

## Disability Visibility at USF Podcast Interview Series

### Episode 4: Theresa Gallo

Liz: Hello and welcome to another episode of the Disability Visibility podcast at USF. I'm Liz Kicak the director of the USF Humanities Institute and I'm so happy to be joined today by Theresa Gallo, Teresa welcome.

Theresa: Thank you for having me.

Liz: ah it's our pleasure. So I thought we would start by maybe just introducing yourself telling us a little bit um about your major and then why you wanted to be on the podcast today.

Theresa: okay um well I'm an Anthropology major. I focus on archaeology so it's- instead of the study of present culture it's the study of past culture and advocacy is really important to me. It's important to me because, if the people who- the people who have a voice can't use it, then it's my responsibility, who does have a voice, who feels like I can help myself and other people like myself or even not the same as me.

Liz: awesome and you're getting ready to graduate I heard, yes?

Theresa: yes

Liz: that is very exciting congratulations that's a huge milestone.

Theresa: thank you so much.

Liz: um so I know you had um told me that you wanted to talk a little bit about your specific disability and um what it was that you wanted to let people know.

Theresa: so I have dyslexia and I also have dysgraphia and dyscalculia. So sometimes I wonder why I'm in school [laughter] with those three disabilities. And the biggest thing that I feel people don't understand about it is that it's not that I can't read. It's not that I can't write. It's not that I can't do math. It's that these things are incredibly difficult for me on different bases.

Liz: So I've heard of dyslexia before um but I suspect, you know, if I haven't heard of the others and I know probably some of our listeners haven't either, could you tell us a little bit about the other two things that you mentioned?

Theresa: So dyslexia is obvious- like not obviously, because some people don't know this um it's a reading disorder and disability. For some people it has the stereotypical you read backwards or you see letters backwards. For some people the letters jump around, for others they fly across the page. For me the best way that I like to explain it is that I'm looking at another language even though I grew up with the English language.

Liz: yeah that makes sense.

Theresa: And then there is the times where it likes to float around and move around and you just don't understand the words. Dysgraphia is basically when you have problems putting words to paper. So I'm a

very articulate person. I can explain what I mean, explain what I want to say and can convey during conversations. I do not sound the same way when I write.

Liz: Interesting okay that makes yeah that makes sense.

Theresa: I do not sound at all the same way when I write. A lot of times dyslexia is used as an umbrella term for both dysgraphia and dyscalculia when you have um sometimes it's referred to as like number blindness you just switch numbers. Like if you were to give me um a phone number, if I were to recite it back to you, um I might switch, you know, the six and the five or the five in the six or, you know, the last number I heard was the zero so I stick that someplace because I heard it.

Liz: Got ya, okay, yeah that's that is really helpful the way you sort of you know describe those things, you know, as distinct um sort of processes. So could you tell us a little bit about what your- the last couple of years have been like at USF? What it's been like to be a college student navigating um the academic world um with dyslexia?

Theresa: It was extremely um frustrating.

Liz: Really?

Theresa: Yes because I don't have a physical disability. I don't look like I have a disability. You hand that paper to someone and the thought process is, "you don't look like you need it."

Liz: yeah that makes sense. Have you found that different faculty members respond differently or is it a pretty uniform like dismissal of it?

Theresa: So I am incredibly lucky being an anthropology major. Advocacy is our whole thing. Regardless if it's disability or race or ethnicity we're a very um- we like to try to understand where the other people come from. So I was really lucky that in my major, I never had open problems with people not understanding my dyslexia. I even found a few people who have dyslexia within the department and one of the doctoral students I'm extraordinarily close to and she told me a lot of different ways on how to work with my dyslexia instead of against it.

Liz: oh that's super helpful.

Theresa: It is [laughter].

Liz: And we've heard from- I've done a lot of different interviews and it seems like one of the things that everybody, you know, tends to bring up is how wonderful it is when they find a support network.

Theresa: It is. So I have a wonderful friends who help me that I found through the anthropology department. I have professors who will reword tests for me. I have people who will help me go over my papers to make sure that they are legible and the right words that I'm trying to convey are there. My best friend actually, who graduated last year, helps me fix my papers [laughter] because I don't know how to.

Liz: Awesome. We all need an editor, like we all need- we all need that person.

Theresa: We all need that person so I am incredibly lucky that I have a wonderful, wonderful support group that honestly- I know like my own merit, I got through school with me, but I wouldn't have done it without them, I just wouldn't have been able to.

Liz: Yeah. Are there things that you think USF could do differently to better support students um either who have disabilities in general or maybe for you specifically, like you said, a visibility that's not physical or not apparent, are there things you wish USF did differently to maybe help train teachers or...?

Theresa: Absolutely I think one thing for everyone is getting out and understanding what a disability is what it means to have a disability. That sometimes it's not the grit of a person that allows you to get over a disability. Sometimes you can't. That when you tell someone with dyslexia or dysgraphia or ADHD, which is at times considered a disability, um you can't just tell them to read, you can't just tell them to write or focus because it's the same mentality as telling someone in that wheelchair, "just walk." And I absolutely think that a lot of it is just understanding what a disability is. Having accessible ramps for everyone, making sure the elevators work just as well in the Marshall Center as they work in any other building, even the ones we don't think about.

Liz: Yeah I think that's a great a great point. I've gotten a chance to talk with um so many different students and I think everybody has sort of been of the consensus that we, as a USF community, can do better can do much much better. And I know that our office of Student Accessibility Services um I'm gonna get to chat with some folks from there next week. And um I suspect some of what we're going to talk about is how they're trying to make those changes and then what challenges they're encountering, whether that's financially, whether that's infrastructure, what that is that might be slowing- making that process slower than we would want. Because I think I- in an email with them I think I read that they have about 2500 students registered through SAS, which in a campus as large as ours, does not seem like it's anywhere close to the right number.

Theresa: No, I mean there's- I know a lot of students who do have some sort of thing that they would go under, um but sometimes they're so frustrated from other experiences, whether it's USF or a community college or um high school even, but they just don't want to go through the hassle. And at times, standing there being frustrated, I totally understand that. Like there are times where I feel that I've been helped through them but there are also times where I feel like they just made the situation worse.

Liz: Yeah is the paperwork side of it really difficult? Another student had mentioned that just obtaining the paperwork that she needed was an exhaustive process.

Theresa: So for me, I don't remember it being that bad. However, I had the accommodations ready to go from community college and they were all up to date. So I can see where if you took that break between high school and perhaps USF and you're starting out as a freshman and you're trying to figure out okay well I have a disability whether it's physical um- I don't like to use mental, but invisible, disability or anything like that, I can see where that would be incredibly hard because if you have a- if you have a learning disability, like say you have dyslexia or you have another one, you have to go to a psychologist to get tested again. Now I've been dyslexic since we found out about it at the age of like 10 I believe. That status is not changing for me [laughter]. I'm not growing out of it. Some people do. I think really people just figure out what works for them and it doesn't bother them as much. But I never grew out of it, I'm always going to have dyslexia it's never going to change. And this mentality that it might- because I remember having anxiety being like, oh my god what if I don't have dyslexia? Like what if they find out that I don't have it and then I realize like that's silly like yeah I'm always going to have it, like it's not a test you do and you either pass or you don't. [Laughter]

Liz: That is an extra stress oh my goodness.

Theresa: And the thing is, is that like I can absolutely imagine going through that process alone not understanding that and that you just have anxiety. And the thing is is that if you're in a wheelchair or you um you have some other disability where maybe it's more physical you can go to the doctor and be like, hey I need these physical accommodations can you send like can you fill this out? But still that's that anxiety that maybe the doctor won't do it for whatever reason. So like I can absolutely understand where that paperwork [inaudible] in like you just you have this fear that, for some reason, someone's gonna tell you no and it's so much easier just to struggle and perhaps drop out.

Liz: No that makes that makes a tremendous amount of sense. Is there anything else you definitely want to make sure we talk about or do you feel like we covered we covered things?

Theresa: I also want to point out that, not only is it about getting other people to understand whatever disability it is, it's partially a journey with yourself. I didn't understand what I'm allowed to do and not do. Like I didn't understand what advocating for myself was and I do think that a big thing that could help students coming in, is understanding advocacy for themselves, what it means to them, whether or not they're comfortable disclosing their disability. If they're not, how do they advocate for themselves without saying whatever it is. And I understand not everyone's like me. I have dyslexia...whatever. [laughter] But, if you're not comfortable with that, that's perfectly fine. But you still have to know how to advocate for yourself, because as much as the department of accessibilities wants to help you, they can only help you so much. And for me, I think one of the first steps is having the people with whatever disability it is understand and figure out how to help themselves. Because no one teaches you that. No one helps you understand that, that's a struggle that you have to deal with from point a to point b. That's stuff I'm still struggling with.

Liz: Yeah I was gonna say do you have any like suggestions for people who are maybe learning this act of self-advocacy?

Theresa: So first off, my advice is be patient with yourself, just always be patient with yourself. You'll understand what you need the best. The hardest thing is when a professor looks at your accommodation letter and says what can I do to help you? What helps you the most? Because you're not used to being asked that and it changes from semester to semester. Once you figure out what works one semester, for me, the next semester everything changed everything went out the window. Sometimes being read a textbook would be helpful, sometimes a note taker would be helpful, sometimes the note taker wasn't helpful at all, [laughter] sometimes the smartpad was the saving grace that semester and other times, I barely touched it. So be patient, and it's okay to ask for help and learn as much as you can about what you have because, if you learn about it, if you understand it, then you can also figure out how it affects you and ways to deal with that. And you can also explain it better to other people your needs.

Liz: That's- I think that's fantastic advice um yeah and you know I think everybody learning to trust yourself and advocate for what you need is a really difficult thing and I suspect trying to navigate um the university system, which is which is always difficult, but having to navigate um with an invisible disability that people don't always understand has got to be- be an extra challenge.

Theresa: It's not always the easiest thing but, I got through it. Other people can get through it.

Liz: Yeah no that's- that's great. Well Theresa, thank you so much for joining us this afternoon and um sharing your wonderful insight and your personal history and I just- I really really appreciate your time. And congratulations on graduating here in about another month.

Theresa: Thank you and it was amazing talking to you and everyone listening.

Liz: Thank you. And so to our listeners, please join us for our next episode of Disability Visibility podcast at USF. Thank you.