

S1Ep5 Lights, Camera, Action! Take One: Veleeta Transcript

Shelly (00:24)

In the next few episodes, you'll meet my friends, people who knew me before I learned about the CCMs in my brain, during the years that followed, and now since 2013 and acquiring multiple disabilities after brainstem brain surgery. I wanted to talk with them because they were there during a time of my life when I felt success starting to happen.

I was passionate and excited for my life. I had worked really hard to build a career in the entertainment industry. I was making connections, learning about who I was, and finally beginning to see my hard work pay off. And then in 2006 I had a seizure.

Suddenly it felt like my life had been interrupted.

I was incredibly grateful for my family, especially my mom who flew out from Minnesota to California and drove me home.

But I was also angry.

I felt like something I had worked incredibly hard for had just been ripped away. I don't talk about that time very often because it still hurts. I haven't fully figured out how to bring the person I was then together with the person I am now.

You may notice something in these conversations. I had then, and am still, downplaying what has happened and what I've been going through. I knew I had CCMs in my head. I knew it was serious, but I didn't want anyone to see how scared I was. I didn't want pity. And I definitely didn't want them to treat me any differently. So, I acted like it was no big deal. My friends have supported and loved me through all of it. But there was one more complication. I kept moving. First it was from California back to Minnesota, then

back to California, Northern California, North Carolina, back to California, and then back home to Minnesota. With every life change, I seemed to also change locations. My friends weren't physically here to see much of what was happening. They saw the parts that I chose to show them.

Now, since returning to Minnesota, I've built new friendships and found community. I've begun to feel grounded. I've lived in my current apartment now for three years, which is longer than I've lived any one place alone since I left home at 18. And I want this to truly feel like home. I think part of doing that means finally grieving the dreams I left behind in California. But here's the uncomfortable part. No one told me I couldn't return to the

entertainment industry. Nobody told me I wasn't capable. Nobody told me I didn't belong. I told myself that. I made the decision that having something going on in my brain meant that I needed to give up that part of myself.

I now recognize that for what it was; internalized ableism. I've buried that belief for years. These conversations with my friends are helping me dig it back up. Not so I can return to the person I was, but so I can stop believing that becoming disabled meant I had to leave that part of me behind.

I'm not a casting director in Hollywood anymore.

But that doesn't mean my life now can't be full, rich, passionate, and deeply fulfilling. I'm learning what that means. This work is harder than I ever expected, but it's necessary. And doing this publicly is oddly comforting.

Shelly (05:23)

Hello and welcome to the Uncomfortably Speaking podcast. I'm your host, Shelly Rohe. I'm a disabled white woman in my mid-50s. I have shoulder-length strawberry blonde hair that's pulled back into a very messy bun at the nape of my neck. I'm wearing a white button-down shirt with a black cardigan sweater, and I have glasses on. I use she/her pronouns.

And today I am so excited to invite my friend Vee on the podcast. And Vee, if you would, please introduce yourself.

Vee (05:59)

Okay, so I'm Veleeta DaCosta. I'm- I suppose I'm a middle-aged black woman with long braids. I'm also wearing glasses. I'm wearing a black t-shirt. What else?

Shelly (06:21)

That's great. I think that's awesome. So, welcome. I'm super excited

Vee (06:24)

Okay. Thank you.

Shelly (06:26)

to have you here. Can you tell us where you are?

Vee (06:31)

I'm living in California right now, Southern California to be exact.

Shelly (06:36)

So, Vee and I met in the entertainment industry. Do you want to

Vee (06:40)
Mm-hmm.

Shelly (06:42)
tell the story?

Vee (06:44)
Oh my God, what seems like a lifetime ago, right? We were so young and you know, just full of like, we're gonna be, we're gonna be making movies and you know, I think

Shelly (06:56)
Yeah.

Vee (06:57)
I- I don't even remember, I don't remember actually how we met, but I remember that it was having to do with the business. You were working with Jay Ohrberg at the time. That- do you remember?

Shelly (07:10)
It was even before that.

I went to California on a tour with my agent from Minneapolis and auditioned for Danny Hoff and he said, "If you move out, we'll represent you." So, I packed my car and drove to LA and said, "Here I am, world!" And

Vee (07:30)
Wow.

Shelly (07:31)
I remember going into Danny's office and I was really sweating it because I had no job. I didn't know what I was gonna do. And I remember Jo was his secretary and she had said, "If you wanna volunteer, you can come in on Fridays and run his tape." And that's how we met. Yep.

Vee (07:53)
Yep. Yeah. And I was doing that too. I think so. I think you were the one who introduced me to Danny. And, and we would we'd go in on Fridays because, you know, and

Shelly (08:04)
Yep.

Vee (08:05)

help with what were new talent who would come in and audition. And yeah, we would run the camera. And I

Shelly (08:10)

Right. Yeah.

Vee (08:12)

guess in exchange, he would send us out on commercial auditions. It was so long ago that it was I remember it was during the black and white era. Like a lot of headshots. Yeah.

Shelly (08:21)

It was so long ago, I know how is that even possible? Right? Real physical hard print, headshots, printed fax.

Vee (08:33)

Now it's all you know online, but yeah. That was a long time ago.

Shelly (08:36)

Right? my gosh. Yeah.

So what are your impressions of me then? What was I like in your eyes?

Vee (08:49)

My God. I just always, you were always so just very, what's the word? effervescent. You know, you were always like nothing seemed to, you were just very easygoing and always just kind of, the life of the party. That's what I remembered. And relationships, it was like if your heart was broken, it wasn't broken for long. I just remember, I'm like, how does she do it? She's just like she moves on. It's like, okay, yeah, you know.

You know, that's what I just remembered. And I always like admired that you didn't wallow, you know what I mean, in self-pity. And it was like, okay, whatever. And yeah, you were just always lively. And you know,

Shelly (09:31)

Thank you.

Vee (09:32)

That's, that's what I remembered. I mean, I don't know if when you were alone, you know what I mean? It was but like

Shelly (09:38)

Yeah.

Vee (09:39)

but what you were putting out there, it was just like easy going, lively, and we, we were also doing the promotions that we started doing that, you know, you're

Shelly (09:46)

Yep. Yep.

Vee (09:48)

Always

go, go, go, go, go. Hustling, hustling.

Shelly (09:51)

I feel like I had a lot of confidence and

Vee (09:54)

well.

Shelly (09:55)

I loved being alive. I loved waking up every day and having new things challenge me and going to new places and meeting new people. Nothing of that was an issue ever. I loved everything. I loved the challenge of it. And now I feel like it's- it's like going from a sunny day to a cloudy day.

I- I, I know I'm missing the entertainment industry, I'm missing being in California, I'm missing my friends, I'm missing you. I miss my life. And I know when I had a seizure and found out about the brain tumors. I chose not to get a job in the entertainment industry again. So, in a way I feel like I purposely cut myself off.

I wanted to be a part of it all and I felt like I shouldn't be. And I know that's something I did. So, I never had anybody say you can't do this or you can't do that at that time, except myself. My internal voice was so loud and so negative. And I just am now struggling with this idea that I've waited for my life to start for years. And until I do something about it, it's not gonna change. So, I guess part of it is wanting to find the connections with my friends again.

I look back on the early days in California with rose-colored glasses.

Vee (12:05)

Mm. But you know what though, Shelly? I think, it- you are being hard on yourself because what you went through, it was serious. You know what I mean? So, of course you had to take a step back to take care of your health, to deal with that. And I can understand how you, you know what I mean, how you'd have those feelings of like, it would make sense that you would pull back because you, you changed. Not

Shelly (12:39)
Right.

Vee (12:39)
in terms of, you know, physical, like you had a real, you know, issue, like you weren't, you couldn't be the person that you were before in terms of, you right, you couldn't physically do the same things. So, you had to take some time to, to take care of your health.

Shelly (13:02)
I did not consider myself disabled in 2006 when I found out I had brain tumors. But that's very much a disability. It wasn't

Vee (13:14)
Mm-hmm.

Shelly (13:14)
until I had the brainstem brain surgery in 2013 and acquired multiple disabilities, and became a wheelchair user. That's when I started associating and identifying with disability.

Vee (13:31)
Mm-hmm.

Shelly (13:32)
And I wonder sometimes now the messages that I took from society and definitely the industry. I mean, when I had that disabling event in 2013, I ended up getting a job with ABILITY Magazine. And I remember being asked, "As a casting director, did you make sure you were casting people with the disabilities?" And I was like, "No!" The thought didn't even cross my mind that I needed to make that a priority because I was so scared of doing something wrong.

Vee (14:23)
Mm-hmm.

Shelly (14:24)

I remember once filling out a voucher on a set and I was nervous because it was my first day and I didn't want to slip up and the director had already yelled at me. And so when they called my name on the loudspeaker to come in the office, I thought they were gonna tell me to go home. And they they said, "You just need to fill the voucher out if you want to get paid." And I was making small talk with them as I was filling out the voucher. But in the end, it said 'Your Name Here', I wrote 'Your Name Here'.

Vee (15:06)

that's funny.

Shelly (15:09)

I mean, that's how nervous I was. Can you talk about anything from the entertainment industry that you are aware of that still happen on sets that like, you had to follow the rules but the rules weren't ever told to you. So, you had to figure it out as you went.

Vee (15:32)

Well, you know what? That's all you that's, that's so the- the business in terms of you know, people on set, right? They're allowed to get away with so much crap. you know, I- I think it's, a lot's changed now, but I remember back then, do you remember- I don't know if you remember that movie? What was it called? Was it Swimming with Sharks? It was it was a movie about how terrible people were treated in, in the industry, you know, how you would be talked to. Like I had a friend who was working for I think it was CAA, back in the the early days, and he called and left us a message, and this guy was literally crying, talking about how he was treated and how he was talked to, and it's like, you know, you're expected to take it because hey, you know, I get an opportunity to be a part

Shelly (16:32)

Right.

Vee (16:32)

of this business, especially at a big time agent like that. And you were expected to take it you know. So, I think that was just I don't know, part of it. Not that it's an excuse, right?

Shelly (16:46)

Right.

Vee (16:46)

But it was like everybody wants to be a part of this business, it's show business. So, you're, you- you're willing to put up with whatever, right?

Shelly (16:54)
Right.

Vee (16:55)
to be a part of it. So,

Shelly (16:57)
Do you think it's still like that?

Vee (17:01)
of course. I mean,

Shelly (17:03)
I

Vee (17:03)
people are speaking out more now, but you've seen over the years all you know, what's been coming out.

Shelly (17:09)
Yep.

Vee (17:10)
All of that stuff. Yeah.

Shelly (17:12)
I don't subscribe to the idea that there's just one disability community. So, when I talk about the disability community, right now I'm just talking about the disability community in the entertainment industry. I know they're working hard to try and make the playing field a little more even. I was working on at least getting a disability rider so that when an A-list actor portrayed a person with a disability, they would have a disability rider that said X percent of the cast and crew needed to be disabled people. I don't know if that went anywhere, but

Vee (18:00)
in terms of representation, would you say any, you know, a person with a disability could step into pretty much any role? Like, for example, you can be an attorney, right?
But

Shelly (18:16)
Right.

Vee (18:16)

you're an it doesn't have to, I think no one ever thinks, this role calls for an attorney, right? Now

Shelly (18:24)

Right.

Vee (18:24)

I don't think anyone would ever think to submit a person with disability unless the role specifically says,

Shelly (18:32)

Right.

Vee (18:33)

you know, an attorney with disability, which if you think of it, like you should be able to, right? Because- we have people right. You know what I mean? You

Shelly (18:39)

Right, wouldn't it be so cool? Yeah, just

Vee (18:42)

have people that happen to be, I'm an attorney, but I happen to be in a wheelchair,

Shelly (18:45)

Exactly.

Vee (18:46)

but like I'm still an attorney. But I don't think it's thought of. Yeah, it's

Shelly (18:48)

Exactly. It would be so right.

Vee (18:51)

not thought of that way.

Shelly (18:53)

It would be just so wonderful to not have disability highlighted, but be cast because that person is right for the role.

Vee (19:02)

Yeah, but yeah, I don't think it's, it's seen that way. And I t- to

Shelly (19:06)

No. When

Vee (19:08)

to be honest, I and I think they don't care. You know, something like that too, it would go under what people call now, 'woke.' Which is, you know, some- some people term it like a, a negative thing.

Shelly (19:20)

A disability rider isn't gonna get picked up right now.

Vee (19:24)

You know, it, it doesn't hurt to try, right?

Shelly (19:27)

Yeah.

Vee (19:30)

That could be a, a new facet, and guess what? That could be something that you could champion, you know?

Shelly (19:38)

I was trying then production shut down and I got a different

Vee (19:43)

Yeah.

Shelly (19:44)

job, but yeah. It was so hard to get anyone to pay attention.

Vee (19:52)

And so much has changed now- too now, Shell, you know, in terms of so many people are doing their own projects, right?

I'm working with- with Kim, Kim Wayans of the Wayans family. don't know if you're

Shelly (20:11)

Okay. Yeah.

Vee (20:13)

So, she's been trying to get, she's amazing. She's so funny, right? She's like, you know what? I'm just gonna create my own YouTube channel and put this

Shelly (20:21)
Nice.

Vee (20:22)
show up. And so that's what she's been doing. She writes it the stuff herself,

Shelly (20:26)
Wow.

Vee (20:26)
We got a nice little crew together. So, there's a lot of that happening

Shelly (20:30)
Yeah.

Vee (20:30)
where people just creating, you know, their own

Shelly (20:32)
Yeah.

Vee (20:33)
In- instead of waiting. Cause the business has definitely changed.

Shelly (20:37)
When we saw each other last, it was right after the pandemic was kind of easing and we were able to socially distance and we had met at, I think CPK Yes.

Vee (20:54)
CPK Yeah. Down there. Yeah. And I work right around the corner from- from there.
Yeah.

Shelly (21:01)
Yep. That was a weird time.

Vee (21:04)
You didn't stay for very long, right? How when you moved back that, that last time, how long were you here? I don't even think was it just about a year? Yeah.

Shelly (21:09)
A year. Yeah.

Vee (21:12)

Yeah.

Shelly (21:13)

It was January, 2020 when I moved out and then the pandemic hit.

Did you see a real shift in me from before and after I became disabled?

Vee (21:31)

Well, the thing is when you became disabled, I didn't really see, right? We didn't really see each other that much.

Shelly (21:38)

Right.

Vee (21:39)

and then like I said, I remember you had moved back.

Shelly (21:43)

Right.

Vee (21:44)

and we'd keep in touch like via Facebook and every once in a while, right? We'd touch base. But so

Shelly (21:48)

Yep, correct.

Vee (21:51)

so if I'm being honest, I don't know much of like, you know, what had been going on.

Shelly (21:58)

I wonder sometimes though after I became disabled, if I didn't keep myself, like I- I shut myself away. I didn't want people to see me. I didn't want people to hear me. I still have an issue with my voice. And I think that's been the hardest part because I wouldn't say it was very skilled at much. I wasn't a great actor, but I- I liked working on my voice. I was able to project and do accents and some of those things and I was never able to sing, but it really hampered me from reaching out and I didn't want people who knew me in California to hear my voice. So,

Vee (23:01)

Mm.

Shelly (23:02)
yeah.

Vee (23:05)
What, what is it that you want now?

Shelly (23:13)
I think, that's a good question. I, it's one that I- I'm still searching for the actual answer. There, it comes and goes in waves. I want to wake up every day with something to do. That's the basic need I have, I guess, because I wasn't doing anything that brought me joy. So, what I really want to do is find peace and let myself off the hook, somehow.

Vee (23:54)
Yes. Please. Yep. Yep. What right, you're- you're now trying to figure out what brings you joy. What do you- what do you like to do creatively?

Shelly (24:07)
Hmm, good question. So before, in the before days, I hate that I talk about it like that, but before I became disabled and I could still use my right hand, I painted and, and I was drawing, I sculpted. So, fine arts was something I did even back in high school. My art teacher sent me to a summer honors college during the summer between my junior and senior year and I got to display artwork at a gallery opening.

Vee (24:45)
wow.

Shelly (24:45)
And yeah, so it it wasn't like a small passing fancy. But I wouldn't say I was like really a great artist, but it really soothed me to do artwork.

Vee (25:01)
yeah.

Shelly (25:01)
Yep. And so now I can't get that back. I've tried! And I- I have clay, I have paint, I have pencils, I've got an easel. I thought okay, if I can't do fine, solid lines because my hand shakes. Maybe what I can do is buy a picture from Goodwill and paint over the top of it. So at least like the background is done. And then I add to it. And I got that idea because I had done a mixed media art piece once for college and I had painted or taped pictures over pictures and then glued things to it and then painted over the top of it and I thought, well I can kind of do that. Maybe not gluing things together, but. So, I do paint a little, but it's, it's Bob Ross painting.

Vee (26:12)

Okay. So, so do, so you don't have any use of your right hand at all? Okay. But- but your left, you do? Okay.

Shelly (26:17)

Yep. I my left yep, my left

side. I still- so, I've got

tremors in my right hand and I can't hold a pencil. If I am at rest, my hand is fine. But if I try and do something with this hand, my tremor starts and then I'm like shaking from it. So, it's called an intention tr- intention tremor. But because I've overused this hand so much, I've now fused the bone in this hand because I've overworked the thumb so much. So, trying to use it for art seems gluttonous, I guess. I- it's nothing. Because my hand has such limited use, trying to do something artistic when I need it for brushing my teeth, let's say.

Vee (27:18)

Right.

Shelly (27:19)

I know that I have a finite amount of things I can do with it. So, what they've done for me is to give me Dragon Dictate software so I can talk into the microphone and it types for me. So, it's

Vee (27:36)

that's awesome.

Shelly (27:37)

awesome. And that's the only reason I could write a book. So,

Vee (27:41)

Wow! I was just gonna suggest that. Are you thinking of writing a book?

Shelly (27:45)

I just I did. I just published a book called, Beloved As We Are: Building a Congregational Culture of Disability Inclusion. And I wrote it with my co-author, Rev. Barbara Meyers. So, it's Yeah.

Vee (28:00)

Wonderful. It's available on, where is that available?

Shelly (28:04)

It's available on Amazon and it's in Walmart. It's on the InSpirit Bookstore, which is the bookstore for the UUA.

Vee (28:17)

What's next for you?

Shelly (28:22)

Well, it's this podcast.

It's easy to fall into a thought pattern that says people with disabilities are never going to be as good at whatever they do as someone who doesn't have a disability because their disability is gonna make them less than somehow.

Vee (28:46)

Mm-hmm.

Shelly (28:47)

And it's so pervasive. In my philosophy anyway, everyone will become disabled at some point, whether it's through illness or injury, ~temporary, permanent, age. Yep. Yep. Yep.

Vee (29:00)

Or through just or through just living, right? And just living and growing older. Yeah, there's certain things, you know, that we won't ever be able to do that we used to be able to do at 20. I- again, you know, it's just part

Shelly (29:15)

Right.

Vee (29:16)

of life. We go through different phases.

Shelly (29:19)

So, instead of everyone trying to say we need to give a little access to, "those people," it would be awesome if we could create a society where it was just ingrained. So, if our culture could just accept that every BODY is different. I

Vee (29:43)

Mm-hmm.

Shelly (29:44)

expect that I'll keep learning. That's what I hope. I hope I can keep doing yeah. Mm-hmm.

Vee (29:47)

Right. You can only Yeah. You can only do your part, right? Do what you do and that's all, that's all you can do. Do your

Shelly (29:56)

Yes.

Vee (29:57)

part and, and encourage, right? Do your part and encourage others. But you know, we

Shelly (30:02)

Yeah.

Vee (30:02)

all are gonna do what we wanna do.

Shelly (30:05)

Yeah. If there

Vee (30:08)

Good for you, Shell!

Shelly (30:08)

was something you would want me to get out of this, what do you think I would benefit from?

Vee (30:17)

from getting out of this doing this podcast?

Shelly (30:19)

Doing the podcast, yeah.

Vee (30:25)

Figure out, what like you're, like you were saying, find out what brings you joy again, you know? And do that thing without any judgments on self, giving yourself, giving yourself grace.

Especially you get to, you know, you get to a certain age, just you know, just give yourself grace. And as long as you are being, being- be kind to yourself, you know, give yourself grace. And as long as you're not hurting an- anyone, you know, do what makes you feel good.

Shelly (31:07)
Thank you.

Vee (31:08)
Right.

Shelly (31:08)
Yes.

Vee (31:10)
As long as you're not causing harm to, to anyone. That's it.

Shelly (31:14)
Thank you.

Vee (31:15)
We have a- we have a, a finite number of years in this life, on this planet and you know.

Shelly (31:23)
Yep. That

is so true. Yep. Somebody, I don't know where I saw it, was going through a list of what a human can expect in a lifetime. Like they get 1250 firsts. And so I was thinking about that, "What have I done lately that I can say this is the first time I've done that?" So, that's my next thing I wanna answer. I wanna find something that I'm doing for the first time. I guess the podcast, but now I have a couple episodes, so I can say that I'm not brand, brand new, but. I really appreciate you coming on today.

Vee (32:15)
No, I'm- I'm so glad that you thought of me.

Shelly (32:23)
Absolutely!

Vee (32:24)
Just you know, let me know how I can support, you know. Yeah.

Shelly (32:27)
Thank you!

Stay tuned while I go over a few key takeaways from today's episode and maybe come up with a few more questions.
Takeaway video:

Here's what I've learned so far:

I miss more than California and the entertainment industry. I miss how I felt about myself.

Sometimes the loudest ableist voice was my own.

There is a difference between what disability changed and what I decided disability meant.

In media, representation means more than disability-specific roles.

Creativity didn't disappear. It changed form.

Access shouldn't be something society reluctantly gives to "those people."

Maybe I'm not looking for my old life. I'm looking for joy.

Future Questions:

Do I actually want my old life back, or do I want the confidence, purpose, joy, and possibility I associate with it?

Why was I afraid for my friends to hear my voice? What did I believe they would hear that I am ashamed of?

Can I miss who I was without believing she was somehow *better* than who I am?

What happens when I stop asking, "How do I get back what I had?" and start asking, "What can I create from here?"

And Vee leaves me with perhaps the most important question of all: What brings me joy now?

Mindful Shift- meaningful shift in my attitude going

From:

Blaming myself for not being enough and waiting for something more to happen.

To:

Releasing the old me and discovering with curiosity the person inside I haven't met, yet.

Shelly (34:21)

Thank you for joining us. This has been another episode of Uncomfortably Speaking, and I'll see you in the next episode.