

NIKKI: Somebody asked me today, like, “When were you aware that you could sing?” and the way I answered that question was, “I don’t remember a time that I ever thought about it.”

I mean, it’s like music has been such a part of my life. My earliest childhood memories are of me singing and dancing and there being music and all things.

ADAM: I have a theory. I haven’t tested it nor am I even a scientist of any kind. And really, you’re the first people I’m presenting it to, just in a podcast format.

But my theory is this: we humans, we’re all alike. (POST 1) Sure, we may dress different or physically look different, but really, when it comes down to it, we’re all after the same damn thing, to be individuals.

And that’s what this podcast is about, to highlight how we’re all collectively just trying to be ourselves through the things we’re passionate about.

My name is Adam Greenfield and you’re listening to The People In My Neighborhood.

NIKKI: My name is Nikki Lerner and I live in the Oakland Mills neighborhood of Columbia, MD.

ADAM: I don’t live in Maryland. At least not anymore. I used to, though. In Columbia, in fact, and that’s how I know Nikki.

NIKKI: We met at Border’s through my husband and when I would come to visit him ‘cause he worked there. So that’s how we became friends.

ADAM: I have to admit, I thought Nikki also worked there with us.

NIKKI: Probably because I was there a lot. (laugh)

ADAM: So this brings up an excellent point, how well we really know the people we know.

I’ve known Nikki for about two decades, before we entered the Zuckerbergian age of Facebook and Reddit and other social media platforms built around community engagement. If that’s what you want to call it. So it’s not like we just met or anything. But how well do I really know Nikki?

Unfortunately we never kept in touch as much as we both may have liked. Life tends to pull you in certain directions and usually that’s away from many people, even when towards others. But Nikki and her husband David haven’t really been too far. We’re connected on Facebook and when they’re able to make it out to San Diego, we try to hook up.

But here's what I do know about Nikki, and they're both things I've known the entire time we've been acquainted. First, though not necessarily foremost, Nikki loves people and engaging with them, both individually and in a community.

NIKKI: I think everybody's on a journey and I'm curious about that journey.

And second, when Nikki sings, there's a power there that isn't just heard but felt, too.

ADAM: While that's playing in the background, I'll let Nikki introduce the band.

NIKKI: So there's four of us. There's myself, there's my husband David Lerner, who plays drums, Steven Watt who plays piano, and David Phillips who plays bass guitar.

ADAM: Alright, with that mood in mind, let's get back to what Nikki was saying about her passion for understanding and engaging with other people because to me, there's something both confusing and commendable about it.

NIKKI: I'm always curious about story and how do people overcome things just as much as why are people overcome by other things. I feel like people, we have definitely seen the best of people and the worst of people and I'm so curious that sometimes it seems to exist in the same person. And so I think just overall I have just stayed really curious about people around me.

ADAM: In case you don't know me, I tend to be a pessimist. In fact, my first word wasn't mama or dada. My first word was "no." So from the very beginning, I haven't really felt all that moved or compelled to trust people. It's almost as if Nikki was born the opposite way entirely.

NIKKI: I think I've always just been so curious about the life of a human. We are so complex. Actually, I think we all are way more complex than we give each other credit for, most of the time. I mean, we're way more complex than we give ourselves, most of the time. (more of Quote 3, possibly) And I think I've just always been so curious about what forms us, why do we do the things we do, what shapes our decision making? I'm curious about those things, even if they are not things that are positive or beautiful or those sorts of things. You know, I'm just as curious about why people choose dark things and dark decisions in their lives or dark words, as much as I am curious about things that are light.

ADAM: And you can really feel this when you talk to Nikki, too. Even when you watch her speak. There's an almost hypnotic warmth to it. But I think I know why. I think I know why I feel so comfortable when Nikki speaks or she and I has a conversation. It's because you can tell she's not only confident and all in when she talks about a subject she's passionate about but also when you talk to Nikki, it's clear she's genuinely invested in what you're saying.

NIKKI: You know, one of the questions I like to ask people is "What have you been learning?" I love that question. It always catches people off guard. But I feel like anytime I talk to anybody,

no matter who they are, that there's something that they need to share with me in that encounter that I need to know.

And so I love asking that question. What have you learned in the last three months? What are you learning, Adam, about loneliness? You know? Like, what are you learning? What is it telling you? What can you pass on? What do I need to know? Just things like that.

ADAM: Nikki's question to me about loneliness stems from a prior conversation we had. And I remember thinking both during that conversation and after how comfortable I felt around Nikki. Sure there's a good chunk of that that probably stems from having known her for so long but her presence, whether it's face to face or on the phone or online, is like a warm, comforting hug. You can't help but open up.

And if I was to answer Nikki's question to me about loneliness, I'd want her to know that over time I've learned loneliness is absolutely real but there will always be someone that will listen, even when I think no one will. And I truly believe Nikki would be one of those people if I reached out.

It makes me wonder, though, just how taxing that must be if she's out there engaging with so many people on a regular basis. Don't get me wrong, I think it's nothing short of amazing work she does in her community and beyond. But I wonder, if singing doesn't do it, how she gets her release. Is there something else she would do if she could, even if surreal, that required no training because she immediately had the skills the moment she thought of it?

Well, if you've been listening so far, Nikki's answer probably won't surprise you.

NIKKI: I would engage in fully becoming a messenger of hope and goodness and kindness. And helping to create a sense of, where people just feel like they could be themselves and become their best selves. And do that through the medium of music and connection.

That's what I would do. So wherever that's taking place and wherever my role and my gift would make sense in that space, that is what I would do.

ADAM: Thanks for listening to The People In My Neighborhood, a podcast series about sharing neighbors. The opening and closing music in this episode is by Blue Dot Sessions. A big thanks to Nikki Lerner and her band for permission to use one of her gorgeous songs, "Tell Me," in this episode.

Nikki, I really appreciate you taking the time to swing by the neighborhood.

NIKKI: You're welcome, it's my joy. It's nice to be asked about your life and things you've seen and learned so thanks for the opportunity.

ADAM: So until next time, you got any sugar I can borrow? I found a cool recipe I want to try but I'm short on sugar and I'd walk to the store but I'm not sure they're open right now so I figured.....