

Episode Title: Lessons From A Chair

Guest: Ryan Rae Harbuck

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Ryan Rae Harbuck: I remember being in the hospital early on thinking, 'oh, I need to ask everybody what happened,' because that's what you do when you're in the hospital. But at some level, I already knew; I already knew that my boyfriend had died, I knew that everybody was injured, I knew that I couldn't walk. But I remember having that sort of almost defining moment of, 'oh shoot, I need to ask because that's what you do when you're in this situation.' That's what I saw in the movies one time or whatever.

Jackie MacDougall: But you knew instinctively what had happened.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Yeah.

Jackie MacDougall: A paralyzing car accident in her teens, left Ryan Rae Harbuck with a new life to build. In her book, *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a Chair*, Ryan shares a poignant message, 'everyone has a chair'. That thing we are bound to or unwillingly defines you, an element that makes you different from the rest; one that you have little choice in the matter, but it does not mean life is without choices.

I'm Jackie MacDougall, and this is The Grown-Ass Woman's Guide.

Ryan Rae Harbuck is not one to look back, even after suffering a spinal cord injury and experiencing some devastating challenges along the way; she became a swim coach, a high school teacher. She traveled to India for experimental stem cell treatment. She fought hard to make the Paralympic swim team. And, she even became a mom. Here is her story.

So, you were 16 years old, you were in a car with friends coming home from a dance.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Yes, it was one of those 'girls ask boys dances', and I had a boyfriend at the time and I really wanted to go. And, he went to a different high school. So really, my whole, like, plan that I had ironed out was I was on this girls' swim team. So, I had two of my girlfriends ask two of his boyfriends that went to his school. I just thought this was like the most perfect thing, the most magical evening.

We went to the dance and then on our way back, we decided to meet another group and go midnight bowling. And, nobody really knows what happened. I have actually zero memory of that night; I don't remember being at the dance, I don't remember taking pictures out in front of our car, I don't remember anything.

Your brain sort of does that when you experience something really traumatic, it just sort of shuts off that memory I think to preserve you a little bit, let you move on. And, I feel pretty blessed for that because as I sit here and I talk to you, I'm not very emotionally tied to it. It's this story that I've been told and passed down for generations, sort of. And so, I'm thankful that I do have my mind that sort of protected me that night.

I know from paramedics and the people that were also involved, that the car ended up flipping on the highway across a grass median and hitting a car head-on. And, the driver of that car was killed instantly. My boyfriend was killed instantly, and everybody else in our car was injured one way or another.

There were two people that sustained traumatic brain injuries. I would take a spinal cord injury any day over a traumatic brain injury, because if you injure your brain, there's no guarantee that you will get the function back.

And, it could be simple things like walking, talking, eating, but it's also things like dealing with anxiety or a temperament issue. And, I saw all of that first-hand watching my two friends recover. We were in a Suburban. So, I was in the backseat of the Suburban and I broke through the glass. The paramedics estimated that I landed about 75 feet from the car.

And so, not only did I severely break my spinal column, I didn't actually tear my spinal cord, but I pulled it just enough to damage it. But I also had severe road rash. I broke both my legs, both my arms. I wasn't breathing, I had collapsed my lungs. And so, when the paramedics got to me, they said they didn't really know if I had a lot left in me if it was viable to get me to the hospital. And so, they just did their best to just get me there.

They didn't really have a lot of things to do to keep me alive other than just get me to the hospital. I know once I got there, my back was not the first thing that they needed to fix. I had like a seven-hour surgery on my legs before they would even do surgery to reset my spine.

And, I spent about a month in the ICU unit and I probably remember about half of it, to be honest. I think they kept me pretty sedated, and I was hooked up to a ventilator machine and I couldn't really do a lot. I had the road rash that had to get redressed every day.

Jackie MacDougall: Ryan actually credits her age for helping her move forward in the months and years ahead.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: I think being a teenager, being kind of like a naive kid who just wanted to be like everybody else, I think that really aided to my recovery because the second that I was well enough, I just wanted; 'how do I get to the mall with my friends? How do I go sit in a movie theater seat? How do I have a sleepover,' all these things.

Those were the things that were important to me. I didn't let myself think too much about what I couldn't do. It was, how do I get back to doing those things that I was doing before?

Jackie MacDougall: What a blessing to be a teenager in one way, in that, they live in the moment. [laughs]

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Yeah, no. I've always thought that. I've always thought that had served me really well.

Jackie MacDougall: Yeah. Not a lot of, like, thinking about the future, wondering how things are going to look; but just, 'how do I go to the movies?'

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Right. Well, and I think that kids too, they don't know how to wallow; they don't know how to look into the past and try to linger there. And so, I didn't. [laughs]

Jackie MacDougall: What was your environment like while you're going through all this, your family, your friends; what did it look like around you?

Ryan Rae Harbuck: I've always said that my accident was worse for everybody else (my family, my friends) than me. Because if you think about somebody experiencing something traumatic or some sort of illness or trauma, it's always hard to watch that because you are so helpless, you have no control over it. And so, I think that it really, really hit hard to my family and friends in a way that I never felt.

It's really been an eye-opening experience since my book has come out. I've had a lot of people from that time period of my life, come out and talk to me. A lot of kids that I went to high school with, I've connected with. I feel so shameful that I never thought about this, but I never thought about what it was like to be the kid that sat next to me in French class when I didn't show up on Monday, or my teammates on the swim team that I swam in the lane with when I didn't come to practice that following Monday.

And so, it's been a really cathartic experience to be able to step in the footprints of other people that had their own grieving to do. They weren't paralyzed. They weren't in a car accident. They weren't necessarily my best friend or even my friend, but there was a lot of grief over that accident and what had happened to each of us.

Jackie MacDougall: Right. How do you think about that? Because on the one hand, I can imagine, like, it's not their story, right? And so, sometimes we go through something that isn't really even about us, right? We go through our own journeys, and our own grief, and our own stress. So, I can imagine as a 16-year-old or even a 36-year-old, you're like, 'it's not your story, get over it.' But on the flip side, how interesting to know that your personal experience and the experience of several other teenagers made such a ripple effect on the community and beyond?

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Yeah, absolutely. And, I would say that's something that I'm just now really understanding, having been reconnected with some of these kids from my past that I was or wasn't even considered a friend of. And, I think there is a little bit of like, 'Hey, this didn't happen to you.' But I think I'm old enough, I'm wise enough, I'm mature enough because it did happen to them.

You know, it's everybody's life and how everybody lives their lives and what their life is worth is all based on how you perceive it. And so, my perspective of my world is my own reality. And so is that kid that sat next to me in French class, their life was changed forever for something that didn't even happen to them.

But I guarantee you that they thought about getting in the car a little bit safer next time, or what have you. Yes, it wasn't their story, but it is their story because that's their own perspective of their reality. Right?

Jackie MacDougall: Yeah, I can appreciate that. And, I think it's very generous of you to give people the space and grace to have their own experience. And, in some ways, does it make it less isolating that other people had their own process to go through as well?

Ryan Rae Harbuck: I think it's both. I think it's less isolating because I understand that it was impactful to somebody other than myself, but there's also a piece that makes it just a little bit more isolating because nobody actually knows how I feel. It's sort of twofold in that same notion.

Jackie MacDougall: Yeah. I have a friend whose brother was murdered in a very public, probably the most public case of our time. And, everybody wants to tell her where they were when they heard.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Yes.

Jackie MacDougall: It's really fascinating to watch because it's her life, her brother, her story. And yet, similar in that everybody else wants to tell you, like, 'this is where I was, this is what happened.' I don't even have a take on it other than the fact that it's so fascinating to have a personal experience that others see as theirs.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Right. I think that on some level, it's human nature.

Jackie MacDougall: Yeah.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: It's a way to try to connect with another individual. And, I've seen that a million times over just being in a wheelchair. I'm a very visible disability. I go into a room and I am noticed very easily. There's countless amount of times when I've had somebody come up to me-- Like, one time I broke my leg and it's just like, 'oh, okay, cool. It's not life experience.'

Jackie MacDougall: Did you?

[laughter]

Jackie MacDougall: Right.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: But I've learned through so many years of that, that's somebody's way of trying to connect; and whether it's appropriate or not, that's not me to say.

[laughs]

Jackie MacDougall: After her accident, it was weeks and weeks before Ryan could even lift her head up, nevermind, sit up in bed.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: So, I was in the ICU unit for about a month. Then they moved me to a multi-trauma unit. I was there for about another month until I was able to get off the ventilator machine. And, they were able to start doing a little bit of physical therapy so that I could even just sit up in bed. It's unreal. If you haven't spent any time in a hospital, after laying completely flat in bed for a month, I couldn't even lift my own neck off the pillow.

Jackie MacDougall: Wow.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: And, I was that weak. And then, I was expected to learn how to use a wheelchair and push myself around and also be able to do things like lift my leg up off the bed. And, that was too heavy for me. I remember that; just being like, 'this is insane, how can I not lift my own leg up?'

Jackie MacDougall: Right.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: And so, then after I was well enough, I went to a rehab facility that's designed specifically for spinal cord injuries and brain injuries. And I really, really lucked out in that regard because I went to one of the best facilities in the country. And, it was about five miles from our house. That was where I really learned, it sounds kind of silly, but I like learned how to be in a wheelchair.

I learned how to do wheelies, and go up curbs, and open doors, and get dressed, and all the things that are going to be a necessary part of life. It was such a fantastic experience. But at the same time, it's not real-life being in the hospital. You know, I talk in my book about, I was in this really fancy apartment style room that had like pictures on the wall and a table lamp and how that really didn't mean anything because I was still in a hospital, and there's still beeping machines.

And, there was still somebody going to wake me up at five o'clock in the morning to help me get dressed. And so, it wasn't until I actually got out of the hospital and made a lot of mistakes or tried things that didn't work that I really, really learned like, 'oh, okay, this is what it's like to not be able to use your legs or to have a wheelchair or to be different.'

Jackie MacDougall: Right, because you don't have all that support 24/7. So, what was that like? You're still a teenager. You're getting back to "real-life". How do you do that after everything you had been through?

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Like I said, I think being a teenager really helped because I remember getting home and just, 'how do I get in my friend's car? How do I learn to drive a car myself? How do I go back to the swimming pool?' All of these things were the things that I focused on. And so, I also think being an athlete, I had always been a swimmer. I understood the value of practicing to get better at something.

And so, I spent a lot of time practicing and practicing things like putting pants on or practicing things like opening a door until it worked. Looking back, I didn't give myself a lot of time to do anything else. I didn't give myself a lot of time to think about what I have lost or what I couldn't do. My mind was very set on, just do. Even with swimming that following year, signed up to be on the girls' swim team.

And, I'm sure there were coaches and parents that were freaking out, 'what is she thinking? What is she going to do?' But in my head, there wasn't any other option. Like, what are you talking about? That's what I always did. And so, I was going to do it and it was just, I was going to figure it out.

And, swimming is something that is always, I think, saved me in the end. And, I talk a lot about swimming in my book. I think it was the first experience I did that I could tie my old life with my new life. It took me several years though, and a lot of energy and upset to realize that, 'yeah, I could still swim and I could still compete and I could still feel really accomplished and get a good workout and whatever,' but it was going to be different.

And, I knew it right away. I knew when I got back into the pool and my body was different and my legs dragged behind me. Like I knew it was different, but I fought it. And, I continued to try to swim in the same way that I did beforehand when my legs worked. And, in swimming, drag is a big thing. And so, my legs were just dragging behind me.

And it was really, really hard, really difficult. It felt like somebody was holding onto me, but I just kind of kept doing what I always knew and didn't really let myself alter it. And, it wasn't until several years later in the swimming pool when I actually let myself, 'well, maybe if I changed my stroke slightly and pulled closer to my body.'

And, once I was able to sort of connect that piece, I was able to swim faster. I was able to exert less energy. I was able to feel more accomplished and it became such a wonderful metaphor that I was willing to continue to do the thing I loved, but maybe I let myself change it just a little bit to make it more suited for who I am today, it's going to work out better.

Jackie MacDougall: Oh, that is so powerful, because how many times do we do that in our lives? Right? We just keep doing the same thing, the same thing, the same thing, because it may have worked at one point.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Right.

Jackie MacDougall: No regard for the fact that like just tweak it ever so slightly or change the angle or look at it from a new perspective, and it might be more aligned with who you are today. That's so good.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Absolutely.

Jackie MacDougall: That's gold right there.

[laughter]

Jackie MacDougall: It sounds like you were a pretty tenacious, resilient teenager. You know, you say that you're an introvert. All of this attention must be very difficult. [laughs]

Ryan Rae Harbuck: It started early on, that attention. And so, I had to learn how to deal with it.

Jackie MacDougall: How do you feel that your experience, your life, your ability to just keep going, has it changed who you are or has it just elevated who you are?

Ryan Rae Harbuck: I'm never one to take a lot of credit for myself or who I am or take compliments very well. I've never been that way. And, I've never really seen myself as tenacious or brave. I've been called brave a lot lately, which is kind of, it makes me feel funny, [laughs] but I think that I have always just had a forward thought understanding life's value. And perhaps, that was from my accident, as I understood that life is fleeting.

And, if you don't take hold of every moment, your moment, then you're really missing out, and you're really not serving anybody any justice. I'm not really certain what I thought before my accident, and if I thought about the way that you would live your life or the power that you hold within yourself. But I think that I must have had some piece of that in me to be able to just kind of keep going

Jackie MacDougall: And keep going, she did. Ryan's passion and dedication for working with young people, inspired her professional goals.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: As I've grown, I've always chosen careers and jobs that I could work with kids. I learned that I really enjoyed sharing my stories and trying to offer my comfort and lessons to younger people. I was a high school teacher for nine years, and I've been a swim coach for the last 25 years.

Jackie MacDougall: Wow.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: I think that those jobs have always just been sort of a front for me, being able to connect with somebody; maybe I can help this person today, maybe I can be the person to listen to them or to offer them the right door to open or what have you. I think that I've always sort of just been me, but in the last couple months, doing podcasts and talking about my book, people are telling me that I'm not like everybody else, that I'm not necessarily normal.

And, I'm holding that with me right now. I've never really thought that I was extraordinary. And, I've never really thought that the way that I looked at the world was better or worse than anybody else's. But I do think that I have a lot of strong outlooks on the way that I do things and the way that I live my life. And, I try my best to offer positivity and lessons to those who want to listen. [laughs]

Jackie MacDougall: Yeah, absolutely. Well, if you haven't thought that you're extraordinary, I'm here to tell you, you are, just in case you weren't told today. Talk to me a little bit about grief. Do you find that grief will pop up on occasion in regards to your life or your accident or--?

Ryan Rae Harbuck: No, totally. I do remember moments, mostly in college, people probably experience grief in college, no matter what, but I remember, you know, like, 'why can't I go up those stairs? Why can't I just have things a little bit easier?' And, I think that my moments of grief have usually been founded by issues around my health, not necessarily issues around me walking or not. I think that I've reconciled some in terms of being able to walk in what sort of a life does that offer to me.

And, I learned that I don't think that it changes a ton, but just being a paraplegic, there are a lot of extra things that go on with your body and your health that don't necessarily have anything to do with you walking. And, I've had several instances where I've been hospitalized, and had either like an infection or wound or something that didn't heal.

That's where I've really been tested in my life. When I've been at my worst, it's when I didn't have my health. I am a strong believer that if you don't have your health, you don't actually have anything. Like, it doesn't matter if you have 12 Ferraris and a giant mansion, it doesn't matter if you can't actually live your life.

I was probably in my late 20s, I was teaching full time high school, I was coaching full time; I developed a bed sore from sitting all the time and not being able to feel, that actually put me in bed for eight months.

Jackie MacDougall: Wow.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: I had to completely quit my jobs. I was forced literally to lie in my bed. I lived in a single-family home, up in the mountains by myself at the time. And so, I was very, very isolated during that time. This wound was something that just sort of like took hold. And, a lot of times they're sneaky. They develop from the inside-out.

And so, by the time I was aware of it, it was sort of like too late. I had like a home healthcare nurse that would come over every, probably three days and change bandages and just like check in on me. But other than that, I laid in bed by myself for eight months.

That was like some of the worst grief, the worst depression I've had because all of a sudden, I wasn't living anymore. I would have people, friends come over and visit. In my book, I talk about them bringing over pity muffins and how that doesn't change things. And, it makes it worse. But at the same token, it's moments like that, that can change things to make them the best of your best.

During that time, sort of like the background of the story is the wound wouldn't heal, and they didn't really know why. They finally realized that, at some point, I had chipped off a piece of my pelvic bone, and it had grown space and bacteria around it. And so, it was really insides. So, I had to have an additional surgery, and it was like a plastic surgery to cover and clean up that area.

And so, once I had that, it was like two more months, and then I was able to get up and sort of join the living again. But towards the end of that, I realized that every night I went to bed and I dreamt about swimming, it was like my happy time. You know, I was like, 'oh, is it bedtime yet? I'm really ready to go to bed. Six o'clock, sure, that's good. I'll dream about swimming.'

And so, finally when I deemed myself as well enough to, when I could actually sit back in my chair for a little bit, I started to do these little secret swimming sessions where I would drive myself to the Rec center. I wasn't supposed to be out of bed, but I figured if I'm in the pool, there's no pressure, I'm fine. So, I started doing these little swimming sessions. First one was probably 20 minutes.

And then like 25 minutes, it was just all I could handle, but it was so freeing. And it was just like, I had just rejuvenated my soul. And, very early on, during one of those

swimming sessions, I realized that I had a lot of regret about my swimming career, my personal swimming career, and that I felt that I always held myself back and that I never really tried and gave myself 100% to see what would happen.

I was always very worried, I think, that I would fail. And so, I never tried hard enough to be able to fail. There was one early morning swim that I promised myself that I would try to compete again for myself in Paralympic swimming and see how far it took me. I would give 100% of myself and use it as a little test to see, and maybe encourage some of my students, like, I'm going to show you, I'm going to be the poster child here.

And, I'm going to give myself 100% of my energy devoted to this one thing and let's see what happens. And so, I trained solidly for two years, my goal to make the Paralympic team. And, this was me getting up at 3:30 every morning to go swim before I taught a full day of class, and then coached after that. I look back and I'm like, that was insane, how did I do that?'

[laughter]

Ryan Rae Harbuck: I thought it was much to me that there was no other way. I trained really hard. I flew to Canada and to California and all over just to compete in these small meets because in the world of Paralympics swimming, there's not a lot of meets. There's not a lot of competition because a very small group of individuals that are doing this. I was doing this all on my own dime, and I was enjoying every minute of it.

And, it wasn't until I got to the actual Paralympic trials, I did well enough to make it to the trials that year. And, I had a fantastic meet, I dropped time, I did really well; I was very proud of myself, but I didn't make the team. I remember the moment they sent everybody into this little conference room, and they just called all the names and my name wasn't called.

And, I had done all of this work and I had set my sights for this day, but I never took the time to figure out what happens after that day. What happens if I don't make this team, am I going to implode? You know, I have no idea. And, my best friend, she always came on these trips with me, and we named her my trainer. So, she had to go everywhere with me.

And, I remember we got into our rental car and I'm like, 'am I going to cry? What's going to happen now?' And, I just sat there, and I was just content. I was proud of myself because I knew that I had done that thing. I had put 100% of myself. I had no regrets. I wouldn't have changed anything. I didn't want to do anything differently, and the result was fine. I was actually fine with it.

Not to mention the night before, at the very last night of the meet, I had stopped to get a drink of water at the water fountain right before my last event. And, I had this brief conversation with one of the coaches on deck, and we exchanged email addresses to talk about Paralympic stuff and he was new to coaching.

And, I was going to give him my insider tips. We connected very briefly, but you know, sometimes you don't realize what is in front of you or what you really want or what the world has for you, the universe is speaking to you. And gosh, three months after I met this guy, we were married. [laughs]

Jackie MacDougall: Wow, amazing.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: So, you know, sometimes you think you have it all figured out; and you think that your goal and your end-project is this one thing, and then it ends up being something entirely different for you.

Jackie MacDougall: Right. And, the thing is you could have just been that person who never did try. You could have said, 'Hey, I've done a lot in my life. I'm pretty resilient. And I'm tenacious, and I'm extraordinary in all these things. And, the Olympics, that's just not that thing I'm going to go for.' And, you could have just settled, and you didn't, you did that work. Especially after those eight months in bed and another surgery and all of that, like you had every excuse, it was offered up to you on a platter.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: That's true.

Jackie MacDougall: And, you didn't take it and you went for it. I can imagine feeling disappointed, but even more so, it makes sense that you were content, you knew that you did, you actually did the thing that was required to find the success. It really hit me when you said, I didn't even go so far to do the thing to be able to fail.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: [laughs] Yeah. Yeah.

Jackie MacDougall: I think that often is something that just stops us all, right? I didn't do that thing, but you could have, or maybe you won't; but if you don't try, if you don't put yourself out there, if you don't make that effort, how will you ever know?

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Well, and it is so true when they say that it's about the journey and not about destination. And maybe, my life would've been different had I made the Paralympic team, but maybe it wouldn't. And, I think looking back on all of those early morning swims and those crazy travel meets, just me being able to really do the thing, that one thing that I felt like I still regretted and check that off my list, that is way more important.

Jackie MacDougall: Yeah. And, you met your husband.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: That's true.

Jackie MacDougall: You wouldn't have those beautiful babies. So, tell me a little bit about that. Being in the chair, getting pregnant twice, right? What kind of difficulties did you encounter there - physical, mental, emotional?

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Sure. I've always sort of lived my life where I learn as I go. You know, I've probably done some things that were risky or challenging because I was like, 'I'm just going to do this, and then I will see what happens afterwards.' And getting pregnant, just sort of realizing that, 'oh, wait, it's not just me.' Like, if I'm going to go bounce down this curb, I'm bouncing a baby down this curb too; or when I'm going to go swim in this 68-degree water, that's not just me anymore.

And, that was sort of the first realization of being pregnant; I need to figure out how to take care of this baby inside of me. I've always been a planner to the best of my ability and want to know all the things. I like to do research. And so, when I first became pregnant, we, my husband and I, we did a lot of research about people that were paralyzed and had babies.

And, there wasn't a lot of stuff to be found out, which made me a little bit nervous. I had a good OB. However, she had a lot of faith in me that I just didn't have back and kept telling me like, 'you know your body so well, you're just going to know when you're in

labor, if you're going to go full term, it's going to be fine.' I wasn't so sure. I had a lot of anxiety, especially with that first baby, because I just really didn't know.

I didn't know, was going to happen. Being pregnant and being in a wheelchair was just hard too, having the extra weight to push around. And then, also, as my belly grew, I used that space between my chest and my lap to lean forward, to go up hills and give myself an extra boost. And so, you know, just mobility became kind of a nightmare. [laughs]

With my first born, I basically just sort of tried to trust the universe and what was going to happen and just hope for the best. Although I kept telling my OB, like, 'I think I'm a little nervous. I don't really know.' We were still living up in the mountains at the time, so we weren't really close to a hospital. And so, she agreed. And I would go in, I think, once a week and get weekly checkups.

And, there was one checkup at my 38th week on the day my husband and I went and coached a morning practice. And then, we went together to the appointment and having the same conversation over again about how I know my body so well, I'm just going to know I'm going to go full term and blah, blah, blah.

And then, my OB says, "Well, let me just check. Let me just check your cervix and see if it's dilated at all." And, I will never forget her face. She stands up and says, "I feel hair. You need to go to the hospital."

Jackie MacDougall: Oh my God. [laughs]

Ryan Rae Harbuck: At some point, my water had broken. I didn't know. I was dilated enough. I was in labor and I needed to go to the hospital.

Jackie MacDougall: Wow.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Luckily, we made it to hospital just fine. Got hooked up to all the monitors. And, I will tell you hooked up to the monitor, that's told me I was having a contraction, I couldn't tell. There was nothing about feeling on the inside or anything that told me that I was in labor.

Luckily, the universe was on my side and my baby was born just a few hours after we got there almost completely naturally, at the very end, his blood pressure dropped so

they had to use a vacuum to help get him out a little bit. I was able to somehow connect my body and my brain well enough to push, you know, and he was a healthy baby boy.

We waited nearly five years before I was ready to have another child. I think I had a hard time with feeling like I had enough love to give to somebody else. And, it was sort of like, why would I want another child? And then, all of a sudden, it turned into, why wouldn't I want another child? Right? [laughs]

Jackie MacDougall: That is relatable right there.

[laughter]

Ryan Rae Harbuck: And so, then we did get pregnant again, and gosh, darn it, the entire time, I had told myself, 'I don't feel contractions. I don't know I'm in labor, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.' So, the same OB, we had these conversations, she finally agreed that she would induce me on the first day of my 39th week. And I felt like, 'okay, well, I guess that's all I'm going to get.

So, we'll just do that.' It was the entire day before my induction, I kept having this like weird side pain and that little baby liked to move all around in kind of weird spots. I just kind of chalked it up to that, telling my husband like, 'oh, isn't that funny?'

We went and coached an entire swim meet that night, had dinner. And then, the next morning I woke up for my induction and I told him to stay home because I was like, 'I've read that these things take forever. I'll just tell you once I get settled.' And so, I go to the hospital by myself and I'm talking to--

Jackie MacDougall: You drove yourself to the hospital?

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Oh yeah. Yeah.

[laughter]

Ryan Rae Harbuck: I was still feeling this weird pain and now I kind of felt it in my teeth and thought that was strange. But I still just was like, 'well, I don't feel contraction, so it's not a big deal.' And, got to the hospital, checked in. They hooked me up to the monitor and I'm telling the nurse about this weird side pain. And she said, "You're an active labor." And, he was born two hours later.

Jackie MacDougall: Wow. [laughs] Wow.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: I was so mad because I had tricked myself that time. Like I actually did feel it; yet, I told myself it wasn't.

Jackie MacDougall: Right. I mean, so much the universe is like, 'all right, I'm going to shake your teeth a little bit,' and you still won't pay attention. [laughs]

Ryan Rae Harbuck: We'll just make sure that this happens okay. You know, I was very blessed to be able to be in a position where I could get to the hospital, and somebody could help tell me that I was in labor. [laughs]

Jackie MacDougall: Yeah. Oh my gosh. And so, now, you have these two beautiful boys, right? Both boys.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: They're both boys.

Jackie MacDougall: I think back-- So, I have three teenage boys.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Okay.

Jackie MacDougall: A mom's greatest fear is for their safety, especially as teenagers. So, I can't even imagine what your parents went through.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Sure.

Jackie MacDougall: Do you think that your experience has any impact on the level of fear that you parent with? Or as they become teenagers, do you think it's an isolated incident or do you think it adds or subtracts from the feelings you have about motherhood?

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Being in a car is always a high-energy experience for myself, whether I actually acknowledge it or not. And so, I think that whether I wanted to or not, I probably have already instilled a little bit of a fear factor into both of my children about driving and being in a car.

My oldest is eight and he knows that I was in a car accident and sort of understands that that's why I'm in a wheelchair, but I don't know to the extent that it sits with him. It's this very fascinating thing, raising two children from a wheelchair, it's all they know. I've witnessed a couple times, like on a school playground or something where a kid would be like, 'is that your mom? Why is she in a wheelchair?' My kid's like, 'because she is,' you know? [laughs]

Jackie MacDougall: It's weirder that the kid is asking that over-- Yeah.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Exactly. And so, just sort of being witness to my own children's perspective and experiences with my wheelchair being normalcy to them, it's fascinating because I don't know what that says in terms of their growth and development as they get older. I don't know if that makes them more empathetic to the world.

I know I have this really vivid, wonderful memory of my oldest when he was about two years old, we were out for a walk in the neighborhood and I had kind of like trained him, like he would train a puppy dog to stay to my wheel, because I can't hold hands with him to cross the street. And so, it was to stay with my wheel, and there was one part that was just a little bit of a slight uphill grade.

And, he walked right behind me, and he gave me just the exact push that I needed. Didn't say anything about it. Didn't need me to acknowledge the wonderful deed he did, just gave me just the right amount of help and then just kept going. And so, that was something that just like really struck me and stuck with me that that was something that I had taught him without meaning to teach him.

And, that sort of personality trait, that characteristic, that's him. That's the kind of person that he is to this day. And perhaps, that's just him and that's how he would always be. But I think having a mom that does need help sometimes, and an understanding that he didn't grab my wheels and treat me like a race car, you know, like he gave me the right amount of help, the most appropriate amount of help, didn't request or require any sort of praise about it. And just, it was what he did.

Jackie MacDougall: Yeah. That's beautiful. I often think about representation, I'll speak in the US, specifically, is not created for those with disabilities. It's not friendly to those with disabilities. And so, having two able-bodied children who are living in this world, I'm curious if they will be the ones who start to notice--

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Sure.

Jackie MacDougall: -because having advocates who can speak up and say, "These things need to change." I see the disregard sometimes for people with disabilities, whether they are disabilities like yours, where you can see it, you know, or others, how many times someone walks by at a handicap spot and they like, see, who's parked there. Like, there's like the police, right? We have to check to make sure that they're parked there legally.

I've seen people like that get into fights. You see videos online all the time, things like that. And, you have no idea what people are going through. And so, I don't want to put progress on you, because it's not your job to educate the rest of us about what we can do. But if you were to talk to people who are able-bodied, people who are living this world, like, how can we be more aware of those with disabilities?

Ryan Rae Harbuck: You know, I think it's so tricky because like you said, there are visible disabilities, there are invisible disabilities. And, among that, there are individual people; and each individual person is going to have different ideas about, what is okay and what isn't okay.

And, that's what makes it really, really tricky. I think for me, something that I learned really, really early on when I was, back when I was 16, was that whether I wanted to admit it or not, it was going to be my job to let everybody know that I was okay.

And if everybody knew that I was okay, then they would treat me like I was okay, but it was going to be my job to show them that. And so, I took that and I wore that hat, and I still wear that hat today. I think that having my two boys, it's a good moment of reflection for me because this happens literally all the time.

It's probably happened twice this week already where I've got my boys in the car and I'm taking apart my wheelchair and putting it in the passenger seat. And, I'll have somebody that comes over and says like, 'can I give you a hand?' 'No, thank you. I'm fine. I've got it.'

And, both my boys don't understand why these people are coming up to us and opening our vehicle. And so, you know, it's tricky. I've also had where I'm literally like on the phone, eating a cheeseburger and taking apart my wheelchair and trying to put it in the car, and that's when somebody will come up and take my wheelchair to help me with it.

That's the wrong kind of help; you don't ever take a piece of somebody away like that. And there are moments when I drop my wheel and it rolls down the street, and I do need somebody's help. I cannot get out of this situation. And then, inevitably, that's usually the time that nobody asks if I need help. [laughs]

But it's so sticky and tricky because there are really easy ways to offend people. I think that if I had to speak for the disability community, I would say just the more that you can see that person as a person and not necessarily discrediting their disability or not letting yourself see the disability, but like understanding that it exists, that it is a part of that person, it does not define who that person is, it does not make that person who they are, but it is a part of them.

Do I need help sometimes? Absolutely. Am I going to always ask for it? No. [laughs] This is how I am, but I would much rather appreciate someone that's like, 'Hey, I know you look like you've got it, but I'm here if you're looking for somebody to help.' It's a genuine person-to-person interaction. I know that when I was younger, I got caught up a lot in feeling like people would ask if I needed help because it made them feel better, really got caught up in that.

It was very interesting. I spent some time in India in my late 20s. And that's when I learned that it's not always that way, because-- This is sort of like a side story. But in India they have a caste system. And so, you're sort of born in whatever class you're going to be and you can't move up, you can't move down. It doesn't matter. And so, I found out really quickly that those people are very genuine because they can't impress somebody. They don't need to impress somebody.

Jackie MacDougall: Interesting.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: They can't be somebody they're not. And so, that was like really my first experience with getting help from somebody who truly just wanted to help. They didn't want my thanks from it. They weren't trying to get my money. They didn't want to feel good about themselves.

They just saw that I needed help. And, I think that after that experience, I sort of like dropped my shoulders a little bit, let go of the notion that not everybody is just trying to make themselves feel better, that people really do want to just help.

Jackie MacDougall: Right. And you know, to notice that if someone's eating a burger and drinking a Starbucks or something, like leave her the F alone.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: True.

[laughter]

Jackie MacDougall: Because she could put those things down first, I'm just playing. So, you talk about vulnerability a lot.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: I do.

Jackie MacDougall: Vulnerability requires I think the greatest amount of courage. And so, where does vulnerability fit into your life?

Ryan Rae Harbuck: You know, it wasn't until I really started putting my book together that I realized that, 'oh my gosh, this is a huge neon-sign theme that runs throughout the course of my entire book,' in this piece about vulnerability. And how, really the moments

where I felt just that like icky-sticky, I can't control anything, I can't do anything, and just feel like wide open and naked to the world.

That's when I've had my most powerful, my strongest moments of my entire life; and the things that matter the most come out. I think the key is recognizing that vulnerability and being brave enough to do something beyond it.

Jackie MacDougall: And, what does that look like?

Ryan Rae Harbuck: It could look like a lot of things. I think just speaking about my children again, recognizing that I need to ask them for help from something, and realizing that's showing them a life skill that it's okay to ask for help. It's okay that I'm a grownup asking for help. It's okay that I'm their mother asking for help. And, there is nothing that downplays my character or who I am as an individual. And, I get what I need. They can offer the help and move on.

Jackie MacDougall: Right. You are teaching them to show up in their lives in a way that I think many kids aren't gifted with.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Sure.

Jackie MacDougall: You're creating those people who then help for the sake of helping and not help for the sake of that feeling that you get.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Totally.

Jackie MacDougall: Because it's just a natural ability, that moment you were talking about with your son, just giving you the right amount. He's like not turning around for some pat on the back or some big kudos. It was like, 'oh, mom needs help.' Like no-brainer.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: And, that is how he is to this day. All of his teachers are always talking about what a big helper he is. The other day he was telling us, he was like, 'I didn't know why the principal got me out of class to help him with this big Promethean board,' but that's why.

Jackie MacDougall: Yeah. Yeah. What a great kid. And, how old's your little one?

Ryan Rae Harbuck: He just turned three.

Jackie MacDougall: Oh my goodness.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: He's the boss.

[laughter]

Jackie MacDougall: I have one of those.

[laughter]

Jackie MacDougall: Yeah. For those people who have multiple kids, do you find that the first one was easier to keep by the wheel? Are you like mother of the year that you can train your kids in a way the rest of us can't?

[laughter]

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Well, I think that what's really fabulous is that my youngest wants to be like my oldest.

Jackie MacDougall: Okay.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: And, my oldest happens to also be a natural teacher as well. Sometimes we have to be like, 'you are not his parent, please stop.' But instead, my youngest, he wants to be like his big brother and his big brother knows to follow at the wheel kind of thing. And so, for the most part he does too, but he's also very, very smart and already asking questions about my wheelchair. The other day, he asked me like, how do we see the world?

[laughter]

Jackie MacDougall: He's so philosophical.

Ryan Rae Harbuck: Right, right. As he gets a little bit older, I think that's going to serve him really well. And, I think that he's going to be the one that maybe asks some really tough questions where my husband doesn't.

Jackie MacDougall: That's amazing. Ryan's book, *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a Chair*, can be found wherever books are sold, or visit grownasswoman.guide/episode169 for a transcript of this episode, as well as links to Ryan's book and social channels.

I think about the woman listening, she maybe has some things going on in her life; some challenges, some obstacles. If she's feeling overwhelmed, she's read your book. She's inspired by you, but she wants to take that next leap into her life. It feels really risky. It feels too hard. What would you tell her?

Ryan Rae Harbuck: I would tell that woman, the only thing that matters is your life and your view of it. And if something feels really challenging, that's not necessarily a bad

thing. Look within that. What makes it challenging and what makes it scary? How can you get beyond it? Will you be proud of yourself if you get beyond it? And, I think the best way is just to make some steps, accomplish this today.

And it was small and it didn't mean a lot, but I took a deep breath and that felt really good, and moved to the next day. And you know, nobody is guaranteed that next day. And so, doing your best with what you have at that moment, that's all that anybody can hope for. That's all that matters.

Jackie MacDougall: Thanks so much for listening. If you like this episode, please share it with a friend. It is my mission to provide tools and support for more and more women to embrace their most badass grown-ass lives. And if you feel inspired, leave a rating and review; that small act makes a huge difference. Unless, of course, you hate the show, then you're welcome to just skip that step. Until next time, remember, you are a grown-ass woman, act accordingly.