



**Storytellers @RPL**  
**Interviewee: Ali Stroker**  
**Interviewer: Sarah Kiefer**  
**Recorded on March 10, 2016**

**SARAH:** My name is Sarah Kiefer, today is March 10, 2016. I'm speaking with Ali Stroker who grew up in Ridgewood New Jersey. We are recording this interview in the Bolger Heritage Center of the Ridgewood Public Library. And to get started, Ali thank you so much for joining us today. And I figured I would just start off very simple yet complex question, can you tell us the story of your life growing up here in Ridgewood.

**ALI:** Sure. I was born at Valley Hospital and grew up, went to Ridge School and GW Middle School and then went to the High School. And Ridgewood was a really really important community for me and my family. I was hurt in a car accident on N. Pleasant Ave. when I was two years old and after I got injured, after I came home from the hospital the town really rallied around my family and gave us a tremendous amount of support which was was you know extremely important for, for the next 20 years of my life while I was still living in Ridgewood. And I, I was really involved in theater in Ridgewood. I was in Somerville Children Theater and did shows at George Washington Middle School and then I with New Players which was really fun. And New Players really became my family when I was in High School and changed my life and Rachel Down was a huge part of that experience for me.

**SARAH:** And I guess to jump ahead a little, because you moved away from Ridgewood, can you describe an event in your life that deeply effected you and your outlook? You kind of touched on that a little.

**ALI:** Yeah, I mean definitely when my, when I was injured in a car accident and I became paralyzed from the chest down, and you know use a wheelchair, that definitely the changed my entire life. And it shaped me to be who I am today and I wouldn't change a minute of that experience because I really believe that it has helped me have a really interesting perspective on the world and my life and relationships and my career. So you know I always say that you know that was, some people think it was a tragedy and I think it was a blessing.

**SARAH:** It's very positive. So I guess if you want to talk a little bit about your career. How did you get into acting? What initially drew you into it, and how are you doing with

it now?

**ALI:** Yeah. I was introduced to musical theater when I was seven years old. And I was introduced by a friend down at the Jersey shore who had just come home from summer camp where she had done theater. And her name was Rachel Antonoff, and so that summer we did a production of Annie in my backyard which was amazing. And then I came home from that experience and started taking voice lessons in town and got involved with you know theater shows, and you know anywhere that I could get on stage. I was definitely, I was ready. And I, I studied theater in college at NYU. I was a drama major at NYU, and then after that I decided to, you know from when I was a little girl I wanted to be a professional actress and performer. So I had the opportunity to be on the Glee project, which is a reality TV show where you compete for a role in Glee. And I was the runner-up in and then got to be on Glee which was life changing. And after that I, you know, up until that point I hadn't done a lot of television I did mostly just theater. And then after that I this opportunity to audition for production of Spring Awakening in Los Angeles when then moved to New York and to Broadway. So I just finished a 4 1/2 month run on Broadway which was so cool, such a dream come true. And now I'm auditioning again and back in the grind and living, you know, that actor life.

**SARAH:** Yeah, I can't even imagine what it's like on Broadway, can, do you have any particular story you'd want to share about being on Broadway?

**ALI:** Sure, I, what was one of my favorite moments. So the night before the dress rehearsal there's this thing called the Gypsy Run, which is where they invite all the other shows that are running on Broadway to come see your run of the show. And it was the first time we had audience in the house. And for most of us, out of like 30 of us, 23 of us were making our Broadway debut. And so we came out on stage and at the top of our show this production of Spring Awakening, there was sort of like a prelude where like we were just getting ready on stage. We got dressed on stage, and we warmed up on stage, and then the play started. And so we came out on stage to get ready and like just the audience erupted and it was crazy. I've never been so nervous, I've never been so excited and there was just so much support in the audience, and people just understood what it was like to be on Broadway and to make your Broadway debut. So was definitely a moment I'll never forget [laughter].

**SARAH:** Yeah I can imagine. I've never heard of that. I guess if we could go back a little bit to Ridgewood because the roots everything here, do you want to share one of your fondest memories of living Ridgewood? Whether it's with friends or family or?

**ALI:** Yeah I, Ridgewood, I mean Ridgewood was home. And Ridgewood, my family came to Ridgewood in 1905 when my great-grandmother, her family had been living in Brooklyn and they were involved in the General Slocum fire, which was a boat fire out in the Hudson River. And after that she had lost a few of her brothers and sisters and they moved to Ridgewood and opened the first confectionary shop in town. And so I just feel like my roots are there, like I was made from Ridgewood. And my grandmother was born in one of the buildings at the top of the town, like where the old

Christmas tree is. And I feel like, you know, the culmination of support and resources you know Ridgewood really made me who I was. And I just like have the fondest memories of the Christmas tree up in town being lit. And Fourth of July parade and the Memorial Day run. And you know I grew up on Pleasant, North Pleasant, and the Memorial Day run like all the runners would come past there. And the Thanksgiving day football game. And you know, going into town after school and going to the Daily Treat. And you know I mean, I have just the best memories and I feel so grateful that I came from such a supportive community. And it really taught me also what it meant to support other people, and that it's not just always about you.

**SARAH:** Right. So are you involved in any volunteer or community work where you are now?

**ALI:** Yes, I, I think community work and service work is so important. And I had realized that I can do that through the arts. Because the arts is really what helped me and saved me and really helped me develop into the person I am today. And so I love to do that, the arts as well. And I travel, I've traveled to South Africa three years, for three years, teaching in, at a home called Kosehaven in Johannesburg. And we do a two and a half week arts program for the kids that are living there who are either infected or effected by HIV. I also do some work with an organization called Be More Heroic, where we've toured the country sharing our story through music and it's an anti-bullying campaign but we call it a pro-love or pro-compassion because we feel like it's stronger to be for something than against. And I work with a group called the Walking Well Foundation and I'm on a wheel chair dance team with them, and we speak and we perform around the country. You know, sharing, you know, who we are and trying to break some of those stereotypes around disability and what it means to be in a wheelchair and how it's not a limitation but it can be an opportunity and to really own who you are. So, those are just a few things that I'm involved in. I'm really excited this year I'm going to be able to do a tour of the Vagina Monologues into some prisons in, in the local area, and I'm so excited to be able to connect with that community. And you know my dad has always been really involved, and my mom, in volunteering and working with causes that they really stand for and they believe in. So it feels like it's just a part of who I am and what you do as a human being because I've been given so much, and people have supported me so much, that the only real way to process that is to then give it back.

**SARAH:** Yeah. And do you still keep in touch with a lot of people in Ridgewood with, through either the organizations or friends and family?

**ALI:** Yeah, one of my best friends from Ridgewood lives in my building in New York and along with my sister. And then yeah I'm in touch with a ton of people from Ridgewood. And a lot of people from Ridgewood came out to see Spring Awakening which was so cool because you know one of the reasons why I was there was because of all the support and all the people who along the way said yes to me and really believed in me. So it was cool to be able to share that with all of them.

**SARAH:** And do you have somebody from Ridgewood, whether it's family, friend or mentor that you greatly admired? And can you say a little bit why?

**ALI:** Yeah, many people. I was very close with Susan McBrayer who is music voice teacher in town. And she was like a second mom to me through, you know, now my entire life and has been you know, unbelievably supportive and has really, you know, my voice I felt like, was the thing that set me free from my chair from my disability. And allowed me feel like nothing was gonna hold me back. And so she really helped me develop that and nurture that gift. And you know, we're still in touch and she's just a big part of my life.

**SARAH:** And the last question is, looking ahead what lifetime goals do you plan to work towards?

**ALI:** Have fun! Lifetime goals, that's so funny I was talking to my friend today at lunch, like oh my god what am I doing? You know like, and how important it is to be day-to-day in this career and in this industry. It's so, we think about long-term it's just like so overwhelming. But I do have some goals. I really would love to be on a sitcom, a TV show. I'd love to do more theater, I'd love to be on Broadway again. And I would love to have a family. I would love to have children and adopt children. And continue to express myself through this amazing art form that theater and storytelling and you know, TV and film. And you know the art form of storytelling is so powerful and it really has changed me and helped me express who I really am. So I just want to continue to do that and help people and try to make a difference for my community, for the disabled community. And be happy. It's what I want, I want to be happy.

**SARAH:** Those are really goals. Is there anything else you'd like to share? This is for the Ridgewood community, doing the oral history project, is anything you'd like to record further?

**ALI:** I wonder, is there anything else? I just think that Ridgewood has really taught me what it means to not only receive but also to give back. And how that is a really important balance and and it feels as good to receive support and help as it is does to give it. And Ridgewood I think stands for that and a lot of people have received a lot of support and love from that town. And I just feel very lucky to be from Ridgewood.

**SARAH:** Thank you. I really appreciate you taking the time to, I'm going to stop the recording real quick. But to end this, thank you Ali for taking the time to share your story with the Ridgewood Public Library.

**ALI:** Thank you.