

Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 80: Fashion

Guest: Stephanie Thomas

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by [Cheryl Green](#)

For more information: DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/podcast

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hello, hello, hello! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong. Today's episode is about fashion with Stephanie Thomas. Stephanie is a Disability Fashion Styling Expert and Founder and CEO of Cur8able, a business dedicated to the art and science of dressing with disabilities. For over two decades, Stephanie researched clothing and retail trends exclusively for people with disabilities. As an amputee herself, Stephanie believes that this is more than her profession; it's her lived experience. You'll hear about how she got into fashion, what it's like being a disabled entrepreneur, what it means to be a stylist, and more. Are ya ready?! Away. We. Go! [electronic beeping]

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

ALICE: Stephanie, thank you so much for being on my podcast today!

STEPHANIE THOMAS: Yeah, it's my pleasure, Alice. It's so nice to do this to.

ALICE: So, Stephanie, why don't you introduce yourself and share a little bit about your background if you like.

STEPHANIE: My name is Stephanie Thomas, and I am a disability fashion stylist. And I'm a founder and CEO of Cur8able, which is a small LLC that's dedicated to making sure that we address solutions for dressing with disability. And this is a space that I've loved and have been a part of for 28 years. It started as a hobby, as a result of being in the Miss America preliminary pageant system in the state of Kentucky, and that hobby became my life's work. And today, I am based in Los Angeles, California, still doing that work. And I'm thrilled to see the industry beginning to talk more about dressing with disabilities as a part of the zeitgeist.

ALICE: How did you first start loving fashion or having interest in fashion?

STEPHANIE: It's like breathing for me. It's not a love of necessarily fashion designers in that sense. I just enjoy clothing, personally, and I enjoy beautiful clothing. And I enjoy redesigning and reconstructing clothing. So, that's kind of where I just naturally started to migrate toward it.

ALICE: And what is powerful about fashion and wearing something that makes you feel you? What is the kind of power of fashion in your opinion?

STEPHANIE: I mean, for me, as a Black woman in America, I literally have ancestors who, the clothing that they wore represented the idea that other human beings had enslaved them. So, just like in other parts of the world, even where there were caste systems, and based upon where you were caste in the system, your clothing determined your power or lack of power. So, as a woman living with a disability that's not often acknowledged as a disability—because I don't necessarily in some people's eyes seem disabled enough—it means a lot to me to be able to advocate for other people and say, "Hey! You can break out of these horrible myths and misconceptions about disabilities by using something as simple as a tool of clothing or other fashion items. And wear what you love and take authority and power over your own life." And that doesn't have to mean that someone is a fashionista at all. It means that you have the ability to dress with as much dignity and independence, with or without a dresser, as possible. That's the power of it for me: you taking control of your own identity, defining your own self-efficacy, building up your own self-esteem.

[bright electronic music break]

The initial thing was I was standing in the kitchen of the woman that was my pageant coach in like 1992, and I wasn't buttoning my left cuff on my shirts. They had very small buttons. You know how buttons on cuffs on button-down shirts are really small. So, I just never buttoned them, and it kind of became a signature look for me. But it annoyed her. She just wanted me to look pristine in her eyes and that sort of thing. And so, when she asked me had I ever thought about clothing for people with disabilities, I was like, oh, there must be something out here. You know, I don't know. Maybe some other 20-somethings weren't like this, but I've always tried to, especially in my 20s, I'm like, oh, I definitely can find that. I can research this. I can find it. I call it my era of being a know it all and knowing nothing. But [laughs] that motivated me kind of start researching. And then I started to think about my own experiences with footwear, how much shamed I felt when I would go into the stores and had to take off my shoes and not be able to wear certain sandals with dresses, and just not be able to dress the way that I personally desire. I don't really like pants, but I wear them a lot 'cause I don't always have the shoes that I want to wear with certain things. And that was until I started developing my styling system. But yeah, Alice, I think it was both. I think it started out just for me being like, oh, there must be something out there. The fuel is my own experience because I know that shame. I know what it feels like to feel like I have to apologize or feel ashamed of how I was literally born, something I had nothing to do with.

ALICE: Yeah. Was there a piece of clothing, or is there something memorable in your past, something that you wore that just really kind of made you feel like a hot queen and just really did it for you as a catalyst in terms of your love of fashion?

STEPHANIE: Well, I love dresses. And so, this is gonna sound like it's not true, but it really is. So, Marcia Brady used to always wear these miniskirts and mini-dresses. And that really had an impact on me because I was like, I mean, I grew up really loving skirts and dresses. So, for me, that is what makes me feel most like myself, even today.

[bright electronic music break]

Joys and challenges of being a disabled entrepreneur

ALICE: You started your own business and have been in business for quite long. What are the joys and challenges of being a disabled entrepreneur, if you don't mind sharing?

STEPHANIE: I never started out to have business. At all. As a matter of fact, I thought this would only be a pageant platform, but then I just could not stop researching. I mean, one article, you know, the bibliography that that researcher used on that article led me to so many other articles that I literally never stopped researching. Some of the joys of being an entrepreneur are simply found in the fact that I get to say how I impact the world, how I use my talent to impact the world. And another joy is that you really have to believe in yourself and understand that. I mean, that what people overlooked and didn't see as really a market, I was able to see it. And I'm not the first. I mean, there were people 1930s, 1940s that did this work and did this research as Occupational Therapists, as Home Ec instructors, and so many other researchers and people. But for me, it just makes me happy that when people laughed at me and told me no and said ridiculous things behind closed doors, it really fueled me to be able to say, you know what? I know what I'm talking about, and I'm gonna do this myself.

The challenges of having a small business, being a Black woman and being a woman with a disability is oftentimes, people don't necessarily desire to fund your business the way that they would a non-minority. Let's just be completely honest. They will look at me, and although I'm a woman that has two master's degrees, over 19 years' experience of being an adjunct professor, following these clothing trends for almost three decades, sometimes people have come to me, Alice, and said, "Hey! We want you to work with our company. We want you to help us build a new brand." And then they wanna offer me something like \$15,000 to help them tap into a billion-dollar industry. They would never ask a man to do that. They would never ask a man to give them their intellectual property for the amount that some people get paid to do speaking gigs. That is an issue that I deal with every day. It is not an issue that limits me because I don't put my faith in man. I put my faith in the fact that I need to do a job, and that there is no human being that can stop me from doing what I'm here to do.

ALICE: Yeah, that's awesome. And I think that speaks to the challenges of just being in a industry where it's still rather hostile to all kinds of diverse people. That's part of the hustle, right? Disabled people are just constantly hustling just to do what they want to do, but also to do things on their own terms.

STEPHANIE: Yeah. And I think there's a real conversation that's happening now around ableism in fashion. But I'm on the bandwagon that before we even talk about ableism, we need to even be able to articulate the word "disability" and to remove the stigma associated with the word "disability." Now, when it comes to self-identification, if people choose to use whatever term they want to use to self-identify. But I like to quote Tatiana Lee, who said that there are literal laws in the United States and other parts of the world associating with the term and with the word "disability." And when you remove that, you not only, in my opinion, remove culture. And when you remove the word "disabled" or certain things like that, you take away the power. And so, you're right. There's a lot of hostility, but it's a lack of knowledge. I mean, we live in a nation where people were taught to not look at people with disabilities or keep people with any type of, or various disabilities in basements or in their homes or in institutions. So, it is a re-imagining and a re-education of what it means to be disabled or as a person with a disability, however you'd like to describe: identity first or people first, it's a re-education.

[bright electronic music break]

Stephanie's approach to working with clients

ALICE: So, you dress and style a lot of amazing disabled women: models, actors, all kinds of folks. So, what's your approach to working with your clients, and how do you wanna make them feel?

STEPHANIE: My approach to it is my disability fashion styling system. It has three major pillars. First, I make sure the clothing is accessible, that it's easy to put on and take off. I make sure that it's smart for their health and making sure it's medically safe. And then finally, the thing that people mostly leave off is I make sure it's fashionable: something that they love, something that works with their body type and with their lifestyle. And then finally, the way that I want my client to feel is I want my client to feel like they are just the version of themselves that they see in their mind. I think that people should have control over their identity, but I think that that happens through trust. I try to co-create is what I call it. I try to co-create with my clients so that they can have right of refusal. And if there's something that I'm really passionate about that I want them to trust me, I generally put that off until I've established that trust, and I've earned a right for them to trust me. I'm not there to be a bully pulpit. The fashion industry's been doing that. And no shade to the fashion industry, but it's always been this, this is what's in; this is what's out. So, I'm not there to do that. I'm there to educate and co-create. And then once I've earned their trust, they're like, "Whatever you want. Whatever you think." Then, that's when I really play. I don't know everything. And then a lot of my clients don't follow fashion, so they may not know what's happening. Or you know, I don't tell all of my trade secrets, but they don't know what I'm looking at and what I'm thinking about. So, but I think you have to earn the right to get that trust, if that makes sense.

ALICE: Yeah! And without naming names, is there an example of a client where, let's say you both came in with different ideas, or just something where it ended up being a really wonderful collaboration that may have surprised you?

STEPHANIE: Well, I think that's everyone. They all surprise me because what I try to do is I try to really listen to the client, and I try to hear their fears. And then once I've heard that, I have to then pull away and listen to my gut. So, I think if I pull the dress, the shoes, they may have a suggestion for the earrings. What happens with that is it allows us both to take pride in the look. And so, yes, for my work, [chuckles] I do require that my clients credit me because that's my work, and that's how I get more work. And that's how people have an understanding of, well, this is what she does. But I think with each of them, I'm always pleasantly surprised that we can come together, agree on something. But then once I get their input, Alice, I definitely kinda go off in my own little corner, and then I just research or kinda meditate on it. And I just make sure that I'm trusting my gut. Because when I know what it is, I get that click like [gasps]. I get that realization, and then that's what I go with. And it hasn't steered me wrong yet.

ALICE: And I think so many of us, we've been indoctrinated by these kind of like rules, right, like these ideas like, oh, I can't wear this because of X, Y, Z. So, do you feel like sometimes, not just the media, but the fashion defense industry makes people feel like they are doing something wrong, like their choices are wrong?

STEPHANIE: I think yes and no. So, there is an art and science to fashion, just like there is any industry. And I wanna be really respectful of the industry because I do understand a, it's a business, but b, just like beauty, you're creating an illusion with fashion. So, if a client has scoliosis, and there's something that I can put in place, and then I give that client, "Hey, here's how, if you want to balance your shoulders out, this is exactly how we're going to do it." That then becomes a rule. But it's not a rule to limit them. It's a rule to allow them to get the look that they'd like to look. There's another thing that I really believe in: if I have a client that's curvy, and she says, "I want to look slimmer because I have a seated body type," but then she wants to wear horizontal stripes, I'm just like, "You know what? Try on the horizontal. Try on the vertical. You'll see why the vertical, visually, is more slimming than the horizontal." Now, she can wear the horizontal as she'd like, but if she's asking me to help her create a more slimmer silhouette

for photo, then I have to be honest with her. Now am I gonna tell her never to wear horizontal stripes? No. But take a picture of yourself, and see what it does to the camera's eye. So, that is a way in which I think the rules apply that will help.

Then other things like not wearing white pants after a certain time, I think that's a little frivolous in my mind, to know the rules that don't apply anymore. And, you know, I remember a cover of *Vogue* with Lady Gaga just a few years ago where it said, the rules no longer apply, basically. And it was talking about dressing real bodies. So, I think that's the direction that the bloggers and social media has pushed fashion in more of what Tommy Hilfiger refers to as the democratization of fashion. So, hopefully, we're moving away from rules that seem frivolous and something that's intended to control consumerism and more towards things that can actually help people solve issues that they have. Because I do have people that say, "Stephanie, I wanna look more snatched," or "Stephanie, I wanna look taller. Stephanie," this and this. And so, if I give them a rule associated with that, I don't see that as something that's hindering. But if I were just like, "Here's the rule. You never wear this or never wear that," I don't think I'm in a position to say that.

[bright electronic music break]

What styling means and tips for everyday people

ALICE: And what does it mean to style someone or something?

STEPHANIE: The work that is involved [laughs knowingly], it's not glamorous. Let's just say that! I think that's the number one myth. People look at it, and they think it's so glamorous. My job is to support the people that I work for. They're gonna be the ones on the red carpet. They're gonna be the one in the photo. But there are also very few people that are in my position as a stylist that are focusing exclusively on people with disabilities, and that's the work that I'm doing. So, when I'm wanting to receive just features in, like the BoF 500 of people moving the global fashion industry forward and then stylists that I love, like Karla Welch and Jason Bolden that are on these lists. And for me to be on that list with them as a person helping to move the global fashion industry forward and being the only disability fashion stylist on that list, I wanna be known within my industry. But it's my job to really shine a light on my clients. There is a lot of work, a lot of tedious things that you have to do, a lot of schlepping, I call it, dragging clothing here and there, mailing back clothing. You know, there's a lot to it that people don't understand. It is actually work.

ALICE: Yeah, and it's more than just clothing. I think styling is all about this complete look. So, in addition to just selecting the right clothes, how do you make your complete look?

STEPHANIE: It depends on my clients, right? So, sometimes when I work with someone like to Tamara Mena, she'll say, "Steph, what do you think about the whole look? What do you think about the makeup? What do you think about the hair?" And then I'll send over some kind of inspiration images to her. And since she's so great at doing her hair and makeup along with the clothing, we create a look from head to toe. There is a look on my social media of her in this dress that I then puddled on the floor. It was for a cover shot, so it wasn't something that she was intended to move around in. So, we could play with it and make it a little bit more editorial. And that whole look, I just said, let's do some old Hollywood glamour. That was the inspiration for that look.

ALICE: Mhmm. What are some tips you have for just everyday folks on developing their own style?

STEPHANIE: Well, I would say personal style is different from fashion. I think really doing some homework. Figuring out what your personal style is can be quite easy. And here's how you do it. The one thing that I would tell you to do if you don't use Pinterest or anything like that, go on camera or even just use a Word or any kind of pdf doc, and then just screenshot things that attract you, anything that catches your eye over time, and just build this page. If there's a color that you love anything. Maybe you like minimalist furniture. Maybe you like feathers or lace or anything that draws yours attention. And then if you see a hairstyle you like or if you see clothing on someone else you like ,that's where I would start kind of getting an idea. And then once you can look at those images collectively, you'll start to get a better idea of what you truly love. Because you're not analyzing, it's like, "Oh, I can't do this. I can't do that. Oh, only if I could do this." That's where people go wrong with personal style. They start by deleting what they think they can and can't do. But if you start being open to what you love, then you discover your style. And then that's when you hire someone like me and say, "Hey, this is my style. How do I make this work?" Or this is my style. Now I need to see what's in my closet, see what needs to be donated to the Salvation Army or reconstructed or whatever. And then that's how you build your style.

And it does not happen overnight. I know. I'm in the middle of doing this myself, so I'm not just preaching to you. I'm telling you what I'm doing. I'm learning what I love today, not what I loved last year or when I was this size or. And then I will approach it from, OK, this is what I love. Let's make a plan. And the one thing people don't do, Alice, they always tell me how expensive adaptive fashion is. But then they'll go to Starbucks or somewhere and spend \$5 on a coffee six times a week. I think you have to start thinking about it as a priority. 'Cause I know a lotta times, we're discouraged from making fashion something important because we don't wanna seem like, oh, I'm not a fashionista. I just wanna look nice.

STEPHANIE: And the fashion industry is shifting. People are sick of all of this fashion waste with all of the fast fashion and things. And then, you know, now people are really looking at how dangerous a lot of those fabrics can be for our body with all of the chemicals and things that they use in it. And I do know that there are gonna be a lot of people that listen to this that are gonna say, "I can't afford anything by fast fashion." That's when you work with someone! Even if it's someone in the store. You say, "Look, this is my budget. This is what I'm doing. This is what I'm able to do." Figure out the things that you need the most. Like if you have some type of assistive technology that's gonna rub up against every shirt you wear or all the pants you wear. You have to be smart about that because a lot of people that use crunches on their forearms, it's really tough on clothing.

I think it's something that you have to think through. And when I think about dressing with disabilities, there's so many different types of disabilities. I'm trying to speak as general as possible because everything won't apply to everyone. But I do think being cognizant of exactly what it is you want to do with your style and what it means to you, that's gonna really start you off in the right place. Because you'll discover more about yourself, and it'll help guide you.

ALICE: Yeah. And hopefully then, people will think of this as something fun because—

STEPHANIE: Yes! Yes. [laughs]

ALICE: —it's about experimenting, also just mixing it up.

STEPHANIE: I agree with you. I think mixing it up is good. And the one thing that a lotta people don't listen to me on, until we get more adaptive clothing and stores made for people that have different body types, until we get more universally-designed clothing with disability in mind, get a

good tailor! No ready-to-wear is really ready to wear. So, even people without disabilities have a good tailor. I have ideas, but whenever I bring an idea or try to develop an idea, I work with a tailor! I tell them what I want, exactly what I see. I work with her, and I trust her to help me bring those ideas to life. You have to find someone you can afford and someone that's willing to work with you and that will listen to you and co-create with you.

[bright electronic music break]

The fashion industry and inclusion

ALICE: Fashion as we know it is really slowly changing to become more inclusive. I mean, we see more designers getting into adaptive fashion and designing for clothes that are really for all genders and body types—

STEPHANIE: Mmhmm.

ALICE: —hopefully, opening up more spaces. So, what would you like to see for the future of fashion, let's say, the next five to ten years. What do you wanna see?

STEPHANIE: There is a gap of information. I can stand in a room with people with disabilities, and I can't tell you how many rooms I've been in where people have never even heard the term "adaptive fashion." People that were born with disabilities didn't even know that there were options available to them. And then on the flip side of that, we need to have more than Tommy. Tommy is doing amazing work! Congratulations to Maura Horton and Mindy Scheier, the work they did with Tommy Adaptive and now with Tommy Adaptive has taken and run with. But we need more. We need more options.

I use Cur8able hopefully to bridge the gap between where the fashion industry is and where it must go. We need to have more people talking about the idea that there is adaptive fashion, that there are options. This is just the beginning. So, that's my dream for the future, really bridging that gap and using Cur8able to do that.

ALICE: It's so important that we also support and amplify disabled designers and disabled people who are creating clothes who are also really being innovative. And I think one example is Rebirth Garments, which is based in Chicago.

STEPHANIE: Mmhmm.

ALICE: Which is created and founded by Sky Cubacub. And Sky designs for all kinds of bodies, but very much about this queer, disabled bodies that's so joyful and so fun. So, I think that's one disabled designer that I think of a lot in terms of just, you know, what they're doing is so futuristic, fashion-forward.

STEPHANIE: I think I agree with you. I think that not only Rebirth, there are tons of other brands by mom and pops. Some are designers with disabilities as well or disabled designers. I do think that that's important. But what I would say to them is that you cannot present your brand as a functional brand and then get upset if people don't see it as a fashion brand. You have to raise the bar. And it is not expensive to do that: to get your iPhone and take a photo or do something that will create a story behind your brand. Now that you have something that's innovative, that's wonderful, create a story behind your brand so that it feels like fashion. People aren't gonna buy your clothing just because it's functional. I'm gonna keep it real, and I'm gonna tell you the truth. I work with the end user every day. And some things that people think people should be wearing because it's adaptive that's not attractive, they don't wanna wear it if the quality's not right, if it

doesn't work for their body type. And also, they want to wear a brand that they can be proud of, that they can Instagram, that they can feel like this is a fashion brand and not like an "other" brand. That's one of the things that I hear!

Goals and ambitions for the future

ALICE: Thank you for that. So, as we wrap up our conversation, I just am curious about your own kind of goals and ambitions. What's the future like for you? What do you wanna see for yourself?

STEPHANIE: I know within the next three to five years, I'd like to do more teaching on my topic. I want to continue to get on set. I want to continue to consult and work with brands. I love working with end users. And I am excited that there is a new fashion app. It's been out less than two years. It's called Wishi. And I will be the only disability fashion stylist on that app. It's a mainstream app. It's by Karla Welch who is a stylist for so many people here in Hollywood. And I'm just honored to be a part of the app. So, I wanna do more styling that way because everyone can't afford to hire me the way people here may be able to hire me and pay me to do specific one-on-one styling. But the app will allow me to style for more people. And I like it because then I can work with people from all over the world. They won't get me redesigning clothing like I do for Lolo or someone like that. But what they will get is they can shop my mood boards. I wanna continue to write about it, being a thought leader, speaking about it. That's what I really wanna do, Alice, I think really bridging that gap. I never wanna get out of the industry and out of the work because what informs my research, my speaking, and my teaching.

You know, I used to want Cur8able to be kind of this own place where people could find options for dressing with disabilities. But I really would love to have licensed content by Cur8able writers that would be included in *Vogue*, that would be included in other fashion outlets. Because I don't believe that separate is equal for a number of reasons. You know, I don't want it to be that. So, I want to continue to inform and educate, and without question, working in the industry as a stylist. And then as the industry shifts to where it's a place where they no longer need that gap filled, that the gap is filled, and we're at the place in the kind of the marketing curve where it's saturated and people know about it, then it's at that point that I can start teaching people more about my styling, my actual styling method, not just my styling system. So, I think for me, education is key. [bright ambient music returns and plays until the end] Doing the work and teaching and writing about it is what I love, and I just wanna move as the industry moves to help fill the gaps of what's needed.

ALICE: Wow. Thank you for that. Stephanie, thank you so much for being on my today.

STEPHANIE: Oh, yeah. You're so welcome. You're so welcome.

Wrap-up

[hip hop]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about Stephanie on my website.

The audio producer for this episode is Cheryl Green. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

Subscribe to our podcast on iTunes, Stitcher, Spotify, or Google Play. You can also support our podcast for \$1 a month or more by going to our Patreon page at Patreon.com/DVP. That's p-a-t-r-e-o-n dot com, slash DVP.

Thanks for listening! And see you on the Internets!

♪ Rock it to the blast off
Stop, drop, dance off ♪

ALICE: Byeaaaa!