

Happie Heads Podcast

Introduction

CHORUS OF YOUNG VOICES: Yay! Yay! Yay!

[upbeat, rhythmic music]

CHORUS OF YOUNG VOICES: Awww!

[music continues with a heavy baseline]

CHORUS OF YOUNG VOICES: Hey-o!

MICHAEL: OK.

CHERYL: [chuckles]

MICHAEL: So. I'm here with Cheryl Green. She, I mean, what haven't you done? You do podcasts, you do documentaries, you have a graduate degree in speech pathology, and you give talks at conferences, hospitals, churches--

CHERYL: Never done a hospital.

MICHAEL: OK.

CHERYL: Do a lot of college classes.

MICHAEL: OK.

CHERYL: Have I done a hospital?

MICHAEL: Colleges, OK.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

MICHAEL: Pretty much the same thing. Higher education realms. And you're a Portlander; you're a Portlandian. How long have you lived here?

CHERYL: Oh, you're starting with the hard question. Um, 2018. 15 years, 14, 15, yeah.

MICHAEL: OK. That's a good run. And before that, prior to that, you are from?

CHERYL: I'm a native Texan.

MICHAEL: Texan.

CHERYL: Yeah.

MICHAEL: San Antonio.

CHERYL: San Antonio.

The goofy questions warm-up and trying to not be a perfectionist anymore

MICHAEL: OK. Well, Cheryl, I usually start with some goofy questions. I hope we can do some.

CHERYL: I don't like goofy stuff, but I'll [laughing] just humor you.

MICHAEL: OK. All right. We'll try.

CHERYL: [laughs] Thank goodness. I love goofy stuff.

MICHAEL: Yeah, good. Well, I watched your--just a real quick digression--the Cooking With Brain Injury was hilarious.

CHERYL: Thank you.

MICHAEL: Yeah, and it's the type of humor that I love, that a lot of people are too cool to, like they're just like, "What was that?" OK, what do you mean, what was that? It was real. It was realistic. It was something that was honest, and it was hilarious. So, I really appreciate that.

CHERYL: Oh, I'm so glad. A lotta people won't laugh at that because they feel bad, like, I don't wanna laugh at a person with a disability. And I look at them, I say, "But I made a comedy. I made this for you, so you can laugh." And sometimes at screenings, I'll look out at the audience, and people are looking at me trying to figure out whether they should laugh. And I'm cracking up. I mean, I'm in it. I've seen it 100 times, and I laugh every time I watch it. But a lotta people are uncomfortable for the reasons you said but also because they feel guilty laughing at me. People with brain injury never feel bad about laughing at that show.

MICHAEL: Yeah!

CHERYL: They love it, and they love to yell at me afterwards: "Oh, my god. Why can't you cook right? You gotta do it like this. You gotta do it like this." They just love it, yeah.

MICHAEL: Yeah, and I love the intro. Or is that Friending? That's Friending With Brain Injury.

CHERYL: Oh.

MICHAEL: There's an intro that was simply you talking and saying, "This is not meant to be educational."

CHERYL: I don't remember!

MICHAEL: It was very straightforward like, "This is us being real."

CHERYL: Oh, that.

MICHAEL: "Let it go."

CHERYL: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I did that way after I made the film. I went back later because so many people were so confused, I went back and yeah, just sat in this little booth. And I'm just sitting there, "This is"-- I don't remember what I said, but yeah, I had to explain like, this is cool. I made this. You can watch it. You can laugh. It's gonna be OK. Don't cry. Yeah.

MICHAEL: So, let's start with the goofy questions.

CHERYL: OK.

MICHAEL: Some of them aren't goofy. First of all, favorite color.

CHERYL: Green!

MICHAEL: That's funny.

CHERYL: Why's it funny? [laughs]

MICHAEL: So, you're left-handed, and your favorite color's green. That is [laughs]--

CHERYL: That's not funny!

MICHAEL: That is my favorite color.

CHERYL: [gasps] OK.

MICHAEL: I'm also left-handed.

CHERYL: Yes!

MICHAEL: Why do you like green?

CHERYL: I think I like it because you do.

MICHAEL: [chuckles]

CHERYL: 'Cause the first time I met you, I was like, "I'm looking in the mirror. Like, identical twins separated at birth."

MICHAEL: [chuckles]

CHERYL: I mean, I think we were born maybe 22, 23 years apart.

MICHAEL: Sure, sure.

CHERYL: But that's practically twins.

MICHAEL: [laughs]

CHERYL: Why do I like green? It's the color of trees. It's the color of grass. It's really convenient that it's my last name. I think it's funny.

MICHAEL: Yes, yes.

CHERYL: I'm wearing green pants.

MICHAEL: Yes, you are.

CHERYL: Which is not why I like green, but I'm wearing green pants 'cause I like green. I think I like the color of the trees and the grass.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: And the ocean can be greenish. I love algae. Love it.

MICHAEL: [laughs] To eat or to look at?

CHERYL: Well, I love to look at it.

MICHAEL: OK.

CHERYL: I like to eat seaweed.

MICHAEL: Seaweed.

CHERYL: Yeah.

MICHAEL: Uh. OK. I think that in the spectrum of colors, you have red, violet, and green's in the middle. And I've always been kind of the balanced type of personality. I'm not a really hyper person or a really, really quiet, melancholic person. I'm somewhere in the middle on a lot of things in my life. So, I think maybe that's why I'm drawn towards the color green. I just had that conniption though, a month ago, driving down the road.

CHERYL: I love it! Wow, yeah.

MICHAEL: Try that answer out sometime. See how it feels. Maybe you'll be like, OK, that is true. [laughs]

CHERYL: It's not true for me. I'm definitely not in the middle.

MICHAEL: OK. [laughs] OK.

CHERYL: I'm a pretty high-strung person.

MICHAEL: [laughs] My theory's a little off then.

CHERYL: I love that theory though. That's really cool.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: That's a cool relationship to that color. Yeah.

MICHAEL: It is. So, another question is what is your favorite dessert?

CHERYL: [laughing] Oh!

MICHAEL: If that's possible to answer.

CHERYL: I don't really eat a lot-- So, recently I was at this thing, and our ice breaker was like, what kinda Halloween candy do you like? And my answer, I think, was, "water."

MICHAEL: [laughs]

CHERYL: 'Cause I don't like Halloween or candy.

MICHAEL: What do you indulge in, as far as food goes. Not guilty pleasure, just pleasure.

CHERYL: I really love bananas and sour cream. Oh. My. Goodness.

MICHAEL: Oh! That's a good combo.

CHERYL: Right? The sweet and sour? Yeah.

MICHAEL: Yeah, and the creaminess.

CHERYL: It's unbeatable. And if you take an overripe banana and freeze it and then take it out of the freezer and moosh it, it's ice cream. Just straight up banana. I mean, I eat junk food. Don't, don't, don't make this sound like [laughs] I have the cleanest living. But I don't really need dessert in my life.

MICHAEL: Mm.

CHERYL: But if I had to pick what would be my ultimate dream dessert, probably just a tub of frosting.

MICHAEL: [laughing] OK.

CHERYL: 'Cause I don't have time for the cake. It's dry and gross. Yeah.

MICHAEL: Yes, yes. Who eats the cake? It's like the top of the muffin, top of the cake. That's what you go for.

CHERYL: Yeah. Yeah. Let them have cake. Let them eat cake.

MICHAEL: [laughs]

CHERYL: I'm gonna eat the frosting.

MICHAEL: Let them eat cake!

CHERYL: [laughs]

MICHAEL: That's funny. OK. Good answer.

CHERYL: Whew.

MICHAEL: Pretty solid answer. Next question: Think of your favorite person in the world, your best friend, and what is your favorite quality about that person?

CHERYL: Sweet.

MICHAEL: Sweet.

CHERYL: Sweet. Just sweetness. Yeah.

MICHAEL: What does that mean, exactly? In other words?

CHERYL: Not out to win anything, not out to piss off anyone, not-- Yeah, really thinking of the other person and really prioritizing other people and not trying to be mean. I was kinda raised in a mean-spirited family.

MICHAEL: Oh, is that right?

CHERYL: Yeah. And so, I'm really intrigued by sweet people. Yeah.

MICHAEL: How many siblings do you have?

CHERYL: Two.

MICHAEL: OK. Older or younger, or are you in the middle?

CHERYL: Oh, that's a cool question. Both. Well, you gave three options. Two. I have a twin.

MICHAEL: Oh!

CHERYL: So, we're the younger pair, and I am--

MICHAEL: Identical?

CHERYL: No.

MICHAEL: Ah.

CHERYL: No. I mean, she's got like your skin color and light brown hair.

MICHAEL: Oh, really?

CHERYL: So, we're the younger pair, and I'm the older of the twins.

MICHAEL: OK, so in the middle, technically.

CHERYL: I'm middle-youngest. I've got all the bad qualities of the middle kid and all the bad qualities of the youngest kid. [laughs]

MICHAEL: Oh, yeah.

CHERYL: And I should clarify when I say I was raised in a mean-spirited family, 'cause I don't know, my family might hear this.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: What I mean is we're really competitive. Really competitive and really, everybody tries to make their voice the loudest or be the last person to speak. And I think especially since my brain injury stuff, that really came out a lot more. Where maybe I would struggle with something, and people would just like, "Well, I'm sorry! I'm just trying the best that I can!" I'm like, "No, no. Well, let's work through this together. I talk slower. I think slower. I get lost more. Why are you mad? Like, let's work through this together." So, a lotta weird stuff like that came up, and a lot of that competition and trying to be the best, like, "I'm the best family member who gets you the best!" Weird stuff like that.

MICHAEL: Yeah. Do you find that that competition, that competitive spirit comes with being offended easily?

CHERYL: [laughs]

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: Perfectionism.

MICHAEL: Perfectionism.

CHERYL: Being offended easily, taking any criticism very personally. Which, like, I can't do that anymore. I just can't. I was so proud of myself. I took the train out here. I know how to get to the library! I was here two weeks ago. I was just walking in circles, lost. And I just had to laugh, like, I hope I'm not late. But I can't be a perfectionist about this. The truth is I actually forgot how to get here, and that just has to be OK. I thought it was hilarious. I was so proud of myself, and I still got lost. But I made it on time. But yeah, there's a lot of perfectionism and a lot of thin skin stuff. That's kinda how I grew up, and I had to shed all that.

MICHAEL: Yeah. Because there's some things like, OK, I really do need to address that 'cause I don't wanna waste other people's time. But yeah, that was an honest mistake.

CHERYL: They often are an honest mistake, yeah. Especially for us. [chuckles]

MICHAEL: I don't know how I would've dealt with that prior to my injury.

CHERYL: Oh, would you have just beaten yourself up?

MICHAEL: Probably.

CHERYL: Oh, yeah.

MICHAEL: I don't know.

CHERYL: So, are you less of a perfectionist now too?

MICHAEL: I think I might be, which I don't-- Yeah.

CHERYL: It's liberating.

MICHAEL: It's liberating. I wanna become a surgeon. So, I'm not sure how good that is.

BOTH: [laugh]

MICHAEL: I'm still working through that. I got a long ways to go, so I think the little pieces will fall into place.

CHERYL: Yeah. I think it's good to have one area of your life where you're a perfectionist, like surgery.

MICHAEL: Yeah, mm.

CHERYL: That would be cool, and then you can not worry about the rest of it.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: But yeah, that would suck to have a really laidback surgeon.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: I had a laidback surgeon one time. She was like 30 minutes late to surgery, and she came in to pre-op. I'm sitting there hungry, right? You can't eat before surgery. No coffee. I'm lying there so nervous. She walks in the pre-op in a leather jacket and hoop earrings. She's like, "Hey!" [car honks outside] That's funny. "Hey, Cheryl! So, they're gonna prep you." I'm like, "I know. I know. I know. You're 30 minutes late to my surgery." And she botched the surgery.

MICHAEL: Really?

CHERYL: Yeah. So, um, I would advocate that in your surgery practice, perfectionism is beautiful. And outside of surgery, pbbt.

MICHAEL: Let it go.

CHERYL: But yeah, oh man. This lady was way too laidback to be a surgeon.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: Pbbt.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: [laughs]

MICHAEL: The good surgeons I know aren't necessarily anal retentive, but they're actually kinda scatter-brained outside of surgery. But when it comes to the clinic, they're very in the zone.

CHERYL: Awesome.

MICHAEL: Next question: I'm gonna give you a word. I want you to give me the opposite.

CHERYL: [chuckles]

MICHAEL: So, if I say up.

CHERYL: Down.

MICHAEL: OK. Outside.

CHERYL: Inside.

MICHAEL: Blue.

CHERYL: Red. [laughs]

MICHAEL: Glasses.

CHERYL: [laughs] What's the opposite of-- Cups?

MICHAEL: [laughs] Oh. Eyeglasses.

CHERYL: The opposite of eyeglasses? Eyeballs? What's the opposite of eyeglasses? [chuckles]

MICHAEL: Computer.

CHERYL: Oh, software. That's not the opposite. Analog.

MICHAEL: Mm.

CHERYL: These are so hard.

MICHAEL: Dark.

CHERYL: Light.

MICHAEL: Tooth.

CHERYL: Nail. [laughs]

MICHAEL: Oh!

CHERYL: That makes, that-- They're not opposite.

MICHAEL: Good.

CHERYL: What is the opposite of tooth? Do you know the answer to the opposite-- OK.

MICHAEL: These don't have answers. I'm just--

CHERYL: Oh!

MICHAEL: --trying to get the creative side going.

CHERYL: OK.

MICHAEL: [laughs] Handle.

CHERYL: Bar? [chuckles]

MICHAEL: Yes. OK, I think those--

CHERYL: Oh, handlebar! That's so funny. I didn't even notice.

MICHAEL: [laughs] Ah, yeah.

CHERYL: Ha. Hmm.

MICHAEL: See, I love this exercise.

CHERYL: Hmm.

MICHAEL: OK, one more: Table.

CHERYL: Mm! Floor.

MICHAEL: OK. That's pretty good.

CHERYL: That was not the first thing that came to my mind. First thing that came to my mind was "top," which is not the opposite of table.

MICHAEL: Yeah. I guess floor.

CHERYL: Yeah?

MICHAEL: Yeah, you're right, floor.

CHERYL: OK, fwew.

MICHAEL: That's pretty good. That's a pretty hard one.

CHERYL: [laughs]

MICHAEL: OK. I got through those. I feel like you did a pretty good job.

CHERYL: Thank you. [laughs]

MICHAEL: Yeah. Solid.

So, from here-- I like to use that to gauge the guests. 'Cause if they get really angry or something, I just keep going until they loosen up. And they just freak out a little bit, and then OK. You freaked out. We're good to go.

CHERYL: [laughs]

MICHAEL: So, that's the goal.

CHERYL: Yeah, I have no guard. Yeah, yeah.

MICHAEL: That's good. I knew you wouldn't take long.

Sharing the story of decades of mild TBIs

So, you--like me and like most of the rest of the guests--have suffered a brain injury. And normally, in the podcast, I just simply have you tell your story. Is that OK with you if you share your story?

CHERYL: Sure! Sure.

MICHAEL: OK.

CHERYL: I can share my story, yeah. It may, I think it comes out pretty different from a lotta people when they share a brain injury story, but I can certainly say: So, I think I said 27 years last time, but I don't know what numbers are. So, OK. So...25, 20, between 20 and 25 years of sports concussions, a lot. A lot of them. Most of them are the really little ones that you sort of, you feel your eyeballs jiggle, and you're dizzy for a minute, and then you're fine. Several, at least six of them, lasted for weeks or months to try to get myself together. One was an assault. I think I was telling you about some of them last time. I forgot to mention the martial arts one.

MICHAEL: Oh, really?

CHERYL: That was a double hit. I got kicked in the forehead really hard, split my forehead, but then I fell to the ground. That was a weird one.

MICHAEL: Which martial art?

CHERYL: Capoeira, Brazilian martial arts.

MICHAEL: OK.

CHERYL: Which is a lot of this, a lot of spinning back and forth, which is really hard to-- I had to quit because I was so dizzy after that. So, just adding up: Mountain bike wrecks, bike commuting, getting hit by cars, you know. After this really massive bike wreck in 2010, then my eyes didn't point in the same direction, and I would walk into walls and hit my head. Or jump and things and hit my head against the wall. Like, why are you jumping? I don't know. I just felt like jumping right then. Kinda knucklehead, not good decision making.

But also, and I don't talk about this a lot, but I was.... I don't know how to explain what was going on in my mind, but I got into this self-harm mode for like a year. And I would just bang my head against the wall, repeatedly.

MICHAEL: Really?

CHERYL: Not hard enough to have a concussion, but I would just sit there, boom, boom, boom, boom. And it was really hard to get out of it. It was really hard to stop. I would just get into a cycle and just do that for long periods of time. Like I said, I never felt like I got a concussion from it, but I'm sure it wasn't good for me. It was really weird. It's really awful to be in a mode of self-harm, and you can see that you're doing it, but you can't make yourself stop. Yeah.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: Yeah. Sorry for that doozy! [laughs]

MICHAEL: Well, I think that's true. It manifests in different ways with different people. I know that I like to work out a lot, and I do a martial art too. And the pain from that, there's something good about the feeling after the pain even though it's painful. And it is kinda self-- I don't know if it's pathological or what, but that's true.

So, at what point did you start getting involved in the brain-injured community or at least asking questions about who else has these symptoms?

CHERYL: Oh, what a cool question. So, there's two ways. I mean, the thing that stands out most right now is, I guess it would've been in 2011, I started volunteering with this organization called BIRRDsong. They've changed. It's mostly different people, and it's now called Brain Injury Connections NW, but back then it was BIRRDsong. I got involved with them so like, volunteering and going to support group. So, that was kinda the start of that.

But the start before that was when I was in graduate school to become a speech therapist, which I never did, but I went to school for it. And I had an internship at the Brain Injury Rehab Center. Is that what it's called? [laughs] BIRC.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: Is that what it stands for?

MICHAEL: I don't know what it stands for.

CHERYL: Brain Injury Re-- It must be. Anyway, so, a brain injury rehab center that may or may not be called Brain Injury Rehab Center.

MICHAEL: We can go with that.

CHERYL: BIRC in Beaverton.

MICHAEL: If it's not called that, they should be upset with themselves because--

CHERYL: Because it's a good name.

MICHAEL: --that's a good name. [laughs]

CHERYL: Right? They nailed it on that.

MICHAEL: So, you're at BIRC.

CHERYL: Yeah, for 10 weeks as a grad student doing an internship. So, that was one kind of introduction to the brain injury world, but from the outside looking in and as studying to be a rehab person. But then, the next iteration was that was then going to the support groups and getting involved from the other side.

MICHAEL: OK. Was that all in Portland?

CHERYL: Yes, yeah, BIRC is in Beaverton, not that far from here.

MICHAEL: OK. What did you think of when you watched BIRC and how it operates? What did you think of it?

CHERYL: In what way?

MICHAEL: What were some of the really positive things you saw from it?

CHERYL: I think the biggest positive about that place from my memory, my experience of just 10 weeks is that it's really team-oriented; it's really multi-disciplinary. So, one person comes in, and maybe they spend some time with the speech therapist. Then they spend an hour with the PT. Then they do occupational therapy. Then they might go for biofeedback. And then they go back for a little PT. I'm probably misremembering it, but people would be there for like 5 to 7 hours a day. And so, they could cycle through and get all these different people to work with and different modes to work in. But then, there were team meetings every single morning at 7:00 am. So, everybody was really trying to coordinate the best they could and try to overlap with each other to give all the patients just a really well-rounded rehab experience.

MICHAEL: What were some of the symptoms that were really kicking your butt?

CHERYL: Well, how long do you have for me to list this out?

MICHAEL: [laughs] Pretty good amount of time.

CHERYL: OK. I mean, a huge one was the vision. So, my eyes were not--and still don't--point in the same direction. And I had what they called Visual Midline Shift Syndrome. So, everything

was just like shifted over a little. I would sit leaned over like this--I'm leaning over pretty substantially--but I felt like I was sitting up straight. And walking through doorways was really disturbing and confusing, 'cause, where'd the wall go? Just everything was confusing. My central and peripheral were not connected. And so, like, I see you right now in my peripheral vision, but if I turn to face you, I'd be surprised that you were there. How long have you been there? Even though I could see you, and I could say, "Oh, I see you right there." They were not connected. And so, I was constantly shocked and surprised. They just were not communicating. My peripheral vision is still distorted. Things bend, and they look like they're moving faster than they are in my periphery. And I wasn't fusing and teaming, and one of my eyes would just--not the eye, but the brain--would shut down so I couldn't see outta one eye intermittently.

The terrible headaches. Terrible headaches. I still have headaches. Dizziness. I hardly ate for like six months 'cause I was so nauseated from the dizziness. I lost 10 pounds. I was so hungry but too nauseated to eat. And then there's all the cognitive stuff! Like, I would go to say something, and the wrong thing would come outta my mouth. I'm like, oh, that's not right. And I'd try to fix it and say the same wrong thing again like a broken record over and over. And I talked really slow. I got lost every time I walked out the front door. I could not tell the difference between fiction and reality. So, like watching TV would just-- I'd have to go to counseling after watching Buffy the Vampire Slayer: "Oh, she died! I saw it!"

MICHAEL: Oh, really?

CHERYL: "Well, it's fiction." "I don't believe she died! Oh, my god, she's back in the next episode! How'd she do that? What?!"

MICHAEL: [laughs]

CHERYL: Just confused.

MICHAEL: Wow.

CHERYL: Just so confused. So, that was that injury in 2010. Other previous injuries--

MICHAEL: Oh, OK.

CHERYL: --had other stuff. Like, I stuttered for a few months with one of those injuries. I couldn't understand figurative language for a while. Like, if somebody's like, "You're so funny. You're killing me," I would just start crying.

I'm like, "I'm so sorry that I killed you."

MICHAEL: Really? [laughs]

CHERYL: "I did not mean to kill you. I'm so sorry."

MICHAEL: That is crazy.

CHERYL: Just like weird, weird out of control crud.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: And I said, "crud," but seven years ago I wouldn't have said crud. I'd just blurt!

MICHAEL: Oh, really?

CHERYL: Blurt!

MICHAEL: Less filter.

CHERYL: Oh, my goodness. Very bad filter.

MICHAEL: Yeah. That's true.

CHERYL: Just blurting and cussing all the time.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: "You know who you remind me of? I saw this music video in the 1980s."

They're like, "What are you talking about?"

MICHAEL: All over the place.

CHERYL: Yeah, all over the place. So, yeah. I needed some rehab. [laughs]

What rehab really helped?

MICHAEL: So, going back to the rehab, what improved some of those? Let's just look at the 2010 with the headaches and the vision issues.

CHERYL: OK.

MICHAEL: Have they improved, and if they have, do you know why?

CHERYL: Yeah. So, I saw Dr. John at whatever that, Dr. Bruce's office. I know the business has a name, but it's just Dr. Bruce's office. Eye Care, Eye Health, Eye Care Professional whatever. Dr. Bruce's practice. So, I saw Dr. John. He was really helpful. And then I was in vision therapy, not constantly, but on and off for like a year and a half. That fixed a lot of my vision problems. It just simply did. I had all these exercises, and I did them. I did my homework. And when stuff went haywire again, and my right eye started shutting off, I went to an OT, and she gave me vision therapy exercises again. I did them again. And I think it's fine. I think my right eye stays on all the time now. The prism in my eyeglasses, that helped a lot during the vision therapy. Yeah. So, that's a huge thing. Tons of my vision problems are fixed. I still, my peripheral vision is still distorted, which is one reason why I've got this big hair on the side of my-- I don't have hair on the side of my face.

MICHAEL: [laughs]

CHERYL: The hair on my head comes down, and I don't tuck it behind my ears 'cause it blocks my peripheral vision.

MICHAEL: [chuckles]

CHERYL: That's what I mean. I don't have sideburns. Yet.

MICHAEL: Like a sideburn.

CHERYL: Giant sideburns. If I could have giant sideburns, I would.

MICHAEL: [laughs]

CHERYL: 'Cause it'll block my peripheral vision.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: So, that's just a huge thing. I went to counseling for almost two years, and that helped with just staying chill about the problems. Learning how to talk to people about the problems instead of screaming and fighting all the time with them. And we did cognitive rehab stuff with the counselor. Like, "Cheryl. Do you know how to write down in your schedule the number of the bus that you should get on?" [gasp] "Oh!" Because then, maybe you won't keep getting on the wrong bus, if you just write it down." "Oh, OK." So, we did cognitive stuff like that too, really simple, like get out your day planner, look up what time the bus picks you up, write down the address of the bus stop, write down the bus number, right down the time that you're supposed to leave the house, not just when you have to get to the bus stop. So, all that, like just cog rehab stuff, that helped.

MICHAEL: Do you still use that detail in your planning?

CHERYL: I have to!

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: Because I still. Just this morning, I was like, OK, MAX leaves at 8:59. And I go back to what I'm doing.

"Cheryl. If the MAX leave at 8:59, what time do you have to leave the house?"

"Oh!"

And it's in a dialogue like this. I can't do it myself. I have to pretend to talk to somebody else.

MICHAEL: Ah, yeah, that helps?

CHERYL: And so the other Cheryl--

MICHAEL: That helps?

CHERYL: Yeah, it helps me remember to do it. The other Cheryl is like, "Well, how long does it take?"

"I don't know. OK, I think it takes 20 minutes to walk to the MAX. So, then I would leave at 8:39."

And so, what do I do? I leave at 8:15 because I can't, it, it doesn't, these numbers just like disintegrate. I write them down, but they still, they just dissolve in thin ear. But I figure if I leave at 8:15, then like today, I was only 10 minutes late. [laughs]

MICHAEL: Yeah, well, I wasn't ready in time.

CHERYL: Instead of--

MICHAEL: 10 minutes is pretty good.

CHERYL: But I leave 45 minutes early and arrive 10 minutes late. Which is better than leaving on time and being nervous that maybe I'll screw the whole thing up. Anyway. But yeah, I still, I'll still write stuff down in my planner to make sure that I'm solid. But it's been seven years. A lotta stuff is just better, you know?

Do things improve over time?

MICHAEL: I think that's really important to write things down. Do you think over time, things just improve? You think so?

CHERYL: Some things will.

MICHAEL: OK.

CHERYL: For some people, right? Not everybody does, but I think a big part of it is just really accepting, OK, I'm still doing stuff wrong sometimes. OK. I'm gonna keep trying to do it better. And not going into this emotional spiral of--

You know, I meet people, even who've had one concussion, who will say things like, "I don't think I can ever do this again because all the brain connections are broken, and they'll never heal. And this is my life."

And I'll say, "Well, actually, you know, with one concussion, you might not actually have broken brain connections. You might not have holes in your brain. You might be able to do this."

And people seem like this is brand-new knowledge to them. And I think it's really important, especially with the mild TBI, to recognize that you really may not have holes in your brain. And some of this stuff, you may be able to get better at over time, even a lot of it. I mean, you wouldn't recognize me today from how I was seven years ago 'cause I've just improved so much. Part of it is just constantly practicing it, and part of it is time. And part of it is believing that I'm not doomed to just have a useless brain the rest of my life. I do think you have to believe that recovery is possible if you wanna keep recovering.

I don't think that faith and believing are what make you recover, but it opens you up to OK, I'm gonna keep practicing. I'm gonna keep practicing. I'm gonna keep practicing. If you think you've got permanent holes in your brain, then forget it. Yeah, where's your motivation? Yeah.

But I feel sad for the people who have one concussion and wake up every morning actually picturing their brain with holes in it. I feel sad that they have that misinformation and that they don't have hope in their lives. 'Cause it's, I just think it's not true. I mean, don't you think?

MICHAEL: Yeah, I 100% agree with you. I've seen that before, I believe, and I've never been confident enough to tell them that. But it sounds like you're not telling them they don't have holes. You're telling them they might not have holes.

CHERYL: That's what I tell people: "You might not. You might not."

MICHAEL: Try it. Try not believing you have holes. Try not having holes. 'Cause we can't prove it. We can't see the holes. It's all, just try thinking of your brain as a complete organ now.

CHERYL: Yeah. Just try. And again, thinking that way isn't gonna fix it, but it opens you up to do more and to not.... Wouldn't it be nice to just feel hopeful every day, just in general? Isn't it nice to feel good?

MICHAEL: Super nice.

CHERYL: [laughs] Right?

MICHAEL: Because life is hard. Life is a struggle.

CHERYL: Yeah.

MICHAEL: No matter brain injury, no brain injury; it's challenging. And if you're negative, and you don't have hope, why get up? Why?

CHERYL: Yeah, it's hard.

MICHAEL: It's so factualized, things like that.

CHERYL: Yeah. So, I truly in my heart of hearts think that I will never go back to how I was before the 25 years of concussions. I really don't think that I will go back to that level. But I continue to think faster and think better. I can write a text message with the radio on now. Which I couldn't even do that a year ago.

MICHAEL: Oh, yeah.

CHERYL: So, I keep putting myself in situations to try to get just a teeny bit better, just a teeny bit. Also, sometimes I just don't care. I don't give two craps whether I get better or not. Because i have my day planner. And because people think it's funny when I'm late, and it's fine. But I do think after this many injuries, you know, maybe I won't go back to that. OK.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: I do fine. I do fine. The impairments that I have left are mild, so pbbt.

Hope, positivity, and supporting people

MICHAEL: Yeah. As far as maintaining hope and keeping a positive attitude, first of all, that's huge, as we're talking about. But also, if you have negative people in your life--whether they're competitive or whether they're just Negative Nancies or Neils--

CHERYL: [laughs]

MICHAEL: --Negative Neils, how do you cultivate an environment in your life with really positive-thinking people?

CHERYL: You know, anybody who knows me well would never even believe that you would ask me that question because--

MICHAEL: Oh, really?

CHERYL: Yeah, yeah, 'cause I don't actually describe myself as a positive person, and I don't look for positivity.

MICHAEL: Oh.

CHERYL: Yeah. And I'm really big on, like, if somebody's negative about something, I try to find out what's going on. Rather than say, "Oh, yeah, Neal over there. What a Negative Neal."

MICHAEL: [laughs]

CHERYL: "What a Negative Nellie Neil is over there." I always wanna know what is going on in that person's world that is making their world so hard.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: 'Cause I think it's easy to brush someone off: "Oh, you're negative. I don't wanna talk to you." But it comes from somewhere, and it's really important, if anybody can do something to relieve the pressure that this person is under, that's great. So, I don't actually, I have some friends where every time we talk, all we do is complain: "And then this crap. And then that crap. And I hate that person. And blah blah blah," and get it out of our systems.

MICHAEL: Cathartic.

CHERYL: It's cathartic. So, I don't have a problem with complaining and negativity in general. But what I stay away from is people who I feel unhealthy when I'm interacting with them. I feel drained. I feel like they're demanding stuff of me and giving me zero. That's the stuff that I try to limit my time with people who will suck the soul out of me.

MICHAEL: That's a good way of putting it.

CHERYL: But I also recognize they're doing that because they're hungry for something. They're not bad people. They're trying to get something.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: But I think for me, the important thing is affirming and validating. Like the person who recently told me, "Oh, I can't. I'll never get back to my life because I have holes in my brain," I did tell her that she might not have holes in her brain. And I also told her I understand that she feels really scared that life is hard and that it may not get better. So, I tried to validate what she said but also give her some factual information that might help her feel better. But I would never tell somebody to just buck up or just smile or just have a better attitude about it.

I have this t-shirt that says, "My other disability is a bad attitude."

MICHAEL: [chuckles]

CHERYL: 'Cause you know that phrase? "The only disability is a bad attitude!" Well, I don't see how that's possible.

MICHAEL: [laughs]

CHERYL: How is that actually possible, that the only disability is a bad attitude?

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: We have the Americans with Disabilities Act because people have disabilities.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: I just don't wanna judge somebody if they have a disability, and they have a bad attitude about that, OK. I'm not gonna judge them for that.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

CHERYL: I would like to know if there's some way we could make their life better, maybe feel better. That would be nice. But I also think it's also not on the person to just cheer up all the time. 'Cause like, you know, I go places, and I am sexually harassed because I'm a woman.

MICHAEL: Mmhmm.

CHERYL: It is not on me to cheer up. It's on these people around me to stop harassing me. So, sometimes it's about society needs to change so that I feel better and not harassed.

MICHAEL: Yeah. Life is, a lot of it is about balance. And if you're trying to force one way, just positive, artificially, that's exactly what it is. It's artificial, and you can't maintain it. It's a house of cards that'll just fall down.

CHERYL: It is!

MICHAEL: So, I also have friends that were negative, not always, but if we need to get it out, get it out. It feels good. And then we move on.

CHERYL: Right. And how can you solve your problems if no one knows you have these problems?

MICHAEL: Yeah. 'Cause problems are negative, and if you're gonna be real with a problem, you gotta bring it up. You gotta be a little bit negative--

CHERYL: Yeah!

MICHAEL: --before it gets positive.

CHERYL: Right.

MICHAEL: OK. I can 100% agree.

How has filmmaking helped with recovery?

One thing I wanted to talk to you about is you do a lot of these projects. You make movies, I'm guessing you write the skits for some of these, like the *Friending With Brain Injury*.

CHERYL: Yeah, I wrote that. Mmhmm.

MICHAEL: Directed it. You did the whole shebang. You also make documentaries that are even more-- I mean, that must have taken hours and hours, a really good film. How has that helped you recover?

CHERYL: That's a great question.

MICHAEL: That's what I wanna know.

CHERYL: So! For any professionals who might listen to this show, you can go to this website called Videoce.tv. It's online continuing ed, like professional continuing ed. And I actually gave this three-hour seminar for Speech Therapists explaining how making film was rehab for me. And I'm doing this presentation at Chico State in like six weeks.

MICHAEL: Wow. The website is Videoce?

CHERYL: Videoce.tv. I'm not affiliated with it. I mean, I was a paid speaker. But they have for Speech Therapists, Occupational Therapists, whoever, you pay, and you watch a seminar, take a little quiz at the end, and then you get the continuing ed credits to keep your license. So, it's mostly researchers and practicing clinicians, but they let me in 'cause I'm gutsy, and I kick doors down and say, "Lemme in."

MICHAEL: [chuckles]

CHERYL: But this presentation, this seminar that I did, is it's all the peer-reviewed journals. I'm not just in there, "Let me share my story with you!" I pull from the Neuropsychology and Speech Therapy and Neuroscience journals to explain this is why this works. And I was just practicing my speech yesterday for when I give it in Chico State. So, now it's fresh in my mind! It would be hard to answer this last week.

So, OK, so, I wrote [Cooking With Brain Injury](#). I wrote this film, and if you're gonna make a film, you have to show up to all the rehearsals to practice the film, right? So, you have to motivate and get serious about learning to read a calendar. And I think part of why rehab-- And I dropped out of cognitive rehab 'cause it was boring, and it didn't speak to anything I cared about, and it didn't work! I got good at doing these stupid worksheets, and then you leave the clinic room, you still can't do anything right. 'Cause all you did was get at doing worksheets in a quiet room, and life isn't worksheets in a quiet room. So, a big problem for me was that nothing was translating to real life. Not nothing, but a lot of stuff wasn't.

MICHAEL: [laughs]

CHERYL: So, OK, so, I'm really motivated to learn how to use a calendar because I've got to schedule these rehearsals; I've got to show up. And back then, I was taking the Paratransit 'cause I couldn't ride the bus. I mean, I would just get on and off the bus all over town and get lost and ride in circles. So, you have to call Paratransit, and you cannot yell at them. [chuckles] Don't do that. Don't blurt. So, I had to practice self-control. I had to write everything down in order first: Tell them the day, tell them what time, where are you going, what time do you need to come home? Because they had that structure, I wrote down the questions, and then I'd fill in the answers before I called them. If they didn't have that structure, I would just call every time like, "Can I get a ride?"

And they'd be like, "When?"

I'm like, "Uh...rehearsal day? I don't know." You know, and I'd just be all over the place. But they had these questions. So, I'd go to my calendar, and I'd write it all down, schedule my ride, show up to rehearsal. That was real-world practice in a loud, busy world, and I just got better and better at it 'cause I just kept doing it.

I also made a little sign for myself that said, "Is it your turn to talk?" And if I thought to myself the answer is no, then I was not allowed to speak.

MICHAEL: [laughs]

CHERYL: 'Cause I was always interrupting people at rehearsal.

MICHAEL: No, Cheryl. No, Michael. [chuckles]

CHERYL: Yeah. No, Michael. It is not your turn.

So, it's fine to interrupt people in conversation--well, I hate that--but when somebody's rehearsing their lines, and I'm just telling stories, this is not OK. So, I had my sign. And if the answer-- Everybody made fun of me when I used this sign, but if I read my sign, and it says, "Is it your turn to talk?" and the answer was yes, then I'd flip it over. 'Cause I didn't remember what was on the other side. And the other side said something like, "Breathe. Plan. Then talk." And I think it said, "Please be brief."

MICHAEL: [chuckles]

CHERYL: And so, I'd sit there and--

MICHAEL: Please.

CHERYL: I said please to myself.

MICHAEL: Yeah, that's funny.

CHERYL: And I'd look at that, and I would force myself, OK, don't tell the story about the cat. OK, don't crack a joke. What is it that you really wanna say right now? Oh! And I would plan it, and then I would say just the thing that I needed to say, and then we'd move on. And that was really good practice, and I just got better and better at being able to control the blurting and talking off topic.

So, out of that long story I just told, the upshot is making films was so indescribably fun and personally motivating that it gave me a place to practice the skills, and I was never gonna quit and drop out like I dropped out of rehab because making films was so fun.

MICHAEL: Hmm.

CHERYL: Got that, SLPs? Stop it with the worksheets. We don't like them. They're boring.

BOTH: [chuckle]

Any kind of creativity is great

MICHAEL: Yeah. Not everybody can make a documentary when they're recovering from a brain injury.

CHERYL: Of course.

MICHAEL: Even if they're mentally OK with doing that, and they're capable, they don't have the time or money or whatever.

CHERYL: Yeah.

MICHAEL: What do you think people, some practical things people can implement in their life that are fun but also help them recover that are much better than worksheets?

CHERYL: Well, you could--here's a novel idea--you could start a podcast. Hey!

MICHAEL: Exactly.

CHERYL: Right?!

MICHAEL: That's what I'm thinking. [laughs]

CHERYL: Right? I mean, you can do art projects. You can get together with people-- Look at the pictures on your phone and tell a story about the pictures on your phone to somebody. Or just pick up a magazine and randomly pull out-- Open up a-- Do we have magazines anymore? Yes.

MICHAEL: Yeah, I think. Doctor's offices.

CHERYL: Yeah, yeah. That's where you find them.

MICHAEL: Dentists.

CHERYL: And that's where we live, right, doctor's offices?

MICHAEL: Yeah. [laughs]

CHERYL: Open up a magazine or a website and pick a picture that you weren't planning to look at and tell a story about it. If you didn't even mean to pick the picture, if you just grabbed one, it's amazing the stories that will come out of you that you didn't even know were true about yourself, or you didn't remember that thing from when you were five. It's so fun.

So, storytelling. It doesn't have to be-- I don't recommend people make a feature-length documentary. That film took me four years, and I will never earn back the money I put in to actually make it. I would never be able to sell enough copies of that DVD. It's a lot. But you can get a storytelling circle, group together. You can--

MICHAEL: Improv. Brandon, he does comedy at a club, and they do improv. It's like Who's Line Is It Anyway? That's awesome. Creativity is so healing to the brain.

CHERYL: It is. Like the [Unmasking Brain Injury](#) project, where people have these masks, and they paint them or do collages on them. That in itself is amazing, but then you can tell the story to someone else: Why did you pick those pieces? And that will bring out all these stories. I feel like every single state Brain Injury Association or Alliance, on their website, they have personal stories. So, record your story and send it to your BIA, and then it'll be on the website, and you can share it with anybody. I mean, there's so many people collecting stories and any form of creativity. But then, telling somebody about it: Look what I made, and here's why I made it, and here's what's so exciting about it.

This guy showcased his work on my blog. He was not artistic at all. He had a very serious brain injury and then kind of cycled into alcoholism and a lot of drunk driving, and it was out of control. And he was incarcerated for the drunk driving. So, he got sober, of course, 'cause he's in prison. And one day, I think, he just started drawing. He had no idea he could draw. And he was this just amazing artist. It gave him this new focus and direction in his life, and he's out of prison

now. Now he does art exhibitions, and he sells his art. And he talks to other people with brain injury and tries to help motivate them.

I'm not saying it's the magic answer, and it's not gonna get rid of racism and sexism, obviously, but being creative and being proud of yourself and making things that feel really fun and exciting to make and telling other people about it is really powerful.

MICHAEL: Yeah. Even being creative in the smallest way can help. When we think of creativity, a lot of people probably think, oh, I'm not an artist. I don't paint. I don't play an instrument. I don't wanna do a podcast. I don't wanna go to an improv group. First of all, maybe you do. Maybe you're just scared, and you need to try it. Second of all, it could be maybe you work as a, I don't know, a cashier, or you work at a grocery store. And all you do is what your boss, I mean, it's a job where your boss tells you what to do, and there's no creativity. Just take some creativity in your job, even. 'Cause you're there; you're gonna have to be there 20, 40 hours a week, whatever. You're like, "Hey, boss. I thought of this. It's better." And just that feeling is what humans are meant for, is being creative. And it suffocates who we are as human beings when we're not creative. And that doesn't have to be watercolors. That could be organizing the shelf in a cool way that the adult diapers get the best exposure on the corner of the Costco aisle, and you feel great afterwards. And then maybe you get that feeling, and it leads into some other things like taking a drumming lesson, something like that.

CHERYL: Mmhmm. My dad is like a really not-artsy person, and he also really-- He's like, "Ugh, why"-- My sisters and I were all musicians when we were kids. He was like, "See where that music takes you in life! You grow up and be a doctor. Don't be a musician." But he loves music. Well, somebody made that music you're listening to.

MICHAEL: [laughs]

CHERYL: So, my dad doesn't like to make art or anything like that, but he loves to tell jokes. And that is creative. He makes up jokes, and he shares them, and he's proud of them. 'Cause he thinks they're funny. Sometimes they are. Sorry, dad, but dad jokes are usually not funny to non-dads. But he loves it. And he's not always making them up. He's finding other people's jokes, and he's sharing them, which is also a very dad thing to do over email. But it gives him that same thing: It sparks this energy in him, and he wants to share it with other people, and it makes him happy, and it makes him feel like he contributed something. I'm with you: Contribute the smallest thing or the largest thing. But just--

And I do think a lot of people stop themselves: Oh, well, I can't paint. I can't. Look. You don't wanna see a painting I've done. It looks like crap. But am I gonna do it? Yeah! Why not? I'll draw something or paint something. But I do my creativity through the filmmaking and through podcasting, and I'm trying to do a lot more with sound design, not just straight talking but putting music and sound effects and editing in a creative way. And it feels great! Yeah.

MICHAEL: One of my favorite quotes is from, I can't remember who it's from, but it goes, "Just because you love something doesn't mean you can't suck at it."

CHERYL: Hee hee, yes.

MICHAEL: And that's liberating. 'Cause I have a lot of hobbies that I'm not very good at.

CHERYL: Like what?

MICHAEL: Well, like martial arts. I just started. I'm horrible.

CHERYL: [chuckles]

MICHAEL: And I enjoy the crap out of it and all sorts of stuff. I try to drum sometimes. And I love drumming, but I'm obviously horrible at it. I'm not kidding myself. Anyways, I really like that quote. It was actually guy from "Dirty Jobs," the TV show. I would never have expected. He's really well-read, Mike Rowe. He has a great vocabulary, but he said that. I was like, wow, that's awesome because just do your thing and--

CHERYL: Do your thing.

MICHAEL: --and don't feel like you have to be really good at it and super competitive at it.

CHERYL: Yeah. So, you know the title of my documentary, Who Am I To Stop It. This is actually a big part of what that title means. The "who am I to stop it," it's that creative spark that you have in you, whatever it is, whether it's creative arts, or it's just creative thinking, or just anything. You're gonna go out there in that big, bad, mean, ugly world, and people are gonna discriminate and tell you, you know, "Oh, you can't do anything 'cause you have a brain injury." Or, "Now you're stupid," or, "You talk too slow. You move too slow. That looks terrible. Your voice." You're gonna get that. Most people get that in their lives. And sometimes, we take those messages in, and we don't realize we took them in. And then we stop ourselves, and we get crushed by it. And the point of this is just, if you have, if you still feel that spark in any way, have it and own it and be proud of it and don't stop it. And I don't know what that means. I don't know what you go out and do in the world, but don't stop that spark.

And what I've found in talking to hundreds of people with brain injuries that very few people lose that spark. They may lose all their friends, they may lose their money, their home, their sense of themselves, they may lose their personality. Like, so many things that you can lose, but I have rarely met anyone, if at all, who said they lost that spark that makes them them. Their soul or their spirit or their creative drive: It's still there! I want people to hang onto that and not get crushed by all the hate in the world.

Wrap-up

MICHAEL: Yeah. I think that's an awesome place to end it. Is there any last words you have for the audience?

CHERYL: WhoAmIToStopIt.com. [@WhoAmIToStopIt on Twitter](https://twitter.com/WhoAmIToStopIt), which I don't know how to use. So, maybe there's some tweets every now and again, but I don't really know how to use Twitter.

MICHAEL: [laughs]

CHERYL: And [@WhoAmIToStopIt on Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/WhoAmIToStopIt).

MICHAEL: Awesome. Well, thank you so much, Cheryl.

CHERYL: Oh, thank you!

MICHAEL: It was great chatting with you.

CHERYL: This was great. Thank you so much for having me on the show.