

Harper Talks: The Harper Alumni Podcast

Episode 4: Reveca Torres

[00:00:01.620] - Brian Shelton

I'm Brian Shelton, and you're listening to Harper Talks, a co-production of Harper College Alumni Relations and WHCM.

[00:00:10.140] - Brian Shelton

Today on Harper Talks I'm excited to welcome 2016 Distinguished Alumni Award recipient Reveca Torres. Reveca earned her degree in fashion design from Harper College in 2002 and her Bachelor of Arts in theatre from the University of Arizona in 2004. Both of these accomplishments are seemingly everyday activities. But Reveca did all of this with a fractured spinal cord. When she was 13, Reveca was injured in a car accident that left her arms and legs paralyzed. This injury would not deter Reveca from pursuing her artistic dreams and using her art to inspire and help others.

[00:00:52.290] - Brian Shelton

Reveca, thanks for joining me for Harper talks today. I appreciate your being here on this cold January day. How are you doing?

[00:01:00.030] - Reveca Torres

I'm doing well. I'm actually sitting in my I have a sauna in my house because I always get very cold.

[00:01:09.600] - Reveca Torres

So this is where I'm sitting today

[00:01:11.760] - Brian Shelton

I like the idea of that maybe I should build one of those myself. I like that.

[00:01:16.170] - Reveca Torres

It's just a fabric one, but yeah, it helps.

[00:01:20.070] - Brian Shelton

That's great. So I just want to start with with the obvious and get here at the beginning, you were injured in a car accident when you were 13 years old in Mexico, I understand. And I'm just curious what memory stands out the most for you from that time.

[00:01:42.920] - Reveca Torres

Well, it was a foggy time, actually, you know, but my injury was in Mexico and then having to travel back to the states and getting back to the states to receive medical care. And the rest of my family was also injured, too. So everyone was kind of in different places. But, you know, it was a lot of community support, really.

[00:02:09.500] - Reveca Torres

We had you know, what really stands out to me is just like the people that were there and that helped our family get through it and sort of, you know, get back to life after the injury.

[00:02:22.010] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, that had to be a pretty difficult time. And you were 13? Yeah,

[00:02:25.160] - Reveca Torres

I was 13. Yes.

[00:02:26.630] - Brian Shelton

A very interesting developmental time for a person to go through something like that

[00:02:31.410] - Reveca Torres

It was right before..... Just a couple of months before starting high school. So that in itself is a scary time. And then having to figure that out, as you know, after paralysis was was even scarier, I think.

[00:02:46.850] - Brian Shelton

So that's played a big role in your life and your career and in your art. And I know that your dream was to pursue a career in fashion. And I'm curious how you decided to come to Harper College to pursue that goal.

[00:02:59.510] - Reveca Torres

Well, I went to Palatine High School and there was a teacher there that that was in the Home EC Department. She encouraged me to she was the one that helped me figure out that I could actually sell

again. She showed me a sewing machine that had a button on the dash of it where, you know, I had thought because, like, I don't have movement in my legs, I won't be able to sew. But she showed me otherwise.

[00:03:31.430] - Reveca Torres

She was like, well, I have this machine, why don't you try it? And I did. I went and I tried it one day after or during my lunch period. And then I never went to lunch again. I would just go to her classroom and play with the sewing machine and play with fabrics and stuff.

[00:03:50.210] - Reveca Torres

So she was really the key reason why I was like, I could do this, and then after that she after she was no longer working at Palatine High School, was she was actually an instructor at Harper and then their fashion department as well. But she encouraged me to go to Harper because the program design program is a really good one and competed with Columbia College and other other really good design schools in the area that I was like, why would I go to another school when I have this right in my backyard?

[00:04:35.160] - Reveca Torres

And It was also at a time where I really wasn't ready to move away from from the area and move away from my family. And I kind of needed to find what, you know, what I really wanted to do in the world. Harper was a really good place to do that.

[00:04:51.030] - Brian Shelton

Were you concerned about. Were you concerned about access and ability going to the campus had you been to the campus, did you know I mean, what was it like at the time that you went? There was a very accessible wheelchair wise and that sort of thing?

[00:05:06.840] - Reveca Torres

Well, it's a very you know, the Midwest is a flat place. So, you know, it's very flat. And I could get around, but there definitely were areas that were not as easy to get to. I remember a specific building where they had a lift that went up to that was five steps and there was a lift, like a stair lift that was always broken. And there were many times that I I would get there and I just couldn't get to class and I would go back home, which is something that shouldn't happen.

[00:05:42.450] - Reveca Torres

But I know that I would report it and they would fix it. But I feel like it was just constantly being being, you know, breaking down. But, you know, the campus has been remodeled and I've since been back. And it

just looks really, really nice, like all the buildings. And, you know, it seems like they they took more consideration access wise, too.

[00:06:09.210] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, I think access has definitely been improved quite a bit over the last few years, that's for sure. So would you say that while you were in high school and then coming to college, that that fashion design, that that form of artistic expression was was an outlet for you or a need for you?

[00:06:26.190] - Brian Shelton

Or was it? I don't know. Was it just a career path? What's it mean to you?

[00:06:30.600] - Reveca Torres

It wasn't just a career path for me. I have been a creative person, I think even from childhood, you know, I was always, you know, playing with my cousins and making up plays and making them dress up in costumes. And just I was always doing stuff as a kid that was creative. And I I can't imagine my life without making things or creating things. It's just part I think it's part of who I am.

[00:07:04.840] - Reveca Torres

And I was scared that I would not be able to pursue something creative. And I had thought, well, maybe I can be a teacher or maybe I can do something with computers or, you know, and all great career paths. But, you know, they weren't exactly what I wanted. So when I started the program there, I was really happy that, you know, I was able to find assistance, I was able to get through the access and disability office.

[00:07:41.560] - Reveca Torres

They were. They helped me find a helper, you know, when I was in class that could help me with, like, cutting things or getting materials or setting up the tables in certain ways so that I could stuff with my classmates. And so that was really important for me.

[00:08:03.190] - Brian Shelton

Oh, yeah. I was going to ask you, when you went to the University of Arizona after leaving Harper, what was what was that like? I mean, that had to be a little frightening, right? Leaving the comforts of home and the place that, you know, and going so far away,

[00:08:16.960] - Reveca Torres

It was terrifying. Harper was just like such a good stepping stone for me to be like, OK, you know, I'm doing this now after high school where I had all these supports. And, you know, obviously in high school, your life is structured to what you have to learn to graduate and all of that.

[00:08:37.600] - Reveca Torres

And so, like then Harper, it was me like learning things that I wanted to learn and then leaving to Arizona was like, OK, I'm leaving my family. I need to figure out not just going to college and college life, but how am I going to manage my care. So with as a person with a spinal cord injury and paralysis, like I am paralyzed from the chest down and I use a wheelchair that is motorized. I have personal care attendants that help me get up in the morning and get into bed at night and like shower and prepare meals and things like that.

[00:09:17.800] - Reveca Torres

So it's a lot to think about and it's a lot to manage. And this was the first time I was doing it without my family being the ones that provided that care. So it was definitely scary. And I learned a lot about management and like managing time, managing people, it's almost like a second job, you know, to manage caregiving and independence. And so it was it definitely was a scary time.

[00:09:48.460] - Reveca Torres

But I think it was something that really helped me become independent and and good at advocating for what I needed.

[00:09:59.470] - Brian Shelton

Do you find I've asked people this question before, is it exhausting just getting to do the normal, everyday things that people take for granted?

[00:10:08.920] - Reveca Torres

It can be. You know, it's it's my normal. It's you know, I've lived with this injury now of about twenty six years. It becomes a normal, but there are times it becomes exhausting when things happen, such as, you know, a caregiver doesn't show up and then I have to suddenly scramble to find someone or, you know, I don't I need, like medical supplies. And, you know, they can't get here. They aren't shipped on time. So things like that that are out of my control, but that I still have to navigate and and make, you know, adapt and be flexible and make happen so that I can continue on, you know.

[00:10:59.220] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. You know, you have a story on your Web page about how one of the most difficult things it is for you to do is to get gasoline in your van. Can you talk about that?

[00:11:10.740] - Reveca Torres

Yes. It is a pain to have to do that because you, you know, I am able to drive. I have a vehicle that has a ramp that I can just drive up to and it doesn't have the the seat in the front. So I can just pull up to the steering wheel and my wheelchair locks onto the floor of the of the van. And then I'm able to to drive with hand controls. However, when you get to the gas station, you know, if you think about it, they the gas pump is up on like a step. And also my mobility level is not that I could pick up the pump and actually squeeze it and put it in the in the van. So I need someone to help me. And when you pull up to the gas station, the person inside sometimes is busy with someone and they can't come out and help you. And they usually say, like, if you need assistance, call this phone number and they're not always available to help you. So you have to wait or they'll say if you need assistance, honk. And it's like, well, if you just pull up to a gas station and you start honking, everyone around you is going to be like, what is going on with that crazy lady that's like her? You what's her deal? So that's not a good solution either. And also, like, what if you don't have a cell phone and you can't call? And what if the person is busy and you're out there waiting 20 to 30 minutes till they're not busy to come out and help you? So it's I end up taking someone with me when I need gas, like, you know, a friend or a parent or my sister or whatever, someone who's available. And I have to schedule when I put gas in my car. And that's not always the best. Like, what if I were driving somewhere and I just suddenly ran out of gas and I it you know, it's not it's something that people don't think about. And it's it's a problem that should be more accessible. There should be a better solution for that.

[00:13:24.210] - Brian Shelton

It's very interesting. I thought about that and I was reading your website and the fact that most gas stations only have one person working there. So in order to come out and help and to do that, they would have to close the store, come out to pump the gas, come back in and lock, unlock the store, and then let customers start coming back in again. And boy, that's got to be an issue all the way around for everyone. So and not the employees fault. Right.

[00:13:46.610] - Reveca Torres

So and, you know, I've made friends with, like, the the closest gas station to my house, like, I know the people there now that sometimes when I pull up and they know my vehicle and they see me and they'll be like, I'll be out in a second, you know, and they come out and they're super friendly. But, you know, that's not always the case for everybody. And also, you can't just, like, trust to hand over your credit card to a stranger and say, pump gas for me. You know, that that's not an ideal solution as well.

[00:14:17.510] - Brian Shelton

That's definitely not an ideal solution, no. So tell me about your organization Backbones.

[00:14:23.870] - Reveca Torres

The organization... I started it in 2009 and it was the goal is to help people with spinal cord injuries and their families connect with their communities. And that can look a variety of different ways that could be helping people find resources in their community or peer support. And we also host a lot of events with the purpose of getting people out and meeting each other and, you know, finding that peer support in a social setting and everybody and say everybody is welcome. It's not just for people with spinal cord injuries for our events. We have a variety of events like 5Ks and wine tastings and fashion shows, art shows, film festivals. And the reason we offer a lot of different activities is because not everyone likes the same thing. And, you know, we don't want to just be an arts organization or a sports organization that we that we can have something for everybody. And, you know, people can connect in a variety of different ways. So that's important.

[00:15:44.000] - Reveca Torres

My motivation for it was my own personal experience. Obviously, you know, at the age of 13, I there wasn't a lot of other young girls like myself that were going through the same thing. And I didn't meet others with disabilities until, you know, many years after that. I connected with. Until I went to Arizona, really, it was at the school I met others with disabilities and they had sports programs and fitness programs. And it made a really huge difference in my life to learn from my peers and to learn and see that they were traveling and they were having you know, they had jobs, they had relationships. And it was like it was cool to see that they were doing things that I thought I couldn't do. And I think it's really important to have that peer support and just others to motivate you.

[00:16:40.910] - Brian Shelton

So let's talk about Tres Fridas, your project. I love the images on your website. I've seen some around the college. I saw the mini exhibition there. The listeners can see your work at revecatorres.com. I know Frida is bit of a kindred spirit for you. Can you tell us about the project and the work?

[00:17:00.110] - Reveca Torres

Yeah, that project Tres Fridas Project was a collaboration between myself and Mariam Pare and Tara Ahern, which were all women with disabilities and artists. And we I met Mariam online and we started talking about art and talking about Frida Kahlo. And she is a Mexican painter who was injured at the age, I believe she was 16 in a trolley accident and injured her spine and her hips and just like very, very injured. And she was also also had polio as a kid. So woman with the with disabilities and, you know, our connection to her and to her work. And we decided to recreate the image of the two Fridas holding hands. And so we wanted to do that. But I sitting as models and in our wheelchairs so that the wheelchairs were visible and. So that we can make a statement and the experience of living with a disability. Tara is a photographer and so she photographed us in front of a white sheet. I made the costumes and then Miriam recreated the background using digital imaging. And she also paints with her mouth. So, yeah, we all collaborated on that piece and we had so much fun doing it. And we ended up recreating 16 other

images of art of, you know, pretty, pretty well known works of art. And each of them, we accompanied with some text and information about the experience of living with a disability, whether it related to employment or. You know, relationships and, you know, all different all different aspects of life, we were able to use these images to talk about disability and educate people and also to celebrate artists with disabilities.

[00:19:33.450] - Reveca Torres

All of all of the images we swapped out the main image and we had a model be a person and an artist with a disability here from Chicago. So I feel like it was also a celebration of artists with disabilities here in Chicago. And just like our lives, we were able to exhibit that in Bridgeport Art Center in September of 2019. And then Harper invited us to to exhibit at the school as well. And we were supposed to be at the Frida 2020 celebration that was happening at the College of DuPage this past summer. However, that's been postponed and we'll wait and see if it will happen this summer. But we will if it happens, we will be exhibiting as part of that.

[00:20:26.640] - Brian Shelton

It's really cool. Speaking of that, how how has the pandemic affected you? Has it changed your life? What is it? Has it been a good thing or a bad thing? Is more people being online made more people and more activities accessible to you? I was thinking about that the other day.

[00:20:42.240] - Reveca Torres

And it's it's it's been good and it's been bad for our community of people with disabilities. Like, I feel like we've had experience of having to be isolated from society in many aspects, whether sometimes if we don't if we lack transportation or if we are sick or if, you know, after a surgery or people have pressure sores, sores and are stuck in bed or sometimes just access to to buildings and access to to things outside of your home. So isolation is not new to our community. And I think that that's a realization that the entire world is now experiencing. What that is. It also is really it has been really scary because many of us are at risk for the virus. It would be really impactful to our lives if we were to get sick and going to hospitals. You know, there's a lot of fear around having to end up in the hospital and rationing care. And if people. Were to say to think that, you know, our quality of life is less than someone else and that we don't deserve a ventilator or things like there's just been issues like that, the stories that of people experiencing that type of thing, that it's scary.

[00:22:16.760] - Reveca Torres

And the other hand, it has also made all the virtual programming and everyone moving to working remotely has really opened up a lot of conversations about. About access, you know, there's different access issues for people who are blind and deaf as well, having to use Zoom. Is their captioning is there?

You know, ASL interpreters, do they describe images that are that are on the screen? Can people use their screen readers and stuff like that? So there's definitely access issues.

[00:22:55.770] - Reveca Torres

But there's also we've had a lot of access to more programming and also understanding that people can work remotely and for years, for ages.

[00:23:07.290] - Reveca Torres

Like a lot of times, people with disabilities request to work remotely or to have flexible schedules. And it's always been a no, this is not possible. We you must be at the office where. Now it's like we don't really need to be at the office and we can be flexible.

[00:23:24.720] - Reveca Torres

And there are these solutions that are really easy that could make someone really have access to employment and to other other things. Yeah.

[00:23:35.400] - Brian Shelton

One thing from the education perspective that I've really noticed is that a lot of technology that really should have been available before became almost instantly available once the pandemic hit and it was affecting so many people. So all of a sudden, companies that did not provide automatic closed captioning in that sort of thing, you know, it was only a week or two before they ramped up their coding and had that technology built into their platform. So I think from that perspective, we've made probably a 10 year leap really into some of that stuff.

[00:24:11.290] - Brian Shelton

And as you say, being able to work from home when that wasn't a possibility for some people before certainly opens up a lot more career fields, especially with someone with a disability. It's it's pretty amazing what's happened over this period of time. Yeah.

[00:24:26.280] - Reveca Torres

And that, you know, I'm happy for that. But we also have to think about when when people are able to be around in person. That doesn't that doesn't make institutions or companies, they're not off the hook where you don't have to provide access because you can say to someone, oh, well, you could just work from home, you know. But that's also something that companies need to consider moving forward, like the flexibility and also that, you know, they're not off the hook. You do need to provide access physically as well.

[00:25:02.580] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, not either/or. But both. Right, right. Yeah.

[00:25:07.050] - Brian Shelton

So you've been working with Kartemquin films and you're an editorial fellow for documentary magazine, which I'm really interested in hearing about how that work tie in with your current projects. What are you doing?

[00:25:18.810] - Reveca Torres

I'm currently working on a film that is about artists with disabilities and the community of artists here in Chicago and also looking back to artists from the past who were disabled and not a lot of people always take that into consideration. For example, you know, I mentioned Frida Kahlo and then there's Vincent Van Gogh, Picasso, Henri Matisse. All of these artists were artists with disabilities. And for, you know, personally, they have all had an influence in my own work. And so I am working on a film bringing celebrating contemporary artists, but bringing tying that into like historical artists and artists from the past as well. And sort of weaving my story into that as well.

[00:26:22.180] - Brian Shelton

Is that with Kartemquin?

[00:26:24.690] - Reveca Torres

That's with Kartemquin. Yeah, I'm working with and I've been I was awarded the Hulu Kartemquin Accelerator Program, so I've been doing that this entire year or this entire past year and continuing to work on that film.

[00:26:44.350] - Brian Shelton

Obviously, the pandemic's probably slowed progress?

[00:26:47.240] - Reveca Torres

Yes, yes. And but it's also given me some you know, I've been able to to think of different ways. And I'm also a first time filmmaker. You know, I don't have a background in film, although I have loved film always. But I have a friend who helped me figure out how to work a camera and and develop a mount for my wheelchair. And that kind of opened up a whole new medium for me where, like, I can do photography and I can do films now that I had these adaptations made for me and I'm exploring I'm exploring all of that. And I think it brings a unique perspective to the film and to my work because it's done from a chair.

And so it's it's definitely lower, a lower angle chair. And I also utilize the help of a lot of help from my caregivers to set up cameras or to shoot this for me in this way when I can't do it.

[00:27:55.630] - Reveca Torres

So I'm hoping to highlight that, too, throughout the film that, like, my process is different. You know, I have help and I have adaptations, but we'll see how it looks.

[00:28:06.010] - Brian Shelton

I think that's really interesting as a filmmaker, thinking about it literally from your point of view, from your chair height. And so everything would be shot from that perspective. And I think that's a very unique thing for your film. So that's pretty cool.

[00:28:19.330] - Brian Shelton

Every Harper College distinguished alumni is nominated from someone in the community or from Harper College itself. In Rebecca's case, she was nominated by her advisor, Pascuala Herrera, a now retired and beloved member of the Harper community.

[00:28:35.410] - Reveca Torres

I love Pascuala you know, she was the first, to be honest. She was the first woman with a disability that I met after my injury. And I get to Harper and a friend of mine says, oh, there's a counselor there or an advisor at the Access and Disability Office who is also a chair user. She's Mexican and you should meet her. And I was like, OK. And I was I met her and we talked the first time and she talked about, you know, the most impactful thing. And she laughs about this, that I tell this story.

[00:29:16.180] - Reveca Torres

But she told me about her activism and she told me about a time where she participated in getting city buses to take a look at ramps on there and how she was arrested for protesting about this. And I was like, what a bad ass. Like, she got arrested. And that just made such an impact in my life that I was like, I want to be like that. I want to be someone who uses her experience to to make change and, you know, whatever tactics she needed.

[00:29:55.000] - Reveca Torres

And I thought that was just such a cool thing. And I was very impressed by her. And I definitely think that that she changed my my outlook and like, being someone that I could that could make change and not accept what was out there.

[00:30:10.180] - Brian Shelton

That's a great story about Pascuala. I've been fortunate to take a couple of classes with her. And then I also took a class from her just this past semester, but she was teaching and I didn't know that about her. That's that's. Fascinating. That's great. It's also your story about Pascuala is also very interesting and very indicative of, I think, the community college experience that maybe some people don't realize the fact that at the community college we are small enough.

[00:30:36.900] - Brian Shelton

In some respects, even though Harper's a very large school, we are small enough to give personal attention to people and for people to for students to actually get to know staff and faculty and have them actually be a change agent in their life. And I think that's a very important part of the community college experience that that some people just don't realize.

[00:30:55.350] - Reveca Torres

Yeah, you do get attention and you get to know your you know, the faculty, the advisors.

[00:31:00.870] - Reveca Torres

And, you know, I I have stayed in touch with with a lot of people from Harper, you know, like I value that I value those relationships because it's a time where you're trying to figure out what to do and and how to do it and like having people guide you through that.

[00:31:20.010] - Reveca Torres

It's really great.

[00:31:21.150] - Brian Shelton

I was just going to ask you, as we wrap up here, when you were nominated for this for the Distinguished Alumni Award, what was what was that experience like for you?

[00:31:29.880] - Reveca Torres

It was cool. I thought it was you know, I thought it was going to be like an award. And you just kind of, you know, maybe maybe you get a certificate or a plaque or something. You know, it was much bigger than that. And I feel like, you know, there was a ceremony and a presentation and then photos. And it was really funny because I went back to Harper maybe in a couple of years ago because I, I like I like I mentioned earlier, I have caregivers that help me.

[00:32:02.580] - Reveca Torres

And I was hiring someone who was a student who at the time was a student in the in the health health careers.

[00:32:12.390] - Reveca Torres

He was studying for nursing. And so I he told me he was at Harper. He was going to get out of class. And I was like, oh, I can meet you at Harper and interview you there.

[00:32:26.760] - Reveca Torres

And I go and I sit at the table waiting for him to show up and he shows up. And then I kind of turn or my turn to the side and notice that my photo is up on the wall like a giant photo on the wall.

[00:32:43.410] - Brian Shelton

I've seen that photo.

[00:32:44.430] - Reveca Torres

Yes. I was like, I swear I didn't pick this spot because my photo is right there. I had no idea it was there, but it was a little bit embarrassing, but funny, like, you know, I was there then the photo was there. But yeah, it was something that I really appreciate the recognition from my friend. Like I said, Harper has played a big role in my life and not just mine, but like I have five siblings and all of my siblings went to Harper, too.

[00:33:13.350] - Reveca Torres

And like and it was a stepping stone for everyone in my family and our education.

[00:33:21.750] - Brian Shelton

So thank you so much for talking to me, Reveca. I really appreciate it. I'm looking forward to seeing more of your art, and I'm certainly looking forward to seeing your film when it's completed. You'll keep us up to date on that.

[00:33:33.930] - Reveca Torres

I will for sure. I will. I will be sharing that once. You know, it's still a way to go, but I will share.

[00:33:41.100] - Brian Shelton

Hopefully you can premiere it at Harper.

[00:33:43.590] - Reveca Torres

Yeah, that would be cool.

[00:33:45.060] - Brian Shelton

Reveca Torres is an artist and a 2016 Harper College Distinguished Alumni. You can see her work at revecatorres.com. Harper Talks is a co-production of Harper College Alumni Relations and WHCM Harper Radio. Our show is produced by Shannon Hynes. Our technical producer is Erik Bonilla Sanchez. Our theme music was created by Aiden Cashman. I'm Brian Shelton. Thanks for listening.