

Johnny: Hey everybody. It's Johnny B Truant down here in the corner for The Badass Project. And today I am here with Jessica Blinkhorn, who has been somewhat of a sensation amongst the folks who started finding initial folks, because I know some of the gals I work with are really eager for me to talk to Jessica because she intrigues them. She's pretty far out of what a lot of people expect out of, you know, a "wheelchair person," or whatever, and that's why I want to talk to her. She's an artist, a performance artist. What are all your credentials, Jessica?

Jessica: Well, do you want my credentials as far as education goes?

Johnny: Well, I want to hear what it is you do. Is artist and performance artist the best way to describe you?

Jessica: I would consider myself a visual artist, performance artist, and creative writer. I do installation as well.

Johnny: Installation. What's installation?

Jessica: Setting up an environment.

Johnny: Okay. And what we thought was really cool - there's a lot of stuff that's really cool - but one of the things we thought was really cool was the way that you've used yourself as a subject in a lot of what you've done, which is really awesome. Did that just happen kind of organically? Some people use themselves as a subject, but I don't know that I've ever seen anybody — You have spinal muscular atrophy like Jon Morrow, correct? — And I don't know that I've ever seen anybody doing that before. How did that come to you?

Jessica: Initially, as an undergraduate, I never used myself, and if I did I was very stand-offish about using myself, but when I got into my graduate program I had one teacher named Craig ___ at Georgia State, and his partner Pam Longobardi, who were adamant about me using myself as a subject. Craig said that I had this shamanic presence, and I had a story that people wanted to know, and not only wanted to know but deserved to know. So I began using myself in that way, also I made a friend when I started grad school and this person helped me to find myself and not be afraid of who I was because for so long I played that role of the quiet disabled person who excelled in school and tried to be appropriate and sometimes outlandish to get attention, and I realized I didn't have to do that anymore and I stopped defining myself as a disabled person and as a person with disability issues, and focusing on those issues in my work. So I guess the short answer to what you just asked is, I started using myself after being persuaded by instructors and professors that I had in grad school, and a very good friend.

Jessica: What's been the reception? What do people think?

Johnny: My work is small scale drawing, and it's extremely detailed. It's very realistic at some points. And their initial reaction was, "Wow, this looks like a picture." And then there was all this content behind it. It wasn't just a recreated picture of someone's life. It was a recreated picture of my life, a very personal side of my life. Me going to the bathroom. Me getting bathed. Me before I lost the ability to walk. I use surrogates to function as symbolisms for my sister, my brother and myself. So people were very intrigued by that, because I was in effect answering questions that people had always had with regard to me being an individual with disability issues. I was answering those questions, and I didn't care how fucking inappropriately I answered them, because if you want the truth I'm going to give you the truth and if you can't handle it then maybe you should not have asked.

Jessica: [laughs] That's fantastic. As you were talking about, you're just going to give them the fucking truth, this thing in the Village Voice blog, the title is "an obsese tattooed smut-mouthed wheelchair-bound bitchy artist..." and then it continues in the post, "who is fucking fed up with the utter lack of individuals with disabilities not speaking up."

Johnny: It's hard to imagine that you were ever not outspoken.

Jessica: To put it in Southern terms, my mom always says, "Jessie, you're like a bull in a china shop." That's what my mother says, because as a child, I'm a middle child, I have an older sister who also is a wheelchair user, and I had a younger brother who was a wheelchair user who has passed due to complications from the genetic disease that we all three share. So my sister was the girl that, she always did what she was supposed to. She did try to break loose and when she did it it was always really cute. And my brother was like my little tag-along buddy, and he was my partner in crime. But as a middle child, I was always trying to find a way to kind of stand out, and art was the one way to do that for me. I wasn't outspoken as one would normally be outspoken. Usually when you're young you're outspoken by the way you talk. Me, it was the way I dressed. When I was in 12th grade I had half my head shaved, and I wore goth girl makeup and carried around a Miss Piggy because I didn't want to be the disabled girl, I wanted to be the weird girl in the wheelchair. And that's what I was my senior year. And I look back on it now and it's like, I could've used my words to attack society - not really attack, that's not really an appropriate word. I don't want to attack society, I just want to offer information to society, and whether they choose to listen is completely up to them, but I at least put it out there. I have always been kind of a ham, and I've always wanted to kind of stand out because I've had to acclimate to being a middle child. And especially when you come from a household where there are three children, all three are in wheelchairs, you have two parents that are doing all the caregiving and working jobs all the time, and by the time you got your help they were so flustered that you got yelled at sometimes. And it wasn't really their fault. It was just their way of dealing with things. It was always kind of like I had to ignite that reaction in people. But now I do it more effectively, I guess you could say.

Johnny: Why do you think it is, that most people who have a disability, it's like you said, the typical what you would expect from the girl with the wheelchair. I'm just wondering why that is, that there's this marginalization that happens where people with a disability typically aren't outspoken and loud. It seems like there's something that you are assuming is natural in you, that a lot of people don't have that spark. Do you think it was something in the way your parents treated you? Because it's fantastic to see somebody who isn't afraid to be who they are.

Jessica: Well, my parents are amazing. I want to say that. My mother and father are amazing individuals, and so strong. My dad says I am just like my mother because I'm very scholastic and dominating, and I need what I need and I want what I want, and if you don't give it to me you're just going to pay hell. Which I am, I'm very much like my mother in that way. But I'm also like my dad, I'm very eccentric, I'm very - not to sound egotistical - I'm very charismatic. I like to be out there. I like to meet people and talk to people. I come from a family where my mother is a Republican school teacher, and my father is a really liberal biker rock musician. So I have a really interesting succotach of family personality. And my sister is incredibly strong. I guess in a way you could say that she is a lot like the way one would think of a woman who has a disability. She's very quiet and passive. But we're not all like that, and sometimes I think it takes strength to be aggressive and be confrontational. But it also takes a great deal of strength to be passive and quiet, especially when you face adversity every day. Because sometimes when you're facing adversity, words aren't enough. Sometimes you need silence. And I know that, and sometimes I am that very meek and mild self-contained woman who lives with a disability, and sometimes I'm just that hardcore bitch that will roll over you if you're in my way. You have to be that way. You have to straddle the fence in a lot of ways. I think that it really comes from finding that side of your personality, it really comes from just having the strength of knowing who you are, and not only knowing who you are but knowing where you want to go, knowing who you want to be and trying to be true to that.

Johnny: It's funny because I talked to Jon Morrow and when I talked to him the first time - I've talked to him a few times, he's a friend of mine, became a friend just because of internet stuff. And one of the things I said to Jon was, just as an observation it seemed like a lot of people who have a disability go in one of two directions. A lot of people kind of say, okay, well I'm going to opt out of life and I'm just going to kind of play it low key and I'm not going to do a lot of stuff because that's what society expects. And then there are a lot of people who take the other extreme, and it's like, we have to pretend that there's absolutely no difference. There's no disability, there's no anything, and we just have to kind of ignore it. And what I told Jon is, what I admired about him is that he has used what's different about him to inspire other people. Jon said, "Man, if I manage to go through a door without knicking the paint people are astonished by me, and when I do amazing things they're really amazed." And that's what I like about what you're doing, not what you're doing but how you live, like look, this is who I am and I'm going to document it and I'm going to answer questions and I'm going to explore this part of life

without being afraid of it.

Jessica: Life is conditional. You make the most of what you have, and you can opt out of life and just be like, okay, I'm going to settle, or you can just really go for what you want. I started really getting into my education and really pursuing my degrees. My BFA from ___ and my Masters of Fine Arts from Georgia State. I pursued those with one thought in mind, and that was to provide for my family. You know? My mother and father gave away their youth. They gave it away. There are parents out there that would've put their children in a home, or would've had an abortion. There are parents that would've just given up themselves, and my family never did that. My mother and father were really adamant about telling us, don't let that wheelchair be something that holds you back in life. Let it be something that pushes you forward. That's always stuck with me, so I do what I do because I want to be able to get a job as a professor at a university, create my work and put it in galleries, receive a steady income, pay my bills, and give my parents money each month, so that when they're retired they can enjoy their life together, because they have really given it to us, you know? They've been my arms and my legs. Even now they're my arms and legs, metaphorically speaking. For the longest time, they were my sole providers, and now I'm on my own because I realize that I would never gain my own strength unless I put myself in a situation of being strong. I can't depend on people to always be there, you know? I have people that are paid to be there, and they're there because I pay them to be there, but I have people that are there because they really want to be there, because they want to see, because they love me, because I love them. I believe life is a series of moments, and if you don't reach out and grab yours, it's just going to be like the best part of the sun. You'll just see it shine in the distance and wonder why you didn't grab it when you had the chance.

Johnny: Your drawing is astonishing, your watercolors. They really are amazing. I know that I saw in something, I think it was Grounded By Reality, you said that people are always surprised when they meet you, and they're like, well I wouldn't have expected that. Your condition is progressive, right? You still have some use of one arm, kind of? How's that progressing? What's the change?

Jessica: This is my drawing hand. This is my right hand. You can't really tell, but I have a tattoo on it. Let me see if I can use the machine of modern man called a wheelchair to get some elevation up in this bitch. Can you kind of see?

Johnny: I can kind of see - I'm in the way. What's it of?

Jessica: It is a hot pink lightning bolt that says TCB - taking care of business - Elvis Presley. Because this is my money maker. This is where my talent lies. This and my passion and the passion of those who believe in me. My left hand is just kind of here. I can hold things with it. I know that eventually my hands will go, and it's a fact, something I've kind of just come to grips with. It doesn't mean I'm not going to use it while it's here though. I mean, to be quite honest, I don't know if I should go there - I was about to say

something dirty and inappropriate.

Johnny: Oh, by all means, say something dirty and inappropriate.

Jessica: You know your hands are getting weaker when you can no longer diddle with your fiddle. You say goodbye to some things and you improvise.

Johnny: How are you going to improvise with the drawing as you go forward?

Jessica: My mouth. And I got into performance as a way of using the external, my form, to create. My body is, by social standards, not beautiful, but to me, there are times when I'm like, I hate the way I look, bleh. There are times when it's like, Okay, I'm pretty fly for a big girl on wheels, you know? I think that it has a story to tell itself. Looking at my body, there are tattoos, they're like chapters of my life. The scar on my back tells a story. The cysts on my hands tell a story. The nodules grown on my side from the wheelchair. The extra skin that used to be filled with muscle, that's now filled with fat, tells a story. And I don't mind speaking about it. So I've let the external me become work. I'm no longer creating from only the internal. My work is becoming more visceral, because it has to.

Johnny: The post I started, I gave the headline for, you get a little further down here and it's actually you writing, called "How to fuck a wheelchair woman, or me," and I saw the thing you had on Facebook the other day which is all about wheelchair fetish sites. And those are both really interesting - because they're both, "oh well you shouldn't talk about that," and you turn them around -

Jessica: Why the fuck not?

Johnny: Well, exactly. That's what's so cool about it.

Jessica: We all need to get some ass. We all need some lovin.

Johnny: Well, tell the story of the fetish thing that you discovered, because I think the moral of that one is really cool.

Jessica: So I have a really good friend, and you know, I'm not going to say I'm not lonely. Of course I'm lonely. Everyone wants to find their soul's companion. Unfortunately, and I'm guilty of this too, you're initially attracted to a person's aesthetics, the way they look. And it's not like guys are going around like, oh, I'm going to find me a big girl covered in tattoos on wheels to take home. Hell no. I'm not bullshitting myself. But my friend was like, I always wondered why you don't do like, the wheelchair fetish sites. And I'm like, I don't really want to be a fetish, you know? I don't want a guy to get a hard-on because of my hardware, you know what I mean? I decided the other night, well, I'm just going to look and see what I find. So I typed in "wheelchair girl fetish sites,"

and I come up to a web site that says a para-girl's special place. Obviously this caters toward men, and I figured, shit. I might as well look at my competition. And I'm looking down the right-hand side of my web page, and all of the women are very attractive. Most of them have a pseudonym. So I click on the first one, and she's really cute, and she's in a push wheelchair. And she has on a full leg brace, and I'm thinking - holy shit, somebody should've been watching here and she fell out of her chair. Who the hell is her caregiver? And I clicked on the next girl, and the next girl, and I kept noticing a series of freaking leg casts. I was just like, oh my god. This is just some guy or woman or whoever, they've taken pictures of women that have leg casts and put them in wheelchairs and I guess are marketing them as women in wheelchairs.

Johnny: They're not disabled.

Jessica: They're not disabled. And so the analogy I came up with is, you want to buy a new car, but you go to a bike shop. And it's like, okay! It's on wheels, but it's not a fucking car. There's no engine to start. Why not test drive the real thing? I just thought it was really funny how, even when you're looking for a person that has a disability, even when that is your fetish, you're seeking out a lie. It's interesting, because when you're seeking out your perfect mate and you go into it and you're looking at the person on the outside first and foremost, and sometimes that's all you're looking at, you're really seeking a lie. Reality and fetish are just hand in hand in a way. I don't know if that really makes sense, but it does in my head. But my head's not all there.

Johnny: The cool moral I got out of it was, you were talking to the other wheelchair gals and said, we're the real deal. Be proud that we're the real deal.

Jessica: Totally. Like I said before, I know I have a lot of hurdles that I have to cross before I find the one. And the person that decides to give me a chance, and the person that I decide to let into my life, it's going to be a very special person because they're not going to see all those physical, one would say, shortcomings. They'll look at those as marks of strength. It takes a lot of strength to be who you are and to embrace your difference. And that's what I want anyone to be, not just a woman who has a disability, but anyone, disabled, black, white, gay, straight, omni-sexual, be who you are because we only have one life. I come from the south, and I'm in the Bible Belt, and it's all like, "Do as the Bible says." I'm going to get a little Christian on you. I really believe that God created us and gave us free will because he wanted us to live our life. And I don't think he would want us to live it in _____. I love everybody, unless you're a complete fucking asshole. I give everyone a chance, and that's all I ask for, and that's all I ask that anyone gives anyone is a chance. Don't let a big nose or a cock eye or messed up teeth or going bald or being voluptuous or in a wheelchair or a walker or missing a limb or missing four. Don't let that be something that holds you back. Don't let society hold you back because of that, because you have the power within you to give - well, you can't give the finger if you have no limbs, but I'm sure one of your next badasses would say "Fuck you." Kyle Maynard. I honestly was a little shocked when I saw my name up next

to his because I know who he is, I haven't met him, but holy shit he's amazing. He has missing limbs and he's accomplished so much. And that's what it's about. Not overcoming life. It's about living life, and not fucking caring.

Johnny: Right. We aren't looking for people who have gotten by and done pretty well for a crippled person. That's not - It's people who have just done amazing things. And Kyle is one of those people. And you are one of those people. Do you think that some of the "fuck you, I'm going to be who I am" comes from the belief that it's like, I'm here for a reason, I was created this way for a reason, so why am I going to try to be anything else? And I'm just going to try to give it to you straight? Everybody I have talked to has, in common, a certain audacity in the eyes of the world, because I think that a lot of people expect a certain level of compromise out of anybody who has any kind of a disability. And when people say, "Oh he's done this, or she's done this," that's amazing, because that's like, oh well they have these limitations, and that's great. But things like writing a book, that isn't something that really requires limbs so I don't know why people are so astonished that somebody can actually accomplish something. There's a raw "I have abilities and I'm going to share them, and I have a life and I'm going to share it," that seems to come out of you.

Jessica: Well, no matter how hard we try and no matter how much we deny, society is and probably will always be focused on image. It's not enough that a person writes a book. When a disabled person writes a book, HOLY SHIT. You know what I mean? Wheelchair, no wheelchair, I don't know. I can't tell you who I'd be if I were not the way I am. I believe that I was put on this earth, like this, for a reason. I'm not going to sit there and be like, oh, my life is great and I've overcome all this. Fuck that. There are people out there whose lives are so much worse than mine, have so many more obstacles than I do, that don't have nearly as much going on in their life or people to help them as I do. It's just a matter of trying. It's hard. I'm not going to lie, it's hard to sit there and to look at my friends have kids and want that, knowing that I can't have that and I probably never will have that. That's what takes strength. Being mature doesn't, it's just a chair. I don't really know how to answer that, because to ask who I would be if I weren't like this only makes me wonder why I am so accepting of being this way.

Johnny: Well, it's who you are.

Jessica: I try not to dwell on why me. I mainly ask myself, why not me? It could've been anyone else. And I always tell myself - because a lot of people ask, aren't you mad at God? Don't you blame God? No I don't. I believe that my soul was hand-picked because my creator knew that I was strong enough, my spirit was strong enough to handle the situation in which it would have to live. So I think I was hand-picked. I was given to my parents for a reason, and I had the brother I had for a reason, and the sister I have for a reason, the friends I have for a reason, so there's a reason behind everything. I think that I'm strong only because I stopped fighting it. I think there's a certain amount of denial in anyone that has a disability. That's my opinion, and I might get a blast for that,

but I think the world is still fixated on image and beauty and normalcy. But there's a certain point of denial, a certain amount of it, of 'oh, things will be different, I can get better.' And things don't get better, they get worse. I don't think accepting that makes you weak. It doesn't make you give up on life. It just makes you enjoy the life you have. So that's what I'm doing, enjoying the life I have, despite a fucking wheelchair, despite weighing 250 pounds, despite having no relationship - I have friends and I have family and air in my lungs and paper I can draw on and pencils I can draw with and pigments I can splash around.

Johnny: Do you have moments where, you mentioned sometimes if you're not in denial then you accept that things are going to get worse sometimes. Are there times when you get afraid and down about that? What do you do? How do you deal?

Jessica: Yeah, of course. I cry. And then I go on. That's all you can do. If I don't let myself feel it, and I live in denial, I'm only feeding into the initial denial. You know? My brother passed. I cried, and I cried, and I cried. I knew it was happening. You know. But, now I don't think "Why was my brother taken?" I know why he was taken, and I never thought, why did he give up? Because some people say, not that he did, but some people say they just give up on life. My brother, talk about badass, if he were here today he would win hands down because he was one hardcore motherfucker. And I love him, and I will always love him and will always carry him with me and it's because of people like him, and my sister and the people I know who have disabilities and differences that they can't change and have accepted it and learned to live. It's for those people that I fight to love, for myself and for those people.

Johnny: One final question to try to close up, and I've been trying to ask this to everybody. What do you say to somebody, and this is anybody, somebody who has any condition or disability, or anybody who is what we'd call completely able-bodied and healthy and whatever. Who says they can't do something? "I can't do that, I'm not able to do it?" and it's not something crazy like fly without wings or something like that. "I can't start a business, I can't do this thing that's inappropriate."

Jessica: There are some things that I say I can't be, but I really can't be them. I can't walk. I can't wipe my own ass. There's a big difference between can't and won't. And I'm actually, I don't know if I'm supposed to tell this story, but I won't mention any names. I had a very sweet student once, who wanted into my class so I let them into my class, and they would get very frustrated because the work wasn't turning out the way they wanted it to turn out. And they were asking for help and I'd help them, but I would always hear 'can't' come out of their mouth. And I guess one day I'd just had enough. I grabbed the edge of their drawing stool, and I leaned over and looked at them, and I said, "Let me tell you something. I can't learn to walk, but you can learn to draw." And they never said can't again. If you want to fail in life, say "can't." If you want to succeed, say "Why the fuck not?" I'm living in an apartment right now that I can not afford. I can not afford it. I am barely making it. I have no money, I have barely any money to pay my bills. But I've

made that choice to stay here. I've made my choice to be independent. I've made my bed, and I'm lying in it, and it's hard. There are some times when I wake up in the morning and I'm like, I can't do this anymore. I'm not getting enough money, I have bill collectors calling me, and I'm going completely nuts. I can't do this. I think to myself, yes, I can. I've done it for the past eight months. I've been an unemployed artist making it off of my talent, off of my skill, off of what I've learned to do, what I was given. You know? I've done it, and I will continue to do it. There are moments when anyone says "can't." Even I say "can't." But you've got to learn that the word "can't" should be taken with a grain of salt, because if you believe that you can do something, "can't" shouldn't come into play. If you want something bad enough, you will make it fucking happen. I want to be on my own. I need to be on my own. I need to be independent. It helps me, not only appreciate my life, but live as long as I possibly can, because there's that struggle, there's that fight, there's that not knowing what's going to happen the next day, and the next day. I like that. I hate it, but I like that, because I'm always fighting. I'm always fighting.

Johnny: Excellent.

Jessica: I hope that answered the question. I think that if you're going to say "can't," go in the mirror, say "can't," scream fuck shit damn piss hell and throw whatever you want around your apartment or your bedroom or your bathroom. Feel whatever it is you're feeling. And then just wipe your face, put on your panties, brush your teeth, brush your hair, and go outside and make shit happen.

Johnny: Great. Excellent. Well, this has been great. It's been a lot of fun, it's been great meeting you and talking to you. So thanks so much for hanging out.

Jessica: Well, I hope that I was articulate enough. I know sometimes my southern accent comes into play and I sound like Gomer Pyle!

Johnny: Oh, no, plenty articulate. And the southern accent makes it charming, not Gomer Pyle-ish. So for the Badass Project, this is Johnny B. Truant here with Jessica Blinkhorn, signing off.