing is. So if you go and you're like lakeshore, what color is that even supposed to be? Some companies are doing a little better job of describing and not just leaving it up to the picture to do that.

Your site is a really, really great example of just how the descriptions of a picture can help so much. The description of your headshot is amazing. I could easily picture what you looked like and what you were wearing, simply because it was described in text. It's a great time to see that kind of thing becoming more and more common. I think it's important if you’re thinking about making a style change. If you're saying to yourself, "I'm not the same person I was 10 years ago, why should I look that way? I would like to step outside this comfort zone," are there ways that people can do that? Are there different considerations for altering your style, getting a new style, as opposed to just maintaining this is how I look, this is how I always looked, that kind of thing?

Stephanae McCoy: I think that making a style change is fine and I think that it can be a mood-enhancing experience. While my style has remained somewhat the same, I think I'm more casual now today than I was years ago when I was out working because I was all about business. I loved wearing my little pencil skirts and heels. I just loved that. But today, it's tennis shoes, it's joggers. And I feel comfortable in that too, so I am far more comfortable in a laid-back style.

One area that I let loose, is my hair. I do that in the form of wigs and/or extensions. I've worn long braids, I've worn long and short wigs, different colors, styles, textures. And each time, I always felt like I had a temporary persona. That was my way of breaking out of my style mode.

I would recommend though, for those that are interested in changing styles, is to follow the tips that I provided earlier: So, making sure that clothing fits your body, that it works for your body, for your size and shape; investing quality; also considering colors that are flattering on you. For that, you might want to get some help from a stylist, or a colorist, or a trusted friend or family member. The most important part is really just to experiment and have fun.

Ricky Enger: What happens though when you are super excited about making this change, and you're doing something a little different, and most of your friends and family are really supportive and like, "Hey, go you. Do what feels great for you." But then, some people, it's like when a band releases new music and some fans are like, "But it's not like the old one," and they're providing just some negative feedback to you. Are there ways that people deal with that, knowing that, hey you're not going to meet with everyone's approval? But how do you stay confident when you've chosen something that makes you feel good?

Stephanae McCoy: Yeah. You know what? That is such an important point. You know, broadly speaking, in my opinion, if it makes you feel good, go for it. None of us, like you said, are ever going to be able to fully please everyone. And after all, it's our life to do with what we will. It can be difficult though and frustrating navigating the opinions of people who are close to us. I think if we do the internal work on ourselves, where we're building up our confidence, we can do this without causing a major ruckus.

I think the important thing to remember, is that the people who are closest to us, they're typically motivated by their love and care for us. But ultimately, we have to be the ones that are able to come to a point where we're comfortable putting ourselves out there even if we're making a mistake. Even people who have vision, have sight, will make a style mistake or a fashion mistake, because guess what? We're human. None of us are perfect. It's all about just living your life, doing it to the best of your ability.

Ricky Enger: I love that. And just surrounding yourself with people who love you and being willing to figure out, okay I accept this opinion and this one, I'm just going to go forward even if maybe everyone's not agreeing with it, because feels good to me, so I'm going to do it.

We've talked about a lot today and it's been really, really fun. I feel like we've gone on this whirlwind style adventure, but maybe there are some things that you want to share with the audience that we didn't touch on. Just as we wrap up here, any final thoughts?

Stephanae McCoy: Whatever your definition of fashion and style is, just embrace it as your own. If you're a little anxious, take small steps, try a different haircut or style. For those who like makeup, try a different lip color, play with eyeshadow. There's nail colors or better yet, even nail art. All of these things can help you to express your personality. And don't worry so much about not getting it right because everyone who starts on this journey, in the beginning, doesn't get it right. It's a process. Finally, as a diehard introvert myself, I'd like to say that it's important to remember that once we're able to fully embrace ourselves for who we are, we are liberated from the tyranny of others' definitions of us.

Ricky Enger: I love it. That's perfectly put, wow. Thank you so much for stopping by. As I mentioned earlier in the show, Bold Blind Beauty, that link is going to be in the show notes, along with other things that we've mentioned here. I appreciate just your tips and your authenticity. It's been wonderful spending a bit of time with you, Steph. Thank you.

Stephanae McCoy: Thank you, Ricky.

Ricky Enger: Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu that's P-O-D-C-A-S-T@hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at (847) 784-2870. Thanks for listening.