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Episode 20: Lights, Camera, Action... and Accessibility: Part 3 August 10, 2022

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Mindy Henderson: Welcome to the Quest Podcast proudly presented by the Muscular Dystrophy Association, as part of the Quest Family of content. I'm your host, Mindy Henderson. Together, we are here to bring thoughtful conversation to the neuromuscular disease community and beyond about issues affecting those with neuromuscular disease, and other disabilities. And those who love them. We are here for you to educate and inform, to demystify, to inspire and to entertain. We are here shining a light on all that makes you, you. Whether you are one of us, love someone who is, or are on another journey altogether. Thanks for joining. Now, let's get started.

Today, my guest is Jonathan Lengel. Jonathan was discovered as part of a worldwide casting call and will star in the upcoming Netflix adaptation of *13: The Musical*, which premieres August 12th. *13* is based on the hugely popular musical of the same name, which debuted on Broadway in 2008, and featured the first and only all teenager cast, which included Ariana Grande and Liz Gillies. In addition to *13*, Jonathan just joined the cast of the Will Farrell produced musical comedy *Theater Camp*, where he will appear alongside Ben Platt, Amy Sedaris, and Patty Harrison.

Jonathan, thank you so much for being here today.

Jonathan Lengel: Hi Mindy. Thank you so much for having me.

Mindy Henderson: My pleasure. I am so excited to talk to you about this film. We do this podcast in the spirit of communicating important issues to the world of individuals with disabilities, and neuromuscular disease. So, do you mind just by starting out by telling us a little bit about your diagnosis, and how it affects your daily life?

Jonathan Lengel: Yeah, of course, let's get right into it. So, I have a rare form of congenital muscular dystrophy called Ullrich, meaning that I have a progressive muscle weakness. So I have hyper flexible joints, I have contractures in both my arms and my feet. I've never really been able to run, jump, or climb stairs, or anything like that. I am an ambulatory wheelchair user, so I can still walk around in my house, and a few steps, and stuff like that. But in terms of long distance, I use my power wheelchair to get around.

Mindy Henderson: Gotcha.

Jonathan Lengel: When I was born the doctors told my parents that I wouldn't do certain things like write with a pencil, but here I am today, I write in cursive. And I've also been a piano player for over six years now.

Mindy Henderson: So, that's amazing. I actually saw a video online of you playing piano, and singing just the other day as I was kind of looking you up, and doing some research for the podcast. And it was very impressive.

So, there's so much to talk about with this film, and your acting career. What made you want to start acting?

Jonathan Lengel: Yeah, well, I've been singing and acting, and playing piano since I was very young. And growing up, I was very musically and theatrically inclined. And it was actually my kindergarten teacher who recommended to my parents that they put me in some sort of theater camp because I was distracting the class all day, these voice impersonation and singing all of these songs from other characters and other movies and stuff. So one year my parents signed me up for a summer theater camp and those turned into local theater shows and then improv troops, professional choruses. And then in March of 2020, I got a self or I got an email from an MDA camp counselor because she remembered that I was a singer. And I actually sang 13 for the talent show at MDA camp.

Mindy Henderson: Oh my gosh.

Jonathan Lengel: Yeah, I know it's a coincidence. And she sent me the self tape, like the casting call for Archie in March of 2020, the apocalyptic madness.

Mindy Henderson: Seriously.

Jonathan Lengel: Funny. Yeah, exactly. And yeah so, I sent in a tape and I think, I remember saying I was practically born to play Archie because I knew the show beforehand. I did it in one of my local theater productions. I wasn't Archie, but I was still very familiar with the show. So, that's why I said I was born to play Archie. And then, I didn't hear anything for about another six months. And then, I went through all of these rounds of auditions, and it just turned into this huge thing and it was just here I am.

Mindy Henderson: Wow. That is fantastic. So tell us a little bit about 13: The Musical. What's the storyline?

Jonathan Lengel: Yeah so, like you said, in the beginning, it's basically a Broadway show written in 2008 by Jason Robert Brown, and Robert Horn. And it's about the story of a boy in New York City named Evan Goldman. And his parents get divorced the year before his bar mitzvah. And he's really upset because he moves with his mom to Indiana, and he doesn't know anyone there, and it's kind of a new setting, and it's very upsetting for him. Along the way, he meets his two neighbors, Archie and Patrice, and becomes friends with them. But it basically is the coming of age story of all of the trials and tribulations of being a middle schooler in general, like being able to fit in, and first crushes, and kisses, and all the drama that comes with that.

Mindy Henderson: I love it.

So, tell me a little bit more about your specific character. You said you were meant to play him. So, who is Archie?

Jonathan Lengel: Yeah so, Archie is a very funny and confident guy. He's a boy who lives with muscular dystrophy. And he kind of tends to joke about his life circumstances sometimes. He's best friends with his neighbor, Patrice, not really in the cool kid crowd. But even so, he still is kind of swayed by the other kids in the group to do not so great things just to get what he wants, which is to kiss Kendra.

Mindy Henderson: Aww.

Jonathan Lengel: I feel like Archie's character, in general, is very similar to who I am in real life. I'm very funny, and confident, and all of that.

Mindy Henderson: Awesome. So, you mentioned a very long audition process. Tell us a little bit more about that. So, you sent in this tape initially. Did you have to go do readings and things? How many rounds of auditions were there?

Jonathan Lengel: There must have been like five or six.

Mindy Henderson: Wow.

Jonathan Lengel: Yeah. I mean, because the first one I got a call back, it was with the casting directors. They just wanted me to sing and do a reading. And then, I heard again from the music team.

And I actually had to sing for Jason Robert Brown, which was a lot of pressure because I had-

Mindy Henderson: No kidding?

Jonathan Lengel: One of his songs.

Mindy Henderson: Wow.

Jonathan Lengel: And after I sang it, he told me that he could really feel my joy when performing. And that felt so validating as a vocalist and a musician. And after I got off that call, I was so emotional because I couldn't believe that he said that. Because when I'm performing on stage or just, in general, I feel energized and it's kind of like my disability fades away, and I become me. You know what I mean? So, for him to say that was just so mind blowing for me.

And then, after that, we had a few more, I think that were similar to the one with the casting directors. And then, there was a final one, it was the final audition with all of these different kids. We had to do chemistry reads. And that's where I met some of my cast numbers. And right after that, we actually found out on the 13th of February, which I thought was fun, because it was 13. And the director, Tamara Davis, she told us just, "Look around because this is the cast of 13." And when I found out I was shocked, I couldn't believe it. I had to pinch myself because I thought I was dreaming and I needed to wake up. But it was just so surreal. And then, a month later, I find myself in quarantine in Toronto, Canada with my mom.

Mindy Henderson: Wow. Oh my goodness. How did that affect the production schedule and everything? Did the filming get pushed out at all?

Jonathan Lengel: No, it really didn't. Thankfully, everyone was healthy and-

Mindy Henderson: Good.

Jonathan Lengel: All that. I mean, we did have to quarantine for 14 days in our hotel without leaving. A bit difficult, but we did what we had to do to stay safe. But, at this point, Toronto is my second home and I love it so much. I love it all.

Mindy Henderson: That's amazing. You're based in New York, is that right?

Jonathan Lengel: Yeah. I'm in the New York Metro Area.

Mindy Henderson: Okay, fantastic.

I can't let this go. You said something a minute ago that literally took my breath away, and I want to go back to it. You said that when you act your disability kind of melts away. And can you talk more about that? Like what acting does for you?

Jonathan Lengel: Yeah, I mean, so when I was a little bit more ambulatory, I did a lot of local theater shows. And when I did those shows, I really became those characters I feel like. And this level of adrenaline just rushed through my veins. And I became that character. And I even danced on stage. I was a dancer, which was risky for me. So, I ended up taking a few dance classes to help correct it. And throughout the years choreographers, in general, especially like on 13 Jamal Sims and Nikki Anderson, they were all very helpful in integrating me into different numbers, even though I couldn't do all of the stunts that everybody else was doing, which I was really grateful for and privileged.

Mindy Henderson: That's amazing. I was actually gonna ask you about that too, because being a musical film, I've seen the clips from the film. And there's a lot of dancing and that sort of thing. So, I was curious to hear how they incorporated you into those scenes.

Jonathan Lengel: Right, exactly. So there's actually one scene, it's the finale, the bar mitzvah scene, and the song is Brand New You. And I'm like front and center towards the end dancing with two other characters. And I felt like that was really important to show because growing up, I never really saw any characters like me on film and television. So, being able to represent that, it really came full circle to me. And it kind of made me realize, "Oh wow, a younger kid who is just like me, is gonna see this and think that this is possible. And that means a lot to me.

Mindy Henderson: Seriously. I'm getting a little bit emotional hearing you talk. I didn't share it with you at the beginning. And I normally do, but I actually live with SMA myself. I live with spinal muscular atrophy. And I grew up not seeing anyone that looked like me on the big screen. And I'm so excited for you, and the opportunities that you're having, and the way that the world is changing.

And I have to say too a little bit about Netflix, because I feel like they are a company, who has really done more than some others to embrace the representation of disabled individuals.

Jonathan Lengel: Yeah, I mean, they were so dedicated to casting authentically. Obviously with me, all of us, we really are such a diverse and talented cast [inaudible 00:12:10].

Mindy Henderson: Oh, that's so great.

So, is there a big premier event that you're gearing up for?

Jonathan Lengel: Yeah, August 8th, there's a special screening at the Paris Theater in New York City where me and a few of my other cast members will be watching the movie, and showing the rest of the world what we worked so hard on for six months.

Mindy Henderson: That's so exciting. Is this your first film? Is the other work that you've done stage acting and other things?

Jonathan Lengel: Yeah so, this is my first professional project. I did a lot of, like I said, professional choruses, improv troops, a lot of [inaudible 00:12:48] shows at least like five or six of them throughout the years. But the last one I did was in January of 2020 right before the pandemic. I actually just performed live, it was my first time performing live in two years at the Disabled Down Center in New York City where I performed live, which I was really happy with because I haven't done that since like February of 2020. A really nice cabaret. And it showcased actors with disabilities. And we raised money for representation. And I felt like that was a really important cause to me.

Mindy Henderson: That's wonderful. So, clearly, we've talked a lot about the fact that you sing, and that you act. Which one is your favorite, if I made you pick one?

Jonathan Lengel: Yeah, I mean, I feel like I can't really do that because I've always called myself a musician, a vocalist, and an actor. And I feel like all three of those really speak to me in their own unique ways. So, I would just say to that question, yes.

Mindy Henderson: Yes. Okay, fair enough. I won't make you choose.

So, we mentioned another project, Theater camp, that you've got coming up. Tell us a little bit about that project and any other projects that you're working on right now.

Jonathan Lengel: Yeah so, I just wrapped theater camp with Ben Platt, Molly Gordon, and Noah Galvin. And I was so honored that they thought I was funny enough to be in their movie because they are just so hilarious. And I can't really talk much about it now, but just that you guys will really like it and stay tuned.

Mindy Henderson: Fantastic.

So, I am a complete novice when it comes to anything in the actor and entertainment world. Your bio mentioned that Will Farrell produced the musical comedy. So, does an actor interact a whole lot with the producer? Did you spend time with Will Farrell?

Jonathan Lengel: Not for this project no, I did not.

Mindy Henderson: Okay.

Jonathan Lengel: Maybe down the road, I'll see him at some point.

Mindy Henderson: There you go. I feel certain of it Because he's a brilliant comedian obviously.

Jonathan Lengel: I love him, yeah.

Mindy Henderson: Fantastic.

So what about school? Where does school fit into to all of this? How do you make that work when you're working on films?

Jonathan Lengel: Yeah so, when you're on set and you're under 18, you have a set tutor who helps understand your lessons and all that. I actually do an online school. And when you're on set, when you're a minor, you have a specific amount of hours that you need to do school that's required by SAG and all of that. So, once you get those done, then you should be able to film. So, it's kind of like a system like that where not only is there acting and your job, but there's also time for school as well.

So, online school is just so flexible for me, especially if I get a job, or if I have a self tape to do. And I can extend projects if I need to, that's very flexible all around.

Mindy Henderson: Okay. Well, glad to hear that you're continuing to make school a priority. That's good news. Your education is important.

So, I'm gonna get serious for just a second here. We hear a lot about needing more positive representation of individuals with disabilities in

the media, in Hollywood, all of that. What did it mean for you not just as an actor, but as an actor living with a disability to land this role?

Jonathan Lengel: Not only am I a person living with a disability, I'm also a sibling of a person with a disability. My sister is developmentally disabled, and she has a totally different disability than I do. So, I've always had to help her through a lot of things as well, especially while helping myself too. We've kind of developed this relationship of helping each other. If she needs help turning on the TV or like getting something for her then I help her with that. But then, if I drop something on the floor, she'll bend down and get it up for me so-

Mindy Henderson: Perfect.

Jonathan Lengel: Kind of become our own team. And we've really gotten with each other like that. And I feel, in general, I have been her voice and I kind of want to be the voice for all of those just kids and people, in general, who just don't have as much hope or confidence as I do because it's out there. And in the words of Walt Disney, "If you can dream it, you can do it."

Mindy Henderson: Well, said.

Jonathan Lengel: [inaudible 00:17:33] a dream.

Mindy Henderson: Yes you are. That's fantastic.

So, do you think that we're making progress in Hollywood in terms of inclusion, and what else would you like to see happen?

Jonathan Lengel: Well, I mean, I feel like we still have a long way to go. But in 2018, I remember when Ali Stroker won the Tony for Oklahoma that's when I felt like we really started to see change in this industry. But I definitely feel like we still have a long way to go, with that being said. But we're just getting started.

Mindy Henderson: Absolutely. And you sir, are paving the way.

So, what goals do you have for yourself for the future? And what do you want to do when you finish school? Do you want to keep acting or...?

Jonathan Lengel: Yeah, I mean, I love what I'm doing right now, and like I told you before, I do a lot of voice impersonations. And I'm a very funny person, so maybe one day I would like to host SNL possibly when I'm old enough.

Mindy Henderson: Okay.

Jonathan Lengel: Maybe at some point I love all things Disney, so maybe I will voice over Disney Pixar character because that's one of my dreams.

Mindy Henderson: I think you would be fantastic at that. And I've also had kind of a secret dream over the years to do voiceover work for a Disney movie or something, because what an opportunity. Maybe to be the voice of a superhero, or something. And trying to get out of your chair with your voice, you know what I mean?

Jonathan Lengel: Exactly. Yeah, that would be such a dream come true. And if they sang too, that would be like 100 out of 10.

Mindy Henderson: Definitely. Well, I see it in the cards for you.

So, for any other kids who may be listening, who may want to act, what advice would you give them? How do you get started?

Jonathan Lengel: Yeah, well, the biggest advice I can give you are three words, audition, audition, audition. Don't be afraid to put yourself out there, and make sure you love what you're doing because casting directors will definitely see that. And who knows what will happen? But if you put your mind to it, you can do it.

Mindy Henderson: Well, I think that is a perfect note to end on.

Jonathan, I can't thank you enough for being here today and for sharing your story. And we are all going to be looking for 13: The Musical on Netflix on August 12th. And just wish you all the success in the future. I think there are great things to come for you.

Jonathan Lengel: Thank you so much, Mindy. Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it.

Mindy Henderson: Thank you for listening. For more information about the guests you heard from today, go check them out at mda.org/podcast. And to learn more about the Muscular Dystrophy Association, the services we provide, how you can get involved, and to subscribe to Quest Magazine, or to Quest Newsletter, please go to mda.org/quest.

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