

Jennie Bastian, founder of Communication

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MK: Hello and welcome to *THE CHILD AND ITS ENEMIES*, a podcast about queer and neurodivergent kids living out anarchy and youth liberation.

Here at *THE CHILD AND ITS ENEMIES* we believe that youth autonomy is not only crucial to queer and trans liberation, but to anarchy itself. Governance is inherently based on projecting linear narratives of time and Development and gender onto our necessarily asynchronous and atemporal queer lives, and youth and teens are at the center of this form of oppression.

Our goal with the podcast is to create a space by and for youth that challenges all forms of control and inspires us to create queered, feral, *ageless* networks of care.

I'm your host, mk zariel; I'm fifteen years old, and I'm the youth correspondent at the Anarchist Review of Books, author of the blog Debate Me Bro, and organizer of some all-ages queer spaces in my city and online. i've organized with anarchist archives, all-ages punk venues, feminist mutual aid collectives, zine distros, neurodivergent art spaces, trans media projects, teenage anarchist support groups, the occasional political campaign, and oh so many trans meetups. With me today is JENNIE BASTIAN, abolitionist artist and founder of Communication!

Jennie: My pronouns are she/her. I have organized formally and informally with other artists as Equity for Artists, as well as under the umbrella of Communication. I have generally stayed away from organizing in any formal with any political party, as I don't feel any of them fully represent me. In my art practice and my parenting I believe in centering the most vulnerable and sharing power to achieve equity and connection. I'm also a mom to a 5 year old.

MK: So, you founded the all-ages and sober punk venue and local art space Communication in WI, correct?

Jennie: Yes! I cofounded Communication in spring of 2018 with three other people. Two were musicians, one an artist and vintage seller.

MK: What led you to make this an all-ages space? Like, were you into art and punk music, or vintage stuff, or other stuff like that, as a kid and teen?

Jennie: I was fortunate to attend Milwaukee High School of the Arts in the 1990s, which was an incredible place to learn at that time. It was before arts funding, as well as education funding, was gutted in Wisconsin. I told my parents I wanted to be an artist when I was 3 years old, and it never changed. I got a camera when I was 12 and that's still my primary mode of making. I was interested in zines and Riot Grrl culture, trading mix tapes, thrifting, and dressing the opposite way most of the "cool" teens dressed.

MK: Ooh, Riot Grrl means the world to me too! How do you think that genre and subculture affected your views on youth liberation?

Jennie: I don't think I understood myself as being a part of any liberation movement in my youth, since that wasn't a conversation I was really allowed to have in my home. But having exposure to zines and subcultures at a young age, as well as attending integrated schools and learning how difference can be challenging AND positive, set me up to be very, very receptive to youth liberation once I spied it. It felt absolutely obvious to me that young people should have power and freedom.

MK: Did you have access to all-ages, queer-inclusive, spaces for your interests in art and music? Or were you aware of other teenagers who were involved?

Jennie: I didn't actually have access to spaces like that often since I lived in the rural suburbs and was bused into the city for school, but I knew about a lot of spaces where friends of mine went to see music and hang out. I didn't know about a lot of spaces that were SOBER though, and that is honestly why I didn't try harder to go. I never liked feeling like something weird would happen and I might not feel safe. Raves were not my thing because of all the drugs and house shows had too much sexual harassment. I was real fastidious about being in control of my surroundings.

MK: Yeah, being a teenager isolated from urban centers can make organizing that much harder—how would you say you coped with that? And how do you think today's online organizing might change that?

Jennie: I had a lot of friends who had cars and were kind enough to give me rides to spend time together, which helped a bit! I also just made a lot of art by myself at home and read alllll the time. I wish I had been able to connect more about why I was making art, to help myself feel less alone, but I also think the internet could have been a really challenging place for me at that age (it still is now!). I also spent more time with nature as a young person - which is a different kind of sense of community. I think there is a lot more accessibility in how teens can connect with each other online, and if they're in the right discord channel or forum, it probably helps many of them feel less alone. I'm glad teens can choose to learn so much from the internet about queer history, subcultures, art, all the things that can be harder to find in small towns or isolated settings.

SPROUT: What sort of differences in use pattern and meaning generation do you find between adults and kids when in the online organizing space. I feel many more adults fall prey to the misinfo and disinfo that goes around, whereas kids have a better sense of media literacy. Can you speak on this?

Jennie: I think that many adults trust their government to make "good" choices for them, and young people have not yet been indoctrinated into that belief, so they are more easily able to resist falling under the spell of fear of the other, and can see the patterns of misinformation as they spread. It also seems to me that there is more likelihood of neurodivergent youth (and ND adults) being able to see through the veil of mainstream media and status quo BS, because they quite literally have stronger pattern recognition!

MK: So for our listeners, can you tell me more about Communication? What kind of a venue is it?

Jennie: Communication is a volunteer run, nonprofit, sober, all-ages, arts and music venue. We have a shop selling the work of around 100 local artists, a stage for local music and other events, a membership based risograph print collective, arts programming that includes work-

shops & exhibitions, and extensive partnerships throughout our community. We are a Safe(r) Space and have what we call an Ethical Booking Policy.

Sprout: Tell me more about this Ethical booking Policy.

Jennie: We developed the ethical booking policy as a confidential process for community members to bring things to our attention, as well as a way to assure that there is a safe process for the accused person to have space to share their experience. We rely on transformative justice tools and facilitation to lead this process. We have not had to use it much in the past few years, but it was used several times the first year or two we were open.

MK: What makes Communication so inclusive for teens?

Jennie: We want young people to have power in the space. Being an all-ages, Safe(r) Space was a core piece of our founding mission, as is lifting up any marginalized individual. It is so common that children and young people in general are not given agency or put in positions where they can have control over their lives and surroundings - children truly are an oppressed group. At Communication, we put as many structures in place as possible to assure that young people are truly safe, and can contribute as much as any adult to performing, arts programming and volunteering. We also encourage teens to sell artwork in our shop!

MK: What have your experiences with this awesome venue taught you about youth liberation? And more broadly, what would you say youth liberation means to you?

Jennie: Youth liberation means believing young people when they say what they need, and giving it to them whenever possible. It means that my needs are not the only needs I'm thinking about as a parent, and that I do not always know better than my child what she needs or what is "good" for her. It means I listen more than I tell. And that I have very fully reframed my idea of what school, life goals and any social norms might look like for her and any other child I love and support. It also means that I support ALL children in my community, especially those more vulnerable than my own, and I teach her how to use her privilege to do the same.

MK: This is such an interesting point—parenting can be a huge part of adult accompliceship to youth and teens. What do you think liberatory parenting can or should look like?

Jennie: Ooh that is such a good question. I think some parts of liberatory parenting might look small on the outside, like never forcing or bargaining with my child to eat things she doesn't want to because I know that can lead to a troubling relationship to food and not trusting her own body and mind. From the outside to many other parents, it looks like a silly and small choice! But it feels very important to me. Something bigger that it could look like is giving a child agency in how they spend their time. Is school a priority? Is achievement? Do they have to go to any kind of traditional school or defer to adults in educational settings? These are all questions I'm asking myself regularly, and want to have my child take part in answering. More broadly, it should look like centering the needs, wants and safety of the child rather than the parent.

MK: What is your relationship to anarchy like as a trans- and youth- liberationist organizer?

Jennie: I haven't had a strong relationship to anarchy (or any organized movement) BUT I have discovered over the past ten years that my values align much more with anarchy than with any other social or political movement. I'm into it!

MK: What advice would you have for youth and teens who want to create art or music, or get into their local art scene? Or, what would have been useful for you when you were younger?

Jennie: As a an undiagnosed autistic teen, I had a couple of opportunities to have an artist mentor, but I was too scared and intimidated to actually follow through with it. I didn't understand HOW to make those things happen or what social process it took. Now, with the perspec-

tive of time, I would encourage teens to 1. trust themselves, their intuition about what adults and spaces are safe to be around and help them reach their goals. 2. Don't be too intimidated by achievement! You aren't less than anyone, no matter their age or pedigree. Going to art school is not any more impressive than making art in your bedroom. 3. find your people online OR in person. If there isn't a space like Communication in your town, there will likely be one online! 4. Don't subscribe to scarcity mindset. This divides artists and performers and keeps them begging for scraps rather than building coalitions to demand more from the structures that disperse opportunities/compensation. 5. Finally, if there is an adult that you think has good ideas or makes interesting art/music, reach out to them! See if they have time for mentorship or offering support. You might be surprised.

SPROUT: Any last comments or things you want to cover that we didnt get to today?

Jennie: I am just so glad that young people are having these conversations, and not simply accepting that the world and their lives have to be the way those "in charge" say they have to. Thank you for including me as a part of this conversation!

MK: Shameless plugs?

Jennie: (your answer) I have some work in an exhibition about chronic illness and disability at the Rochester Art Center (in Rochester, MN), and will have a solo exhibition at Arts + Literature Laboratory in Madison, WI in January 2025. You can see my work at <http://jenniferbastian.com> and follow me on IG @jenniebee. Learn more about Communication at <https://communication-madison.com/> !

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