

Jenna Deml, Kai Russell, Justin Semke

[00:00:00] **Rafael Otto:** Welcome to the Early Link Podcast. I'm Rafael Otto. Thank you for listening. You can always catch us on 99.1 FM in the Portland Metro on Sundays at 4:30pm or tune in at your convenience, wherever you find your podcasts. That includes iTunes, Spotify, and Amazon Music. Today, I am speaking with Jenna Deml, our fantastic producer at Portland Radio Project, and two of her lifelong friends, Kai Russell, and Justin Semke. All three of them happened to be on the autism spectrum. And today we have a chance to hear their stories about what it was like growing up on the spectrum, how they've remained friends for so many years, and their experience in the education system right here in Portland.

Jenna, Kai, and Justin, welcome to the podcast. Great to have you here today.

[00:00:48] **Jenna Deml:** Yeah. Thanks for having us.

[00:00:50] **Kai Russell:** Thank you for having us.

[00:00:52] **Justin Semke:** Thank you so much.

[00:00:53] **Rafael Otto:** Very much looking forward to the conversation. Jenna, you are all in your twenties now and you've known each other since elementary school. Tell me the story about how the three of you got to know each other.

[00:01:06] **Jenna Deml:** So, I was in second grade. I had just transferred to Edwards Elementary School. It was my first experience in public school. I was getting to know everybody, but I think I'd also just been diagnosed at that point. And I didn't really, how do I put this? I hadn't really seen other people like me who had also been diagnosed as on the spectrum. But in class, I remember this particular person who was labeled as a problem child, which was Kai. And in retrospect, I feel like, really bad for how myself and the other kids in the class treated them at that point. Our teacher in particular did not like Kai's disruptions. Kai, you remember like you would do these like laser battles with your fingers. Was that right?

[00:02:00] **Kai Russell:** Oh, no, no. Uh, it was... I mean, sure lasers were involved, but it was more of an early form of live action role play, I guess, just using my fingers as puppets or like action figures, kind of. Like I would walk my pointer and middle finger along a table and have that stand in for like a human, I would use the other pointer to give that same, uh, finger person like a sword or something. I would use my arm as all my fingers kind of, coming together, like jaws as... a dinosaur and then maybe put my other arm across it to form wings and make it a dragon.

[00:02:40] **Jenna Deml:** But what literally everybody else in the class heard was like, *imitates exploding noises* and then our teacher, teacher Nancy, would like, grab Kai by the collar and be like, "Kai, you're going out in the hall," or "Kai, you're going to the office." And all of the kids in unison would be like, "Kaaaaaai, be quiet." So that was how initially, like my relationship with Kai was, but...

[00:03:01] **Rafael Otto:** I can literally hear a classroom of kids doing that when you say that story.

[00:03:05] **Jenna Deml:** So, one day, my mom suggested that I invite Kai over, because I was getting to know everybody in my class and all that. And she was like, "Oh yeah, Kai might be a good person. You haven't invited them over before." And I was like, "Okay, fine..." We had a really good time. Kai, I don't know if you remember this, but you also had so much fun that you like, ran all over the house, ran all over the backyard and your dad was trying to catch you when you were like, "No."

[00:03:35] **Kai Russell:** Sounds legit.

[00:03:36] **Jenna Deml:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:03:37] **Kai Russell:** I did a lot of hiding from my parents when I didn't want to do stuff.

[00:03:42] **Jenna Deml:** Yeah. And from there, friendship was born. And Edwards closed down the year... I think it was like, our fifth-grade year. And so, we ended

up at Abernathy for fifth grade and we started becoming really good friends with Justin there.

[00:03:59] **Justin Semke:** Yep.

[00:04:00] **Kai Russell:** My fault.

[00:04:02] **Rafael Otto:** So Justin, what are your memories of how you all connected?

[00:04:06] **Justin Semke:** Well, it was fifth grade. I had actually, um, two of my best friends had just moved away. I basically... I was kind of lonely. I didn't have a lot of friends in fifth grade. I met Jenna through another friend, and we connected pretty well. And I met Kai through a fun story. We, uh, I was just wandering the playground and there's this giant dirt pile that our elementary school had, and it was kind of a cool place to play, and I saw Kai and another one of our friends, Elijah, playing on the dirt mound and I thought it looked really fun. So I was like, "Can I hang out with you guys?" And it kind of just went from there.

[00:04:52] **Rafael Otto:** Each of you were diagnosed with autism at different times, different ages when you, you're all very young. Could you tell me about that diagnosis, and what do you remember, and maybe what changed for you after the diagnosis? Justin, let's just stick with you for a moment.

[00:05:09] **Justin Semke:** Well, to be honest, my diagnosis came a little later. I was diagnosed when I was younger, but I didn't fully comprehend what the diagnosis was. In middle school, I was fully diagnosed to be on the spectrum. And I got a little more knowledge about what that meant. It definitely changed my mindset on a lot of things. It made a lot more things make sense.

[00:05:37] **Rafael Otto:** Okay and Kai, how about you?

[00:05:40] **Kai Russell:** So, I have an older sister, Meaghan, four years older, one time when my parents took her into a pediatrician but they brought me along this

particular time. I was a baby. and the doctors said, " When your baby gets older, be sure to bring them in also because, your child seems to have something going on."

So, I think that my parents knew from a young age that I had Asperger-like symptoms. The first time I remember ever hearing that word was actually from Jenna when we met in... was it first grade or second grade?

[00:06:16] **Jenna Deml:** It was second.

[00:06:17] **Kai Russell:** Okay. And Jenna came up to me in class and asked if I had Asperger's. I thought it was a food. Uh, you know, like ass-burgers. I'm not even joking. Like I actually thought yes... and I think that might have been around when my parents actually got me taken in to be diagnosed. And at the time it was just Asperger-like symptoms. Although, I think that in high school I needed a psych eval in order for me to have an IEP to get me accommodations. So, I had to get taken back for an official psych evaluation and it might have still been just Asperger-like symptoms on the general autism spectrum. In college, I needed another psych eval for... well, to get accommodations even though I already had one from high school.

I think that this is when I was finally diagnosed. Well, given a straight answer, like, "Yes, you are autistic." When I was looking for work, I was working with a special program to help me find work and they needed proof that I had a mental disability and so once again, I had to get tested.

[00:07:43] **Rafael Otto:** Jenna, could you talk about what that was like for you. I know that there's been sort of a move away from Asperger's or recognition that Asperger's is really just part of the autism spectrum. And I'm wondering if you could talk about that a bit.

[00:07:58] **Jenna Deml:** Yeah. So, there is admittedly kind of a push to call it, like have Asperger's be part of the autism spectrum itself, which yeah, it is. And there are two reasons for that. One of them is, a lot of child psychologists are saying that there's not enough... it's something to do with not being as concrete of a diagnosis which I guess makes sense. But a big reason in my book is the person who it's

named after, Hans Asperger, he worked for the Nazis. So that's kind of one of my big reasons that I push away from saying that and just say like, "Oh, I'm on the spectrum," or, "Oh, I'm autistic." But since I think I've masked it pretty well, I generally say I'm on the spectrum. Actually for school, I did an explainer video on that. So if folks are interested, I might drop that in our blog post about this episode.

[00:08:54] **Rafael Otto:** That'd be great to do that. Can you talk a little bit more, Jenna, about your early school experience?

[00:09:01] **Jenna Deml:** Yes, I can. So, I don't know if this counts as early schooling per se, but I can tell you about like what spurred my diagnosis. I was probably about three or four years old. And we like, my mom would take me to the park and it was very clear that I didn't know how to neurotypically play with children. I would run up to kids and like, quote Winnie the Pooh at them. I would just be like, and Pooh says, "Oh bother," and all that stuff. And the kids would be like, "Uh, okay, bye."

[00:09:36] **Kai Russell:** I would have just quoted something back at you.

[00:09:39] **Jenna Deml:** And I would have loved that and I still do. And that's something we do to this day, just quote back and forth at each other. But yeah.

[00:09:46] **Justin Semke:** I can confirm.

[00:09:48] **Jenna Deml:** So, my mom was like, "Jenna, that's not how kids want to play with you. That's not how you do that." And I'm like, "But I want to do it my way." And she was like, "Okay." So, at that point I did get some kind of a diagnosis or my parents put me in play therapy, physical therapy even because they saw my coordination was a little off. But it wasn't until I was seven that I did get the official diagnosis and I did have a little bit of trouble in early schooling.

It was first grade. I was at a private Montessori school. So you know how Montessori schools, they have like, the lead teacher and they have an assistant teacher in the classroom. And I swear to god, that assistant teacher was out to get me. She would always scold me for doing things. I like, painted a picture in class

and she wouldn't hang it up on the wall because she said it was wrong. And I'm like, in retrospect, "Lady, what... how was art wrong? What's going on with this?"

[00:10:45] **Justin Semke:** Yeah, that, that, that doesn't seem very possible. Honestly.

[00:10:49] **Kai Russell:** Bad teacher.

[00:10:50] **Jenna Deml:** Yeah! But I was just this kid who like, dutifully wanted to follow the rules. So I was like, "If it's wrong, it's wrong, then it's fine. I'm a little humiliated, but it's fine." And funny enough, it wasn't until I got to Edwards and met Kai and a bunch of other people, and Justin afterwards at Abernathy that I felt some sense of belonging. Like, these were my people.

[00:11:17] **Kai Russell:** Yeah.

[00:11:19] **Jenna Deml:** Um, and even then the teachers, they were actually pretty good to me. I also had an IEP, an Individual Education Plan, speech and language therapy. My parents, I really can't thank them enough for supporting me all this time too. So as I was growing up, it was just developing that network of people I could rely on and trust. And also to some extent be led by, because I'm just a kid learning about the world.

[00:11:46] **Rafael Otto:** Justin, talk a little bit more about your school experiences.

[00:11:51] **Justin Semke:** My school experience. It was an interesting one younger-wise. I will say Abernathy was a good place for kind of leading me in the right direction. But I had a very similar experience with just... I had maybe one or two friends. I couldn't really connect to anyone as much. I had other ways of play than most others. I would run around the playground, I'd bounce like, a red bouncy ball around and everyone seemed to want to play something. And I just never seemed that interested.

But as for classes and such like that, I had such focus issues. I would just draw while someone else was doing something. I felt like I was doing something wrong

most of the time, but I didn't know what it was, because really until middle school, I didn't really even have a full idea that I was anything but normal.

[00:12:53] **Rafael Otto:** Okay.

[00:12:54] **Justin Semke:** And, you know, until I met Kai and Jenna, I didn't really meet anyone who I guess played the same way I did, because I only met people who wanted to play their way. And I just, I had no idea how to do that and enjoy myself.

[00:13:12] **Rafael Otto:** Was it in middle school when... I'm assuming you got an IEP at some point as well. Was that in middle school or...?

[00:13:18] **Justin Semke:** Yes, I got an IEP. I think I had one in elementary school without knowing, whereas middle school is when I really understood what an IEP was. I had notes taken, I had an individual class. Middle school was when I fully experienced it. I'll say I was a little separated from my crowd. So even during middle school, I had a very hard time connecting with people. I was excited for the weekends when I could meet up with everybody.

[00:13:49] **Rafael Otto:** Right. Kai, how about you? Do you have something that stands out for you?

[00:13:54] **Kai Russell:** Um, let's see. As far as friends go, I've never really found friends or settled into friend groups of like, my own action so much as I guess I've either drawn people to me or been put into groups.

[00:14:12] **Rafael Otto:** Okay.

[00:14:13] **Kai Russell:** I do remember that there have been times when, uh, I just kind of did my own thing. Like in elementary school there were many recesses where I would just find some corner of the playground and play my hand games. I've had strong friend groups throughout my school experience. In middle school and high school, it was, uh, entirely because of speech group or social thinking group, however it was called, where I was essentially put in a room at lunchtime

with other autistic people. Although in elementary school, I think more of other people approached me and it was just like, "Oh, cool. Hi!" I've been told that I got bullied a lot, throughout my elementary, middle and high school experience. But I didn't notice it most of the time.

[00:15:07] **Rafael Otto:** Can you say more about that?

[00:15:10] **Kai Russell:** Let's see... In middle school I do remember, uh, bullying to a degree... although I think that might've had to do more with my gender expression, because at one point in middle school, I had longer hair and I think that, I also wore pink, which I got in trouble for, from other peers.

[00:15:27] **Rafael Otto:** Sure.

[00:15:29] **Kai Russell:** Yeah, I'm sorry. I don't really remember much of my experience with being bullied because it was more of that I was told that I was being bullied, but didn't notice, I guess.

[00:15:39] **Rafael Otto:** Okay.

[00:15:39] **Jenna Deml:** Yeah, Rafael, I think it might be like when I mentioned what happened with my teacher and it's like, yeah, it's an authority figure, it's fine, and you don't realize who a bully is or what bullying is for a while when you're on the spectrum. It's sort of a blissful obliviousness, and then you talk about it later and it's like, wow, that actually wasn't okay.

[00:16:00] **Rafael Otto:** Right.

[00:16:01] **Kai Russell:** Like It was normal to be, uh, sent back to my desk or to the office. It happened regularly and I figured, "Oh, well, it's because I'm disruptive." It never occurred to me that I needed help or that they were mishandling the situation.

[00:16:17] **Rafael Otto:** I'm just wondering overall, like there are these moments of tension that you describe and then moments where things worked really well.

Jenna, you talked about the fact that you were able to develop a community and you did have supports eventually. But overall, do you feel like you were supported as students in your learning? Just thinking about the education system as a whole, what, could the education system do

[00:16:44] **Justin Semke:** Very big question.

[00:16:46] **Jenna Deml:** Yeah. Taking a moment to think about it. So I'm not sure if I'm necessarily the best person to answer this question. Because I think in comparison, I think I'm able to mask my diagnosis fairly well and kind of blend in and act as neuro-typical when there are some instances like, people who get to know me really well realize like, "Oh, there's something slightly different about her." But in terms of my schooling, I think, I think I was definitely able to keep up the act, dare I say it, and turn out pretty okay. I think honestly, it was just like my early learning experiences where I had the most issues. And that was 20 years ago to be fair. And I think a lot has changed. If anything, that teacher in particular didn't understand what Montessori school was meant to be founded on, and the types of students who are there to be taught, which are neurodivergent individuals. But frankly, I think this teacher was just ill-equipped to handle that sort of thing. So I think it's just a matter of educating yourself further. If anything like Kai, Justin and I, we are the autism spectrum.

We have varying degrees of which these traits come out. So it's just realizing that it is that spectrum and not just a "You are a problem child, please go away" scenario.

[00:18:17] **Rafael Otto:** Justin I know it's a big question. And you, you said that, but what are your thoughts?

[00:18:24] **Justin Semke:** Well, my thoughts are... I will admit, after hearing Jenna say it,, I do agree that a lot has changed over these past years. But the one thing I think that is very important is just educating people who are on the autism spectrum what's kind of going on as early as possible. Because you need to kind of know what's going on, giving them at least a bit of an answer of like, "Oh, okay. I am a little different. That's why this happens." And by educating them, they're able to kind of utilize that because this is a part of them. So they want to make sure they

can live their life. So, I think it's important, especially in early childhood to kind of properly explain what's going on.

[00:19:15] **Rafael Otto:** Kai, do you have thoughts on that big question? What could the education system be doing better?

[00:19:21] **Kai Russell:** One thing is making it so that you don't have to jump through as many hoops to get the help you need. Every time I went into a new institution, I had to reprove that I am autistic in order to get the help that I need.

[00:19:37] **Rafael Otto:** Right.

[00:19:37] **Kai Russell:** And then you had to kind of like, argue even then to get the accommodations that you need. It's seen as an unfair advantage to have time and a half on tests when, I mean, are glasses an unfair advantage? It's the difference between, uh, equality and equity. Equality being everyone has the same things, equity being having more or less depending on what you need in order to do as well as the others.

[00:20:13] **Rafael Otto:** That's right.

[00:20:14] **Kai Russell:** Because I do remember that my parents had to do a lot of advocating for me especially in elementary, middle, and high school. My struggles were uh, on focus and time. Time being the biggest one. Like, throughout college, pretty much every assignment was turned in late.

[00:20:34] **Rafael Otto:** Right.

[00:20:35] **Kai Russell:** But I mean, they all got like A's and B's, because I was very thorough and insightful. I guess the main thing really is just making it so that you don't have to fight to get what you need in order to be successful. and not stigmatizing, fighting for it. You aren't privileged for having these accommodations that other people don't have because they don't need it. And you do in order to do as well as them.

[00:21:06] **Rafael Otto:** I appreciate that Kai thank you.

[00:21:08] **Kai Russell:** Certainly.

[00:21:09] **Rafael Otto:** I wanted to ask about the language used to describe people on the autism spectrum. I know of, I introduced you all that way as being on the autism spectrum. And I know that within the autism community, there's a big difference between describing someone as an autistic person as compared to a person with autism. And I wanted to ask you how you feel about that. And do you have advice for people?

Justin, do you want to start?

[00:21:40] **Justin Semke:** Sure. That's also a hard question. It's something a part of you. So, I don't know much about the language personally. I've always just referred to myself as on the autism spectrum because it is the safer language option for me personally. Though, I know that it's like, some people do have personal preferences on whether they would rather be referred to as autistic or someone with autism. I think it's whatever makes them feel comfortable or what they want to be referred to as, because we have it and we should be referred to however we feel comfortable with. Because everyone is different.

[00:22:29] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah, Jenna, do you have thoughts on that?

[00:22:33] **Jenna Deml:** So I, actually, this was kind of the first time I've heard of that being a debate. But it is interesting to look at it. Because it seems like a lot of people who are parents or individuals who don't have it, who are not on the spectrum, they say like, "Oh yeah, person with autism is the more appropriate way because they want their kids to be seen as neuro-typical and like, there's nothing wrong with them," something like that. I am, for example, I am a white person, I am a female person. It is part of my identity. I am an autistic person, so that's probably kind of preferably how I would address it. I think it's ultimately like, whether the semantics empower the individual and I think that's kind of what Justin was getting at too.

Like how would they want to be referred to as what empowers the most? And the way I'd refer to myself as I'm an autistic person. That's just the way it is. I don't know if Rafael or any of you have seen, there was a Temple Grandin biopic, and it had Claire Danes. And like, one of the things that she says, she like, goes, "I'm autistic," and I'm like, "Yeah, I'm autistic. It's what I am."

[00:23:44] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

[00:23:46] **Kai Russell:** That has, uh, like visual representations of whenever-

[00:23:51] **Jenna Deml:** Yeah. When she thinks in pictures, that's the one.

[00:23:56] **Kai Russell:** Like, oh yeah, "We like to get up with the roosters," and then imagines like, her grandparents are sitting on the roof with

[00:24:01] **Jenna Deml:** Yeah. And then there's, there's one where it's like, um, somebody is talking about animal husbandry, And she pictures like, somebody marrying a cow. And yeah, like, that's another thing I think all three of us do is think in those pictures until we're like, "Oh yeah, metaphors."

[00:24:25] **Rafael Otto:** Kai, do you have thoughts on the language?

[00:24:27] **Kai Russell:** Ah, yes. Okay. So, I haven't heard about this debate in particular, although my guess is that it would be similar to the move from talking about homeless people to people experiencing homelessness.

[00:24:45] **Rafael Otto:** Right.

[00:24:46] **Kai Russell:** Which is putting the person first, so that they think of you as a person before they think of you as autistic.

I guess with the stigma of autism being... Like I think that I've seen online people calling other people autistic as an insult. And also I remember in high school when I told one of my classmates that I was autistic and you know- this is someone that joked around and bantered with me a lot-, he suddenly became very like, soft and

apologetic and kind of, treating me a little like a child I guess. Like, dude we've been bantering for how long?

Although, I personally, I refer to myself as an autistic person. Because autism is part of my identity. It has defined my personality. It has defined who my friend groups are. It has put me through struggles throughout school. It has also gifted me with being able to hyper-focus on my interests and become a walking encyclopedia, and make connections that are very helpful as a fiction writer. So it's both a strength and a weakness for me. Sometimes it really feels like a disability, like I won't be able to achieve my dreams because while this gives me a superpower in some areas, it keeps me from using my superpower in others. And so, I very strongly identify as autistic. And so I personally call myself an autistic person. Though I also understand why some people would prefer being seen as a person with autism, because they want to be seen as a person rather than by the disability.

[00:26:46] **Rafael Otto:** Kai, on this question of identity. How do you think about the connection between being on the autism spectrum and being neurodivergent and being gender-nonconforming?

[00:26:59] **Kai Russell:** I've never really been one to pick up on... or maybe I'm not sure if it's that I didn't pick up on or that I just didn't care about and didn't internalize gender norms. I've always been a soft kind of gentle person who liked to like flowers and pink and dolls. My sister is more of the rough-houser.

Well, I like being clean. Yeah, there's a picture of me back in elementary school wearing a flower wreath on my head. And I like to have long hair. My mom in particular, said that she knew since I was a baby that I wasn't necessarily going to learn gender the way that other people do. And for the most part I think that I've never really cared too much if something was seen as a boy thing or a girl thing. Just... well... is this something that I like? I've heard that neurodivergent people or people on the autism spectrum in particular make up a large percentage of the LGBT community. And part of that is just because we don't internalize gender norms. We don't feel as compelled to conform to what society wants us to be, I think.

[00:28:31] **Rafael Otto:** Thank you, Kai. I know I wanted to ask you all this question, because I know you're all involved in the creative world in different ways and so this is yet another thing it sounds like that has connected the three of you.

So tell me a little bit about your creative pursuits and when you feel most capable of expressing yourself. Jenna, would you like to start?

[00:28:56] **Jenna Deml:** Sure. So currently, I am a graduate student in multimedia journalism. So that's funny enough, like podcasting, broadcast journalism, documentary filmmaking. So I am really heavily into like, the audio-visual kind of artistic aspect of things. But as a way to kind of channel my diagnosis when I was younger, my parents put me in theater classes and I continued to be in like, theater and choir.

I've always loved drawing. I'm just kind of all over the place. It's like a "Jack of all trades, master of none" scenario. But now that I'm in my twenties, I've had to specialize and I can't really get away from like, audio, music. I love the heck out of music. If there's a day when I don't have a song in my head or music playing, something's seriously wrong with me. So, um, yeah.

[00:29:49] **Rafael Otto:** I'm the same way, Jenna.

[00:29:50] **Jenna Deml:** Yeah. Yeah. No, I love... I love singing, the performance arts, that sort of stuff. I just kind of had to learn to let go of some inhibitions. Like, "Oh my God, they'll think I'm weird. Oh my God. They'll think I'm..." I don't know, just whatever. Like the way people behave. But I think the people who helped me bring all that to the forefront and be able to really express myself was... my parents were always just behind me cheering me on, being my biggest fans. And I honestly like these two goons that we're talking to right now. I love them to pieces. I feel like I can really be myself around them, and they empower me because I'm inspired by them and seeing them grow and seeing what they do.

[00:30:37] **Kai Russell:** I've always admired the weirdness in you.

[00:30:40] **Jenna Deml:** Oh, you too.

[00:30:41] **Justin Semke:** Yeah, you guys are the best.

[00:30:45] **Jenna Deml:** Oh heart emoji.

[00:30:51] **Rafael Otto:** Justin, how about you?

[00:30:53] **Justin Semke:** Well, actually, I'm playing off of what we just said. I'll actually answer this question a little differently. So when I feel most capable of expressing myself is actually when I'm around friends and people super close to me. Like with Jenna and Kai, I feel very empowered and I can just go nuts and create. I kind of feel inspired. I can just create stories, create characters. I'm mostly a story creator in my head, but I'm also a 3D modeler. So I 3D model different art kind of pieces for things, and I feel like these two and my family are very big inspirations for me.

[00:31:46] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

[00:31:47] **Justin Semke:** So I feel most capable and empowered when around, or even just talking to people I care about.

[00:31:53] **Rafael Otto:** That's great. Kai, How about you?

[00:31:57] **Kai Russell:** Well, let's see. My ideas flow, most when I am like, out on a walk or in nature or doing something repetitive, such as washing dishes or showering or when I'm talking with friends. I think that as far as empowered to express myself, time is one of my biggest enemies. I have difficulty finding it and stuff. Like, I need to have a chunk of time in order to sit down and create.

[00:32:27] **Rafael Otto:** Right.

[00:32:28] **Kai Russell:** I think that I'm most creative when I have to be doing something else that I don't want to be doing. I end up hitting a wall when I'm supposed to work on the creative stuff. I use music to help me get through things. Like, I'm a very musical person myself, although mostly I just sing nowadays. But also, I have a very visual imagination, and so I listen to a piece of music and can

see a story playing out. And also, I guess maybe reading about writing also kind of inspires me.

[00:33:07] **Rafael Otto:** That's powerful. I feel like I want to ask you each one more question, and that is what would you say to your younger selves? What advice would you have for your younger self now? And let's see... Jenna, would you want to start with that?

[00:33:30] **Jenna Deml:** Sure. Stand up for yourself maybe a little bit more, is one way to put it. If something feels slightly off, if you're feeling uncomfortable in some sort of situation, your feelings are probably justified. This is kind of in reference to the one teacher and all of that stuff. I'm not bitter at all about that... But no, in all seriousness, trust in your feelings, trust your gut. Your mom and dad love the hell out of you. Embrace the weird, because being normal is overrated. You will find your people. Things may seem tough at the moment, but they're out there and they will love you.

[00:34:15] **Rafael Otto:** I love that advice. Jenna, thank you. I'm sitting there smiling. I know you can't see me. But Kai, how about you?

[00:34:22] **Kai Russell:** Well, one of my concerns has always been like, am I a burden? Or am I annoying someone? Because I can't tell if I'm annoying someone and oftentimes they won't tell me and I can talk for hours about something that interests me and I've had to really be trained over the years to look for non-verbal cues. I think that because of this training, it's why I overthink things nowadays and like analyze most interactions with people. There's always this worry that I'll be bothering someone and that they won't tell me. So, I don't know if I have any advice I would give to my younger self. I guess maybe, probably something self-affirming. Like, there will always be people that you will bother without meaning to. But there are also always people that love you. And those are the people that matter, and those are the people that would tell you if you were a burden, and you are worthy of love and having good things in your life.

[00:35:45] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah, I like that a lot. Thank you, Kai.

[00:35:48] **Kai Russell:** Yeah.

[00:35:48] **Rafael Otto:** Justin, I'm going to go to you.

[00:35:51] **Justin Semke:** Okay. Well, after he asks me, uh, "How's the future, like, can you tell me anything?" I would probably go with, "You're you and that's probably the best thing ever. There's a lot of good people out there. You're going to meet a lot of good people". And I think I would just end it with saying things are going to be okay. It may not seem like it sometimes. But things are going to be okay.

[00:36:18] **Rafael Otto:** Thank you very much for that. I think I'm going to end it there. And just want to say thank you so much to the three of you for coming on the podcast today and talking with me. Really appreciate your perspective and sharing your opinions. Thank you so much.

[00:36:38] **Kai Russell:** Thank you for having us.

[00:36:39] **Justin Semke:** Thank you for having us!

[00:36:40] **Jenna Deml:** Thanks Rafael for having us.