

Brianna Knotts

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

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Brianna Knotts (b. 1989, Morgantown, WV) is a professional independent wrestler in training. She works as a physical therapy assistant. In this interview, Knotts speaks about her interest in professional wrestling, her wrestling training, and her goals as a woman wrestler.

This interview is part of a series of interviews with independent professional wrestlers in West Virginia.

EH: Emily Hilliard
BK: Brianna Knotts

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EH: Okay, so could you introduce yourself and tell me your name, when and where you were born?

BK: Yes, I'm Brianna Knotts. I was born in Morgantown, WV, April 17, 1989.

EH: And why don't you tell me how you first got interested in wrestling.

BK: So my boyfriend watched it as a child growing up. He watched all of the major paper views, McFoley, Undertaker, all of the big greats of wrestling from the time he was probably 6 or 7. And then he got out of it when he got--you know, you become a teenager. "Oh, that's no longer cool anymore." And so he started watching it again in about 2013. And I was giving him a really hard time because he was just sitting there watching these guys and I was like--they're wearing tights and they're touching each other, and this isn't really--this is a bunch of baloney. And so I continued to act like that for probably a year and a half once he got back into it. And then I started watching some of the women's matches that were happening and they were called the Divas at the time, on WWE. I was like, why are they degrading these women by calling them divas? I was like they're out there taking chair shots, getting hit with tables, doing all of the same things that the women, or that the men are doing. And I think it was in 2016, 2017 that the Women's Evolution happened and they gave them major airtime. Like they were getting like 30 second matches and the fluff of the 2000s where they were running around in their underwear. I was like this is really degrading as women--we're all trying to break through this glass ceiling--why are you doing this to your athletes? So it was about that time when they actually started having like main event type action between the women and that's when I really started

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BK: Gaining interest and watching some of these guys, like Seth Rollins--he had a major--he blew out his MCL, like a total--the unhappy triad of the knee. Like blew out his meniscus--everything that you can possibly tear, he tore it. And it wasn't even--I think it was in a house show like overseas. I don't even think it was in like a major event. So he had a huge, like he lost the title, he had to give up that and a huge comeback. So I watched some of his like PT 'cause I'm a physical therapy assistant. I watched--I was like oh, they have physical therapists that work for the WWE? That's awesome! I kinda want to do that. But then I realized that they don't employ very many of them, so that would be a very hard niche to kinda get into. And I'm an assistant so I'd have to go back to school. But watching all of that unfold and then had a lot of friends that were like, "Oh, why are you watching wrestling?" Because it's awesome! It's like a true form--it's like the last true form of storytelling, I think, in television right now. I mean, yes, some of it's scripted, but a lot of the promotions, at least locally, you know, these guys are telling an epic story of good versus evil and it's just a site to watch these people, you know, very minimal communication and to put on such an epic feat of talent. I mean some of these guys have been doing this for 10, 20, 30 years even, and you know your body takes its physical toll. But just watching this all unfold, and just appreciating what these people, what these athletes are doing, for the sake of the audience. Because their end goal isn't to show that they can do all these awesome back flips and air kicks and all of this. It's really for the audience. And I think a lot of people fail to realize that when they're watching wrestling--that what they're doing isn't for their gratification. It's for us as the fans, as the audience.

EH: So how did you go from that to wanting to train?

02:08

BK: I think going on the Jericho, Chris Jericho's Rockin' Wrestling Rager inaugural cruise at sea--when we signed up for this, I was pretty much on board for because Diamond Dallas Page--I was, I still am, into DDP Yoga. So he was gonna be on board. I was like alright, I don't care--I want to go to the Bahamas, I want some sun, we'll go on this cruise. So we went and I was just blown back. Like we got there, we boarded as they were putting up the wrestling ring and they had to like physically engineer a way to put this ring on this cruise ship for the safety. Like the cruise company was--I guess they had this huge meeting with Jericho and at the time it was Ring of Honor and Impact Wrestling. They weren't AEW at the time. That wasn't even a thing. They had to like engineer safety for all of these wrestlers, all of the fans because you know, what if there's a--what if there's a storm? The ship could move, the ring couldn't move--it was crazy to watch them, because it was just big tanks of water under this ring. And from there, watching that from you know, 30, less than 30 feet away, 'cause we had the balcony of the ship and I'm short so I can't see when I get up front, so we always try to elevate ourselves. And just watching these guys that have never been on a cruise, let alone wrestling, you know, doing their passion. We actually ran into a couple of the guys on the elevator the first day of the cruise, and they were drinking a little bit, but they were like we've never wrestled on a boat! We don't know what to expect. So I think their excitement was just as big as the fan's excitement for something that had been Jericho's dream for 2 plus years that finally came together. And I don't know, just meeting some of the fans that were there that also shared a love for wrestling--it was like okay, you know. These people are doing this. Knowing like, their backgrounds of other wrestlers. For instance, like Britt Baker with AEW, she's a doctor of dentistry. I was like okay. When I started learning that women--you know, they've gone to school. They have master's degree, doctoral degrees--they're putting their body on the line? I'm like okay, if they can do it, why couldn't I do it? And watching like, I know, Total Divas is not like the most accurate depiction of wrestling life because not all of the wrestlers, especially in the indie scene, aren't having their hair and makeup done every single day. But just kind of getting that. Watching these women I'm thinking, you know, these women look more like models, not athletes. And not to say that to discount them, that they can't do it. But just watching them, I'm like okay, if she was a supermodel and she's like taking these back bumps and putting her body through this physical strain, you know, night after night, sometimes 6 days a week, why can't I do that? Like...so that's kinda where it come from.

So we went to a seminar. My boyfriend, he signed us up for this seminar with a couple guys that had been working for Impact and they were running a seminar in Winston-Salem back in July. So I was just like, alright, 3 days of wrestling? I don't know what I'm getting myself into--I'm gonna go to support you but yeah, sure, I'll see what this is about. I'd been working out regularly--I was like, I can handle this. Holy moly! Like 2 days--by Sunday when you're getting out of bed and your neck is like--you can't lift your body up off the bed because your neck muscles are not used to the barrage of back bumps as they call them. And doing that like 30 times in a row--trying to learn how to do it? You learn pretty quickly what not to do. 'Cause that hurts a lot. But doing that and just seeing--I was one of 2 women that were there at the seminar. And one of the women actually recently wrestled in Dunbar a couple weeks ago.

EH: Oh cool!

06:04

BK: And she remembered me from the seminar. I was like oh my gosh! That's awesome! So it was interesting to see people at various stages of their careers like we were day one. Like we'd never set foot in a wrestling ring--to people that had been training for a year or 3 years and had 50 to 100 matches under their belts. It was just nice and encouraging to have the--Tim Hughes and Bob Evans--the guys that were running the seminar, with Josh, one of the trainers at AML Wrestling in Winston-Salem, just be really supportive and be like you guys have something, like keep going. You know, this is day one. But keep pursuing this. Age is a number--like we met a guy there that was training that was 47 and he'd only been training for a year and a half. So I'm like okay, this is something you know, it's harder when you're older because most people are starting at 16 or 18 and they're training for 10 plus years. Even in Japan, those girls are starting at like 7 (laughs), 8, which anything with gymnastics, 8, it takes 8 years to hone a craft. And so I'm getting a little bit late of a start at 30, but I feel like it's what you make it. And at this point, I have to be able to put in as much time--it's gonna mean sacrifices with family and friends and having to say sorry, wrestling training is this weekend, like I have to, I have to take every advantage that I can because my days are you know, I don't have as much time physically to get all of the training in that some of these people that have been doing it. But it was a little bit of a jump from fan to trainee, but it's, I feel like I appreciate the art form so much more having understood how it works. And I still don't know exactly 'cause I'm so--I just started training at the end of July. And really August, so just about 3 months. And some weekends, you know, there's no wrestling training 'cause we don't have like a school to go to. We're just kind of...we train with Rocky and we follow him to the local shows, so we've traveled to Lincoln County, to Madison, here in Charleston, Hurricane, Marmet, and there's not wrestling every weekend, so we have to get there and I have to plan my work schedule around it to get off work to be there, try to be there at 3 to help them set the ring up. And then we stay until the ring comes down, so it's a lot of time and it's volunteer hours, so we're not getting paid. And we're paying to train, so...

EH: So do you go so you can use the ring?

BK: Yeah, yeah.

EH: Okay.

BK: 'Cause we don't have like Rocky doesn't have a school. There's a couple, like I think there's one in Saint Albans, but it's more expensive and I, with my work schedule I can't get there on the weekends, on the weekdays. So pretty much Fridays and Saturdays is what we're limited to. To 2 or 3 a month. So on the other times my boyfriend and I are practicing some of the lock-up moves in our house. We've considered buying gymnastic mats to put in our basement to practice some of the takedown moves and things that you don't necessarily need a ring for, but it helps to have the ring, cause then you know what it feels like. (laughs)

EH: (laughs) right! What kind of--so had you played sports before and what kind of workouts were you doing leading up to it?

BK: Yeah, so I actually in high school kinda dabbled in a little bit of everything. Like I was never the star athlete in any one thing. My parents pushed me like try that! See what you feel. And so I did--I was a band geek, I played trumpet, which you don't have to be super active to do that but you still have to have some cardio. I ran cross country and track, not the greatest, pretty much did it for conditioning for swimming. I swam. I played basketball but at 5'3", I knew that I was never gonna be a star basketball player, so I played like freshman and JV and that's when I switched to swimming. So I had some conditioning and I played a little bit of college just like intramural sports. And as my degree in exercise physiology, we did a whole, we had to take classes on weightlifting and weight training. Olympic lifting. So I had some background in that. And so I have an Olympic bar in my basement that I train with sometimes. And then the DDP Yoga Program has been huge for me because I got really really sick earlier this year and pretty much had to start from ground zero. Like I was in pretty good shape last year when we went on this cruise because I had been doing DDP Yoga every single day for like months.

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EH: And what's that?

BK: It's a mixture of like dynamic resistance, isometric muscle contractions while you're putting yourself in yoga traditional positions but DDP has changed the name so instead of like Downward Dog is the same, but he's given them like wrestling names, like "bentlegged barback" is like the--I can't even, honestly I don't even know the traditional yoga names now! But it's kind of yoga mixed with isometric muscle and calisthenics. So it's low impact on the joints, which is really good and he's actually been using it for sports training. So he's been cross training with NFL players to help reduce injury risk, same thing like he's introduced it to like NXT and WWE like AJ Styles is a huge proponent of it. Like he and Chris Jericho were a couple of the first guys that were doing it. And Jericho actually blew out his back and that's how he rehabbed to come back to wrestling, with DDP Yoga.

So doing that I'm actually in the process of becoming an instructor to teach it as well. So I got a lot of things on the table. But also I am a Beach Body Coach so I do--I started that in April after I got over my major illness with autoimmune disease and started, once I was strong enough to do more weight training I went from DDP yoga, doing that like 2-3 times a week and then weight training. And now I've done like it's called the Morning Meltdown 100 Program. It's 100 different workouts--they're like 20, 30 minutes line of variable strength training, cardio, like HIIT cardio, so a lot of jumping, which I'm finding is very helpful in the wrestling ring. Like it's a different kind of cardio when it comes to wrestling so even though I'm doing all of these workouts, when you get in that ring, it's a completely different beast. 'Cause we had--a couple weeks ago we had a training where they made us do all of these drills. Like you throw yourself down onto the mat, you roll out of the way like someone's going to stomp you. And you just keep doing that. And it was just like okay, I can do 30 minutes of cardio but this is crazy. And you felt it. But it was, I don't know, it just makes you feel really alive. That's kind of like the first time, the thing I remember most about training, or at least the seminar, was the very first time they asked me to take what's called a back bump, which is one of the most traditional things in wrestling--when someone gets hit across the chest and they fall backwards. That back bump is like everything of wrestling. So if you can't do that well, you're probably not gonna get very over with the crowd and people aren't gonna believe what you're doing. It's learning to fall. And I remember they said okay, go full force, let's see what you got. And I did

that and I was like holy moly that really hurts! But I want to do it again. I don't want to say it's like self-torture, but it's almost okay, my body's capable enough to do this. I want to keep doing this.

EH: Yeah, I mean I think that's what a lot of extreme sports--what people get out of it. And the adrenaline.

BK: It's an adrenaline rush. And knowing all of the crap that I've been through in the last year with this undiagnosed autoimmune issues that I've had--I deal with chronic daily pain. So I'm like this is pain that I can control. Like I'm not being forced to do this, but it feels like I'm still living. Like I'm not like 30 years old gonna be trapped in a nursing home in 2 years. I might be! That's what my dad's worried about. He's like are you gonna be in a wheelchair? Are you gonna be able to walk? Are you gonna be able to continue working? It's like dad, as long as I'm being you know cautious, it's like any other...like I could go out here and fall off the sidewalk and get hit by a car!

EH: Yeah, anything has risk to it.

BK: Yeah, everything.

15:02

EH: So in your trainings, what do you do--do you aside from moves, do you also focus on like costuming, gimmicks, facial expression?

BK: Yeah, Rocky has been working with us primarily since we're so fresh and new into training, you know, we're primarily trying to learn the basics--the lock-ups, the selling of, you know, being put in a move and knowing what it feels like to give it properly so you're not, it's not just me on the line, like I'm making sure someone else is being taken care of. So if they're, if I'm putting them in a compromising position and I don't know what I'm doing, like, we're both at risk for injury. So that's I think the biggest thing that they've taught us at the beginning is, don't do anything that you're not comfortable with doing and make sure you can do it well before you go out there and basically, you know, you're putting someone else's health at risk too. We have learned, you know, we've worked a little bit on promos and learning, learning facial expressions and learning how to carry yourself. Like we've talked a lot about, you know, if you get--you take like a pile driver. He's like okay, that's a serious move. You're not just gonna get up and come at me. You're gonna wanna be down. You're gonna--that would hurt. And they refer it back to--we did a seminar with Al Snow a couple weeks ago--he was in town. And he was talking about like being punched in the face. He said why do you punch someone in the face or poke someone in the eye in the wrestling ring and then just come at me like it's nothing. He's like, a punch in the face doesn't feel very good! If you've ever actually been punched, or if you've ever been poked in the eye. He's like, have you ever poked yourself in the eye? It doesn't feel good! So it's--and it's learning to slow things down. Cause I can already tell from like training and being with Rocky and being with the other guys that have worked with us--you do get anxious because you want to do well, but then you're in your head and it's kinda one of those things where you need to be able to know how to do these things so well that you don't even have to think, you just do. Kinda like, you know, we know how to brush our teeth. We could do that in our sleep, we could do it in the dark. The same thing goes with these moves--if we don't know how to do them, and we're you know, we get a match, we get a booking, we go out there and we look like we have no clue what we're doing and that's--I think we're still so fresh. I'm hoping by the time, like this time next year that I'll have a match or 2, but it's all up to us. It's how...everyone learns at a different pace and I feel like I've picked up some of the things like some of the harder moves, like I've picked up and mastered. But it's the basics that I'm like, I'll get in there and I'm like--what am I doing? Because I'm over-thinking it and over planning and as someone that's done that my whole life, it's almost like a mind

trip a little bit because you have to get of your own way. And you have to, you have to learn how to respond and adapt in a situation because if you call a move and they don't go for it, then you have to plan and have to just roll with it, because you can't just both be standing there looking clueless. The fans are not gonna be very happy and you're gonna look like-- no one's gonna book you if you don't know what you're doing.

EH: So calling a move is like you go for a certain move and they don't respond?

BK: So from what I understand because we haven't really delved into this, but I know a lot of guys will call spots prior to the matches. Like okay, we'll start with this and then we'll work up to this, and then this is our finish and this is our go home. That's kinda--some guys do that. Some people will just call every single thing like on the fly. And I've noticed like watching it on TV, like when you draw someone in really close and like headlock and their heads are down, well your heads are supposed to be up. But when they're drawing them in, they're saying, "go for this." But you can't even tell because they're so subtle and there's also like hand gestures like pulling of the thumb and saying like, I'm ready, reverse this or go into this. It's a lot of subtle cues that as someone that's knew in the business, I don't know all of those yet. But a lot of these guys that have been working for 15 years, it's just like--they don't even have to communicate, they just go with the flow of the match. They know how to reverse things, how to change things, what moves come into what. And it's so fluid, like it's a dance! It's wild to watch some of these guys work that-- I know one of the shows that guy got there like 5 minutes before he was supposed to wrestle and he like warmed up, went out there and you never would have known. Like he had never even talked to his opponent. So some of those things are still maintained, but sometimes I think for newer, some of the newer people, you know, they need those guideposts of the match. But from there on out, it's kind of a-- I don't want to say free for all--I can't think of the word--like a, just a...

EH: Improv?

BK: Improv! Yeah. They've improv-ed what they're gonna do and then I think a lot of it too here, is feeding from the crowd. If you go to do something and you have all of these moves planned, and the crowd's just not going for it, you have to kinda be able to go off the rails a little bit and maybe not stick to the plan that you had, because if the crowd's not into it, your match is kinda dead in the water, and that's what I'm kinda finding just going back through and watching tape of like AEW and watching Ring of Honor and even some of the local matches replayed. I'm like okay, this is where they gain the crowd's momentum and they took the time and slowed down to let the crowd react.

And it's--it's all of these things. It's not just the physicality of knowing what to do physically but knowing how to read a room. It's almost like a public speech that you're wanting interaction with. Like it's not just a one-sided conversation. It's a give and a take. And I feel like there's no other form of entertainment that does that. Like you go to a movie theater--you don't get to tell the movie what to do.

EH: Right, right.

21:33

BK: You don't get to tell Broadway or even like a concert--I just think of people yelling "Free bird!" So like you can't get that at a show--you might, like they might play a song, but they already had it planned.

EH: Yeah, yeah.

BK: But with wrestling, like anything goes. Like anything can happen, and I think that's what's so exciting about this time in wrestling because some of these newer promotions and even the local

promotions really pay attention to what fans want. And sometimes I think that might not be a good thing because I don't think wrestling fans always know exactly what they want. Because in this society everything is so instant there's instant gratification so if they don't--oh we didn't get what we want-- I kinda worry about that for AEW, like they're new and they're responding to fans' needs--or not needs, but their wants and it makes you wonder like okay, how are they gonna sustain this if the fans turn on something and they don't like it because it's new and it's fresh. But I'm sure they have tons of experience within their company--they can handle that.

EH: I mean I've been thinking about that and writing about that aspect a lot too because it is this conversational form and the way that that works is very folkloric to me because it is a community-based form where the fans have say over the direction. And I was kind of thinking of it as this community-based form but that is also working like pop culture, because it's market driven. Gary Damron is gonna make these calls because he knows it'll bring people in to buy tickets so it's sort of all based in the economy of it all but at the same time it's a way for community to shape a narrative which is very cool. I mean...

BK: Yeah, I don't think we've ever had anything like this in the--I don't know a lot of the history of WWE but just watching, like we kind of have strayed away from watching WWE because I feel like they're not listening to what their fan base really wants. And I'm sure the tried and true fans and for younger kids, it probably is a better draw because there's not as much...I feel like AEW has been a little bit more violent. No necessarily, but they've had some bleeding and WWE tries to stay away from that. But you're right, I think in today's society culture is shifting. It's the next big thing--you have to stay on top of it because we're going through all these trends and all of this social media. Like everything is just there. And you have, I'm sure you know, 20 years ago if there was a match and it wasn't good, or the fans weren't happy, there wasn't 6 million people on Twitter and Instagram talking about it. So I think that shapes that too and for indie wrestling even, I know I've looked through some things like of people I've followed and there was a bad match and they're already getting...like I think it almost kind of damages your, I don't want to say it damages your product or damages you as a worker in the business, but you have to be very careful in what you're saying. Even for me, someone that's new in this business, like what I say today could affect how I'm received 10 years from now if I'm hopefully still in this.

EH: Right. It's like being a politician.

25:06

BK: Yeah, cause I know there's a lot of heat. What is it--oh goodness, Hulk Hogan I think he was super--he had some racist comments that have come out and the WWE has kind of like swept it under the rug and there's still some really unhappy fans that are like why are you welcoming this man back with opening arms.

EH: So you're like a public figure in the way you (unintelligible) 'cause you have a whole record on social media.

BK: Yeah, yeah. And I think you know, trying to become a DDP Yoga instructor at the same time as also being a beach body coach and then you know, my public, it's grown a little bit. I'm sure as I train more and actually wrestle more I may have to change my personal-- I know a lot of the guys have like separate personal and but--these are things I never expected to have to think about like at this point in the game. I'm just training. But you know people are like, we know you--I'm getting all these friend requests of people that are working in the business. I'm like I don't... I met you once? It's crazy how it's such a community of people. Like they take care of their own. It's very like hey, can we do anything for you? But it's also a very kind of politic-driven society, 'cause there's still like the old ways of show up, pay your dues--helping to set up the ring. And I'm thinking okay, how do people do this that have a full-time job. So there's times that I can't make it and I feel like I'm letting someone down but at least so far they've

been very understanding like you know, you work a 40 hour work week, plus you're trying to do this on the side. But it's still trying to juggle home life, which I don't have any kids so that's helpful but I do have pets and they have to go to the bathroom sometimes!

EH: So is this all people who are following Rocky or is it affiliated with ASW?

BK: It's a little bit of both. Like I've met some of the other promotions, but like I'm drawing in some people that since I've been posting like my journey of this autoimmune, whatever it has, 'cause I still don't have an official diagnosis--since that started back in January, I've kind of been--I didn't really have any place for social media and I was like, you know what, I'm sure there's someone else out there that's going through this, and I'm going to just be a voice and show that you know, anything's possible. So that's kinda where that started. So yeah, a little bit of ASW, some of the folks that are workers with Rocky. I've gained some of them and it's wild because I just didn't realize that there was this happening here. Like I knew that AEW, well it wasn't, but I knew other wrestling promotions, but I didn't realize how big the scope of it was here.

EH: Yeah, right. So I'm interested in--I mean wrestling is obviously very male-dominated and I've just been interviewing lots of guys for it (laughs). It's hard--there aren't too many local... I don't think ASW has any women who are permanently...

BK: I don't think.

EH: ...on their roster.

BK: I don't think so.

EH: But, so I guess what are your thoughts on that and also looking at the way wrestling has been sexist in the past, like you were talking about the Divas and they didn't get a lot of airtime and it was sort of a fluff piece. So I guess what's your thinking about that and how you're kind of grappling with it.

BK: I think, you know, I actually had a small bit in Conquest Wrestling, Jock Samson--he has a girl, like they occasionally have come to the ring. And like they're his groupies, they're his fans. So they're like hey, when I went to this training, after the seminar with Al Snow here a couple weeks ago, they're like we need a female to portray his lover/fan girl--can you do it? I was like, I guess? And then in the back of my mind I'm thinking, well this is not what I want to portray for wrestling, but I was like hey, it's a chance, I gotta take it--this might get my foot in the door later down the road, when I actually know how to completely wrestle. But that--I think it still frustrates me a little bit, that we're still looking at women as more of sexual objects in the wrestling ring. Like the WWE is doing this whole segment with Rusev and Lana and Bobby Ashley I think is the fellow's name--where she's like in bed with him. And Rusev is her actual husband in real life. I just don't think there's a place for that at this point in time. I kinda get what they're going for, you know, oh he couldn't be a man, so... and there's some comedy to it. And I think that's more of the soap opera-driven--because WWE has a lot of writers that used to write for TV and soap operas. Not wrestling. So to me it kinda takes away--like I'm grateful that I got that opportunity and it was totally professional and he was super kind, but I was just thinking, this is what I don't want to do like as my character, as my gimmick, whenever I get to that point like I want to be a strong female persona for girls that are 10, 12, that look at, will hopefully look up to me and want to do this too. Because I think that's what it's gonna take for the shift of culture in wrestling for women to be taken seriously, and it's happening, but I still feel like there's some--I haven't met personally anyone locally that has been like oh, women shouldn't be wrestling, but there's still a lot of animosity towards like intergender wrestling.

Personally, I'm training with all men. There's been a couple younger girls that are between 16 and 18 that have kind of dabbled, but I've been like for the last 3 months pretty much predominantly the only female training and even at the local shows, I've seen like a handful of female matches. Like women's matches. So I feel like as women we really need to lift each other up and show that hey, we have a place to be here, we're not just eye candy. We legitimately want to show up and show our physical talents and show that we can hang with the guys. And I don't know why as women we want--I'm sure I'm not making WWE money like Lana is, but to me I feel like, it's cool to be sexy, and that's great and you can be sexy in another way besides showing that you're "being you know unfaithful to your husband." I just think of that segment--he was standing in the ring and they were like making out on the entrance ramp. And I'm thinking, you're kid--like you don't have children, but your kids are gonna find this and you'll be, oh that's just wrestling, but to the girl that's watching that, be like oh, it's okay--I can be in wrestling and just make out with the hot super star. I don't--and that's great if that's what women want to do, but I don't want that for myself. I don't want to just be a fluff piece. I want to show up, show that I know what I'm doing, and you know, if I have to wrestle men, to me that's fine. And if men are okay with that, because I think women can be just as good as men in this business.

And there's some, like Tessa Blanchard for Impact Wrestling, she's phenomenal. I don't know if you've watched any of her matches, but Tully Blanchard was her father. I don't know the significance but I know that he was a huge name in wrestling. She just had an intergender match, like a ladder match, and it was pretty brutal. Like she took some pretty hard hits and I was like okay, she's able to do that. And there's still people locally that are like women should never wrestle men. I'm like why? Why is that? "Oh, it's sexist." I'm like okay, that's sexist? But it's okay for women to dance around in their underwear and have a pillow fight in a wrestling ring? Like that was a legitimate segment. I just don't, I don't want that. We as women are always already fighting all of this less, you know we're being paid less in a lot of our fields and even the women in WWE are making significantly less money than the men. And I think that's partially because of Vince McMahon, like he's a very... I don't want to say he's sexist, but he probably is (laughs).

EH: Yeah, probably.

BK: So he's, I feel like that--to see like Brandi Rhodes and Cody Rhodes--like she is a great female figure for their company because I think she's gonna help. I don't know that the women's division that they have is quite as strong yet, but I think give it some time, it's really gonna be something special because you have a woman--I mean, what was it, Stephanie McMahon's in the top but I feel like she probably has to answer to her father. And Brandi Rhodes isn't answering to anyone. She's there you know, a proponent. And I think that that's gonna be huge in the next few years. I think even now we're gonna see more of women's wrestling just explode and that's kind of why I'm hopeful for myself because you know, I'm getting my foot in the door at such a tumultuous time in wrestling culture. It's just--and that's even what people have told me. They're like you have no idea. Like wrestling 5 years ago here was practically almost dead and it's just had this huge awakening. I don't think anything...

EH: Why do you think that is?

35:15

BK: I don't know if people are getting tired of like other forms of entertainment? I don't know if we're kind of, as a culture, as a society kind of going back to some of our like traditional roots like storytelling. I think that form is such a loss art form because we have all of this fake news and all of these other, what do you call 'em, like reality TV shows that are so scripted. To me watching, like I cancelled cable a couple years ago so we just pay for subscriptions, but watching wrestling to me is the most true form of entertainment because maybe it is scripted, maybe it is "fake" to some people, but the reality of those

people in that moment, thinking on the fly, I've watched so many almost slips, and then they just come back and just turn it into something phenomenal. And I think people respect that aspect of it may be a scripted outcome but in between is very, very real. And I think people are tired of having this you know, just now having something that's real anymore. Everything, you know, Instagram, we're trying to portray these fake unquote lives that aren't real. You know, people, you can slap a filter on anything and make crap look beautiful. So I think a lot of people in my age category are like okay, let's check this out because it's not--and maybe it's just a cycle. Maybe because the 90s and then we're kinda coming back through. Like everything--fashion is coming back that were 70s and 80s. Maybe because wrestling was a 90s and 80s thing, maybe it's just making a comeback. But I think more people are interested in that storytelling aspect, at least from the folks that I talk to. And even like friends that I have that have never watched wrestling, have never tried to watch wrestling and I'll talk to them and be like oh yeah, okay. And they'll turn it on and they're like, I didn't watch the whole thing but what I saw was pretty cool.

EH: Uh-huh, yeah. And do you think it's also, well people getting into it locally--do you think that's also maybe a rejection of WWE or to have some kind of live entertainment in their hometown?

BK: I think maybe a little bit of both? Because I mean, I don't think WWE is ever going to fall. It's such a huge component of culture in a whole, I mean it's been around-- I don't know the exact year it was formed, but it's been you know, 30 plus years. It's been a stronghold in the wrestling industry. And I think the changes here are people, people are excited to have something to go to. And in West Virginia right now with the opioid epidemic and the drug issues, it's nice to go to something that, I don't know, you feel safe? Like the people that are there, like there's tons of kids and it's definitely a different culture than I was expecting. Like the couple times, I was like oh, wow. Like I didn't expect this many people to be here. But I think people are excited to have things to do here and then maybe social media, people following that, it's kinda gained some traction, because people aren't just, especially for the local promotions, you know, those guys are having to do promotions, their promo videos on YouTube and Facebook, but they're sharing them and I think because of that platform they're able to reach more people and more people are saying, "Hey did you see Rocky's promo?" Or "Did you see Huffmanly's promo?" Like all of these guys that have put in years of dedication and are trying to get to that next level of success, it's important to have a strong community standpoint from behind them. So it's a toss-up. I don't really know, and I don't know if we're ever really gonna know why it's making turns now. But I think a lot of the fans of my age group, that people I've met on this cruise, there's a whole wrestling community, like 30 to well, I'll say like 22-probably 40 that have witnessed WWE and seen it at its low and seen it at its high and now it's kinda just there. And we're like okay, why isn't there something more for us? Like more entertaining that's not just a bunch of talking. And that's the thing I notice the most, even from local promotions. Like the ratio to okay, get a promo, talk, wrestling. Like the wrestling is the main component of it. And with like Raw, I feel like 90% of it is talking. And you get some wrestling, and maybe that's because it's a 3-hour time slot and they have a lot of time to fill, but I feel like you have enough talent, you could fill 3 hours of good wrestling every week.

EH: Yeah. What time is it by the way?

BK: It is 2:45.

EH: 2:45? Uh-oh. I'm late. (laughs) Well, maybe just one more question.

BK: Sorry, I'm yapping.

EH: No! It's really great. Yeah, I have a lot of ideas--I guess, so one of the things I've been trying to make sense of is the racialized character and I'm gonna talk to the Cuban Assassin. Like someone who plays a racial stereotype.

BK: Oh okay.

EH: As their gimmick.

41:28

And I actually haven't seen that so much with ASW or other promotions in West Virginia, but I think it used to be pretty popular, so I was curious what your thoughts are on that, like if it's dying in popularity and why.

BK: I think people--I would hope that people are kind of getting over the racial stereotypes but I know it's still very much alive and well in our country. But I think there are other ways that wrestlers can find a gimmick now. Like they're finding other outlets to promote themselves and not leaning on the racial stereotype crutches so to speak, so much. I know like with GLOW, have you seen that on Netflix?

EH: Yeah.

BK: The Russian character Zoya.

EH: Yeah, and the Welfare Queen.

BK: Yeah, Welfare Queen--I don't think it will ever totally die out. Like I think that that still, there's something, especially in like southern West Virginia, that's unfortunately someone's gonna find that hilarious and I think if it's done in the right place and as tasteful as possible, it's probably still gonna be something that people will respond--it'll probably get a mixed reaction, but they're still probably going to go for it. (laughs)

EH: Yeah, I mean I was at the one that had, in April, there was the Sheik from Syria.

BK: Oh okay, yeah, we didn't make it to that one.

EH: Yeah, it was. I mean it was like--oh no, are we going here? But then it was also, like it worked so well (laughs) because it is so easily... you can so easily see who's supposed to be the "good guy" and who's supposed to be the "bad guy" and he was like wrestling Huffmanly and then the henchman threatened that he would make the gas prices skyrocket! So it was like very funny and then I was realizing that the Civic Center, or at least one of the rooms is named after a Lebanese guy from Boone County, whose family was Lebanese, and I was like, this complicates this binary of Huffmanly the hometown hero wrestling this Sheik from Syria. You know, there are other narratives here in the coalfields where it's not so clear. But in wrestling it's always gonna be clear. (laughs)

BK: I think with wrestling it's almost like a kind of temporary lapse of reality comes and it's kinda like a veil of, if it's done in the ring, you know outside of it, I know in like the 90s people had like stuff thrown at them because people were--they still believed in the kayfabe, like everything was real. And I think now that that has kind of been kind of pushed aside, wrestling is going to be wrestling. I don't know that we'll ever completely get rid of that stereotypical character, because you're right, it does flow so well if it's done right and the characters know what they're doing and they know how to work the crowd. But I'm sure there can be like--there was a character that was like, oh he was here recently. I'm trying to think of what he did. Like he was like the... I don't want to say it was like White Trash, but he was like something like that. Oh he was like the liberal...

EH: Oh, the Progressive Liberal?

BK: Yeah, the Progressive Liberal. So things like that. I think it's gonna be like timepiece, like time period pop culture. It's gonna kinda follow those things so like if there's a whole tension in terms of like the progressive liberals with the election, I'm sure there's probably gonna be some pop-up gimmicks of characters following stuff like that. I don't know if those are like long-lasting things that characters...as a wrestler I'm sure you probably need to have more than one identity.

EH: Yeah, they have less of a shelf-life.

BK: Yeah, because those things probably won't get over every place you go. Like that probably wouldn't fly in like L.A.

EH: No, no.

BK: Or like upstate New York or somewhere.

EH: Yeah. Well I should probably go. I'm sorry to cut it short. But thank you so much! This was really great.

BK: I appreciate the time and sorry for (laughs) long-windedness.

EH: No! I also wanted to know what you're thinking for your gimmick.

45:47

END OF TAPE

END OF INTERVIEW