

Ep. 17: Second Adolescence w/ Fae Sturniolo (they/them)

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SPEAKERS

Adam James Cohen (he/him), Fae Sturniolo (they/them)



Adam James Cohen (he/him) 00:09

Hello and welcome to the Second Adolescence podcast. I am your host Adam James Cohen on this week's episode, I mean, gosh, I feel like I keep saying that each week we have a really special episode because they really just keep being so good. But yeah, today we really do have such a special episode. This week's guest is queer librarian and mental health advocate Fae, who runs the fantastic Instagram @inkedlibrarywitch and team before this conversation. I knew librarians were awesome. But holy moly, I truly think it's going to be queer librarians who are going to save this world because my gosh, that I just feel so inspired and invigorated by Fay and the work they do as a teen librarian first working in schools and now working in the public library where they're really supporting queer youth and having access to queer story isn't just the coolest. And yeah, in addition to sharing about their work, Fay invites us all into their journey, their queer journey, their mental health journey. And yeah, their story is just so powerful. And they were so generous with it by inviting us all in, I was truly so touched throughout all of this conversation. And so I'm really excited to invite you into it as well. And just a heads up that the topics of suicidal ideation and self harm are components of today's conversation. So feel free to do whatever you need to take care of yourself with this heads up, okay, I'm going to stop gushing, I'm very excited to invite you into this conversation. And yeah, as with each episode of the second adolescents podcast, I want to invite you as listener to listen with open curiosity, knowing that each of our stories are different and unique. You might hear some guests share things that really differ from your experience, and you might hear other guest share things that really speak to what you are going through or have gone through, 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 For show notes and more where you can follow the show on Instagram at at second adolescence pod. All right. Welcome to the conversation. Thanks for being here. Welcome to Second Adolescence, I'm so curious and excited to have you on and get to know more about you and

your story. And I guess the first place I like to start with everyone is first framing for the listener kind of who the person is behind the voice. So anything to speak to about just a mini intro to you then we'll dive in from there.

F Fae Sturniolo (they/them) 02:51

Hi, I'm Fae. I use they them pronouns. I identify as a non binary lesbian. Basically, I'm non man attracted to non men. I am a later in lifer only have come out and figured my own stuff out in the last couple of years. And I also happen to be a mom. So that's just a little bit about me, I'm also a librarian, so I'm super passionate about queer reads. And that's just a little intro to me.

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 03:22

Oh my gosh, great. Okay, I want to ask about all of the things. It's always so cool when I first asked that question, because we all hold so many different identities at one time. And it's also interesting, like coming into relationship with those identities at different points in our story. So I'm very curious and excited to chat with you. So thank you again. And I guess like, starting there, why the hell did you say yes to coming on my show and sharing your story?

F Fae Sturniolo (they/them) 03:46

Well, one, as someone who really pushed my own identity down for so long, just continuing to just like not face who I was as a person, between my gender identity between my sexuality, all of that, I pushed it down for so long. And while I could appreciate and support others, and you know, like, my older brother is also gay, I could never accept it in myself. And so being able to come on and talk about my experiences, and honestly a little bit of my own unique experiences, I know can help even one person listening and I've seen that as a librarian because I tend to draw in those little queer babies and they feel comfortable with me and I make them more comfortable in who they are and sharing my story and kind of not only destigmatizing just like my own journey, but also destigmatizing my mental health journey. When you reached out between thinking about my own queer journey and also my own mental health journey, I was like, Oh, yes, this yes, this is right up my alley. This is what I'm passionate about. This is exactly what I want. to do and talk about. So to be able to talk about it in a platform like this is awesome. And I'm so glad that you there's something like this that exists because I can't think of if I had had things like this growing up, would I have come out as late in life as I did?

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 05:19

Oh, ah, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Yes to all of it to all of it. And yeah, on that last point, that that was like a big impetus for me wanting to start the show in these conversations is because I too, have been curious, like, wow, what would have happened if I would have had access to this type of dialogue and the exposure to this type of experiences? What would that have done for my younger self? And? Okay, I already know we're going to be friends. So this feels I'm very excited. Okay, wait. So like you were alluding to Yeah, like repression and kind of this journey

of both your queer journey and your mental health journey. And it makes me curious, when you look at the origins of that journey, kind of where do you go when you think about the beginning of your story and kind of making sense of what set the groundwork for what came later?

F

Fae Sturniolo (they/them) 06:06

That's hard to say? Exactly. Again, in complete transparency, I have a lot of trauma, I have complex PTSD. And so a lot of my childhood is big blanks. So I don't have this, like, pinpoint that I can give you of like, well, this is when I knew or this is when I started repressing. Or this is when I started struggling, or any of those moments, because there's these huge big gaps of my own upbringing. And while there are certain things I can remember, and certain things I've started to remember, like, once I kind of came to, once I finally came to terms with who I'm a lesbian, and I'm a non man attracted to non men, like, Oh, my God, little things would pop into my head, like I was brought up in a very Christian household. And so we went to church every Sunday, very involved in the church. And I remember being in third grade, and looking back, I had this infatuation with a girl named Bryn. And I didn't remember that up until probably the last two years, I remember being in third grade, but I didn't remember anything that happened. But I remember Bryn now. And I remember being Oh, so infatuated. With her, but she had crushes on boys. And I was like, Oh, I'm supposed to have a crush on a boy, right? Like, that's what I'm supposed to be doing. And she would ask me, she goes, Well, who do you like in our church, you know, Sunday school. And I'm like, um, I like him. And it was the most feminine boy of all. And she got, oh, yeah, you know, cuz she was so focused on all the other boys and I was liking for instance. So I can think of those times now. But in past like, I couldn't tell you exactly where it started. I remember being in ninth grade and coming out at least as bisexual, but only because my friend came out as bi. And I was like, wow, I guess I am, too. So like, I can remember those things. But in all honesty, I tried not to think about it because it felt like one more thing to deal with. To be honest. As I said, I grew up very Christian, I love my family, but grew up in a very repressed Christian household of you just aren't good. That's just not. That's not God's plan. God's plan is for you to find the one person who's the opposite sex of you, and you marry them, and you have kids and you go to church, and you do all that. That was God's plan. And so I was dealing with severe mental illness at a very young age. And so to me, I was already this mess of a human to my family that I was like, we're just, that's not what I am. We're not going to deal with that. And so super repressed super deep down, pushed that down so deep, that I was even like, homophobic at one point where I was like, oh, no, I hate gay people. Because it felt like I couldn't give my parents another reason to be ashamed. It just, I remember wanting to kill myself and all and sorry, I guess trigger warning for those listening, but like, I was hurting, I started hurting myself in seventh grade. And it was because of this. It started out as you know, being like, I'm just this mess. I'm just this horrible human, I can't do anything, right. I I make a mess for my family. I do horrible things to my siblings. I make my parents stress. I do all these things. So I deserve to be punished. God is first other second and then me third, so I don't matter. And so all of that pushed it even deeper. And as I said, even though looking back I'm like, I had no interest in men. If I liked men, it was the emo boys in the early 2000s, who, like women, or at least androgynous enough, because I do very much, you know, like the Androgyny. But again, it was like I do not let myself deal with it at all. And it always felt different than how my friends felt about guys. them, it seems so natural. And to me, I was like, awkward with it. Sorry, I know, you said where it started. And I was like, I don't even know where it started. Like, there was a lot in, the older I get, the more therapy I go to the more introspective and self awareness I become, there's more and more things coming up. And more and more I'm discovering of myself and more memories kind of pop up. So yeah,

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 10:54

I mean, just quick pause and just like want to just namely how honored, I feel that you're sharing your story. And I think your story is gonna be so helpful for so many folks, you know, particularly so many queer folks have come with their own histories of traumas, as well, in addition to the trauma of growing up queer in a culture that doesn't, right, that doesn't allow that. We also come in with our own set of trauma and have so much healing work to do. And so I just feel really appreciative and grateful of you kind of sharing your journey with that. And as a listener, I can't help but like, have my heartbreak for little you who was first internalizing shame, because of the trauma and because of kind of your mental health experience, then there's this other layer of your identity. And yeah, and I guess when you look back, like in this moment, at younger you at that time, like what happens for you, as you kind of see what was going on for them, then,

F

Fae Sturniolo (they/them) 11:45

I mean, I look back and I go, Man, I wish I could have just come to terms with who I was. Because I feel like that would have opened a door to not as many struggles as I put myself through. That's not to say that, like struggles wouldn't have happened. But I've shoved myself so deep in the closet, that I ended up with a severely abusive boyfriend in high school, who was emotionally and sexually abusive. And so like I was with them. And then after him, I started using men as a form of self harm, in all honesty, because again, it felt like, I still wasn't ready to deal with my attraction to people who weren't men, because again, I felt like I was already a massive human, I didn't want to add that on to my parents, they already had one gay kid, which they were already struggling with. And so I, I didn't help that I saw the way they dealt with my older brother. So I was like, we're just, I'm already making a mess, we're going to just deal with the mess that is me. And not that asked of who I am. And so I very much convinced myself that I was straight, which was bullshit. And my best friend, we've known each other since the last day of senior year, and when I came out to her, like to be honest, within the last like year and a half to two years, she was like, I could have sworn I told you Thank you. You did not. She was like you just never connected with men, the way I saw you, with women and other people that were not done. And I was like, Oh, thank you. That would have saved me so much time. But again, there was a lot of try not to deal with it. Try not to acknowledge it trying to really, you know, force myself to be straight. Basically, in convincing myself I did a good job lying to myself for a long time of being like, oh, yeah, I'm totally and the guy's like, that's who I want. And so again, that put me into some hard situations. And ultimately, that's how I became a mom. So then to add another layer on top of the already repression that I was doing. After I had my daughter, my mom was like, You need to find her father, you need to find her dad, you need to find a partner in this that's going to step up because kids need both. And I was like, Oh, okay. Oh, okay. This is what we're doing. I'm looking for dad for her. This is what I'm doing. So like I had a literal checklist on my phone of what would work. It had to be someone who could look like they genetically contributed to her. It looked like someone who knew how to be a dad. It looked like someone who had their stuff together. It looked like somebody who, you know, this, this, this, this this and I like you know, had this checklist of like, well, they at least have to be my friend. Aren't and so funny enough, I met my soon to be ex wife, but they were not true. That was before their transition. And I met them and we were able to be friends. They were funny. And they immediately stepped into the role of being the parent. So I was like, Okay, I guess this is what I'm supposed to do. And before they came out, it was like, months before our wedding. And I was like, Oh, my God, I'm just gay. But I still went forward with it.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 15:31

Well, yeah, tell me more what happened in that moment, like, oh, my gosh, I'm just, I'm just gay.

F

Fae Sturniolo (they/them) 15:35

I told myself that I was like, Okay, I'm just gay. But I can't leave. Because they're a parent to my child. And they're my best friend. I was like, I can't leave, I don't want to lose them as a friend, even though I'm not interested in them in that way. But I love them. And I care about them. And they're a great parent to my kids. So this is just what I'm doing. It obviously was not the greatest idea. But I went forward with it convinced that I could at least make myself happy in some way. Then shortly before the pandemic hit, I finally came to terms with being non binary. And I came out to them and I was like, I don't feel like I'm a woman. I'm definitely not a man. But I don't feel like a woman most of the time. And they were like, oh, okay, I don't know what that means. And I'm like, it just means that I'm me. And then shortly thereafter, I guess it opened the door for her. And she was like, I think I want to wear women's clothes. And I was like, okay, and she was like, and I think I might want to be feminine. And I was like, Oh, hey, and then all sudden, she's like, No, I'm a trans woman. And I'm like, awesome. And I was like, okay, so I don't have to leave. Because you're not a man. And this will work out. Obviously, you heard I did not split because she's a trans woman by any means. There was a lot of other stuff that I had kind of also repressed because of mental stuff. And we don't need to get into that, because that has nothing to do with this current conversation. But it was so weird to be like, Oh, this week, what a story to be like, Okay, I'm pretty sure I'm gay. But I'm with a man, right air quotes. And then going, I think I'm non binary. Okay, that opens the door to my wife becoming my wife. What a ride. It was. It's been a roller coaster. And I was my life has been a roller coaster. And I'm like, you know, it'd be nice if it slowed down.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 17:44

Yeah. Where's the pause button? I just need a break. Yes, totally. Totally. Wow. Yeah. I mean, I'm like, on one hand, like, yes, it's like a roller coaster and what a ride to be on. I'm also just thinking about, there's a specialness to to in that in that partnership, like there was space for you and your ex wife to both come to your own personal understandings of yourself and be able to kind of work that out with each other in a sense. I mean, I'm sure it was like, there's complications in that process, too. Yeah.

F

Fae Sturniolo (they/them) 18:15

So in some ways, me coming out to her allowed her to become herself. The unfortunate part was, she never accepted really, me being non binary. And so it became, well, again, I'm very happy for her, I'm so glad she gets to be who she is. And so thankful that she has discovered herself and that I made her feel safe enough to be able to do that. And there is still a love and care for her. But when I was with her, she still when I asked her to stop calling me my dead name, and just calling me fe. She at first was like, I don't understand like that, and gave me

like, a hard time about it. And then when I started talking about like, well, I might want top surgery or I might, like, I want to buy a binder. And she was like, What, no, I love your boobs. They're like, and I'm like, but it's not about you. It's about me. And then, and then even when she came to terms with me possibly getting a reduction or top surgery, she was like, Well, I understand they give you pain, and I'm like, but like not physical pain. Not really like I mean, they do to an extent just because having a weight on your chest. But I said but it's more about my dysphoria. And she's like, but she would always dismiss that, like it was more about the physical illness of having boobs rather than the dysphoria of having them. And I understand trans women are killed in inordinate amount and they're constantly in danger, and I understand that, but she would also use that as a way to invalidate me. She was like, well, you pass you're safe. I'm not and I'm like, I'm not saying that you're not unsafe. But like that doesn't invalidate that I'm non binary, it doesn't invalidate the fact that I don't identify as either. So it became this way. And so when I left, and that's why I said it was like, I feel like I'm going through my second adolescence right now, because since I've left, I bought a binder, I tried trans tape for the first time, and it was super validating into how I feel. I don't know if I'm going to start hormones, but I've contemplated starting testosterone just for some of it. And so I've been able to finally feel like I can explore me as a non binary person, because now I'm not being invalidated by the fact that she went through these whole things as a trans woman, which again, I'm so grateful that I could give her that safe place to be. But in the same breath, it was like, It all became about her identity, and mine wasn't valid. And she constantly would be like, This is my wife, and only you she her pronouns. And like, when I tried to test out different names, she kind of made fun of me for it, and threw me under the bus for it with our neighbors. Again, I'm totally getting off track here. But I said to her one day, I was like, hey, you know, like, not that I hate the name fe. But like, I'd like to try something out that maybe is a little bit more gender neutral, just a little bit more. I said, Would you mind calling me like moss, just here at home just for the day, maybe a couple of days just to test it out. See how I feel. And she was like, ha, ha, ha, that's hilarious. And I'm like, No, seriously, like, I want to test it out. Can you? You I'm not asking anyone else to I just want you to test it out. And she goes, alright, and then we had a game night with our neighbors that night. And she immediately was like, well, Faye wants to be called moss. And why don't you try out moss. So my neighbor with all the enthusiasm. I mean, he was very sweet. But he was like, Okay, I'll call you mass, mass, mass, mass, mass, mass, mass, mass, mass mass and it just like over and over that he killed it. And she thought it was the most hilarious thing where I was like, no, no, no, stop, please just stop calling me it. And she thought it was the most hilarious thing that kind of threw me under the bus with it. And I was like, it's not funny. I wanted to genuinely try out a name. So I still haven't decided if I want to try out different names. I'm sticking with Fe for right now. But now it just it feels like there's this way where I can if I decide to I can I have a good community? I've honestly met someone who's very validating of my identity. They're trans mass non binary to It's very liberating. Yeah.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 22:49

I mean, yeah, when I hear you talk about, I guess what first let me just also name, I appreciate you sharing your experience having your identity invalidated. Because again, that is something that I think so many people unfortunately have to like, navigate these relationships, particularly painful when they're like a very intimate relationship. And we're experiencing that validation, right. And so I so appreciate you kind of just illustrating kind of what that process was like for you. Because again, that's unfortunately, too common of an experience for folks. But it was so interesting, energetically, the listeners can't see you. But I saw like when you started talking then about kind of you being in your second adolescence now and like getting a binder exploring tea, and even now like exploring kind of what name feels most true, like I see a

lightness in your face. And you use the word liberation. And throughout kind of your story. So far, I've really heard how so much of the beginning was the word repression was such a cornerstone of that experience. And I'm curious now about this idea of liberation. And yet, what has that been like being more in this liberation phase of your journey?

F Fae Sturniolo (they/them) 23:50

It's phenomenal. I feel like the most me that I've been, since I don't even know when you know what I mean? Because I've lived my life in so much fear between the trauma between my identity between my mental illness, so much fear and so much repression, in my own self, not to add on, you know, just general insecurities have been someone growing up to you know what I mean, and especially as a fat person growing up, so not even to add on that layer, but like this fear of just not being able to be who I am not being able to explore that freely. And now it's like, no, like, I get to be me. And I don't have to be fearful of everything. It's so nice to not be fearful and like, I obviously still have mental illness. I still have anxieties. I still have that. But like I genuinely feel, again the most like me I have since I can remember. And not so fearful because I've lived so much of my life in fear for fear of commitment, fear of myself fear of shame, fear of guilt, fear of judgment of all these things between, you know, in the Christian upbringing to mental illness, stigma to all of that feeling like, I'm not a sis woman, or you know, like all of that, and that now I'm like, I feel like I can breathe. It's so amazing. And I have a good community, and good people around me that are uplifting of that when I when I tell them, I'm like, I'm so sick of living in fear. And they're like, yes. And I'm like, This is so nice to not be living in fear. And they're like, Yes.

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 25:47

Totally, totally. And yeah, it sounds like having this community has been another layer of help and healing in this kind of freedom and liberation, like what else has that looked like for you in letting go of that fear and moving beyond that fear? What does that look like in this last bit of time in your life?

F Fae Sturniolo (they/them) 26:05

I mean, the community itself is the reason I can do this, that I stopped repressing, that I stopped pushing and beating myself down. I had a library assistant, who helped me question my own gender, they're non binary. And they were like talking to me about it. And I'm like, Hold on, let me ask you all these a million questions that have always been in my head, but I've never heard about them. And then Richmond as a city is so LGBT friendly, as much as you wouldn't think the capital of the Confederacy would be. And I discovered a queer hair salon who's owned by an amazing, we're now friends like I met, I discovered this salon, I met the owner had them do my hair. And she's been a super big support. And she's been super supportive through my divorce and, and then we started a queer book book, they're like, I helped inspire that, because I was like, always talking about queer reads. And so they were like, we're gonna put this in the slot like, and we're gonna start a queer book club this summer, and like, to having all of these people so like them. And then general friends I've made through Honestly, my Instagram is a lot of it is like, I've met these people through my Instagram, which I never would have. Meeting my partner now who is phenomenal, and they're super, super

outgoing. And golden retriever energy, where we meet the community, we go out in the community, we go to these, they go to the safe space markets, I go to the safe space markets when I have time, and like, there's just this huge community of people in Richmond, I just feel like I can live authentically because I have this community has allowed me the safe place to discover who I am. So when I'm not in the safe places, I feel more confident because I know I have these amazing people in my life, in this community in Richmond that I can just go out into and connect with. It's super validating. And again, I don't think I could have if I hadn't moved to Richmond. It's like getting a hug. I don't know, like, amazing. And I keep trying to convince all my like online friends who don't live in Richmond. Like, it's amazing. It's so queer friendly. I have a friend who lives in Wisconsin, and she's like, I just wish I knew more queer people. And I was like Richmond, Richmond, Richmond. Like,

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 28:45
this is Richmond, Virginia, right?

F Fae Sturniolo (they/them) 28:46
Yes, yes.

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 28:47
Yeah. Just I thought I will check it. Yeah. I mean, gosh, yeah, it sounds like what a powerful and special community you found there. And yeah, this is a theme I hear so often in our own, like queer healing journeys. A key component is often finding this community that allows us to fully be ourselves fully discover ourselves, get that mirrored back, be inspired by other people doing the same. Ah, it's delicious. Yeah, it's a Licious. Totally cut. How special, huh? Wow. And yeah, you you mentioned to like part of your work as a librarian and being able to like create literary spaces of queerness for younger people to like, what has that been like to kind of be offering that to younger queer people now,

F Fae Sturniolo (they/them) 29:31
it's such a special place in my heart because like, when I started out as like getting my library degree, I started as a library assistant in a high school. So like, when I was in the high school, I was still very much like, Oh, I'm straight, I'm straight. I'm straight. But I would meet these kids who were just drawn to me and I, you know, we talked to them about books and first became that I was a safe place because of my mental illness because as I mentioned earlier, I've self harmed for We're close to 20 years at this point, but 17 months, almost 17 months, that I haven't done that. And they would literally see my emotions on my arms. And they'd be like, oh, this person knows. So they would come up to me and they find me as a safe place. And so I became very passionate because I struggled as a teen. And I didn't always have adults between my family and teachers, who really acknowledged that in the they let me kind of fall. And while there were some, I still honestly have contact with my eighth grade chemistry teacher, who was married to a man at the time, and is now lesbian with her wife. Amazing. Um, when I, when we reconnected, I think like, five years ago, I was like, oh, explains so much.

through high school, because I moved a bunch I was, you know, like, went from living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to living in Northern Kentucky, which was horrible, and did not help the repression. I didn't have those adults consistently around. And so I want to be that for these teams. And so that was kind of how it started. And then now kind of finding my own identity and coming out, obviously, COVID shut down, I was working at a middle that I was a middle school librarian at the time. And I started kind of understanding my identity. And then we went into quarantine, we went into COVID. And I came back out of COVID, my wife had transitioned during COVID, my I had come out as non binary, I was discovering what that meant for me. And like, I was very proud about being like my wife, my wife, my wife, my wife. So then I always wear like a pride mask and stuff at work. And so then I started gathering all the like, queer, you know, middle schoolers, they were like, oh, and I had before COVID, but not in kind of the droves that I did after. And I honestly, I have one former student who is now in high school living, not here, and we're still in contact, because I was able to support them so much, they just have attached me and I want to be that for them, I want to be that support that I can be. Because they don't always have the family support. Yeah. And then now I'm in the public library, but I work with teams, I'm still teen librarian. And so then they find me and they, they, they're like that, and I have like my pronouns on the back of my computer so that they know my pronouns, and it makes them feel more comfortable. And I talked to them about queer books. And like, I remember the day when one of them came up and was like, so I'm looking for a non heteronormative fantasy. And I was like, Oh, my day has come, this is exactly what I've liked about them. So it's amazing to be able to be kind of that queer adult, because again, while there may have been them, when I was younger, they were scarce. And I mean, they're still scarce, sometimes, depending on if, you know, we're I feel like they're getting more and more in the schools, especially, because there were several of them when I worked in the schools, but it still to be able to be kind of like, Hey, I'm here, I'm a safe place. And that's why I love libraries in general. That's why I love being a librarian is why a fiction especially is becoming so queer based, I can do so much in terms of like talking about it and destigmatizing and just being there and making it a safe place for them because I was literally taught through my master's degree that libraries do not discriminate. It is a place where you don't have to spend money so it doesn't matter your class, your race, your gender identity, your sexuality anything and that was like over and over in every one of my classes in my master's program. It's like I knew I picked the right degree. And it just reiterated that you know, my passion for being able to be in that space and be safe and be a safe person and place for the team patrons that I work with.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 34:28

Okay, I'm like I wish I was a scientist and could create a cloning machine because I just want phase all over the country and world like as you were talking I couldn't help but like feel like my little 12 year old self with me to feeling so much comfort and support from you. And I am just so grateful that you're out there doing this work it particularly in Yeah, the locations you've been doing this work, which may or may not have a ton of access, who I don't know what the exact situation is for a lot of these Your youth in terms of what they're being exposed to, but you're creating such a space just even just by existing for them to kind of feel less alone. I'm having such a good time talking to you. Wow, cool. Librarians are like, taken out. I love it. I love it. I love it. I love it. Okay. Okay, I want to stop just gushing about to you. One other thing that you mentioned kind of throughout all of this to kind of, you've had like, your queer journey and your mental health journey and kind of the healing in both and curious I can I can imagine there's like parallels, right? And intersections. But I'm wondering if you could speak to me about in this mental health journey in terms of kind of, as part of the last couple years in particular,

when it sounds like there's been so much healing that's happened just by just being and being in this community and doing the work you're doing like that. So healing, curious if there's anything else to share about what that has looked like for you that journey.

F

Fae Sturniolo (they/them) 35:54

I mean, I found an amazing therapist in 2018. So that has helped. She's been phenomenal. She's queer, positive, fat, positive, poly positive, hits all the marks, and she's a specialist in trauma. So like, I went to her to be honest, because I was still struggling so much. I had gotten diagnosed when I was 16 years old, with bipolar type one with psychosis, and eating disorders. And so I went to her because a psychiatrist had said, when I was like, 18 years old, well, I think you're actually a borderline personality. But I don't want to label you with that, because people won't treat you. And being on medication wasn't helping my bipolar I struggled a lot. Medications never worked. And so I was like, Oh my gosh, is it because they're treating bipolar and they were not treating the borderline? So that's how I discovered my therapist was I actually looked for Borderline Personality therapists in my area. And I found her and we started talking, and she kind of went to Why are you here? You know, and I told her, I was like, Well, you know, I had a psychiatrist told me, they think I'm borderline personality, but they never officially diagnosed me with it, because they didn't want people to not treat me. But I've really, you know, while I'm doing better in many ways, with my mental illness, I feel like, I still struggle with a lot of the mood and the thoughts of self harm, and the suicidal ideations and, and to be honest, making connections with people. And while I had met my ex wife, at that point, it still felt like relationships and connections were not natural to me. And looking back, that was probably because I was gay. But I thought it was because I was borderline personality, because that's what they said is like, when you're a borderline personality, you struggle to connect with people. And while obviously, there's nothing wrong with that mental illness, lots of people have it. Lots of people thrive with it. All of that month into me seeing this therapy, my therapist, she goes, You're not borderline personality. And I was like, what, that's what I was told. I said, I struggled to do that. She goes, you're traumatized. You have PTSD. And I'm like, no, no, that's like, you know, because my ex wife was a military bed. I was like, that's what, like, I know people can have PTSD, but don't have, like military experience. I was like, but that's like that. That's it's for other people. It's not for me, I don't have that trauma. I've bad things that have happened, but I don't have trauma. Because no, you literally have PTSD, possibly Complex PTSD. She's like, you're traumatized. And I was like, oh, because honestly, I never let myself tell myself that I had trauma. I was like, I don't remember my childhood. And they're like, did something bad happen to you? And I'm like, Nah, probably not what? So I, as you can tell, I did a lot of repression in so many ways. So getting curly kind of go, no, no, you have this. And it sounds like there's been several things over your life that have done this to you. Some of them you remember some of them you don't. So I actually went through exposure therapy in summer of 2019. I did it with encouragement from my ex wife partially because when I moved in with her and looking back now it's because I didn't feel safe. But when I moved in with her, my triggers started getting worse. I was super triggered by a lot of things. You know, I was living in a constant state of fight flight or Freeze and my response tends to be a freeze, I tend to.



40:06

So I was in a constant state of elevated heart rate fatigue, because I was working myself up so much. So I was like, Oh, well, before we get married, I should try to do something about this. So

I went through the exposure therapy, and it helped a lot in many ways, addressing some of my own trauma, and my, and it helped with triggers that weren't even necessarily associated with the event. So that's another thing is like, it was probably the hardest thing I've ever had to do reliving an incident over and over again, it's not for everyone. And when I would tell some of my friends, I was like, I'm going through this exposure therapy, they were like, That's not effective. Like you shouldn't do that. That's horrible that your therapist is making you do this. And I'm like, he's not making me do this. She just said, it's the statistically most effective treatment for trauma, and doesn't recommend it for everyone because they can't handle it, which is valid. But if I really want to address, especially this particular incident, then I can do this therapy. And it's going to be hard. And I'm probably gonna backslide before I go forward. But I did it, and I got through it, and I am much better for it. While it was hard, and I've definitely many more traumas to deal with, that helped a lot of my healing. And honestly, that also helped start to know myself. Because I wasn't hanging on to this trauma that had basically invaded my entire life, I was able to move forward and go, Oh, I'm gay. I'm non binary, I'm passionate about this, I can get back to what being me, because I'm not constantly in fear. Or thinking about this event. I'm not having nightmares each night, I'm not waking up in a panic, I'm not constantly waiting for a shoe to drop of gosh, is something going to come of it. So being able to do that therapy, I'm so thankful that I have the means and you know that health insurance, because not everyone has that either. And I had where I was working in the school, so I had the summer off. So I didn't have to be at work. And dealing with the exposure therapy while being at work, which was her suggestion to she was like, I would not be working when you do this. And so I have a lot of privilege in that sense of being able to do that. Again, hardest thing I had to do. But it was liberating, as you know, I was saying with a lot of other things is I guess maybe I could pinpoint that that helps with the liberation of being me.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 42:58

Yeah, I'm so pumped for you that you kind of have gotten to do that healing work. And I also feel, again, just so appreciative and grateful of you just sharing your journey with that. Because so many of us have our own journey. In a similar sense. You know, everyone's healing is different, but there's often we got stuff to heal from. And so I just so appreciate you kind of sharing your journey. And that's how I initially kind of connected with you and over Instagram, it strikes me that a lot of your Instagram is really you're like this, like queer mental health advocate out there. And I'm curious, like, tell me what your journey has been there. You mentioned meeting a lot of people over Instagram, and just curious, like, what does that been like? And also, what is your Instagram so people can I'm sure people are gonna be listening to this and wanting more from you. And so so give me the whole rundown.

F

Fae Sturniolo (they/them) 43:48

I mean, initially, I started my Instagram for fashion. I started it because I wore dresses and cardigans every day. And that was how it kind of started. And then I met people through like buy sell trade groups, and we just kind of all followed each other because we all liked dresses. And then when I started, you know, kind of thinking about myself, and actually, to tell you a story of like what made me really go I need to destigmatize mental illness, like I had always kind of had that, where I was like, I really want it to be more acceptable. You know, especially like when I was working with the teenagers and I saw them struggling and I wanted them to feel like they could talk about it, and share with it and move forward with it. And that was kind

of the start of it. And I'd always been like, really want to destigmatize it and at one point, I was like, Ooh, maybe start a nonprofit because there was like no support groups for self farmers when I was doing all that. But again, I'm getting kind of all over the place. But one of the major stories that I can think of besides like my team's coming and finding me at the school was there is a Chipotle, right right near where I was living, and I would go within there frequently, it was fast food that didn't hurt my stomach quite as much as traditional fast food. And I am not a cook. So I would go in there often. And they kind of knew me, but I didn't. We weren't on like a first name basis, but I went in there a lot. And one evening, I go in there, and I remember it was during the summer because I was on my way to actually go pet sit for a friend, and I go into this Chipotle order my stuff, and I go to checkout, and this one, I don't know if they were queer, gay, they were somewhere within the community. Masculine presenting goes, I need to tell you something. And I'm like, what, like, what is happening here? He's like, I just, I just need to ask you a question. And I was like, ah, cuz you never know, like, with random people, when you're out, you're like, Oh, what are you gonna ask me? He's like, I'll meet you over by the drinks. And again, a little weirded out, because I don't know. And if it were, like, a very obvious straight man, I probably would have been like, now, okay, I'm good, like, I'm gonna go. But you know, he didn't have that energy. So I go over, I'm getting my stuff, and he comes out and he goes, I see you in here all the time. And you do not cover your arms. And at that point, I had much less tattoos on my arms. So it was very obvious, you could see all the scarring. And he's like, and I just need you to know, you come in here, you don't cover your scars, you smile all the time. And you seem so genuinely happy that I need you to know that you give me hope. And I was like, what, and he's like, seeing you living like you are, makes me feel like I can get there. That there is a light that it doesn't always have to be darkness. And I was like, Oh, he goes, I do that too. And seeing you living with the scars on your arms, but smiling and being happy. It helps. And I was like, oh, and so like, I gave him a hug. And I never got his name. I never, you know, anything like that. But like we had this moment of Chipotle. I will always remember that instance, because it really lit a fire in me. Okay, I need to do more. And while it took me a while to get to the point where I started posting more on my Instagram and talking more on it. And talking about mental health stigma and really sharing. And I've only been able to do that within the last couple of years, you know, between COVID and like discovering my own identity and all of that. I will always think of him. And I still think I'm like I hope he's doing okay. I just will always think of him and like I have a fair amount of students that I think about that. I'm like, Man, I hope they're doing all right. But he will always stick out with me because he was just a stranger. He saw me everyday in the capacity of like, I bought Chipotle. But like I wasn't his teacher, I wasn't his librarian. I wasn't anything really. I was just someone who came in who had scars on their arms. And so I thought, well, maybe I can do that for others. Like maybe I can be that stranger in another way. So I started thinking about that and doing my own work and then really started posting on Instagram on my ink library which and going I really want to destigmatize this and then especially once I went through the exposure therapy, I was like I really want to destigmatize this. And I want to continue and want to talk about this more and more and more and to the point where people might want to tell me to shut up about it. But actually, I've been putting it off. But I went through the exposure therapy and I actually treated myself to a tattoo for it. I have a Medusa tattoo on my shin and I kind of took the new rendition of Medusa where she is a as a survivor. And that's why I got her and I actually have a Medusa dress and me and my new partner are going out to the mountains Memorial Day weekend. And we're going to finally take the pictures that highlight my tattoo in the dress for this PTSD awareness of exposure therapy and everything like that kind of taking back the power and tying it together. And so those photos will be coming out at some point. And I've been putting it off because I've been a little bit scared about it, but I want to de stigmatize it. I want to continue to destigmatize conversation around mental illness, especially around PTSD. So yeah, and I just rambled a whole bunch.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 49:58

Okay, so one of my new favorite Things is your rambles. Like there's too good. That's not even, it was just like a gift not rambling whatsoever. And like, Oh, I'm just thinking about this, the image of you with this tattoo and the dress like this photo, oh my gosh, like what a powerful symbol for what healing has been. And again, sharing that as an advocate. It's just like, you probably don't even know the impact that you're having on the folks who are following your work. And you probably don't even know like, there's more of those Chipotle people, right? That he just by kind of being out there and existing. And I'm so glad I reached out to you this is so this has been so special to get to know you and your story. And I feel so filled up in this moment. And I just feel so appreciative. I think my ramble is I just like just want to say how much I like I'm so obsessed with you. And I'm going to try to like, pull that back a little bit. But thank you again. And I know I'm sensitive to your time. So I'm looking at the time, but like, was there anything else that wanted to be included from your end in this conversation? And or what's it like to have had that conversation? Where are you at in this moment?

F

Fae Sturniolo (they/them) 51:09

I mean, I'm super thankful that you did reach out and I'm super thankful that you are doing this podcast and kind of giving me a little bit more of a voice because obviously, I share tidbits, I share little things and here and there. And I try to destigmatize the conversation, but to kind of have this whole long conversation of tying everything together. But both my queer identity and my mental health and all of this together is kind of like, I hope that you're right. I hope there are more of those people out there that hearing my story will just even touch just a little bit. Like and to kind of give them the they're not alone, that it's okay to deal with this to move forward to accept themselves to do the things that they need to. And while there are hard things about it, that they're also great things and the victories that we can share, you know, especially through, as you said, like the second adolescence of being able to celebrate these victories of being who we are and finding our community and all of that. And I'm super thankful that I've gotten the opportunity to talk and ramble away and yeah, no, I'm just I'm incredibly thankful for it. And I hope that even just one person, even just one.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 52:28

I'm so appreciative of you. Thank you so much for coming on. And I'll be sure to link to your Instagram so people know how to connect with you and thank you. Thank you so much. This is awesome. Hey, thanks for joining us for today's conversation. Feel free to head on over to secondadolescentspod.com For show notes and more. And you can connect further by following the show on Instagram at [secondadolescencepod](https://www.instagram.com/secondadolescencepod). 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 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 in 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.