

# Ep. 11: Second Adolescence w/ Nikki Hiltz (they/them)

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## SPEAKERS

Adam James Cohen (he/him), Nikki Hiltz (they/them)

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Adam James Cohen (he/him) 00:09

Hello and welcome back to the Second Adolescence podcast. I'm your host Adam James Cohen. We took a little pause to catch our breath and are now back with some more weekly episodes for you. And to kick off this set of episodes, we have a super special guest, we have Nikki Hiltz for those of you who don't know them. Nikki is a professional runner and a major advocate for the greater LGBTQ+ community. They are also someone who I've known personally since I was 19. And they were 12. When I was there instructor at a summer program called Junior Lifeguards back where we both grew up, we spent the next five summers together. And that program was so fun, and was also interesting because we were both deeply in the closet, me as a young adult and them as an adolescent. And so that's why it was so interesting today to get to have them on and talk about what like really, this part of our experience that we never really shared together. And it was so cool to hear more of their story. On the episode Nikki shares about their experience growing up and navigating the limiting box of society's gender and sexuality expectations and their experience of in adolescence really pushing away thought of their gender and sexual identity and really wanting to use their success as an athlete as a place to really focus their energy instead. And then they go on to share about how you know, in college, they got to this place of feeling more able to acknowledge what was happening underneath the surface and what their own process was of coming out and into their true self first embracing their sexual and romantic identity and then later, embracing their gender identity that's really been there all along. And then Nikki goes on to share how they really use their platform that they've built as an athlete to be an advocate and voice to increase representation, visibility and inclusion of Trans and Queer people both in sport, but also in the world. Nikki is who I want to be when I grow up, hands down. And they were so generous with their story. And I'm so honored to invite you into this conversation. And as with every episode of second adolescence, I want to invite you as the listener to listen with open curiosity, knowing that each guest story is going to be different and unique and how you might hear some folks share things that really differ from your experience. Whereas you might hear other people share things that absolutely give voice to what you went through or currently going through. And I really hope that all of this happens and that together we can continue growing and expanding our awareness of what life and queerness and healing can be for folks, if after the

show you want to connect further, feel free to head on over to [second adolescents pod.com](https://secondadolescentspod.com) For shownotes. And more more follow the show on Instagram at [second adolescence pod](https://secondadolescencepod.com). All right enough for me for now. Welcome to the conversation. Thanks for being here. Nikki, Welcome to Second Adolescence. It's so so cool to have you on. And okay, before going anywhere, I like to invite the guests, the person on your side of things to give a mini little intro to who you are just to give a little context to the person behind the voice. So who are you?

N

Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 03:09

So my name is Nikki Hiltz, and I'm from a little town called Aptos, California, I guess I am a professional runner. So my job is I essentially run and get paid to do that. I feel like along with being a runner, I identify as like an advocate for the LGBTQ community because I am a member of that community. I identify as trans non binary, and I use they them pronouns. And yeah, I feel like I have somewhat of a platform from being a professional runner, and people caring about that sport. So I feel like I really try to use my platform to educate and like raise awareness and raise money for everything, all the issues that come with being a part of the LGBTQ community. And yeah, I guess I'm a race director or founder of a race, I put on the Pride 5k, which I started in 2020. There was a race in 2020 race in 2021. And now I guess our third race is going to be this year, and it's gonna be in person, which is super exciting. So yeah, I feel like that's kind of like a short intro. Like, who I am.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 04:20

Oh, my gosh, I wish we had like 20 hours to go into all of even just that. Okay, but But first, I guess, before going anywhere after this, I think it's helpful to name I'm just finding myself in this moment. And also, I'd mentioned this before we started recording that it's trippy, because we grew up in the same general area. We both know each other from, you know, pre coming out years of each of our lives. And we've never gotten to have this conversation around identity and queerness and all of it and so I'm just really curious and excited. And as I told you before we recorded Yeah, I wish we could have had this conversation when we were both way back then. But we were in the closet. So I'm really pumped. So thank you for coming on,

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Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 05:03

ya I know, I'm so excited.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 05:05

And yeah, just kind of given this is the second adolescence podcast, I guess just the first place that I'm curious just to start before then going into your story, when you kind of hear that phrase and that concept of second adolescence curious, like what gets sparked within you as you think about your own story and your own experience.

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Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 05:22

I feel like the word adolescence like I instantly kind of go to like that awkward Middle School of

I feel like the word adolescence like I instantly kind of go to like that awkward, middle school or coming of age to phase of like, you know, figuring out dating or like, who you like, and like your body's changing and like all that really awkward, great stuff. Then second adolescence, I feel like it's like people who, I guess came to terms with their sexuality or gender identity later in life, like, we get to go through that awkward stage all over again. Right? And so, I don't know, I feel like for me, I kind of instantly think of like, my dating scene of like, when I was 13 14 15. And like, everyone around me was like, oh, yeah, like, this boy is cute. Or like, we like him. Like, he's funny. And I'm like, Yeah, me too, you know, just going along with the crowd. And then kind of the second adolescence, it's doing that all over again, when I'm like, Oh, I'm actually attracted to women and like, being 21, 22, 23, almost like 10 years later, right? It's like going through that awkwardness all over again. So I feel like to me, that's kind of like what I instantly think of when I hear second adolescence.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 06:30

Yeah, totally. That's, that's kind of where I typically go first to, in my own experience as well. Yeah, I too, was that little 12 year old, 13 year old, 14 year old 15 year old where people were talking about, oh, you should be liking this particular gender. Oh, this this person's hot and me very much at that point. I don't know what your story was, we'll go into it being more aware of Oh, that's not me. And I'm now I'm like, trying to pretend like it is. Oh, yeah. Later in life, 10 years later, 15 years later, trying to both repair what was lost, but also learn how to date and learn how to feel empowered, all those things that are peers in middle school in high school, we're getting to experience then, but do that now? Totally. But okay, tell me more about your story growing up, like we grew up in the same area, but curious for you. What was your experience, like, in childhood? And in that early adolescence? What was the beginning of your story?

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Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 07:20

I think, for me, like, I feel like I just knew at a really young age that like, the box of, like, what it meant to be like a little girl, like, wasn't me, you know, it wasn't like fully me and like, I just have so many early memories of, you know, having to dress up for things like my aunt's wedding or something. And it's like, okay, and I have an older sister too. And it's like, Okay, you guys, we need to pick out a dress, you know, to work. This is a nice occasion. And that's what little girls wear. And I was like, I don't want to wear a dress and like throwing temper tantrums of like, I do not want to wear this. And then again in like when it came to junior guards, which is how we know each other. That was my instructor. And do you know guards is like an incredible thing, right? It's like all these little kids on the beach, and you're in bathing suits. And you're like, learning how to be lifeguards. But mostly, you're just playing in the sand and ocean with all your best friends. So you can sign up for junior grads when you're six, right? Like that's the age you can first do it. And my two older sisters, she was two years older than me. So she was eight when I was six. And it was her third year of doing it. And I wanted to do guard so bad, right? It was like everything that I could want. Because I was like a little athlete to running, swimming, playing with your friends. But I didn't do it because I was like, I don't want to wear a girl's bathing suit. I feel so uncomfortable in that. Like, that's not me. And so I didn't do guards like that first year. And then when I was seven, I remember it was like you go to kneel, surf shop, you know, you pick up the bathing suit, and I was there with my mom's sister. There's like the boys section in the girls section. And like I remember like looking at like the boys bathing suits. And like, there was like also rash guards. I remember like being like, okay, Mom,

if I were a rash guard and like board shorts, like, Can I do guards? She's like, of course. And so when I was seven, like that's kind of how I played out my gender on the beach was just kind of wearing something that like, I felt like me and like, I did guards the rest of my life, right? Like 17 I think is your last year. So I when I was seven through 17 guards every single summer. It's literally where like fell in love with running. It's where I like realized, like, I was a really good runner and like, Oh, I could do this in college and then maybe even after college and like, I don't know, it's just crazy to me that like, my gender was something that like, there wasn't a space for me. And so like I had to make a space you know, and like, because I made that space I could like find myself like through sports. I don't know. Like, kind of like a little story about how my gender identity at a very young age was like so real to me and like something I've just been trying to like, understand ever since I guess

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Adam James Cohen (he/him) 09:59

Oh, totally. Yeah, as you're speaking to there is such limited boxes for like what it means to be a boy what it means to be a girl. And we're only given those binary options as well growing up when we did, right, and of course, it's shifting now. But yeah, it really places such limits on young people to get to really explore their fullness. And what's so wild to think about your little seven year old self, who like had that, inside? know, hey, I'm gonna carve out my own space. Like you said, I'm making my own space. Like when you said that. I like got chills just thinking about a seven year old Nikki doing that, and also pumped on your mom being like, hell yeah, go for it.

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Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 10:39

Oh, yeah. And also such a testament to all of the instructors to like, I feel like all the adults in my life really cultivated that safe space. Like, there was never a single instructor that was like, You're not wearing a one piece or two piece, like, get off the beach. You know, it was like, You're a great kid, you're good athlete. Like you're gonna go win this run. Like I really understand the privilege that I had with the adults in my life helping me create that space for myself. .

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 11:07

Cool. Awesome. And yeah, sidebar. So fun. Remember, little 12 year old you just crushing it. And it's been really fun to just watch your journey and career as an athlete. And I always just think of you on the beach, just like killing it at such a young age. And so it's very fun for me to see. But going back into your story, like, what do you remember growing up within the greater Santa Cruz County and app toss at that time, being informed around like queerness and anything around gender expansiveness? What do you remember kind of coming to learn about this part of humanity?

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Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 11:45

No, it's such a good question. I feel like I had, obviously, I feel like Santa Cruz can very much be this like liberal bubble at times. And like growing up, like, obviously did a ton of sports like soccer volleyball like softball like I did them all And like I remember having a soccer coach

soccer, volleyball, like softball, like I did them all. And like, I remember having a soccer coach who was a lesbian, like, same sex marriage. And I was really young, I was like, 12 13 14, whatever. So obviously, I was like, exposed to it, right. Like, there was queer people within my life. But I think there was like, this internalized, like homophobia that I was like, that's not me, though, you know, of like, pushing back or like, I think it was also like, Junior High was like, Glee was like, on TV a lot is super popular and right. And there's like, gay characters in that and like, I would get so uncomfortable whenever there was like, a gay scene on screen, right. And I think that was really just like, this internalized thing of like, I don't want to be that because that's, like, so different. And like, I was just so afraid to be different. I think like, I just wanted to, like, fit in. I was obviously like, exposed to it. And like, also my parents, like, I remember my mom at a super young age saying things like, you know, I think she knew I was queer from like, the moment it was born, like, saying things like, you know, Mikayla, Nikki, like my sister, like, you guys can marry whoever you want, like, doesn't have to be a boy, or just like, you know, like, kind of hints like that along the way. And I was like, why would I not marry a boy like, literally, so I obviously like was definitely exposed to it's not like I grew up in like, the south, or like, the super conservative family of like, being gay is bad. Like, if anything, it was the opposite. It was like, this is accepted. There's people in your life, but something inside me was like, No, that's bad. Like, I don't want to be that. And so I think that's why, you know, I buried it for so long. And I didn't come out until I was like, you know, 21 Or like, 20, like, you know, because it was like, just this internal thing I was working through.

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Adam James Cohen (he/him) 13:41

Oh, totally. And I think we have a similar story and not like both like my micro culture of my like my family unit, and immediate kind of relationships. I knew they were all open minded and supportive of the queer community, maybe like, still like misinformed on some degree. But I do feel like I can remember my mom saying a similar thing to me. Yet, it really speaks to the power of like, the macro culture and socializing us of what we believe is like, right and wrong, what's normal, what's not. And yet so many of us fall victims, even if we're not in a situation where like, within our family or small community, there's like, direct messaging about the wrongness of being queer. Yeah, it's just this deeply entrenched, like, macro system where it's in the media, it's just everywhere. Right? Right. Right. And on such an unconscious level like that. We are kids are sponges and so little, you came to really pick that up, even if you weren't necessarily being told directly, like this is wrong. Yeah, that's such a bummer. Oh, my God.

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Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 14:42

Yeah, but I mean, it's so crazy how much that's shifted. Like, I think about young kids now, and it's just like, I don't know, there's just so much more visibility and exposure and like, there's like data like more and more Gen Z or like young people, like identify as queer or trans and like, you know, and it's not because there's Like, some queer agenda that we're like, we're not making people like gay or whatever. It's just like, right? There's more dislike exposure and like, oh, okay, I see myself in that person. And like, I'm not too and like, yeah,

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Adam James Cohen (he/him) 15:13

totally, totally. We're like removing the barriers that are blocking people from like, yeah, knowing who they really are. Yeah, totally. And so when you were kind of, at that point, kind of,

in your early adolescence, at guards, now were you kind of individually thinking about yourself and your identity? When you're being exposed to Glee? You're feeling like, ooh, whoa, I don't want that. That's not what do you remember kind of going into out of middle school into high school, like you, understanding about your identity,

**N** Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 15:38

I really like didn't come out to myself until probably like high school. I think I was really like, that's not me. And like really doubling down on that fact. And I think also, even when I came to terms of it myself, I still was like, Nope, we're not gonna, like ever tell anyone about that, you know, and I think I just really double down like, I had a boyfriend, like, on and off, like, all throughout high school, right. And like, it's so funny to me, my senior year, like, I won homecoming queen, and my boyfriend won, like homecoming king, like, the most straight, and then also like, sis thing that could ever be with me. And it's, like, so funny now looking back, like, but it's not like I came to terms with it. I came to terms like very early on, right, like, and even I think my gender identity, like, even earlier than my sexuality, because I feel like sexuality, you. I don't know, I feel like it's more like a 13, 14. Like, you're like a teenager, when you're starting to be like, Oh, I'm, I get nervous around this person, or, you know, like, but what's your gender identity? Like, that's from birth, right? You're like, oh, I don't really like want to, like paint my nails or wear dresses, or like things that like little girls are being pushed towards, like, I want to do like, more of the things that the boys wearing, you know. And so and that also came, you know, with how I present my gender with, like, clothing and things like that, that we talked about. But yeah, I honestly think I just like buried it, like deep down and I was like, I'm not going there. You know, really doubling down on like, this will never have to like, come out. You know?

**A** Adam James Cohen (he/him) 17:20

I like nodding my head. I didn't really realize this. But yeah, I have a similar thread there too, of like, getting clear. In around high school or on 16 is when I feel like I had this moment of coming out to myself after like breaking up with my girlfriend and realizing. I'm like, I know I'm toying her. I know I'm lying to her that didn't feel good for me anymore. Yeah, very clear moment of just like sitting from my mirror and just being like, oh, fuck, I think I'm gay. I'm gay, and then actively committing. But I'm now not going to tell anybody. Just like, I don't know, when I but I'm not going to tell anybody. I'm going to keep denying it. And all Yeah. But oh, it just sucks that like our younger selves. So many people's younger selves had to do that had to shut this part of me away. By doing so we then at least so many of us kind of missing out on a lot of different things that maybe other people are getting to experience in that latter part of high school into college. And what was that experience like for you after kind of locking that away as you, you know, became homecoming queen. And like left high school then started going into college, what was happening for you then,

**N** Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 18:25

I think when I went into college, that was kind of where I couldn't like hide from it anymore. So I broke up with my boyfriend, like, we were not going to do distance. So you know, I got to college, and I immediately got injured. So I feel like running also plays such a role in my story. Like, it's always kind of been like my safe space. And like ours were like, came out to myself. I

think it was like on a run in high school. And it was like, Okay, I make this pact of like, we're never done anyone. So then in college, like I committed the University of Oregon, so I was in Eugene, and moved away from my family different state. It was super rainy all the time. And I got injured, like I had to get surgery on my foot. I had like, a broken bone in there. Yeah, it was the whole thing. But I think it was like when I couldn't run anymore. Running was always kind of like my distraction to write it was like, Okay, I don't have to focus on like, boys and my gender. Like I can just like focus on running like, right and like be the best athlete I can be. And so and then when like that was taken from me, it was like, oh shit, I kind of have to, like confront this, you know. And also, once again, like Eugene, Oregon is this very, like, liberal bubble of, you know, it's a college town in Oregon. Like, it's very inclusive and like progressive and like I remember seeing like on campus, two girls like holding hands. And it was like the first time like, I saw people like my age kind of playing out their sexuality. And I was like, oh, like that's like, okay, here that's like, a thing you know, and like, that's like the power of representation, right? There are visibility. It's like, oh my gosh, and so I once again kind came out to myself. And then I was like, Okay, I'm gonna tell us I'm just gonna, like, see how this goes, you know? And so I told my roommate freshman year, and I came out to her and like, she was like, so good about it, right? It was like, Oh my gosh, like, that's awesome. Like, I'm so like, Have you ever told me one before? I was like, No, you're the first person and like, yeah, it was just like this really like accepting moment. They're like, Okay, well, like, I won't tell anyone. But like, obviously, like, I'm here for you in this, like, doesn't change a thing. And it was like, it just like made me want to, like, tell more and more people. So I did, I kind of started slowly coming out to like, really close teammates. And I think I took like four or five girls on the team. But that was kind of it. I started to help people. And then I was like, Okay, this feels good. This is great. But like, we're not gonna really, like do anything. Like, and so then I kind of like back in the closet. It was this weird thing of like, okay, cool, like people know, but like, I'm still not going to like date girls, right? I'm just gonna, like, I don't know, because I think it's just such a process, right? It's not totally, it's not like one day, and you know, you're like, Oh, I'm gay. And like, I told everyone, and I'm like, now I'm dating like, people with my same sex. It's like, no, like this, you're actually and I feel like, I've realized this, like, you're actually becoming out your entire life. Like, until we live in a society where like, straight and cysts aren't the norm, like, you're always gonna have to be like, oh, yeah, like my boyfriend or my girlfriend. And then people like, oh, okay, well, you know. So that was kind of like, I guess the first step or stage of me coming out. And then I spent two years at Oregon, and then I transferred to Arkansas. And that's when I like really went back in the closet. Right? Because I was like, I don't know a lot of people here like, all I know, is that Arkansas is like a red state like, and yeah, I kind of like just didn't tell anyone there.

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Adam James Cohen (he/him) 21:49

What was that like kind of going back in the closet in that way? And kind of being an Arkansas being in this space? That foot sounds very different than like, the crunchy Eugene like, yeah, what was that? Like?

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Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 21:59

It was crazy. I mean, I think I was ready for a change. Like, there was a lot of things about Eugene that I, I didn't really click with, like, I had kind of been like, also because of like, I was dealing with all like my sexuality and gender identity stuff. Like I was kind of like a hot mess my first year because I was injured, like, I was going out and drinking a bunch. Like I was partying

like, I was definitely not well. And so my next year, when I got like, healthy again, I had kind of, like, ruined my reputation, if that makes sense. Like, the coach and the people on the team, like kind of knew me as this like crazy partier and like, you know, wasn't going to take running seriously. And it was hard because I was like, No, now I'm ready. Like, I'm healthy, like, um, but I kinda was like, stuck in this like, box of like, someone who like wasn't going to take it seriously. And then like, I think that really impacted like, my ability to make relationships with people on the team. And then like, kind of me and the coach would butt heads a lot over that, like, I had a bad race on time. And she was like, Oh, you were like drinking the night before. I was like, No, I wasn't like, just kind of like, I mean, I did it to myself, but also, like, it was just hard to break. I think that stigma. And so I was just like, so ready for like a brand new coach, brand new state, like, I'm ready to run, like, you know, I'm ready to kind of take this this thing seriously. And so I was really excited to go to Arkansas. And it was also I couldn't transfer within the PAC 12 due to like NCAA rules. So I wanted to go to like, a power five conference. And Arkansas was really good at track. So I also really liked that about Oregon, it was like such a good track school. And so there was a lot of reasons like pushing me to Arkansas. And so it was kind of like, Yes, this is like in a really specific part of the country. And like, maybe not as safe or what I'm used to, and like Santa Cruz and Eugene, but like, this is where I'm going. And this is my fresh start. And this is like going to be that. And so I think I kind of once again, kind of did what I did in high school was like, I'm just going to focus on running, right, like, I'm not going to even worry about my gender identity or sexuality. And that was like, plus, it's safer here. Just maybe no one knows that. And then I actually ended up dating someone on the team. So it was kind of like, okay, we kind of have to come out about this, right? Like, that was kind of the next phase. And I coming out was like, going through it with a girlfriend like being like, it's easier to just be like, Oh, this is my girlfriend, right? Instead of like, Oh, I'm gay, right? It's because it just kind of like says it all in one totally. And so that was like 2016 is kind of when I would say I pretty publicly came out just like posting and like, being very open about like, Yeah, I'm in a relationship and it's actually with some of the same sex and so that was kind of like, I guess me going back in the closet didn't last very long because I transferred fall of 2015 and then by like, 2016 That was like in a relationship.

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Adam James Cohen (he/him) 24:50

Yeah. What do you remember about like that decision to make this more of a public known part of who you are? What do you remember before making up Post,

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Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 25:00

I remember like social media was definitely like really taking off then like Instagram was getting very popular and like, I just like saw all my other teammates like posting about their significant other and things like that. And like, I was like, Well, I want to do that too, you know, it definitely was like scary because it's like, I don't know how many people are gonna like React or whatever. But this is something I really want to do. And like, if people don't accept that that's a really good vetting process actually, of like, maybe I don't want you in my life. And so I just kind of forced them to it. And he was like, the response was great, you know, like, people were super accepting. And like, I feel like it was actually really important to be in Arkansas during that time, like it was during the 2016 election, like, we had so many conversations with teammates were like, I have no idea if I, you know, change their mind or heart or anything, but like, at least they now know, a queer person, right? And like, if they ever have a kid or a family



member, that's like, also queer, they can be like, Oh, I remember Nikki and like, they were cool, or like, they were they were nice. And like, I don't know, I remember having a lot of really important conversations during that time. I think also having like a partner to go through it with was really helpful during that time, right? Because like, we weren't alone, like, at the end of the day, we had each other, you know,

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 26:15

totally. Wow, gosh, it really sounds like that was like, that was the beginning of your activism. And so much of your work now is centered on that. What a powerful pivot point in your life, it seems like yeah, at least for me, I conceptualize kind of, there's the life before and life after often that happens around kind of not necessarily even just like one coming out. But like one particular time. I'm curious, like, Did it feel like things started to really shift for you after?

N Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 26:39

Yeah, definitely. And this is kind of where like, running comes back. And, like, after that year, like my running just like took off. I went from like, pretty average, like runner, and then sibility to like, one of the top three, you know, like, I was getting second twice, like, third and then like a six, my running just like took off. And it was like, Oh, this weight is like lifted like, right. This is like this ball and chain I had been like dragging around the track was like the whole time. And now it's just like gone. And so I think like right there kind of shows the power of how much it does weigh on you when you just bury something that's so authentic to you. And so I would definitely say like 2016 2017 was like a massive turning point, just in my life, for sure.

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 27:24

Totally. And it's so interesting hearing you talk about, like, what a relationship with running and how it's like, been a part of your life and play different roles in your life since the beginning. And as you're talking about going back to like high school, you know, I often talk with queer people, anyone on this podcast about this idea of, we can often like unconsciously really lean into one particular part of ourselves or skill or identity, like the athlete, the artist, the overachiever, and like use that as a tool to gain like success and validation, but also as a place to kind of, okay, I can put like, my eggs in this basket, I can just like leave behind, like, when I think about my sexuality, right? And, and it's like both. And it's both like, super awesome and helpful, because it does often lead to great things for the person. And it can just be interesting when it also becomes like the source of your validation, right of your prayers and all of that. And it sounds like you've kind of had run and be a consistent part of your life, but it's just taken different shapes. And gosh, like I'm thinking about, yeah, I can just see this visual of you after coming out and the weight dropping and being able to just run like you haven't before, like, whoa, so that's so. Wow. Yeah. Okay, so then what happened next in your story,

N Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 28:36

my last two years at Arkansas were like, just really great seasons. I was running really well. And I graduated May of 2018. And it was kind of like, okay, now I had ran well enough to like turn pro. And I got an agent. I was like talking with shoe companies and like deciding where my next

pro. And I got an agent. I was like talking with shoe companies and like deciding where my next move is going to be. And I had spent three years at Arkansas, it is common for some people to stay with their college coach and stay training where they've been training just because you know, it's worked. But for me, I was like, This chapter is closing, like I'm ready to move. You know, I loved my coach at Arkansas, but it was just kind of like, I don't think I really want to be in Arkansas anymore. And so there was a few different groups and shoe brands. I was like descending between but I ended up going with Adidas and moving to San Diego. I always loved San Diego like we would go there for guards for regionals, and it was like paradise, right so I was really excited to like move back to like my home state too and like be close to the ocean again and like I got a good offer from adidas like the stars aligned to like okay, this or I'm gonna go this far. I'm gonna try next. And so yeah, I just signed a shoe contract and moved in October 2018. And I've been professionally running ever since I kind of like I feel like the next chapter of my story was like, really coming to terms with like, my gender identity, right? Like I had come out about my sexuality and like category public like girlfriend, and like, you know, that was all going great, but I feel like there was just something else that I wasn't like being fully honest with. So that was kind of happened in 2020, the pandemic hit and like, I was like, kind of once again, couldn't run, like, it was like, all my meats got canceled. And so I was like, okay, what can I do that's like, not running, but something I'm still like, really passionate about. And it was like, oh, like, I'm really into activism and like advocating for queer people, like, I'm going to use my platform, and like, I'm gonna put on a race, like, I'm just gonna put on a virtual race, like, a lot of people are getting into running because like, of the pandemic, and like, I'm gonna raise money for the Trevor Project, which is the leading national organization, providing suicide intervention to LGBTQ youth. And so I kind of a few my teammates, and I like, threw it together. It was like, yeah, we'll just like, have people sign up by buying a shirt. And like, you know, I was, I don't know, we'll just see how this goes. And so we launched it like, April, May, 2020. And like, the race was gonna be in June, during pride month, all the proceeds go into the Trevor Project. And like, 2000 people signed up, and we were like, wow, like, okay, like, this is really cool. And I think part of me was like, I was so desperate to create, like, a safe space and use running to do that. And I think I was so desperate to do it. Because, like, I was closeted in some way, right? Like, I was, like, kind of craving that for myself. And so it was this really awesome thing. Like it played out virtually, like we had the race was in June. And like, on race day, we had, like, people basically use the race to like, come out, like, I remember, obviously, like, everyone's tagging me, like hash tagging pride five gram trying to like, keep up and like everything. And I just see this one post. And I was like, please, it's like, coming out post. And we like reading. We're like, Yeah, it is. And we're like, wow, like, and then as the day went on, like, There ended up being like, four of them, like four people use like this day to, like, you know, come out of the closet. And that was like, crazy. For me. I was like, Okay, this was just something like I threw together and my janky garage in San Diego with like, a few teammates. Like, it was kind of like that moment where I was like, Okay, this is not just like a quarantine special, right? Like, this is like, something I want to do every year. So that was 2020. Like, summer, the next year, around this time, 2021. I was planning the second race, right? And so I decided, I was like, Okay, I want to talk to these four people who came out, right? I want to connect with them and just kind of like, share their stories. And like, I love podcasts. I love being on them. I love listening them. And so I was like, Okay, I'm just gonna record like podcast episodes with these people and like, kind of talk to people. Like they're coming on experience, like was that day like for you? Like, you know, were you planning this, whatever. And so, I recorded my first one, march 30. So like, almost exactly a year ago. And it was like, I was like, still a closeted person, just having a conversation with someone who used my race to come out. And like, he was in that conversation with this podcast guests. That I was like, Okay, I think I'm ready to come out. Right. It was just like, she was just telling me about, like, how good it felt and like how, like this such this weight was lifted, right? And I had known all this too,

because I also previously come out about something. And I was just like, I think I'm ready. And so I called my girlfriend and my girlfriend and I had, obviously, like, she knew about my gender identity, we had been having really important conversations and like, just kind of learning together. And so I called her and I was like, okay, like, the pockets went really well, like, so I think like, I'm ready to come out. And like, the next day was March 31, which is Trans Day of visibility. And I was like, Yeah, I think I'm gonna do it like tomorrow. And she's like, okay, like, Yeah, do it. Like, I support you. I'm here for you. Like, if you're ready, like, you're ready, you know. And so the next day I posted and that was a year ago today, actually, like, it's March 31, that we're recording this. So yeah, I feel like it was kind of like this moment of, I'm ready to be seen, like, as cool. I've always like, see myself as, and yeah, it's kind of crazy that like, the pride 5k Was that at the start, I was like, Okay, I'm creating a safe space for queer people. And like, it ended up being like, my safe space in the end, you know? Yeah.

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Adam James Cohen (he/him) 34:18

What's that, like, right now? In this moment? Looking back like a year ago? Exactly. To that moment, and kind of everything that's happened since well, yeah, what's it like in this moment?

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Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 34:27

It's definitely like it's crazy. Like there's so many moments this past year like that I've been so affirming and so joyful but it's been like so scary and like so different than kind of what I had imagined it was gonna be in both like good and bad ways right like it's both it's this like paradox of like feeling so firm and beautiful and like, finally being like, you know, even just referred to as they them instead of like she her and then is also so jarring when it's every day it feels like there's more and more like anti trans legislation being passed. Like, it's so different than when I came out about my sexuality, right? Because like, that was what like 2016. And then 2015, like gay marriage had just been, like, legalized. And it was, like, it's so much about if you feel safe in your environment, you know, and I felt like, as a country as a whole, like, it was like, yeah, there was so much like representation on every single TV show of like, a gay couple. And like, you know, it was, like, legal to be gay now and like to marry and like, I feel like now like coming out in 2021, to a world where it was, like, honestly, going backwards when it comes to like, trans legislation and like, acceptance, like, it's been, like, very jarring at times. And like, kind of just like, very a scary thing to navigate honestly.

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Adam James Cohen (he/him) 35:54

Yeah. How have you been navigating that? Like,

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Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 35:59

I feel like, it's so much of the time I want to, like, go back to like, toxic positivity. And like, it's great to be like, you know, called being them and like it because it it like, it is great to have people understand that, but it's like, I don't know, I think it just comes back to like this fact that like, this isn't something that people that comes naturally to people and like, this isn't

something that people even see is like, valid or real, you know, and like, it's definitely hard. Like, especially being I think somewhat of like a public figure. It's like, I think people forget that I'm like, human and like, even when I do interviews with some, like running brands or media where like, the comments aren't like, monitored. And like, I like see that, you know, and it's hard to kind of shut that out. But I think honestly, like leaning into the people and things that do bring me joy and like that are so affirming, kind of like what I talked about earlier, like, it is a really good vetting process to like, people who like are still using like, she heard it's like, okay, like, you haven't taken the time to like, understand or like a simple thing, like getting someone's pronouns, right. Like, maybe I don't, you know, want you in my life or like me, I'm not gonna, like invest so hard in this relationship, you know?

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Adam James Cohen (he/him) 37:15

Totally, yeah. It clears a way to find your people, the ones you know, who can I fully see and embrace and affirm all of you. And there's also like, a loss in that there's like a grief in that like off on like, how come these other folks just can't get off work? Yeah, totally. Yeah. And it strikes me like, I see you doing so much activism too, politically in this last year. I'm curious how that role, too, has also been a support for you to do what you're doing. Like, you're right. Like, we have gone backwards. There is so much oppression of transgender folks and gender non conforming folks and both like culturally, but also legislatively, and I see your activism as a response to that. I'm curious, like, how has that been? Do you identify as an activist, like, what do you hear when you even hear me use that word? What's happening on your end?

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Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 38:02

Yeah, I mean, I definitely have, like, leaned into that part of me, for sure. And I feel like, you know, having a partner like now who also, I would say, like, Emma, my girlfriend now is like, through and through the, like, definition of an advocate. And so really like learning from her and like, I don't know, it's been pretty cool to kind of, like glean it more into that, as well as my running. Like, I feel like, there's moments where like, once again, like the parallel of running where like, it is this thing that like, kind of drives me, I feel like, I run the 1500s. So it's like at the Olympic trials this past summer, there was a lot of rounds to get to the final, right, there's like the first shot and the semi final. And then you're finally in the final and like, I felt like, in honestly, the semi final Olympic trials, I was like, You need to be like on that starting line. Like, right? Like, it's so important for someone like you to be there and like to be seen, because I so deeply know, the power that visibility and representation can have. And so I just kind of like I think, in that race, and this doesn't happen, every race, it's kind of like here and there. But it was like, a very conscious thought of like, if you make that final like, that means like, maybe a trans kid out there watching like, can see themselves in you and like, they can like be the next non binary runner, like, you know, so I feel like I definitely like channeled it in more than one ways of like, being an advocate and really, you know, not being afraid to like be seen and like be very vocal about not part of my life. And so, yeah,

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Adam James Cohen (he/him) 39:37

oh, yeah. I'm also thinking back of Yeah, being an advocate for other kids now, but I also it's always interesting to to think about, like our younger selves to whenever we do things in our own lives. And I'm going back and thinking about this image of seven year old you and the

portraits and rashguard and just like how often or do you ever kind of step back in time and think about as you've kind of made these different personal and professional milestones like How often do you go back in time and see little nick? Yeah, different points. What's that? Like?

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Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 40:04

I think this past year, like I really have gone back to, you know, little Mickey and like, just because I've done so many interviews of like, when did you know about your gender? And or just like things like that? And like, there's always that question like, What would you tell your younger self or like, if you could go back and like, you know, and it's honestly, like, I want it reversed. Like, I want little Mickey to give me advice. Like, I feel like they were like fearless. Like, screw it, I'm just gonna wear a rash guard and shorts. And like, you know, I want to channel like, they're like a fearlessness of, I don't know, just like not being afraid to like, make a space for themselves. And so I feel like I've been trying to get back to that seven year old Nikki, like, Okay, how do I get there? Again,

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Adam James Cohen (he/him) 40:44

totally, I that's been a common theme to I've seen in kind of on this show. And and other conversations I've had with people I work with professionally, or even just in personal conversations, this theme of like, the true self was there at the beginning before like, culture and everything else put our shit blocking the true self. And it's like our path in like our own healing is getting back to that True Self that's been there underneath and clearing everything. And it's a process. And in this idea of second adolescence, that's like, absolutely kind of a core task is to kind of clear away the scripts, the internalized beliefs that have kind of kept us distant from who we truly are. And it's just so cool. It's so cool to hear you say that and like see where you're at now, with all this, it's just like, Oh, it's so cool. And kind of on this kind of like journey of like, starting at seven year old. And now coming back to this true self, I'm thinking to like, it's always interesting, you made a post about this recently about returning to Santa Cruz returning to where you grew up. And I'm curious, like, what has that been like for you, in your evolution of your own relationship with where you grew up in returning now, where you're at now,

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Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 41:52

I mean, it was kind of like, I came back a couple of weekends ago, for she is beautiful, great race. And it was kind of like, I don't really go home that often. Like, just because I'm like, so busy with racing and things like that. But when I do it is kind of this weird feeling of like, okay, I spent my whole life here, but like, all of it was in the closet, right? Like, I was never like, openly gay or like, openly trans. So it is this kind of like, you're going back to a place that holds a lot of trauma, most of not being your true self. And so I think it was actually, this time, going home now was actually like, one of the best times like for me, like I felt like I finally was like, kind of in a place where I could lean into myself and I had worked through a lot of my own internalized homophobia and transphobia. to like, be back in the space where like, it was a little traumatizing, but like, I think I was also maybe putting too much weight on like, what people thought of me, like, you know, people will see me as like, Nikki, the homecoming queen, or like, I don't know, Nikki, who had like, all the boyfriends, but like, no one's actually thinking of you

like, like, actually, like, you think of yourself more than anyone ever thinks. But yeah, totally, I did feel really good about going home this time. And also, because I was there to speak on this panel at choose veto. It was kind of this moment, like, I'm coming home and I'm, you know, talking to my hometown community about being trans and like how to, you know, make a space for trans people in sport and how to be more inclusive, and like when you put on events and like, things like that. So it was like, kind of this full circle moment of like, I really, like have really broken that promise that I made to myself on that run, right? Like I'm like, Well, we're never telling anyone about this. It's almost like the opposite. I'm like, I could not tell more people about this, broadcasting this to the world. So yeah, it's like, kind of proving that, that Nikki wrong.

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Adam James Cohen (he/him) 43:57

Ah, what a journey you've had. And it's so cool to witness it from afar, just knowing you from kind of growing up until now, but then it's also just so cool what you're offering to culture now by being so visible and sharing your story and creating space for other people to share their stories and being just so thank you for what you're doing. It's so cool. And then you said pride five K's in person this year. And I gotta let you go in a second. But tell me about that.

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Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 44:27

Yeah, it's we're hoping to do an October Ray's just kind of like, I think the pied piper will always mimic like my life and like my journey and like we put it in July last year because the trials were in June and like, for me, like we've realized that like I do put so much energy and effort into it because it is like my baby and like it's like June and July or like June is pride month obviously. And it's like those are also the most important months of like my career because that's like when USAID czar that's where the trials are anyways, and so I'm like, wait, it doesn't have to be June, right? Like, pride is not exclusive to one month, like pride is all year round. And so we're actually going to push it back to October, so is gonna be like a fall race in person. And I actually just moved to Flagstaff, Arizona. I was in San Diego for the past four years, but I just moved starting like a new chapter of my writing career. And so we're still figuring out where we're thinking right now, like back in San Diego, just because that's where it was born, it's way more accessible to get there than Flagstaff flex was very specific, but we're really excited and like, we're talking with brands, and like, you know, different companies to see like how we're going to pull this off. But I'm so excited to kind of see that online community that's been cultivated, like to see some of those people like in person, I think it's gonna be so cool. And it's definitely not exclusive to like LGBTQ people, like allies can run it. There's just so many cool stories about the prototype guy could do like a whole podcast on it, but

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Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 45:57

it's this one girl, like came out. And then her whole family like to celebrate, like, random pride vibe getting together, you know? So it's like, I think sometimes people was like, oh, it's only like for queer people. It's like, no, it's like, everyone can run it. And I think we're always gonna

like, for queer people. It's like, no, it's like, everyone can run it. And I think we're always gonna also have a virtual aspect to it, because that's how it was born. And like, people from all over the world turn on it, too. So I think also really important piece that we're like, moving into is the entire team that's gonna put it on. Our goal is to have like, an entire queer staff of like, queer run and operate with pride, five, gay, so it's exciting. And like, I could talk forever about it, but

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Adam James Cohen (he/him) 46:37

awesome. And for where people, if they want to learn more about the 5k, where's a good place to send them?

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Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 46:42

Now honestly, just follow pride 5k on Instagram, and then or follow me like, I will always be posting about it. And we'll post like one race legislation opens and like exactly where it is. We still need to figure a few things out. But yeah, that's where all the info can be found. Either follow me it helps or pride five. Good.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 47:01

Awesome. Well, I could talk with you all day. I want to be sensitive to your time. Was there anything we didn't get to that you want to be a part of this conversation? Oh, my gosh,

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Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 47:11

I don't know. I feel like we need to share like stories of like, guards more. But now I want to like flip the whole conversation totally. Tell me about like yours.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 47:24

Totally, totally ain't no, no, no, that's a whole other whole other long time hours. I could talk about that, for sure. But yeah, I think it was cool and interesting. Like, our stories are, of course, very different. But there's also similar timelines of things. And I can really connect with like, what adolescence was like for you in particular. And again, I just like wish, like, I could go back in time. And yeah, you know, how cool would that have been when I forget how old I was? Maybe I was 18 or 19, when you were like a 12 year old when we first met and I was your instrument partner. And like, if only we could have like, it was just different. We could have a different conversation then. So I'm like thinking about our younger selves. I see them in conversation yours behind you mind behind me. And it's a cool moment. And yeah, yeah, let's keep the conversation going. We'd love to share more about my, my stuff and another another time, but I am just Yeah, again, I'm so appreciative of you, coming on to share your story and being so visible as you are and also crushing it in running. It's so fun, and we're so excited to keep watching your career. Awesome.



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Nikki Hiltz (they/them) 48:33

Well, thank you so much for having me. This has been a blast.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 48:45

Hey, thanks for joining us for today's conversation. Feel free to head on over to [second adolescence pod.com](https://secondadolescencepod.com) For show notes and more. And you can connect further by following the show on Instagram at [second adolescents pod](https://www.instagram.com/secondadolescentspod). If you're interested in being a future guests on the show and you want to come on and share about your own second adolescence visit [second adolescence pod.com/be A guest](https://secondadolescencepod.com/be-a-guest) and you can submit your interest there. Alright, that's it for me for now. Whether it's morning, afternoon, night, wherever we're finding you and your day go on out there and keep doing things that would make younger you absolutely thrilled. That is what it's all about. Alright, take good care.