



TRANSCRIPTS FROM TATYANA MCFADDEN'S PODCAST

Andy Stevenson: Lots of people know your incredible back story. But there will be people who won't. Can you explain the extraordinary early years of your life?

Tatyana McFadden: I was born in Saint Petersburg in the fall of communism. I was born in 1989 and was born with spinal bifida, which is a hole in your back and your spinal column sticks out. Usually you need surgery after birth but for me, it took 21 days to have an operation, so it was a miracle I survived through those conditions. Shortly after that, I was put into an orphanage. My birth mum did not have the resources or finances to take care of a disabled child so she hoped for me to have a better life and put me into an orphanage. I lived there for the first six years of my life and didn't have any medical treatments. I didn't have an education or a wheelchair. The only way I knew how to get around was to scoot on the floor or to walk with my hands. The sixth year changed when my mum Deborah McFadden was there on a work trip to see the orphanage and to place kids into families. We met, I felt like it was love at first sight and my life changed forever at that moment.

Your birth mother was advised you would get medical treatment in the orphanage, wasn't she?

I was never mad or upset because I had to look at her perspective. It must be so hard carrying a child for nine months and knowing you don't have the resources, so she gave me a new life and I'm so thankful for her. She prayed for me to be put into a beautiful family and I am living a wonderful life all because of her.

What can you remember of the orphanage?

It was quite small but I remember it being so huge. Crawling everywhere. I remember the smell of cabbage and potatoes. You had a sleeping room and an open area for the kids. It was a simple life. It was ahead of its time to have someone disabled in the orphanage and they kept me safe. At the age of six, you're supposed to move to the adult, but they kept me there a little longer. I came back and visited the orphanage in 2011 right before London and I wanted to go back and thank them for everything they did. They transformed the orphanage into healthy kids and disabled which was really unheard of. During my time, I was the only disabled child, but when I went back in 2011 there were others there, which is huge. They took in and cared for disabled children.

You were a trailblazer even then. You were walking on your hands?

Yes, I scooted, whatever was fastest for me! When I came to the US, I was given a little red wheelchair which I used from then on. It's amazing what the human body can do and it's what we're meant to do. Bodies are meant to adapt to who you are so it is extraordinary.

Do you remember the day Deborah went on to adopt you?

Yes. She went around the whole orphanage and I remember playing with her video camera. She had brought some lollipops and I remember taking the whole bag and giving them out to all of the kids there. And we just hung out, I guess! She was trying to explain that she would come back for me, but I didn't really understand. And then she came back for me.

Can you sum up the impact she has had on your life?

She's made a huge impact. What she did as her career, she ran an international adoption agency, she worked under the first Bush Administrative for disability and she was a commissioner of disabilities. She was paralysed from the neck down in college from an autoimmune disease too, so her experience from growing up and being disabled herself, she helped me acclimate really well and fight for my rights, pushed me to be the best person. Bridget is her partner and she also took me to the track and to practice, so I have two wonderful parents who would take me to the Bennett Blazers every weekend. They're wonderful parents.

We should also refer to your sisters, Hannah and Ruthie who were both adopted from Albania.

We love each other, we get on each other's nerves and then we love again. And I compete against Hannah! We get on the starting line and get competitive but we have a special bond. When I was younger, I really wanted sisters so then Hannah showed up. Then Ruthie did when I was a senior in high school. I love doing anything with my sisters. We train together, watch movies, and they are always there for you at the end of the day. If you're winning medals or marathons, they help to bring me down a little bit. They're just my little rocks.

You have 24 major marathon wins, 16 summer medals and one winter Paralympic medal. You had to fight to be allowed to compete as a youngster though, didn't you?

I did, I had to fight to be allowed to train. Coming back from Athens and being at high school, it was a shock to me that I was discriminated against as someone with a physical disability. I was denied the right to run alongside other athletes and I thought 'this is not how it should be'. We're setting the stage of teaching people it's okay to discriminate people with a disability. So, I wanted to do something about it, it's not what I wanted my sister and generations to go through. So, I sued for no money, no damages, but the right for the opportunity to participate in high school sports. It was the hardest battle as a high schooler to go through for four years. We won, then took it to state level, federal law then when I was in college.

As a student going through high school it was really, really tough. I was mature beyond my years trying to fight this battle and having high school students around me who didn't understand why I was doing this. I was really bullied a lot. I remember coming home and crying all the time. I would get booed at track meets and team-mates would write letters saying I didn't belong, parents would come up to me. But it's the education. You have to teach people about disability and the sport of wheelchair racing.

How fast I want to go is how fast my arms will push this chair so it's just a misconception and I had to provide that education. The time was now and it's something I'm so happy I did. The reason it passed as a law so fast is because it was the right thing to do and now

it is forever and it cannot be taken away. I just hope any high schooler with a physical disability, if they want to take part, they can.

That must mean so much, maybe more than your medals.

That was always my goal. Whether children knew who did it or not, I knew that sports were so important to me and if it is to me, it could be for the next person. And everyone should be allowed to play, everyone should have that opportunity. That person doesn't need to go to the Paralympics or run marathons but it allows them to be part of something. It educates people that disabled people are just like you, they're not that different. And so when they get older, they will then hire that person because of this. It's the growth and education part of it.

It reminds us that law changes and activism are only the first steps, it's the cultural changes. And in amongst this as a 15 year old, you compete at the Paralympics.

In Athens, it was my very first international competition experience ever. I was so excited and didn't know any of the competitors. I kind of knew how to warm up properly and just went in and had fun. I knew I wanted to make it to the finals but I knew that I just needed to get off at the start and push my little heart out.

The Paralympics at the time weren't really recognised so the stadiums were not packed and the biggest crowd was my family. Being on that podium I knew I wanted to be the best in the world because if I won all these medals, I could have a voice. And I wanted to educate about the Paralympics and disability in my own country and globally as well.

When I came home after Athens, people didn't know the Paralympics happened. At the time you went, competed, went home without equal pay, so I was fortunate to have a few sponsors at that time. The only way to do something was to become the best.

In Beijing, the Games were unbelievable, and the crowd was amazing. Then London did such a good job of paralleling the sport because media grew, and sponsorships grew. Now heading to Tokyo, we had a really big shift in the US where we became the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee, and I finally get equal pay after 16 years of my career! I didn't think it would happen in my career but the sport is definitely growing and it's an exciting time to be an athlete.

By winning medals, it helps your campaign to get the access I guess, and it gave you a certain standing to say 'this is what happens'.

I think winning my first two medals gave the buzz a little bit more by saying 'we have an athlete who won medals for our country and now she can't race in high school'. Even more now as we're moving on, so far I've had an amazing career and I hope to have even more of one. But I want to use my voice and I feel like it's my responsibility to do something with it. There are so many before me who used their voice and I thank them so much for that. I know a few of my former Team USA athletes were at Atlanta in '96 and it's really important to use my voice.

London 2012, was it genuinely the Games where things changed a bit?

Yes, definitely. The whole attitude shifted. They made sure that we talked about the Olympics and the Paralympics, it set the stage. And we didn't want to have good Games/bad Games, we want it to keep going. Even now we want to make sure the Movement still happens in London, all those athletes need to get what they need. Rising

Phoenix will help with that because people see it visually in a film and I hope the continuation will help.

I get the impression that you could become a politician in the USA...

I don't know about that! Maybe the UN. Chantal Petitclerc is a senator in Canada now and she is a great person and someone I really looked up to.

You mentioned it briefly but Rising Phoenix is out now on Netflix. You're in it and a producer on it.

Four years ago in Rio, it was my first time meeting Greg Nugent the Exec Producer, we were talking about the Paralympics and my experiences. We were talking and discussing how people know about the Paralympics but they don't really know-know because it's a story that has never been told. And so, Greg was like 'it should be a movie' and I said 'yes it should be!' And he said 'well, why don't I just do it?'. It was such magical thinking and four years later, here we are! I met the team two years ago and my role as a producer was to stay true to the whole Movement. I told the directors what I went through as a young disabled person, my journey, what I hope for and where we are globally, how I want the film to go. And we talked about hiring people with disabilities because that's a problem globally, so I wanted everyone stayed true to their word. 16% of the people who worked on the film had a disability. The directors learned a lot and they learned things like finding accessible buildings, we have to go through so many things. Accessible buses or taxis or transport, we shouldn't have to hunt to find disabled people to work in film production. I hope it sets a change for Hollywood and a change for the British industry and it pushes a movement. 'Yes, we can have disabled actors and producers'. So, it was a lot of fun and everyone was so great. We were honest and open with each other too. I'm very picky so I was telling them we needed to redo the ending so many times! They took my advice on it so it was cool to see the different stages. It's really beautiful and every athlete is captured so elegantly, so composed. It's just quite amazing with the music and the drama too.

Oscars in February, Tokyo in August?

That sounds great! That's what we're hoping for.

When you arrive in Rio, it must just be non-stop without any downtime? How do you manage to train for so many events?

For me, I just love racing and take every race for what it is. I'm from 100m to the marathons so it is really tough, but I love challenges. Bring on the challenges and let's see where it will take me.

The medal I find most impressive is your Winter silver in Sochi, in front of your birth mother. And I believe you targeted it for that to happen. That must have been an amazing moment for you?

I was so excited. When I heard the games were going to be in Sochi I went into my mum's office and said, 'Oh my gosh, do you know where the next Games are?' and she did. 'I think that's awesome, back in Russia, how cool is that!' And she said 'What are you thinking? Do you want to commentate for NBC?' 'No, even better...I want to go as an athlete! Cross country skiing.' I just had to learn technique and I didn't know what I was getting myself into because it was the hardest thing I've ever done. It's not like track

where time matters, technique was the hardest thing to learn because it was more finesse than muscle. It was very hard to learn it and I really struggled a lot. You had to turn the page to see my results, I think I was 20th and I thought 'my chances for these Games are not good!'. A lot of people told me to go back to the summer sports and get ready for Rio, but I tried it one more time. It took my last World Cup before Sochi to make a final which led me to be on the team. I did it! It was always my dream as a young child to have my birth and adopted family in one competition. And you should have seen how many jaws dropped when I won that medal, nobody thought I could do it. But I knew I could and my family believed in me. I didn't care what other people thought and my purpose was just my family and it is something I'll never forget.

So, for Tokyo?

I'm trying to stay healthy and positive, do the training we can do. It's so unpredictable this year so I'm taking it day by day and I hope to do the full range in Tokyo.

You've seen such change now. How much more development do you think there can be?

Oh, I think we're just getting started. It's a perfect time for this film because we're in a pandemic so people are at home and will take the time to watch it. Then it's one year out to the Paralympics and I think right now we're finding ways to stay in touch more globally through talking online and sharing stories. It's really important to use this time for growth and I see it rising in the future. I hope for it to be on TV and for people to latch on and watch it. I just take it day by day and keep continuing to be that voice.