

[theme music]

PETER: Welcome to StutterTalk, and welcome to 2016. Our first guest this year is Nina G. Before the interview, we will hear a little of Nina G.'s comedy. Enjoy the show.

NINA G: [from a live show] I'm part of The Comedians with Disabilities Act. And so it's me, a guy who uses a wheelchair, someone who's a little person, and someone who is blind. People come up to me, and they say, "You know, stuttering and dyslexia, those aren't real disabilities. You shouldn't be in that show!" So I explain to them that if you look at the definition of what a disability is, according to the Americans with Disabilities Act, a disability is a physical or mental impairment that substantially results in having to deal with ***holes [audience laughs, cheers].

[music]

PETER: Hey, everyone. Welcome to StutterTalk. Happy New Year. This is episode 563 for January 1st, 2016. I'm Peter Reitzes, using some good voluntary stuttering in Carrboro, North Carolina, and I'd like to welcome Nina G. on the other coast in California. Hey, Nina.

NINA G: Hey! Happy New Year, everyone.

PETER: Yeah, we're having you as our first guest for the New Year cuz we know this is gonna be an awesome episode. But no pressure, right?

NINA G: Oh yes, no, thanks.

PETER: [laughs]

NINA G: Thanks a lot [laughs].

PETER: Our topic is What Causes Stuttering with Nina G., and I'm sure we're gonna go a lot of places with that. Nina G. is a comedian, speaker, author, advocate, disability activist, storyteller, counselor, and the author of a children's book, "Once Upon An Accommodation: A book about learning disabilities." Her album is "Disabled Comedy Only." To find out more, visit Nina at NinaGComedian.com. So you wear a lot of hats, Nina: you talk to a lot of people about stuttering; you are way out front doing standup comedy with stuttering; your YouTube videos are very, very popular, near viral I think one of them. So when somebody asks you, when a parent says, "Nina, what causes stuttering, where do you take it? What do you say?"

NINA G: Well, I think there's also the question of what does not cause stuttering. Because there's so many misconceptions about it. And as great as "The King's Speech" was, I think that people saw it, and they misinterpreted a lot of things around it. I had people, at the time, say, "Why can't you stop stuttering like the guy in 'The King's Speech'?" It was like, well, first of all, he wasn't cured, and he kept on stuttering. But nobody got that. And also, just the assumptions that were made in that. And that's been like our best thing that we've had in a few years in the popular culture, and it was still inaccurate. So people see stuff like that, and they jump to assumptions. And there are things like trauma that a lot of us who stutter have experienced, but that isn't necessarily the cause. I think it's really important that we tell people that because when a parent asks what causes stuttering, my concern is are they asking, "Is there something I did that caused stuttering?". Cuz I know for my own mom--In addition to stuttering, I also have a learning disability. Once, and this was after I went to college, and I had ended up fine after a lot of challenges in my childhood, and me and my mom were in the kitchen. And she said,

"You know, I think maybe you stuttered and had a learning disability because I took these pills when [I was] pregnant." And I was like, "Mom, half of your family has ADHD. My dad's family: I have two cousins who stutter and most likely have learning disabilities. I'm pretty sure that it's not your fault." And I think we really need to make that clear, that this isn't because of something the parents did. The way that I go is that I really like the research coming out of Gerald Maguire's stuff about it being a neurological process.

PETER: Mm, I am so happy to hear you say that. In fact, Jerry is gonna be a guest for this series on what causes stuttering, and he--

NINA G: How could he not be a guest [chuckles]?!

PETER: [laughs] You're sweet to say that. He is a good friend of the show. He actually has the flu. So I was gonna record with him sometime around the same time I'm talking to you, but he has the flu. So his episode will have to wait a little while, but I'm excited about that. I love where you took it immediately: what does not cause stuttering? Dennis Drayna was just on StutterTalk, and he sort of tackled that a bit too. He might have even have said the same phrase, and I love that. OK, I'm gonna put a lot on the table, but some people from the disability rights corner get upset when I have on Dennis Drayna and Gerald Maguire. So Drayna is a geneticist, and Maguire is a psychiatrist who does pharmaceutical research. And they get upset because it's looking at a perhaps medical aspect of stuttering. But these guys, you use their research to disprove some of these silly theories. Like you take the diagnosogenic theory that we just can't fully shake off, which is stuttering's caused by parents overreacting to normal speech. And you look at the genetics research, and that seems less and less likely. I mean, it seemed less likely anyway, but we can use this great research coming from the medical world to say, "Hey, wait a second. Parents aren't causing this." So actually, if you don't mind me putting you on the spot: when your friends, our friends in the disability rights area come down on StutterTalk or anybody else for featuring people like Jerry Maguire or medical doctors and researchers on air, what would you say to them? Why should the stuttering community welcome the medical researchers into our family?

NINA G: OK, well, first of all, what comes to mind is Gerald Maguire is one of us, and "one of us" also comes from a wonderful disability film called "Freaks." So if anybody out there really knows their disability film stuff, "one of us" is a big deal. But he is a stutterer, and he's coming at it from a different perspective than a lot of people. You know, of course he is looking for the magic pill, and I think we can still get the research aspects out of that. The thing is, you know, this is where for me as a person with a disability who really identifies that way, I have a difficult time separating my learning disability from my stuttering, just like I have a difficult time separating my gender and being a woman in that experience from my stuttering. It's all part of me. And to try and tease that out seems really inappropriate and really disingenuous. For me, it's about neurodiversity. And stuttering, it's really important to establish it as neurodiversity because it's not something that we can help, and it's not something that we should be ashamed of. I mean, just in the same way that people learn in different ways--and that should be celebrated--people talk in different ways. I mean, if somebody has a New York accent, should they really try to lose that? No, that's part of them. So that's kind of where I integrate it all. And I think there is probably an emphasis--Once at the NSA conference, I had the misfortune of having a workshop at the same time that Gerald Maguire was on to talk about his pill. And guess what? Nobody came [laughs], so.

PETER: I would never go up against Maguire.

NINA G: No!

PETER: In fact, I just said to Dr. Drayna a few days ago, the last time I went to see you, I had to stand in the hallway. I couldn't get in the room! I think Jerry Maguire was speaking with him on that same panel. Yeah, I would not wanna be up against them [chuckle].

NINA G: Yeah, and that's always very interesting to me where people really say this is something that we should accept and that we should celebrate, but then it's standing room only when he talks about the pill. So for me, I think that we kind of talk a good game, but then when the opportunity comes, I think people get very interested in that. I think that's kind of like the sexiness. Disability rights, to me, is a very sexy thing, but I don't think that that's how everyone in the community sees it. And I think that we can have a balance. If we're talking about the disability rights model, we are looking at not fixing the person but on fixing our culture and our society. And around stuttering, it's not like we need ramps like a person who uses a wheelchair. We need attitudes to change, and we need people to shut up and not interrupt us. But I think that people need to understand that it's a brain-based thing, and that's the way I consider it. Their work and their research in that is very important. Of course, I might use it in a different way that other folks would.

PETER: Wow.

[music break]

PETER: This is StutterTalk. Peter Reitzes with Nina G., who is a comedian, speaker, disability activist, and so much more: NinaGComedian.com. This is so far the best show of 2016.

NINA G: Yeah [giggles]!

PETER: But honestly, I am so excited about this conversation. This will probably end up being one of the best shows of 2016. I've got so many notes here, and I'm starring them all. OK, let me boom through a couple things you just said. I completely understand what you said about Dr. Maguire seeking the magic pill. I think to be fair, I think he's very open that there might just be a pill that helps relieve stuttering.

NINA G: Yes, exactly, yes.

PETER: OK, so a couple things, and you can feel free to tell me that I'm being too easy on our community, because I might be. But when I had Dr. Drayna on the show, I was also wondering, cuz I said to him--Drayna and Maguire are the two most downloaded guests on StutterTalk. So yes, we do talk a good game, but I actually believe that the genetic research and the pharmaceutical research is like moon landing interesting. So I believe the research has a lot of value for many aspects of stuttering, but I think we're allowed to be really interested. So Drayna just found the fourth stuttering gene, the fourth gene that leads to stuttering. I think that's so exciting. Even if we can't use it for any type of treatment or counseling or whatever--and I think we can use that information very productively to help families in some way--but isn't it OK to just have this interest in our version of the moon landing?

NINA G: Yeah. I mean, from the dyslexia point of view, there is similar work being done by Sally Shaywitz in how the brain processes information differently and language differently when you have a learning disability. And for me, that has freed me up so much because it's the difficulties that I see when I read, I'm like oh, that's because of my brain! And when I'm really tired, I stutter more. And when I'm really tired, I read a lot less efficiently. I do think, though, that we do need more women in this area because every 28 days, my stuttering gets to be more severe, and I've not seen a whole lot of work on PMS and

stuttering. So I know there's a neurological link somewhere, and it's very intuitive. I think we need to let people know that this isn't because of any weird thing that they may think; this is because it's the brain.

PETER: Mm, so interesting. And I should point out that something like 96-97% of speech-language pathologists are women [chuckles]. So it's hardly a male-dominated field.

NINA G: Yeah, no, but the research on the brain.

PETER: Yeah, OK, wow, so--

NINA G: From a female point of view.

PETER: Yes.

NINA G: Because I think that you don't really understand that experience, and I don't even think women necessarily identify it. But I think it's something. And that's where, if we had women who were doing the research, and we had people of different ethnicities, they bring in a different kind of flavor. And that's also another aspect to all of this. And I think that's why Gerald Maguire's done such an amazing job, because he comes at it somewhat from a cultural point of view.

PETER: Mm, that's really interesting. So you said, a few minutes ago, you used that term "neurodiversity." I really like it. I really love it. I'm gonna ask you to talk about that in just a second, but I wanna share with you and the listeners that, like you, I have learning disabilities. And sometimes folks say to me, "Well, why didn't you get stuttering treatment when you were a kid?" Well, I was so busy going to school. I went to schools for children with learning disabilities. When I was five, they told my mom I wouldn't learn to read. I had OT and PT and all type of vision services. So I was a kid who had some stuff going on. So stuttering, it seemed like it wasn't considered the biggest problem; it just became the biggest problem as I got older. But take a minute on neurodiversity. It's a lovely term. How do you use it?

NINA G: Well, just like diversity of people or diversity in nature, there are different ways to think, there's different ways to process information, there's different ways to process feelings, and that it's OK to be different. And I think our school system--it's a problem with having a disability or stuttering isn't with the disability or the stuttering; it's with the environment. And that's where disability activists oftentimes come at it from how do we change the environment? And in neurodiversity--In the past, just like you and me, I mean I was in educational therapy, and I was pulled out. My mom had to drive me to a special school for special kids so that I could get that extra help, and it was all special. And I think looking at it more from a universal design standpoint where we make the world accessible enough for everybody. And just like we have ramps to get into stores and automatic door openers, we need the neurodiversity in our schools so that there are learning ramps so that people can access the information in the way that works best for their brains.

PETER: Mm. Yeah, that's a great way to look at it. And being a public school speech-language pathologist, I do see a lot of my colleagues from Resource Room teachers to other speech therapists doing, I hope, what you're saying. At least, we aspire to. It's important stuff. So wow. I'm gonna go back, I think, to some of the stuff that you've mentioned. So you've brought us to this intersection of disability rights and how that interacts with stuttering. So let me read you an email that StutterTalk received yesterday, and it's from a self help leader not in the United States. And I'm not gonna say who, mainly because the person agreed to come on air. So in a few weeks, I hope to feature the person on

StutterTalk. But here's what this self help leader wrote: "As a fan of StutterTalk, I've been listening to the interview with Nick Weaver. You were discussing the question of whether society or stutterers should change. This is an area that deserves more discussion because I fear that people who stutter could expect too much of a society which is confronted by a legion of human problems and disabilities. Yes, society should celebrate diversity, but people who stutter, too, have a responsibility to use whatever help there is in consideration of people around them. It's a two-way thing." What are your thoughts on that?

NINA G: Well, and I think one of the questions that I would have is what kind of help is that? Is that help to be fluent to make other people comfortable? Or is it help in terms of, "Well, I stutter, and don't interrupt me"? Because, OK and this is when you texted me about this question, I asked you to remind me of a conversation that I had with my psychologist. And this was years and years and years ago. And it was when I was single, and I had an online dating profile. What I was doing was--and it was just like I do on a job, which is--as soon as the date was confirmed, I would send them information on how to talk to a person who stuttered. I was like, "Here. Here's some information." And part of it was, was that I didn't want any of those stupid, awkward questions. I didn't want people to say, "Oh, know you don't! You sound good to me!" or "I stutter too!" It's like, no you don't. No, no, not true. And so I wanted to get past a lot of that stuff. So I was like, "Go learn this on your own because I'm only going to teach you if I'm onstage telling jokes, or you pay me. So if that's not the case, then you don't get any free information." My psychologist had called me out on it [laughs].

PETER: I was gonna say, it's not such a bad thing to tell a date a little bit about stuttering. But please, what did your psychologist say, and what was your response?

NINA G: So he had said, "You know, you've taught me a lot about stuttering, and if you're gonna have a relationship with a person, then you need to educate them about that." My psychologist is also an African-American man, and he's told me about his wife. His wife is Caucasian, and he said, "You know, I've had to tell her what it's like to be an African-American man. And in situations where that kind of stuff comes up, I will tell her that." And I'm all, "Yeah, you're right. I totally have to [chuckles]." But there was that part of me that had resented having to teach people stuff. And I think there is a balance. So I kind of feel that from what that person said, that we have a responsibility to perhaps teach but not over-teach, not to feel exploited. But also, I think there might be a social and political aspect to what they said. I find it very interesting here that the disability rights community--kind of like the mainstream disability rights community--is very focused on what's called inspirational porn. Have you ever heard of that?

PETER: Yes, I had the Did I Stutter? folks on StutterTalk, and they--

NINA G: Good. I'm sure they covered it well.

PETER: Yeah, I actually brought that up to them on air. So yes, our listeners have heard it a little bit, but please, go ahead.

NINA G: Yeah, and I think if you are in a country where they may not have the ADA, or they look at disability in a different way, then inspirational porn may not be the top thing that you're trying to obliterate. I think that we really need to look at things in a social and political context, and not knowing what goes on in that individual's country, is really hard to say. I think we really, I think sometimes we are a bit ethno-centric in how we might view other people's attitudes, especially like you look at something

like Stuttering Arena, times people kind of jump on other folks. I just feel that there's this cultural aspect that we miss because we're coming at it from our own, it's our own sense of the world.

PETER: Yeah, and just for the listeners, Stuttering Arena is a popular Facebook group about stuttering, and wow, Nina. Yeah, you're right. When I see things posted on Facebook from people who stutter from around the world, I think it is very important to keep in mind that we have no idea what they're facing. I mean, I have no idea what it would be like to live in a country where it would be OK for someone to say to me, "Oh, Mr. Reitzes, you can't be a teacher; you stutter. Period."

NINA G: Yeah.

PETER: In the United States, sure that might happen, but it's also gonna be really, really frowned upon by perhaps, hopefully a majority.

NINA G: Or at least they know how to hide it enough so they don't get sued [laughs].

PETER: Yeah, I've said this. This is weird. Yes, you're absolutely right. And I've said this on air. It's weird. It really annoyed somebody because they thought I was speaking down about religion and faith, but I shared on air that working in Brooklyn, I had most of my students were religious. It just seemed that way.

NINA G: Mmhmm.

PETER: Often, I was surprised and happy to hear so many of my students--3rd, 4th, 5th graders--say, "Well, I stutter because God wants me to. He's given me this burden." And like whoa, they're really raised to believe that. The flip side of that is I did have a few students--not many--and one really sticks out who, their parents were very Catholic, and they were from Mexico. And they had only been in the country a short time, and they were convinced that the child stuttered because the child had sinned against God and that the child was being punished. They really talked about this child--through an interpreter--like the child was bad, like the child had done something wrong against God. Now, I really annoyed a listener because they thought it was an anti-Catholic statement, and it's not. It's just that's where the family is. You know, so many other listeners were like, "Oh, well, you should've told them!" It's like, well, wait a second. This is where they're coming from, this is what they're bringing to the table. You gotta respect it, and you've got to--I don't know if it's my job to say, "You're wrong." But it's certainly my job to help them perhaps think differently about it. I just put a lot on the table.

NINA G: Yeah, no. And I have a lot to say on this because it's models on disability, which we've already talked about the social and the cultural, which is disability rights. And we've talked about the medical, but the other is the moral model, which a lot of times can be like you sinned in a past life or whenever someone says, "Well, I don't wanna make fun of a person with a disability because then my kids might have a disability," that is like saying a child with a disability is a curse. And I don't believe children are ever a curse. And also, like for me, I went to Catholic school. Catholic school with a learning disability and a stutter: not the funnest thing in the world. And for me, I never understood why my--And first of all, there's tons of very good Catholic schools now, but back in the '80s, at the one I went to, not great at all. I never understood why they wouldn't give me an accommodation because I'm pretty sure that Jesus would've said, "Accommodate the kid."

PETER: [chuckles]

NINA G: And that is where, I think there's sometimes a disconnect there. But whenever people--And what she did say was that kids feel that God gave them that as a burden, I would wanna reframe that. I would wanna say that stuttering isn't a burden, but when people ask me if they want them to pray, if they want me to pray for them, or if they want to cure my stuttering in some way through prayer, I will tell them that, "if God thought that Moses could lead his people with a stutter, then I'm pretty sure that he thinks that mine's OK too. And what God did is he gave him an accommodation of his brother. I much would've rather had him speak instead of Aaron, but back in those days, that probably wouldn't have worked as well." So I think there are religious ways around all of these things, and religion, as we've seen in this world, can be used for good, and it can be used for bad. I think it's our responsibilities as people who stutter, as speech and language pathologist, as educators, is to reframe that and help people kind of celebrate that instead.

PETER: Wow, well said.

[music break]

PETER: This is StutterTalk. Peter Reitzes with Nina G. comedian: speaker, author, advocate, activist, and much more. Nina, so you mentioned a few moments ago inspirational porn. That's sort of like when you're on Facebook, and somebody posts a video of let's say, a montage of athletes from the Special Olympics. So I think about that a lot actually because speaking to people in the disability rights arena, it's mocked. It's often, and I've felt like it was sort of looked down upon on StutterTalk. So I see it all the time on Facebook, and it makes me think about so, so many people click "like," and they'll write, "What strength! Way to go!"

NINA G: Yeah.

PETER: And then I think about my own students, and when I have a range of students. I have children who are very intellectually impaired in my public school, and I have children in the gifted classes. So I work with a wide range of students who receive speech and language services. So if you go to a school performance, I might have children with low IQs performing, I might have children in the gifted classes performing, and I might have children in the regular ed classes performing, and we clap for everybody.

NINA G: Mmhmm.

PETER: When I have a child who stutters who gets up there and speaks and stutters a ton, people clap. Part of it is, well, look how brave she is.

NINA G: Yeah.

PETER: And if she, or if another child who stutters gets up there, and they're stuttering less than before, perhaps it's because they're just having a day where they're not stuttering much, or perhaps they're working on stuttering less, people say, "Oh, well, that's great. She's working on her stuttering."

NINA G: Mmhmm.

PETER: So I don't want to be too judging like I'm gonna clap for everybody. So I don't know. There's not a question here. I apologize. I just wanted to throw that out because sometimes I read the comments in the disability rights world on Facebook and stuff, and I think maybe we're being a little too hard on the people who celebrate the strength of others. Am I being too easy on people?

NINA G: Yeah, so I feel that I think the problem about all of that is that it's objectification. My one-person show that I go to colleges and do is called "Going Beyond Inspirational" because I think people see the things at the surface, but they don't choose to dive in more to learn more about it. I think that is the problem is that they could say, "Oh, isn't that cute? They're doing this and that!" Whereas, they don't choose to really learn about the issues and then to engage as an ally in the disability rights movement.

PETER: That is fair enough. Boy, it's gonna sound like I'm tooting my own horn, but I work with so many students who are disabled in some way, and some we might even say very severely or profoundly, that I just, I'm not saying I'm above it. But maybe I am because when I see the Facebook videos, I just often think of people I know. Yeah.

NINA G: Mmhmm. And I think the one that drives me the most, it's the most upsetting, is there is one of Oscar Pistorius with a little girl, and they both have amputations. He was a runner in the Olympics, the first runner with an amputee, and he's achieved so many things. The caption on it is, "The only real disability is a bad attitude." Now, not integrating into the fact that Pistorius has shot his girlfriend and is serving time right now [laughs].

PETER: Yeah, yeah.

NINA G: That's such a good example of what's wrong with it is that they look at that image and don't dive any deeper. And it's the objectification of it in that moment. Now, you know, it's not to say that when I--Oh, I'm going to go see Mel Tillis next week. So I feel like it's a pilgrimage that I'm going on an airplane with my boyfriend and going to see him. It's because he has inspired me. I have his comedy albums. I'm sure you guys don't even know he has those. But I'm inspired by him talking so freely and so openly, but that's because I have a personal connection there. It's not like the woman who once, after a presentation--this wasn't even a comedy thing--she came up to me and said, "You know what? You are such an inspiration. If I were you, I wouldn't talk at all."

PETER: Mm! Yeah, yeah.

NINA G: It's like what?! What does that mean?!

PETER: I've gotten quite a bit of--I used to get all the time, "Oh! You're handling your stuttering so well." Oh, you mean I'm not stuttering today, yeah, OK.

NINA G: Yeah, I am making you comfortable. OK, well, thank you [laughs].

PETER: Yeah, and you know, it's interesting because some people--and sometimes you hear the loudest voices--but every now and then, someone gets mad at StutterTalk for featuring "famous" people who stutter. We had Mel Tillis on.

NINA G: Yep. Loved it.

PETER: Thank you. And to get flak for that, it's like wait a second. I'd like to hang out with Mel Tillis. Of course I'm gonna bring you Mel Tillis. Why wouldn't I? And I didn't know he had a comedy album, but I know that when I've watched him on YouTube, he has a lot of jokes, and he's funny. Yeah.

NINA G: Mmhmm, and the album actually helped me because people in his audience laughed at his stuttering. And coming from a very militant Berkeley disabled background, whenever anyone laughed at

my speech and not at my jokes, I would get really upset. And so to hear the people who love him the most do that, I was like, OK, maybe I don't have to come at it in such a defensive way. Maybe there's another way to consider that.

PETER: Hmm. Yeah, I completely agree with you. Boy, this is gonna get us off topic, but this is fun, right?

NINA G: Yes.

PETER: So I'm just gonna have some fun with you. I know from your Facebook feed that you are a Howard Stern fan.

NINA G: Yeah.

PETER: So am I. I love say in the same breath, "I love public radio," but I do keep--

NINA G: And I don't. I'm all about Stern [laughs].

PETER: Well, I listen to a ton of public radio, and I've listened to so much Howard Stern as well. And I'll give you my take first, which is I love Stuttering John, John Melendez, who I think is back to calling himself Stuttering John. And I often thought the humor was really great around his stuttering, and there were times when I thought it was mean, specifically--

NINA G: Fred [chuckles].

PETER: Yeah, Fred. I thought Fred was mean, but I thought--And it bothered me, it got to me, I think. You know, you don't wanna be overly sensitive. It is Howard Stern.

NINA G: Yeah.

PETER: But I thought a lot of the times it was just funny. So are people saying to you, "Nina, you're a feminist?" I don't know if you are, but you know, whatever.

NINA G: Yeah, I am.

PETER: "You're a feminist! How can you like Howard Stern?"

NINA G: Mmhmm.

PETER: What do you say about his stuttering? And just take it where you will.

NINA G: Well, OK. I share this in my one-person show. And by the way, Baba Boeey to anybody out there.

PETER: [laughs]

NINA G: [laughs]

PETER: And back at you. Sorry.

NINA G: Yeah, thank you. And what I share in my one-person show is that the first time I ever saw a woman on TV who had stuttered was on the E! Channel because Howard Stern had on this girl who was

like the hot hot dog girl. She wore a bikini, and she sold hot dogs out of a cart, and of course she had stuttered. So that was the thing that got her onto the show. But that was the first time I ever saw someone who talked like me in the media. What I say is that when a feminist with a disability says the only place she ever saw herself reflected was on The Howard Stern Show, you know we could be doing a better job in the images that are presented to us around stuttering. I think there are, oftentimes, some problematic things on Stern around disability issues, but he talks about it, whereas most people are so afraid to talk about it that it doesn't get talked about whatsoever. And also, in doing comedy, the people who have come up to me and said, "I hope this doesn't come out wrong, but have you ever considered going on The Howard Stern Show?" And they are fans, and because they've known a person who stutters, they know how to respond to me. And that has been such a gift that people can interact in a way that they are comfortable because they've already known a person who stutters.

PETER: Yeah, yes. All of what you said is really interesting. So if you think about Stuttering John--John Melendez--he was hired from The Howard Stern Show to be the announcer for Late Night.

NINA G: Yes! And then I learned on your show that Jay Leno, who I'm not a big fan of, he had cut out all of his stuttering, which to me was kind of offensive.

PETER: Yeah, yeah. I learned that too. But even so, Howard Stern, and he was being mean, but it really didn't offend me, where Howard Stern has said many times, "You know, Stuttering John, you're not funny. I hired you because you stutter." I think that might be true. I'm not saying he's not funny, but he probably got hired just because he stutters. And in some way, it's neat to know that somebody could get a real break into the industry because of a speech impediment. So that's one of those things that doesn't offend me. It's just interesting that somebody got hired and ended up being the announcer for the Late Show because of his stutter!

NINA G: Yeah, but I don't think so.

PETER: Really?

NINA G: Yeah. Because once I was on Good Day Sacramento, and this video's online. But the announcer, at the very end of the interview, said, "Hey, you know what? Mel Tillis made a million bucks stuttering." And I was like, "Well, that and his talent."

PETER: Yeah.

NINA G: And I know that the stutter is good for about three minutes, and then you have to have some substance there. And I really believe that Stuttering John, at the time, he added a lot to the show, even more than his speech. I mean, there's not anybody who would ask those questions that he would ask of Raquel Welch--

PETER: Yeah.

NINA G: --and Adam Sandler whether they had stuttered or not, so.

PETER: Yeah, I agree. I think my larger point was the stuttering was his foot in the door, and he stayed in the door because he's funny, and he's got guts.

NINA G: Yes. Yes, exactly.

PETER: Yeah, yeah. No, he's really great.

NINA G: Eeeeh, no. I think he has been great.

PETER: I mean, I thought he was great on the Stern show, at least.

NINA G: Yes, yes [laughs].

PETER: Yeah, and actually here's, I'm such a dork: I even listened to his recent appearance on the Artie Lange podcast.

NINA G: Oh!

PETER: He was on that a few times, and that's really funny too. I mean, that's really funny.

NINA G: Oh yeah. I have to check that out cuz I had heard about that.

PETER: OK, so just to put you on the spot a little bit. You saw on The Howard Stern Show a woman who was attractive in a bikini, and you saw yourself reflected in her. Why is that not some form of inspirational porn? Cuz it feels like on some level it's objectifying her.

NINA G: Because when you talk about Stern, porn oftentimes comes up. In this case, I don't think it is because porn is they hold the person up as an inspiration, and that's it. And he wasn't holding her up as an inspiration. It was more like, oh yeah, so tell us about this. And even when he has people with other kinds of disabilities on, he asks them about sex. And that is the thing about inspirational porn is it objectifies you so you're only that thing. Your only experience is inspiring others because you get out of bed or that you talk, because you stutter. But you don't have a sexual side, or you don't have an intellectual side. You're just this thing, and that's it.

PETER: Hmm. Very interesting.

[music break]

PETER: This is StutterTalk with Nina G. Nina, you've done so much. You do so much. You have an album, "Disabled Comedy Only." What's the best place for listeners who wanna check that out?

NINA G: Well, the cheapest place to check it out is at CDBaby.com, where you can download it for \$5. But it's also available on iTunes. And iTunes, I'm not allowed to set the price. So it's a little more expensive there.

PETER: Thank you. Do you have time for a few more questions?

NINA G: Yeah!

PETER: Great. And just to remind folks, Nina G. can be found at NinaGComedian.com. So taking this back to the beginning of the show, what causes stuttering, I think broadly, my first three guests--including you as the third--have sort of said something along the same lines. So my first guest, Dr. Mark Onslow, who's very well known, probably famous for being one of the lead developers of the Lidcombe Program, here's something that he wrote, and he pretty much said the same thing on StutterTalk: that stuttering "appears to be a problem with neural processing of speech involving genetics." And then Drayna came

on the show--Dr. Drayna from the National Institutes on Health--and he said, "Yeah, that fits into my view." It sounds like that fits into your view too. Or do you see--

NINA G: It almost does.

PETER: OK, please.

NINA G: The only thing that I would change is calling it a problem.

PETER: Mm! Take a second on that. Riff on that.

NINA G: Well, because a problem indicates that it needs to be changed. And for me, this is how I speak, and I don't feel that I need to be changed. That would be like changing that I have brown hair or that I have my grandmother's butt. Those are things that just exist, and I'm not Taylor Swift, nor do I think that I should be, where I need to be this little blond with a small nose and a small butt. I'm an Italian who has a big butt, and I'm an Italian who stutters.

PETER: Hmm. So what, OK, just to push back a little bit. And I admire and respect all of that. From my perspective, I think it's totally OK to stutter. I have to stutter to be healthy with myself.

NINA G: Mmhmm.

PETER: But I also personally wanna know how to stutter less. There are times like yesterday, I was so tired, and speech for me was really hard.

NINA G: Mmhmm.

PETER: And I was glad I knew some ways to make speaking less hard because sometimes it's easier to stutter, and sometimes it's easier to use some type of speech tool because it's physically hard to get through those stutters. Do you ever want to stutter less? Or do you ever actively do things like, I don't know, slow rate or stutter on purpose or use some type of light contact so that there might be a moment where you do wanna stutter less?

NINA G: You know, I guess sometimes on the phone. And I don't even know if this is because of the stuttering. It's been so integrated in, that I don't know what's what. [Speaks in a stilted voice] But sometimes, when I'm making a phone call, I will use the business voice that my mother always had. [Back to her own voice] And that makes me not stutter as much. So you know, I think there are, but I don't think that I'm conscious of it. For me, and this is just for me, because I think sometimes some of us who are more like the totally self-accept side, I think we sometimes alienate people who may not feel the same way. If we are gonna talk about neurodiversity, we have to talk about neurodiversity and diversity of acceptance within that. That everybody's gonna be at a different place, and that people really need to choose what's best for them because your identity as a person who stutters is gonna look different. And that's OK.

PETER: Mmhmm, wow. So I'm gonna try to limit myself to two more questions because I invited you on, and I said, "Just 15 minutes."

NINA G: I know, right?! Now it's almost an hour.

PETER: Well, you know, I gave up on that idea. It's too good of a conversation. So let me ask you a couple questions that I think are specific to disability rights, but you wear many hats. So we'll see where you take it. It was recently expressed on StutterTalk that we shouldn't be providing speech therapy to three year olds because don't have informed consent. So we would need to get informed consent from the three year old. And I chimed back, well you know, I'm a parent, and I don't ask permission of my kids to vaccinate them. My children are gonna have many problems in life. Just look at our genes and with the families on both sides. But I'm not sure stuttering is one that they would need to have. So I don't feel--and for what it's worth--pre-school speech therapy the way I do it is play-based. So kids, as far as I know, don't know it's speech therapy cuz I'm really helping the parents make changes, and I'm not directly telling the child to make changes. That's most of the time. That's a general overview. So do you have a position on if we should be treating three year olds who stutter without informed consent?

NINA G: Well, I think the question is what kind of therapy should these three year olds get because the way that I look at all kinds of therapies, especially with kids, is that it is systemic, that it's family-based, that the parents may need to go through that at that time to get through a point where they accept it. And I remember there was a little boy when I worked in daycare who was two years old who had stuttered. And it was pretty severe. I was talking to his home, and I told the mom that I stutter too, blah, blah, blah. And the mom's like, "Well, I don't think he really stutters. He just repeats the same sound over and over and over again."

PETER: Hmm.

NINA G: I was like, "That is stuttering!" But parents come at it, and they accept things at different rates. I would want them to come to the right people at the right time. For me, I started speech therapy when I was two and a half, and it wasn't for stuttering because I didn't stutter till I was 8 or 7. It was for articulation issues, and those articulation issues were an early sign of dyslexia. For me, I think the recognition of sound that I received for those five years before I started to read helped me to have more phonological awareness. Of course, my speech therapist was an amazing person who was married to Rich Wells, who stutters, and my speech therapist was Elaine Wells. I'm still connected to her, and we hosted the stuttering Christmas party a few years back here. So she came at it from the right point of view. That's where a therapist can come at speech therapy or any other kind of therapy from a cultural point of view instead of a medicalized one. Instead of focusing on the cure, it could be how do you manage and accept and go through that process?

PETER: So for two and a half, three year old, most of my colleagues, I think--certainly the ones who work in stuttering--would agree that we're not so much--Well, acceptance is important in the sense of our child stuttering, and we're going to, and it's OK, and we're gonna deal with it. But you're really looking to help a three year old child stop stuttering. That's just to be blunt about it. I've recently spoken to disability rights folks on air who I think they pretty much said, "Well, why? It's OK to stutter. We shouldn't be doing that." And again, my thought was well, sure it's OK to stutter. But it's really also OK if a three year old is stuttering to help the family in a way that hopefully help the child stop stuttering.

NINA G: Mmhmm.

PETER: And I'm OK with saying that, but it's interesting cuz some people got really annoyed at that. And other people wrote in and were really annoyed that anybody would suggest that we shouldn't be helping a three year old stop stuttering.

NINA G: Mmhmm.

PETER: So do you have a position on that?

NINA G: I mean, you know I think for me, the intervention part is that the family needs to come to some understanding. I think my concern would be is that is the speech therapy not addressing the parents' behavior and helping the parents handle the behavior of grandparents and aunts and uncles?

PETER: Yeah.

NINA G: Because for me, my mom brought me into speech therapy when I stopped talking because whenever I would--I would go up to my mom and "blarhdbaeehbeeblarhabeebee" and my mom would just act like she understood, "Oh, yeah. Uh-huh. Yeah, yeah." And then one day, she was faking it, and I caught it. I knew that she was faking it, and I stopped talking. And that's when she's like, oh, we have to go do something about this. That's when she got me into speech. So you know, I think that it's more complicated than yes and no, and it's more complicated than groups of people. I think that's also where I think we need to integrate these issues a little bit more.

PETER: All right. So last question for you, and it might be a big one. I'm not sure. But coming from a disability rights perspective--and I know you bring more to the table than just that--but is there a way--I thought what you said about--If I understood you correctly, you were saying yes, it's important to think about inspirational porn. But I thought you also said it might not be the biggest thing on the table right now. Did I get that right, or did I not get that?

NINA G: Well, for some countries and some communities, it may not be the thing that is their most crushing issue. Whereas, for some people it is.

PETER: Hmm. Great. So if you were advising disability rights folks in the area of stuttering, what do you think the agenda should be? Or what do you think the agenda should include right now in 2016? I should've given you that ahead of time. I'm sorry.

NINA G: No, oh please. I already know the answer [laughs].

PETER: OK.

NINA G: So I think if we're talking about the US, I think that a lot of people don't know that they have rights under the ADA. And that's because the old ADA, before 2008, didn't necessarily include stuttering in there, but it doesn't now. I think that we need to know that. I think we need to practice that in our schools and in our workplaces. And also, if I was advising the disability rights community, I would say also, this group of stutterers don't necessarily identify with you guys, and there needs to be a bridge there. I think for me, the bridge has always been that I have a learning disability, and my dad was Hard of Hearing. So for me, disability is a general thing, but I think there needs to be more engagement, and I think we need to break down some of those barriers.

PETER: Mm, excellent. I'm gonna make a comment and let you get a last response. But I'm always careful, from a reporter's aspect, of talking about stuttering being covered under the ADA because when I speak to lawyers on air and off air, there's vast disagreement on that.

NINA G: Mmhmm.

PETER: So what I generally end up hearing is, "Well, if you have a lot of money, you can find out if stuttering's covered." Or you might hear somebody say, "Oh yes, it's covered for sure." Then you'll hear

another person saying, "Nope. It's not covered. There's no case law, but maybe there could be some case law if you can afford it." So I'm always just very careful because I just get the sense that in the legal world, they're really not sure yet to what extent and when stuttering is covered. Do you have any last thoughts on that?

NINA G: [chuckles] You know, because disability is a social construct, people might allow that to define their rights, which yeah, maybe a lawyer could. But I think that the assumption that--Cuz I think what had happened in 2008 was that speaking was included in daily life activities, and that's where we come in. And it's not like we necessarily need an accommodation; we need people not to discriminate. And that's kind of where I consider all that.

PETER: Hmm. Excellent, excellent point. I wanna thank you, Nina G. Comedian.

NINA G: And can I make one announcement?

PETER: Yes, of course.

NINA G: For the next six months, I am--Every six months, I choose an organization to donate money to. So whenever I have big speaking engagements, I donate a portion of the proceeds to the organization. For the last six months, it's been a really cool organization called YO! Disabled and Proud, which is in California, and it trains kids and young adults who have a disability to be advocates. And for the next, from now on to the conference, I am donating part of my proceeds for speaking gigs to the NSA, specifically to the scholarship fund because I want as many people as possible to have that experience that I've had and that's changed my life.

PETER: And to the two people listening who don't know what the NSA is, the National Stuttering Association.

NINA G: [laughs]

PETER: And I hate to be a wet blanket, but I have to say that those are Nina G.'s suggestions that StutterTalk is not, we don't get in the business of specifically saying to donate to this or that group. But I'm glad that you took a minute to share that with our listeners. And I wanna thank Nina G. for coming on StutterTalk, being generous with your time. NinaGComedian.com. Let's get you back on air, OK?

NINA G: OK, great. Thanks so much.

[music]