

TRANSCRIPT: More Talent Untapped

EPISODE 6 – Howard Sonnenberg

AK: This program is brought to you by RBC. In order to speak up for inclusion, we need to speak about inclusion.

AK: I'm Anna-Karina Tabuñar and this is More Talent Untapped. Conversations about unconventional, sometimes underestimated talent... and the differences that connect us.

Howard: I had people who helped me. And people who understood. And I realize that because of that, I have to be willing to talk about it for the people who don't have that, and say "You are not alone. This stuff is bad. This stuff happens. You are not evil. You are not a bad person. You are not unemployable. You have an illness."

AK: Howard Sonnenberg is the man behind the song that's playing in the background. He created the original theme song for this podcast. Howard and I first met a few years back — he was the sound engineer for my documentary Talent Untapped. We reconnected recently on a video call. He was in his sound studio. But we didn't talk about music or sound production. We talked about mental health. As you'll hear, Howard is very open about his mental illness and he's brutally honest about the events that literally made headlines. He calls them "his adventure." Before his adventure, Howard says he kind of understood disability. But as an outsider.

Howard: At that point, it hadn't become personal to me. In a sense that I wouldn't have labelled myself as disabled in any way, shape or form. But I had lots and lots of people who I knew who were disabled. I've had friends who spent years in wheelchairs. And I know the struggles they've had to find employment and do something other than sit in a house and wait for the government to send them money.

AK: Howard, what happened then to you that made this really come to life?

Howard: In August, actually in July of that year, on July 4th to be precise, in 2016, I suffered a mental breakdown of sorts. I basically got into my car and started driving west. And I just drove. I didn't think, I didn't do anything. I turned my phone right off. And I just drove. I disappeared. I was

eventually tracked down in North Bay, Ontario. Got myself into a little legal trouble there as a result of that. Public mischief charge to be precise, that actually ended up locking down half the city. I called and said someone had abducted me and basically thinking that everybody would think I was dead. They completely mobilized the North Bay Police Force and found me an hour later.

AK: What triggered it for you?

Howard: What that ended up being was an undiagnosed case of bipolar 2 disorder. And that was a borderline manic event. The trigger was actually me being in what they call a hypomanic state. What that means is I was not hallucinating, not audio or video. I was still viewing the world and the real world, but through the rosiest coloured glasses you ever could. I was convinced I was Mr. Brilliant. I was working on this huge project that was basically going to out-Disney Disney. That gives you an idea of the level of... grand schemes that you can get in your head when you're like that.

AK: So, you finish working, doing post audio for my film Talent Untapped. You're on this great big high. You've got these grand notions of you out-Disneying Disney. And then something snapped for you.

Howard: Exactly. So about a month later, just at the end of August, I was here and part of the, basically that giant project I was working on failed in a spectacular way. All the investment fell through. I was head over heels in debt. And literally it was like somebody had thrown a lightning bolt into my brain. I got off the phone with the investors and hung up the phone. I closed my laptop, put my keys and my phone down on the desk and walked out the door. I ended up travelling — across the course of five days — I ended up travelling to Montreal, through Montreal back into south Quebec into Hemmingford, and then eventually into New York state.

AK: And at this stage you hadn't told anybody. You just upped and left.

Howard: Just literally up and left. At that point, I suffered what's known as a dissociative event and a fugue state, marked by wandering and aimless wandering. I didn't really have a plan other than going that way. But I had completely disconnected from who I was. I always said it was like I knew that person who left, who was there before. I knew all his memories. I knew everything about him. I knew every detail of his life. But I wasn't personally

connected to him. He wasn't me. It was a very unusual scenario. In five days I walked about... I mean I took the bus to Montreal. But from there, I walked about 90km to Hemmingford... and across the border. Yup.

AK: I remember that period very clearly because as a member of the general public, I remember seeing all the social media posts from your family and friends pleading with you to come back. Or if anybody had any information. So this was a really big public manhunt for you.

Howard: Yes. Everybody knew it. Still to this day, I occasionally will meet people and give them my name and they go, "You're the guy!"

Howard: So basically, I came back and obviously went through a gallon of medical procedures. ECGs, everything physical was ruled out. Eventually got referred to a psychiatrist who ended up diagnosing me as bipolar two with dissociative episodes and generalized anxiety disorder. Because that tends to run comorbid with everything else.

AK: Ok, so how did you pull your life back together?

Howard: For six months I didn't. It was literally like that had been somebody else's life. For six months I actually cleaned houses. I built things with my hands. All the sorts of stuff that I'd never done before. When I say I cleaned houses, I mean I cleaned my friends' houses. I wasn't doing it as a job. I had no job. I was very much like, I don't know who this new person is but I have to figure him out. So it took about six months before I was able to reintegrate any of myself and feel like I should be doing something. And you know, financially speaking, that's not nearly enough time to collect disability. That's not enough time to, also by that point the financial wolves were knocking at the door and it's like I really need to do something to earn a living.

AK: You need your income. Sure, sure.

Howard: When I first starting looking for work again, I thought I wasn't coming back to my career. I didn't think I was going to work in audio or film or television or any of that again. I thought that course had run, and I was going to try to find something perhaps more simple. And honestly, I was looking for something that had as little stress, for lack of a better word. Not

necessarily on the job stress, but the stress that you get running an organization where you're on 24/7.

AK: Understood.

Howard: I was looking for something where I could work 8 or 10 hours, and then check out and not worry about it. And of course that presented its own set of problems, number one because immediately, it was very obvious with my public thing, who I was. Right away, I was at a bit of a disadvantage. Everybody knew I was suffering from mental illness. Not that I ever hid it. I would walk into interviews and say, look this is the scenario and I need you to know that now.

AK: So you did your disclosure right up front?

Howard: Always. Always. Always. I felt there was no point in doing otherwise because. And sometimes I do honestly wish that they'd just gone, "Thank you, well. We're not comfortable." And save me some of the time. I started to get back into things. I started to do videos with friends. And finishing up some stuff that kind of got left behind when I disappeared and hadn't gone anywhere. People were like, can we maybe finish that? People were giving me small gigs here and there. But ironically what happened was I had been doing some production sound. And I was working on a film. And a friend of mine sent me a message. And he said, hey, I know you're looking for different things and I don't know if this is something you're interested in, but these guys are looking for an editor. And he sent me the thing and it was the new Fly Fisher at JenCor which was a show I worked on at Atomic/Affinity Audio for years and years and years. I immediately called on Wednesday, and I started on Monday.

AK: It was right in your zone. How perfect. And you're there right now?

Howard: I'm there right now. That's actually my office behind me here at JenCor. And I do edit video and audio for the New Fly Fisher and a whole bunch of others. Colin is the owner of JenCor, yeah. He and I sat down and had a good long discussion about everything. He looked at me and he said you know, what could you say, can you guarantee that this won't happen again? I said quite frankly, I can't give you a 100% guarantee. This mental illness is something I will deal with for the rest of my life. I am stable. I am

on my meds. Things are good. But stuff can happen. And he looked at me and said, great, that was the right answer. (Laughs).

Howard: So it's been a very welcoming thing. I feel like if I'm having a really bad day, I can say to Colin, hey I'm having a really bad day. I could literally call in and say, "I just can't function today. And he'd say, "OK, we'll see you tomorrow." That becomes the key for a lot of disabilities, but especially for people who do suffer from mental illness because there's such a stigma attached to it. To have a place where you can go, "I can't come in today because I just can't function," knowing that you will probably be able to function tomorrow. You have good days and bad days.

AK: What I find really wonderful is that you sat down with your employer at the very very beginning and said, "This is what I'm going through, and this is what I'm managing. And this is what I need." That's so important and I know that not a lot of people have that courage and are not quite there yet. What's your advice to them?

Howard: Here's the thing, I can't recommend the way I came to my place. But I came to a very good place because I had that completely dissociative event. In a very real way to me, that happened to somebody else. That wasn't me. When I was able to synthesize the two me's, like I said the one that came back and the one that left. And find the best parts of both. And accept all the demons and monsters and everything else that whirl around in my head. Once I had done that, it was very easy for me to be honest about it because I have perspective on it. I can take that perspective on it. People who don't have that, it becomes much, much harder. It requires an environment where you can get that level of support. I have known Colin now for well over a decade.

AK: OK.

Howard: He knew what happened. He had seen it all. He had been in close range when the explosion happened. So, to be able to do that wasn't a terribly frightening experience for me.

AK: I am really happy for you Howard.

Howard: I won the lottery. I did. In terms of how this could have gone down. I won the lottery. I was surrounded by people who helped. I had a family

who was there to support me through the whole thing. Including my father — God love him — even though we spent 30 years not talking. When it came down to it, my dad was like, it's taken care of, don't worry about it. And of course we now have a much better relationship as a result of all this as well too. But I had all of those. I had family. I had friends. I had people who helped me. And people who understood. And I realized that because of that, I have to be willing to talk about it for the people who don't have that and say, you are not alone. This is bad. This stuff happens. You are not evil. You are not a bad person. You are not unemployable. You have an illness. People look at me and go, you don't look like sick. No, I don't. But I am. And that doesn't mean that I can't function, or that I can't do things. It just means I have to go about it a different way. And that's become so important to me.

Howard: I'm not cured. There is no cure for this. It can be managed. Much like diabetes, it can be managed. For me, meds are my foundation. If I did not have my mood stabilizers, I probably couldn't do the rest of the things that I need to do to stay healthy. Things like making sure I get enough rest, like a regular sleep schedule because that's a big one. Sleep is a huge thing with mental illness. Taking time out for myself. Self-care. Self-care is so important and self-care can be a lot of things. Self-care can be making sure my bills are paid so I don't have to worry about them. It's not fun but ok, I've taken care of this now so I don't have to sit and have anxiety when I'm trying to fall asleep. Things people wouldn't necessarily think of... making sure you take a shower. Going to get your haircut... Therapy. Can't say enough. And the most important thing for me has been to be able to monitor myself. Uh, for years and years and years, looking back at it, my bipolar disorder probably started at about 16. The age of 16 is where I can really pinpoint a couple of big mood events. It's like your leg has been sore for 30 years. And somebody finally says it's because it's broken. And you go, oh, I'll put a cast on and walk with crutches. Oh, I feel so much better now. It was that sort of thing. So knowing that, I've been able to monitor my moods much more closely, monitor my mental health much more closely. Again, I like to use diabetics as an example because like a chronic disease, it can't be cured, but it can be managed with the correct steps. And as a diabetic has to check their blood sugar on a regular basis, I have to check my emotional state on a regular basis. How am I feeling today? Because once you get into a full-on mood swing either way it becomes very hard, especially in a hypo-manic phase, to realize what's going on.

Howard: And thank you, thank you, thank you for doing this. Thank you for doing this because what we're doing here is so important for people to realize that just because somebody has a physical or mental disability does not mean that they can't work. And also for the people like us who suffer from these, that we are worth, we are worthy.

AK: Yes. Amen to that, Howard.

AK: We're ending on a different note... well, a different tune than our usual song. It's another tune created by Howard Sonnenberg. I'm sending him a great big thank you, not only for his creativity but for his generosity. He's so open about his mental illness... It's opened my eyes to the complexities and fragility of mental health. As Howard stresses, we need to talk openly about what we're going through and what we need. By talking about inclusion, we move closer toward inclusion.

More Talent Untapped is a sequel to the documentary Talent Untapped. If you're interested in a special screening of the original film, send me a note through my website annakarinatabunar.com.

More Talent Untapped is made possible by our sponsors RBC and EARN – the Employment Accessibility Resource Network, an initiative of United Way East Ontario.

The people who helped put together this show are: Lindsey Vodarek, Howard Sonnenberg, Ashley Wright, Colin Van Hattem and me, Anna-Karina Tabuñar.

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