**Fat Chicks on Top Podcast ep. 318**

**Maria Pendolino (actor, entrepreneur)**

Auntie Vice:

[1:01] Welcome to Fat Chicks on Top. You are here with your host, Auntie Vice, and it's great to be back. I hope you're all surviving the heat in the U.S. It's been quite a hot August so far. When we're recording this, I am in the midst of being near the park fire in California, so we are covered in smoke. I'm hoping everybody is safe and surviving. Today on the show, I have Maria Pendolino. She is an actress, a voice actress, an entrepreneur, and a childless cat lady, which is perfect in this time that we're coming to you. So welcome to the show.

Maria Pendolino

[1:37] I'm so glad to be the avatar for childless cat ladies everywhere. So glad to be here. Thank you for having me.

Auntie Vice:

[1:43] Of course. Yeah. When I was reading your bio, you mentioned your cats and your husband, and I thought, this is ideal. So there was an article last week in Them magazine on why Trump should fear childless cat women. So as the avatar for childless cat women. Do you have anything to say about the power that we have?

Maria Pendolino

[2:03] I think childless cat women are masters of Microsoft Excel and Google Docs. So like, do not cross us because we can manage a project, whether it is a bachelorette party, whether it is a baby shower, whether it is fundraising for a cat rescue. Like we have the online tools, we mobilize, we organize, we are ready to go. And also, I feel like, Like, I mean, I have four cats and they are a combination of both like lovely and like wildly disinterested. So you're finding women who are basically spending anywhere from 12 to 20 years of their life trying to convince a disinterested being to love them. So like they're really never going to give up. Like we are we are dogged. We are ready. We are persistent and resilient. Like, I really think that you picked the wrong group of people to, like, make fun of and pick a fight with because we are going to come for you.

Auntie Vice:

[2:58] And not only that, we don't have children's sports games on the weekends. We can go out and organize.

Maria Pendolino

[3:04] That's right. We have a free schedule and we can leave our cats home for two to three days while we're organizing because they just shit in a box. So really, like, we have all the power.

Auntie Vice:

[3:14] We do. We do. I do. And as a childless cat woman, I am so glad to find so many people I am in alignment with this.

Maria Pendolino

[3:22] Yeah. And also I think it's like childless cat women, we don't necessarily hate children or people who reproduce. Like I am a fantastic aunt. Like I have nieces and nephews that I am happy to be a wonderful adult in their life. I am really happy to pay taxes so that public schools in my area are great. And just because I'm not sending kids to them doesn't mean that I don't care. And I don't want to invest in my community. Like, not only are we, like, angry and mobilized, but, like, we're also great members of our community, and we're great adults in kids' lives all around us.

Auntie Vice:

[3:55] And I love that. Yeah, I love being an auntie. And I have the bandwidth to do things that the parents of the kids in my life don't. And that's, you know, whether it's taking them, the kids and babysitting for a weekend so mom and dad can get a reprieve, or trying to overthrow the patriarchy. I'm good with both.

Maria Pendolino

[4:14] Yes, Auntie Maria and Uncle Eric, we are frequently the host of birthday parties because we have a nice big backyard. What better way to show parents that you love and appreciate them by having the 15 eight-year-olds at your house instead of their house? We are contributing members to this child-full society, even if we don't have any living directly under our roof full-time.

Auntie Vice:

[4:34] Right? No, it's fantastic. So you're known for acting and voice acting. You started acting at a very young age, and there is some stigma around child actors, right? Yeah. That they all end up, you know, drug addicts and strung out by the time they're 16. What was your experience as a child actor?

Maria Pendolino

[4:58] Yeah, so my childhood acting experience was very much in the vein of community theater. And if you're a fan of the movie Waiting for Guffman, I feel like my experience was much more like Red, White, and Blaine than it was than like staying at the Oakwood Apartments in Los Angeles trying to get a job in a pilot. it. My parents were the opposite of stage parents. They had absolutely no interest in trying to hire me out or monetize me. So I was walking home with the art section of the Buffalo News, having highlighted the different community theaters that were doing musical productions like The Sound of Music and Joseph and the Amazing Technical or Dreamcoat and whatever. And I'm like highlighting these things and informing my mother at age 12, like, I need you to take me to this community center Wednesday at 7 30 I need a check for 12 dollars I'll be auditioning for this and I'll be performing blah blah blah so like my parents were just like we I mean I joke that I was 40 since I was 12 years old but like I just.

Maria Pendolino

[5:53] I had to find it. Like they, they were happy to support what I was interested in. They were always at, you know, the chorus concerts, the orchestra concerts, the school plays, like very much supportive middle-class parents. But when it came to the arts, I was like, I was ready. You know, the, the Tony Awards every year, that was like my national Superbowl. I would watch the shows that had arrived in New York. I, you know, grew up pre-internet access. So this was like the way in. And then I would like go to my local like media store and buy the piano vocal selections of whatever had come out and started memorizing.

Auntie Vice:

[6:28] The next Andrew

Maria Pendolino

[6:29] Lloyd Webber musical. So yeah, by the time I got to high school, I was just like very addicted to all things performing and then kind of pursued it in college and like took it off from there. But yeah, I must have been the most annoying 10 to 15-year-old, I think, because I just lived, slept, and breathed everything to do with Broadway and acting and performing and singing. And they show videos of people like Britney Spears and Taylor Swift and Carrie Underwood getting up at 11 years old at a county fair. I remember saving my allowance money when my class took a trip to Darien Lake, which is, like, our big Six Flags park. And at that time, they had, like, this booth thing where you could sing a song and they put it on a cassette tape for you. And I thought, like, that was, like, the pinnacle. I was like, I'm gonna save up my whole year's money so that I can make my cassette tape at Darien Lake. Like, I was just looking for any way to, like, perform and be in front of people and, like, be heard.

Auntie Vice:

[7:30] So many people have stage fright, and the idea of doing that is absolutely terrifying. It sounds like you never had that. What was it about the theater and singing and acting that was so connected to who you are?

Maria Pendolino

[7:43] I come from a very gregarious Italian-American family, so I think we're all just really loud. My dad and his father worked in a factory, so they were kind of like industrially deaf. So like everybody was always yelling. So I just feel like that kind of family atmosphere just got me being a person who was always comfortable kind of like trying to find my voice among others. But yeah, I just I loved performing from an early age. My mom and dad both listened to a lot of music. So we had a lot of music playing in the house when we were growing up. My dad took me to the theater when things were coming to town, like different national tours and things like that. So just having that exposure to it, I think, was a big part of it. But I just fell in love. I just fell in love. And I think, you know, kids come in and out of activities, you know, you try different things. And for me, I just remember like buying these different cast albums and like having the boombox that I bought with my first communion money like in our basement. And just like that was just like my space and my time, you know. So other people were finding dance or were playing soccer or whatever, but for me, it was just the music. The music and performing, that was my space and that was my outlet.

Auntie Vice:

[8:57] What roles, really, were you drawn to in your teen years?

Maria Pendolino

[9:01] That's a great question. As someone who became fat in their early teens, I feel like I immediately recognized that, like, the ingenue path was, like, not available to me. And I don't, I honestly don't know if anyone ever said that to me. But, like, you just perceive, right? Right. So in like middle school and high school, I was already playing like the kooky aunt, the grandmother, the weird neighbor, like the very funny character parts that are played by wonderful women like Deborah Monk and Mary Testa and like these fantastic performers, character actresses, you know, Melissa McCarthy in some of the movie movie roles that she's done. And it's just like, you're the funny comic relief. I remember my very first paycheck for acting was a summer job at a theater where I went to college. And it was the... It was an Agatha Christie murder mystery. And I played Mitzi the Hungarian maid, who was kind of like the red herring in the story. So everyone thinks that maybe she's the one who's done it, but actually she didn't. Spoiler alert for anyone who's looking at their or Agatha Christie murder mysteries for the first time.

Maria Pendolino

[10:17] And like, just, you're the funny one in the straight play. You know, you come on, you have the goofy lines. And then ultimately, you get to go back to your dressing room and read a book for 15 minutes because everybody else is doing stuff on stage. age. So yeah, I just, I immediately clocked from a young age that number one, I was not the love interest. And whether that was, again, explicitly told to me or just like I absorbed that, I don't really know. But I was not the love interest. So the best thing that I could do was figure out how to make people laugh. Because that was, that's a superpower, like being able to deliver those lines and get the laughs and move the story along in that way. And, you know, there were a couple of of times that I you know had great roles great performances and then you know would get called out by a reviewer for like being hysterical or something in a show and that just like fed the fire even more like this is what I want so I I went full-on you know pursuing just like branded myself as a character actress and said these are these are the roles I want to play these are the tracks that are right for me and I'm just going all the way in that direction how.

Auntie Vice:

[11:22] As being bigger body because Hollywood is, well, and across the board, European cinema and everything, very biased towards the body types they like to put on screen. What was the, like, I can't imagine going in for these roles as a bigger body. Like, that's terrifying to me. What was it like for you going in knowing you weren't this svelte or fat for Hollywood, which is like a size six, right?

Maria Pendolino

[11:47] Yeah, I had some weird experiences when I got to the professional world. I think theater is one thing, because theater is its kind of own thing unto itself. And in a lot of cases, there's not room for...

Maria Pendolino

[12:03] There's not room for like dreaming beyond the boundaries because there are situations where people are like we've literally already like rented a set of costumes so like like i would audition i would try to audition for like cruise ships and stuff because i'm a great singer and they're like the the show is already costumed if you are larger than a 10 like there's nothing we can do so there's just some like really interesting boundaries that exist and like we're breaking some of them down like we've seen some really cool and different and i would describe almost as subversive like there was a couple years ago a production at the only theater center they did beauty and the beast and cast like a beautiful larger black woman as bell and it's like oh yes like more of this please in the time that i was auditioning we were not there yet um and there were there was just this sense that like there were there were places that you could go there were places you couldn't go tv and film was interesting because in tv and film they're even more explicit about what they're specifically looking for. So I had my agent submitting me whenever like fat was specifically requested. And I remember I kind of called the group of women that I auditioned with in New York, I called them the plus size princess club, because the 10 of us would basically be at every audition, when the word fat or some derivation of it, you know, zaftig, plus size, chubby, curvy, whatever euphemism they wanted to use to describe our body type, it would be like like, the 10 of us.

Maria Pendolino

[13:26] So it's like, do they want someone who looks ethnic Mediterranean like me and Italian, or are they looking for someone who's a little bit more corn-fed?

Maria Pendolino

[13:33] I actually had a casting director. I was auditioning for a role of, like, a chubby tourist or something, and I went and I did the lines, and she's like, that was great. She's like, I just don't feel like your face is fat enough. And I was like...

Auntie Vice:

[13:45] Okay. Thank you for that feedback.

Maria Pendolino

[13:48] This is my face. Okay. So, you know, a director or something might have a specific vision in their mind of what they're looking for. And of course, that's their prerogative. It's an artistic choice. I think we've seen a lot of, I think we've seen a lot of different and better things happen in the last few years in media. I'm thinking of like Nicola Coughlin and the Bridgerton universe and things that I would not have imagined could ever happen in my lifetime. So I'm like really excited to see that. but also like we have such uh distorted views of even like what the norm or left of center is but it's something like 60 percent of women wear a size 16 or bigger and yet what we're seeing on tv in magazines and all forms of media are people like between sizes zero and four which is actually such a huge minority of the population and i'm feeling this even more acutely like when i'm getting instagram ads targeted to me and they're like oh inclusive sizing blah blah blah blah, blah, blah. I log in and I'm like, I click my size and it's like out of stock, out of stock, out of stock. And it's like, hello, there are fat people on this earth. Fat people want to see themselves in media.

Auntie Vice:

[14:53] And if you're going to advertise to me,

Maria Pendolino

[14:55] Stock more of my size, you know, we're here and we want to be included. So there was, yeah, there were just a lot of moments where like, it felt like it was clicking and I felt like there was a lane for me to go in.

Auntie Vice:

[15:12] And then You bring up, and I will circle back to acting because I have more questions on it. But you bring up the Instagram ads. And it's so interesting because the body positive language has been so co-opted. Oh, it's fully

Maria Pendolino

[15:28] Marketing speak now.

Auntie Vice:

[15:29] It is. It is. And like size inclusive will go up to an 18, which is ridiculous. Like if you're not going up to at least a 4X, don't target. I have groups that will hit me up and they're like, this would be great. Ad for your podcast and their maximum size is a 14. And I'm like, did you not do any research?

Maria Pendolino

[15:50] Yeah, that's my left thigh. Can I have the rest of my pants too? I get really frustrated when ads use fat or even super fat models, and then you click on the website and it's just traditional sizing. And it'll be like, you know, 16, 18, and then it tops out at 20, which is approximately a 1X to 2X. And I was like, the woman that you used in your ad is at least a 4X, 5X, 26, 28. She was beautiful. She was fabulous. I clicked on this for a reason. And you don't even sell clothes that fit her. So we're talking about not only co-opting the language, but also using like really misleading bait and switch advertising. And also, like you say that you want to be inclusive and like I have money. And this is the one thing that I do not understand about brands.

Maria Pendolino

[16:42] Brands are constantly, constantly being told by all women, plus size women, fat women, that we want to give you our dollars. We are done buying leopard print clothes at Lane Bryant. No offense, Lane Bryant, I've given you much of my money. but like we're looking for options i'm looking for different things and i don't always want to wear like a perfectly square corporate outfit eloquee like sometimes i want something that's a little bit more left of center and i feel like these brands that are trying all of these cool different things are trying to talk to us and we're like we hear you we'd like to give you our money and like they just don't make the sizes and we constantly just hear it back to us like there's not enough interest we we made it and then it it didn't work and it's like well.

Maria Pendolino

[17:23] Did you you actually like do it? Did you just make one thing and then that one thing didn't sell? So you decided that plus size people were not interested in your clothing? Like what did you really do? And is there any fat people at your table? Has anyone who is fat worked at your company to say, actually, if you speak to people this way, like if you build it, they will come, right? And I think that's the most frustrating thing to be constantly fed these ideas and images and as a consumer, like actually be willing to like put your money where your mouth is and then and get to their website and not be welcome anymore. And that just sucks.

Auntie Vice:

[17:57] Yeah. And it's not just fashion. It's things like jewelry. If you don't have chains longer than 18 inches, most of my listeners aren't going to be able to. That's a choker for a lot of my listeners is 18 inches. Like, where are your long your wrist? Like, I have hands. I wear a man's XL glove. I have I can palm a fucking basketball.

Maria Pendolino

[18:17] I have big man hands, too. I literally have my dad's hands and feet like on my body.

Auntie Vice:

[18:23] Yeah. So where do you get fabulous clothes? Because you're wearing a darling top as we interview.

Maria Pendolino

[18:28] Oh my gosh, thank you. I am a devotee of a wonderful plus size store in Minnesota where I do not live. And it's called Cake Plus Size Resale Fashion.

Maria Pendolino

[18:39] And it is owned by a fabulous plus size woman. And she staffs it with fabulous plus size women. And they do sales on Instagram and they have a great website. And I honestly do my very best to buy almost everything that I wear secondhand. I love keeping things out of landfills. I love getting a bargain. I grew up as a woman whose mother loved coupons. So getting something for a deal or a steal is a big thing for me. I also love there's a great store in Brooklyn called Plus Brooklyn. There's a great store in LA called the Plus Bus. And recently I saw one open in Chicago. I think it's called Lovesick Plus. I have not been there yet, but I'm going to Chicago in October and I I can't wait to stop in. So I would say the network of fat women who have already found great things and then are ready to refresh their closet has been like my greatest new shopping secret. And then I do enjoy the selection from Old Navy when it comes to like athleisure wear. So Old Navy is my first stop for like bike shorts, yoga shorts, kind of lounging around the house pants. I wish that they would bring plus sizes back into their stores because I I really would love to go back into a store and have a good try on experience, but I'm pretty confident with my sizes now. So I can usually say like, Ooh, soft pants. Let me have three. Here's my size. Good. There we go. I also do a little bit of buying and selling on Poshmark. I feel like it's a mixed bag. Um, but I found some good stuff there.

Maria Pendolino

[20:03] And, um, where else? Oh, uh, I think Torrid has great swimwear. They have had the, uh, the best, I've had the best luck with comfortable two-pieces that are sexy and feel like they fit and are cut well. And it's not just a tankini to hide everything or the little flouncy skirt to pretend like your ass is not there. Like I bought some really nice two-piece like tank and bottom suits where like my belly can be out and proud and I feel really comfortable and I'm not like squeezing everything into a sausage casing, I can just be comfortable. So those are, those are my shopping faves.

Auntie Vice:

[20:44] I love those. We'll get the links up for our listeners in the show notes because I'm all about promoting secondhand clothing. And as a plus size person, most secondhand stores, it's tremendously difficult to find my size because not only am I plus size, I'm six feet tall with a 34 inch inseam. So it's really hard to find secondhand clothes. So these secondhand stores that you can do online are fantastic. Yeah.

Maria Pendolino

[21:09] And the fact that they specifically specialize in the plus size community. Oh, one more that I would love to give a shout out to, and I will send you the link if you can't find it. There's a fantastic girl who runs an Instagram account called Shop Fatties. It's shop.fatties. and she pulls vintage and dead stock items from secondhand stores, thrift stores, and estate sales all across the country. She and her boy drive in their van and they do all this great shopping. And she finds some real diamonds in the rough because I feel like we get fed this lie that like in the 50s and 60s and 70s, there were no fat people. Like they didn't exist. And like fat is like a new thing, but she finds shit. She finds stuff from like the 50s and 60s. She finds some really awesome two pieces and sets from the 80s. I've gotten some really cool lingerie and like swim cover-ups and stuff. Really interesting vintage stuff that she has. And she does a great job of measuring everything. So we know that sizes have changed over time. And like what we call an 18 now is not what people called an 18 in like 1985. So she puts the measurements on everything that she sells. You can be really sure that what you're buying is going to fit. So love her.

Auntie Vice:

[22:22] I love that. I'm definitely going to check her out after this. You mentioned wearing a two-piece bathing suit. I do, too. I love having my curves and my rolls out. How did you get confident? Because we don't see people who look like us in two pieces, especially two pieces that aren't with the tankini and stuff where you actually are showing skin. So how did that confidence develop to like, I'm going to worship the sun in this two-piece exactly as I am?

Maria Pendolino

[22:50] You know, it took me a while. I'm not gonna say that I was born with the confidence, because I was definitely a person who was like, ooh, public pool, I'm gonna swim in a T-shirt. And I realized that my uncomfortability came from me projecting the perceived insecurities that I had onto the people around me and assuming that they were thinking things about me without ever having a negative interaction. So I never had someone at a public pool, you know, call me fat or point to me or laugh at me. I am lucky that I have not had that situation happen to me in a swimming or water situation. I know many of our fat brethren certainly have, and I'm not trying to undermine that at all. But I never had that experience. And yet, I was behaving as if I was trying to protect myself from that eventuality or believing that everyone around me had those thoughts. And it was my job to cover my body so that they didn't have to have those thoughts and they didn't have to be somehow bothered by what I was presenting.

Maria Pendolino

[23:57] And I would give a little bit of credit to Ashley Graham as someone who I look up to as a woman who has broken traditional beauty tropes and beauty standards and placed herself in areas and places where we as fat women have traditionally not been invited or not been welcomed. I would also give some credit to like the different plus size clothing manufacturers that started to like offer things like two pieces and bikinis to fat people. And then I would also just give some credit to my husband. Um he like reminds me all the time that he loves my body and the real the reason that he loves my body is because it's my body and not because he loves what it looks like or what size it is but because it belongs to me and he loves me as a person and i think as a person who is fat as a person who is disabled which we haven't talked a lot about but i have really big scars on my knees for my knee surgery, I got to a point where I was like, like, who am I living in this body for? Who am I visiting these beaches and pools for? I'm doing it for myself.

Maria Pendolino

[25:04] And I have bought over the course of my adult life, I've bought so many swimsuits that had so many different things to try and make me less fat. Either they are extremely tight and smoothing with all sorts of things to to keep the fat in place, or they have little flouncy sleeves and skirts. God forbid we see your arms. God forbid we see your legs. God forbid we see the cheeks of your butt.

Maria Pendolino

[25:30] And I just got to this point where I was like, I don't need all this fucking fabric.

Maria Pendolino

[25:34] Like, it's hot outside. I want essentially a sports bra and underwear. Why can I not have a bathing suit that is just a sports bra and underwear? I don't want straps. I don't want 17 different cutouts that's going to leave me with like a polka dot connect four tan line. I just want a simple bathing suit that I can get on and off without assistance and then just enjoy. joy.

Maria Pendolino

[25:58] And during COVID, my husband and I bought a hot tub. We were like a COVID recreation purchase. I literally bought it over the phone. I called up a recreational place and I was like, do you have any hot tubs in stock? They said, we have one. I said, I would like it, please deliver it. And they did. And I went and I bought like 10 bikinis for myself because I was like, I am going to be in a hot tub in my backyard during COVID around no one. I want to wear They're cute bathing suits. I don't want these suck-it-in sausage casing tankini bullshits. And I bought them, and some of them fit, and some of them hysterically did not. And I was like, yeah, this is what I want to wear. And then I found the really awesome swim collection at Torrid, and they had these great suits. No adjustable straps. It's just like slip it on, slip it off. No artifice. and they don't even have the stupid cup things that always like get folded over. It's just literally a sports bra. It's just literally a sports bra and a brief. You can mix and match. And I bought like four of them. And like, those are my go-to.

Maria Pendolino

[27:05] And I just got to a place where I was like, this is my body. Like it's going to get larger and smaller as I may or may not do things, but this is my body. And at the end of the day, it is attached to me. There is nothing that I can do. and no amount of fabric can change the fact that this is my body. So instead of worrying about what other people think, feel, or the fact that they might be uncomfortable because my thighs are jiggly, I'm just gonna put on a bathing suit and go swimming. And I can honestly say that leaving the emotional baggage of, like, trying to do things for other people by the wayside is way more healthy.

Auntie Vice:

[27:47] It is. It is. And I love that you bring up, they put on so much fabric on these damn things for fat people. Like, I like a slimmed down, simple line. And I don't want to have to Jenga myself into a bathing suit.

Maria Pendolino

[28:02] I could do an entire, like, 30-minute dissertation on what I call fat girl ruching. And it happens in bathing suits. It happens in formal wear. It happens in wedding dresses. And all it is is piling on more fabric to try and hide some sort of perceived flabby area. And all it does is make you look bigger and bulkier. So what I say is death to the fat girl ruching.

Auntie Vice:

[28:27] Yes, I am in complete agreement there. You bring up that you are disabled. So I want to talk about that a little bit. We have a number of disabled folks. So you were out, you were acting, you had a recurrent role on Army Wives and you developed psoriatic arthritis. So for our folks who don't know what that is, I mean, they've probably seen the drug commercials because all the biologics are really big right now. But what is psoriatic arthritis?

Maria Pendolino

[28:53] Yes, if you're suffering from moderate to severe psoriatic arthritis. Yeah, so psoriatic arthritis is an autoimmune condition. And basically what happens is you have inflammation in your body and your immune system essentially gets confused. And it thinks that your joints, the healthy tissue of your joints, are actually the enemy that need to be destroyed. So your body is actively kind of eating away at healthy joint tissue, which causes inflammation, pain, swelling, and that joint degradation can eventually lead to osteoarthritis, which is the type of arthritis that we associate with old people rubbing their hands in aspir cream commercials from, you know, gardening or athletes and overuse or the guy who golfs every day and at age 55 needs a knee replacement. It gets to that level of arthritis. It just happens very, very quickly and at your body's own kind of activity.

Auntie Vice:

[29:42] So I was diagnosed when I was 22. It was right after I had moved to New York City.

Maria Pendolino

[29:47] I was the first time living in a pedestrian kind of urban environment. And at first, I thought it was because I was wearing Old Navy flip-flops. So I thought that me walking around the Upper West Side in Old Navy flip-flops, I was like, that is the source of my knee pain. Let me go get myself some shoes. So I went and had like fancy custom orthotics made and I bought these really expensive sneakers and I was like, all right, I'm a working girl in the city. And it just started to hurt more and more and more. I went to one orthopedist who told me that my kneecaps sat too high and that's why I was experiencing knee pain. Turns out, false. I continue to experience pain. So I actually got the New York Magazine that has like the ranking of doctors every year And I paid out of pocket to see the number one orthopedist in New York City in his fancy office on Fifth Avenue with cucumber water and warm towels.

Maria Pendolino

[30:42] And he took one look at my x-rays and kind of my whole health history. And it was like, I don't think you have an orthopedic problem. I think you have a blood problem. And I think you should go see a rheumatologist. So he sent me down to NYU and I met with a rheumatologist. And he did kind of like the whole workup and then said to me, he's like, okay, out of everything that we talked about, is there anything else in your history that we haven't talked about, even if it seems like it wouldn't be related? And I said, well, I have psoriasis, but it's very, very mild. I just get it on my scalp. And sometimes when I'm stressed out, I get it on my knees and my elbows. He whips around in his chair and he gets this brochure and it says psoriatic arthritis. And psoriatic arthritis as an autoimmune condition tends to affect women more than men. It tends to hit women in in their 20s and 30s. That's kind of the period where most people are diagnosed. And basically, it had all of my symptoms. And it is frequently found as a disease that lives alongside people who already suffer from psoriasis. And I was diagnosed with psoriasis when I was in my early preteen years, around 12 years old. So I started taking various medications with some success, some not success.

Maria Pendolino

[31:50] But basically, what happened is throughout my mid to late 20s, the joint kind of degradation just like really proceeded very, very quickly. And it got to the point where I had trouble standing, walking, had trouble going up and down the stairs. And living in New York, the pedestrian wonderland got really, really difficult. I was living in a third floor walk up at that time. And like, God forbid, you get off at one of the subway stops that's so far underground that they have escalators and the escalators are broken. And very few subway stations in New York City have elevators. And when they do, a lot of times they're out of order or they've You've been used as urinals and you don't want to get in them. So it just became increasingly difficult to live...

Auntie Vice:

[32:29] To live and breathe in New York,

Maria Pendolino

[32:31] Ultimately that was what helped me make the decision to leave and come back to Buffalo where I grew up, just because it's an easier place to get around. You kind of get in your car, drive to where you need to go. In my early 30s, I had my knees replaced because the degradation had gotten so bad. And now I identify as kind of a disabled person who uses mobility devices as needed. So I am an ambulatory wheelchair user, So that means I can walk, but I use a wheelchair or a scooter for distance. Or if I'm going to be someplace like a standing room only concert or something, I would bring a device. So essentially I have kind of like my own chair ready to go. So I choose my adventure, my device based on what I'm going to be doing. I have a mobility scooter named Scoot Bakula. He and I kind of just go over Hill and Dale together. He's got a headlight. He's got some beeps that I can do. It's just really luxurious. I've got a nice little folding featherlight wheelchair, which is great if I just need a little bit of help getting from one place to another. I have a walker so I can do some walking, put some stuff in my basket, sit down if I need to. And then I have a cane if I'm just walking from a parking lot to a restaurant and I know that I can make the journey on my legs, but I just want something for balance. So that's kind of been my disability journey. It took me a while to just...

Auntie Vice:

[33:50] Reconcile with the idea of being a disabled person.

Maria Pendolino

[33:53] I think it's challenging to acquire a disability. People don't realize that disability is like the largest minority group in the world. One in four people in America have a disability. It's something that you can come in and out of. You can become disabled. You can recover. You could become disabled again. But it's a population that I've gotten to know more about as I joined being a member of the disabled community.

Maria Pendolino

[34:20] And kind of advocate and amplify voices as I've learned more and more about the work at hand. And I think there's a really interesting intersection for fat disabled people. We know that fat people in media and fat people in public are often branded with monikers like lazy and, you know, unhelpful, unfit, all of those things. So there's an interesting intersection when you are a fat young person using a mobility or disability advice device and i think for me a lot of times as i was getting used to this identity again it was me projecting onto other people like thinking that they must be thinking that the reason i'm using a scooter is because i'm lazy like should i wear shorts so they can see the scars on my knees and then they know that i need to use a scooter and it's not because i'm lazy and it all comes from just these messages like surrounding us all the time. So I think it's taken me, it's taken me a while to just kind of process it and think about it. But I've gotten to a place where I'm proud of who I am. I'm proud of my identity. And I know how much better I feel when I choose to use the devices that make my life easier. They are not a restriction. They are freedom. So, you know, we don't say wheelchair bound because I'm not bound to the wheelchair. I am free because I'm in the wheelchair, right? So, things like that and finding the community have really, really helped me in forming my identity and then, you know, turning myself into an advocate for others.

Auntie Vice:

[35:49] There's a lot in there i want to touch on my brain as somebody who lived in new york my brain is still stuck on you walking around in the whole navy flip-flop it

Maria Pendolino

[35:58] Didn't last long it was only there was only about three weeks but.

Auntie Vice:

[36:03] Yeah i know how dirty those streets are and i was bad they are i've broken more than one walking around new york city and then had to walk home with one And it's awful. But so you use mobility devices. And has there been a problem finding ones that accommodate bigger bodies?

Maria Pendolino

[36:25] Yeah, absolutely. A lot of mobility devices are specifically developed for senior citizens who are more often than not frail and small. They have shrunk in size and perhaps have lost weight.

Maria Pendolino

[36:40] So there was when my husband and I took our honeymoon in Scandinavia, our last stop was Iceland. And we went to a museum in Iceland. And I had I had a walker, but they had wheelchairs that you could use at the museum. And I was like, Oh, that would be perfect. You can just kind of like wheel me around, we can look at stuff. The wheelchairs were for children, like they were so small. And we got there and I was like, my ass is definitely not going to fit in that wheelchair. So it's things like that, like them just not even thinking about the fact that disability can have different sizes and disability is not relegated to just senior citizens who are already on their osteoporosis journeys, you know? I have been fortunate enough that I've been able to find companies and brands that actually do cater to a larger population. I would say if anybody out there listening is like, oh, I really struggle finding this.

Maria Pendolino

[37:36] Adding the keyword bariatric to what you're searching for will lead you to the vendors that specifically support larger size populations. I'm not sure how bariatric became the term because it really is mostly associated with your digestive system and surgeries and things like that. But somehow this idea of bariatric, like if you are the type of person who could qualify for bariatric surgery, then you are also the person who would buy these products. I don't love the alignment of it having to be like a medical designation.

Maria Pendolino

[38:12] But I will say adding the keyword bariatric to whatever you're searching for is what I've found. But the scooter that I use, the company is Pride Victory. They have scooters that accommodate upwards of 500 pounds, which is great. Different options that you can choose based on where you are. the wheelchair that I got is from 1-800 wheelchairs and the feather light that I have I believe is rated up to 400 pounds and then I actually got the walker that I have I just got it off of Amazon I was just kind of searching for different kind of light easy to fold options this one had really high reviews and it's a very light titanium metal so you know it just doesn't take up a lot of space doesn't take up a lot of weight but yeah it's a challenge because a lot of times I'll find something like, Ooh, that's cute. And it's like rated for up to 225 pounds. And I'm like, not for me moving on.

Auntie Vice:

[39:00] Yeah. When you talked about the, the walker that has the built-in seat, my first thought is most of those aren't made for bigger bodies at all. And like, I'm always looking at, will it hold my weight plus 50 pounds? Because I'm never sure how accurate they are.

Maria Pendolino

[39:19] Absolutely, of course. Yeah, you definitely want to have that space in that room. I'll also call out, there's a great company called Scootaround, and they do scooter rentals in different cities. They definitely serve a lot of the cruise ports. So like if you're a disabled person who's getting off of a cruise, and then you would like to have a mobility scooter to explore wherever, you know, your ship is docked for the day, they'll deliver a scooter right to you. And I use them when I'm traveling for conferences or I go to visit my sister in Los Angeles and they'll deliver it right to your hotel and they'll pick it back up when you're done with it. And they have scooters up to like the super max that are rated for 500 pounds. So that's another like very fat friendly company that I'm happy to support.

Auntie Vice:

[40:02] That's great. The other thing I like is you talked about the internal phobia of, well, people must be thinking I'm using these aids because I'm fat. And I went through the same thing, especially when I have a flare and I have to use mobility devices or I'm having trouble negotiating something. It's like I worry I have that internal worry too how long did it take you to adjust to the this is just what my body is and letting go of that because for me that was a very hard part of the journey yeah it's

Maria Pendolino

[40:40] It's a super hard part of the journey I totally validate that and I still have the feelings like they don't go away forever but I would say every every disabled person or every fat and disabled person, I feel like you have what I would call like your dark night of the soul moment, which is like, it could be your come to Jesus moment or whatever you want to call it, but like that moment where you realize that you cannot continue trying to do what it is you're doing. And for me, that happened in Heathrow airport in London. I was attending a friend's wedding. I had a great time and I was very much in denial about how disabled I was. And I was doing my level best to kind of just like chug through. And I happened to be on a flight, a British Airways flight, that could not have been further from the security line when you get out of it. And Heathrow is an enormous international airport.

Maria Pendolino

[41:41] And, you know, there are gates that are close to security and there are gates that are in a different time zone from security. And I had 45 minutes to get from security to my gate. And by the time that I got to my gate, I was in so much pain. I was sweating so profusely and I almost missed my flight. And it was because I did not admit to myself that that distance was more than my body could handle walking. And if I would have just registered at the counter as a disabled person who needed assistance, I would have been assigned a wheelchair advocate to help me get through security and get to my gate. And then I can, you know, walk onto the plane. Again, you know, it's about the distance, right? If I had just admitted to myself that I needed the assistance, I would not have put myself in that position of being in extreme pain, triggering an unbelievable arthritis flare that lasted almost two and a half weeks.

Auntie Vice:

[42:43] I put myself in danger,

Maria Pendolino

[42:44] Really. I put myself in health danger. And I think that was the moment that I realized, if I would just admit that I need help, if I would just admit and ask for the help that I need, I will feel so much better. And that has been my experience to date. And it still is a journey and a challenge. There will be times where we get someplace and it's not what I expected. Like I researched it ahead of time, but the parking isn't what we thought it is. and I don't have the right device or whatever. And then it's about accepting help from the people around you. Someone saying like, oh, well, why don't you get out and I'll park the car? Or why don't you sit on that bench over there while we see if our table's ready? And it has been really, really difficult for me to accept assistance. I'm a fiercely independent person. I'm the cruise director of like my family and friends. Like I'm the one organizing things. I'm the one who's like the wild, gregarious extrovert who's like happy to talk to people, happy to investigate things. So it's really hard for me to like take a backseat and say, somebody is going to do that labor for me.

Maria Pendolino

[43:49] But I think when you get to one of those dark night of the soul moments where you have put yourself in a situation that you realize you don't have to be in, like if I had made a different choice, I wouldn't have been in that pain situation. I wouldn't have been in that physical anguish. To me, that was the turning point when I realized, okay, my body has disintegrated further than I thought it had. I am not the same person I was a year ago. My body and my joints are not the same body and joints that they were a year ago. So I can either get on board and meet myself where I'm at and try and find a way to live through it in a way that does not set me up for pain and failure, or I can continue struggling and struggling and struggling and just making things hard for myself. So instead Instead of like playing my life on hard mode, I decided to like, I don't know, I'm making like a Mario one reference. I decided to take the warp zone and get my mobility devices.

Maria Pendolino

[44:45] And I've been so much happier. I've also realized that like my friends are really happy to be willing and able allies for me, taking on the labor of like calling a restaurant in advance to make sure that they have, you know, the ability for me to sit in a chair that I'll be comfortable in. There's been this huge rash of restaurants lately that have all like bar height tables and don't have any like regular low tables. So like even just my friends like taking on that labor of like checking and making sure that they have tables that I can like be comfortable in is great. My husband and I went to a concert this weekend.

Maria Pendolino

[45:20] I reached out to the venue in advance. They had an area set up for me so that I could park my scooter and I would be comfortable. And I had a really nice view of the stage. And right before the show started, there was a woman who was kind of standing in front of me. So I just said, hey, would you mind when the show starts just like stepping to the side a little bit? So I've got this nice direct view to the stage. She's like, yeah, no problem. And then throughout the entire concert, anytime somebody kind of like danced their way into our area, she would like tap them on the shoulder and be like, hey, make sure you're not blocking the girl behind you on the scooter. Like she took on the labor and being my like disability ally without me even asking to make sure that like my experience was not um was not blocked by other people kind of like joining around and like i just had she's she was younger than me so i just had this moment where i'm like oh the kids are all right you know the kids get it so yeah i think when you have that moment and you realize it i i honestly if there are other disabled people listening to this i my hope for you is that you never have a dark hope of the soul moment. And you can get to that acceptance without it, without having to go through the pain and the anguish. But that was the moment for me where I realized if I treat myself better, everybody wins.

Auntie Vice:

[46:31] That is so identifiable from my experience, because it is really hard to admit to yourself that your body has just taken this turn. And with autoimmune, it's literally your body is fighting you, which can be so hard to accept. So I love the way you put all of that. Speaking of being the cruise director of your family, you are also an entrepreneur. In fact, you are a very recognized entrepreneur. So do you want to talk about your business and what you're doing and all of that cool stuff?

Maria Pendolino

[47:02] Yeah, absolutely. So So I basically am a working actor. I do voice acting almost exclusively now. I audition for some TV and film things here and there, specifically when they're looking for either a fat person or a disabled person. But mostly voice acting is what I pursue. And then, you know, I've got agents in different cities who are submitting me on projects and representing me that way. And then I also run my own voiceover services business where I work with small and medium sized businesses all around the country, all around the world to provide voiceover for the different things that they may need. I do a lot of work on the industrial side where I'm doing training programs, safety messaging. I do telephone systems. We're living in such a voice-first world now. You've got your refrigerator telling you that you're out of milk. You've got your car telling you that you're due for an oil change. And all of these things have voices, and that all starts with a human at some point.

Maria Pendolino

[47:55] Um so i've done a lot of kind of businessy work that you would not even think of as acting like when i was like auditioning for things i never really thought of that as quote unquote acting but they hire actors they hire actors to do these things and i love getting messages from people when they're like my husband is taking a training program on sexual harassment and i think it might be your voice telling him not to sexually harass people and i'm like that's amazing there was somebody shared on tick tock i had narrated uh i think it was like a defensive driving course that she was taking for her job and the course was like and then judy was texting and she took her eyes off the road and then judy got in a car accident so this woman was like showing the training program she's like judy no um and someone sent me her video and we're like i think this is your voice and i was like i did i narrated a defensive driving course it was me sending judy to her grave.

Maria Pendolino

[48:46] So that was really funny just having people like discover my like very under the radar voice work in that way. But yeah, I have really enjoyed running my own business. It's kind of interesting when you are the business and you're also the product. So you know, I can hire different people to help me in my business. Like I have a publicity team, I have a virtual assistant, I have an accountant, I have a lawyer, like I have all of those people. But like, I can't hire more people to do more work because people are hiring me and it's my voice. But yeah, I work I work with all kinds of companies from hospitals, small businesses, digital media studios. I do a lot of kind of social media messaging, short videos that explain how to use an app, how to sign up for your healthcare, all of that kind of stuff. And then I audition every day for major national commercials, animation, video games, and like that stuff is great. It's wildly competitive. If I book it, Yahtzee, that'll pay for the next vacation. But my bread and butter and kind of the foundation of my business is serving businesses of all sizes around the world who just want a professional voice explaining or teaching or introducing their brand.

Auntie Vice:

[49:55] So with that, the pivot really allowed you to stay in acting, correct? Because you can do most of this from your studio at home, right?

Maria Pendolino

[50:04] Exactly. So I am a working actor from home, which I didn't even know that was a thing that you could be. But when I was growing up and people asked me, like, what do you want to be when you grow up? I'm like, I want to be a successful working actor. And to me, that just meant that I was making my money from acting and I didn't have to be a server and I didn't have to be a substitute teacher and I didn't have to be temping. I could just make my living from acting.

Maria Pendolino

[50:30] And it looks a lot different than I thought it would. You know, when I was 13 years old, I thought I was going to be doing eight shows a week on Broadway for the rest of my life. Spoiler alert, not happening. And but yeah, when I like took a minute to just like take a deep breath, I'm like, oh, I am a successful working actor. I happen to do it from my home. And I run my own small business. I work for myself. And it is a great it's a great lifestyle. I really love that. I love having the flexibility of running my own business. I love networking with other women business owners. I joined my local chapter of NABO, the National Association of Women Business Owners, great chapters all around the country and just found other people who are doing the thing, which has been great. I've also networked with other broadcasters in my city, joined the chapter in my city of the American Advertising Federation to work with other kind of digital advertising creatives. So I've found ways to kind of up my business acumen and kind of my ability to run and scale a business as an entrepreneur alongside my creativity and my acting skills and all the things that I've been honing since I was the very annoying 10-year-old screaming and singing in the basement. You know, I've kind of taken the whole craft of everything, mixed that with the business acumen to become, you know, a successful female entrepreneur and business owner.

Auntie Vice:

[51:54] Well, and I love that. And I think it's so emblematic of what so many of us who become disabled have to do, because the regular work world, regardless of your industry, does not accommodate much in terms of any type of accommodations. We have the ADA, but it's still if you can't do the nine to five, if you can't, you know, anybody who has a dynamic disability, autoimmune stuff where you have flares, you're not going to be able to work. In mainstream. And it's such a huge percentage of us. So I think what you've done is really cool because it shows that you can still pursue what you love And it just takes a different form. It's just a different shape. Absolutely.

Maria Pendolino

[52:36] And we're in such an interesting place because obviously the height of the lockdown of the COVID pandemic was such a great equalizer because disabled advocates have been saying for so long that there are jobs that disabled people can do from their homes where they are safer, where they have access to hygiene equipment, where they have access to physical therapy equipment, where they have the ability to set up an environment that works for them. And you'll hear from disability advocates all the time, the majority of people who are disabled do want to work. And it's not just because we live in a capitalistic society, it's because people have skills and want to be able to use them.

Maria Pendolino

[53:14] And if folks were just a little bit more flexible, on the rigors of the quote unquote, nine to five cubicle life, like you'll find that there's a really great population of people who have a lot of dynamic skills, who if you just gave them a little bit of space on the scheduling and the reporting to an office, I think that's a big, big part of it. And the pandemic showed us how many things can be done from home. Real estate closings done from home, doctor's appointments, virtual telehealth, all of these things, and we come out of it four years later, and then we've got companies trying to roll all this shit back. And it's like, no, no, no, no, no. Thank you very much for the advancement. We're sorry that it took everybody so long to get on the goddamn train, but, like, don't take it away. Like, we need that. This is our link to be able to be the productive members of society that we want to be. In the voiceover world, prior to March of 2020, there were a lot of things that required you to physically report to do the job in New York or Los Angeles. It was very much a geo-fenced major market metropolitan game.

Maria Pendolino

[54:17] And I totally get that there are times when having people all together is useful. From a directing standpoint, if you want to do things as an ensemble, that all makes sense. But there's so many individual projects, rank and file types of things, that do not require a Madison Avenue address to get it done. So our industry revolutionized like 30 years over the course of like three days. And those of us who had already been working from home and had done the work in investing in our space and our technology, making sure we had really high quality microphones, high speed internet, the connection software, all of that, we were all just like, hi, how are you? Have been waiting for this call for five years. Glad you made it. Glad to have you. And it was kind of like this, we call it the home studio revolution, where kind of having a home studio is now kind of a requirement to be a working class non-celebrity voice actor because people now have gotten so used to the fact that we have them, that they're not budgeting for studio anymore. So we moved our industry forward. And there's other examples of industries like that where people realize it can be done remotely, it can be done asynchronous, you know, give people a chance. If you just tell them what they are accountable for and hold them accountable to that, and then say it doesn't matter if you're doing it at 9am or 9pm, when you're feeling the best, just get it done by deadline. Like, that's the way it works, especially for disabled people to have that kind autonomy.

Auntie Vice:

[55:36] Yeah. You talk about March 2020. I felt like I was like, welcome to my Thunderdome. I have been doing this for almost a decade. Now y'all are coming into my world.

Maria Pendolino

[55:47] Yeah, exactly. It was like, this is what we trained for, folks. Let's go.

Auntie Vice:

[55:53] I love that. What are you currently grateful for?

Maria Pendolino

[55:57] Oh, that's a great question. I am grateful for my friends and family who support me day in and day out. I am grateful for a career that I find fulfilling, that I'm able to do comfortably and safely from home. I am grateful for people who respect boundaries, whatever those boundaries may be in your life. I'm grateful for my therapist.

Maria Pendolino

[56:24] Every two weeks on video, she keeps me sane. And I am, I'm grateful for people who are saying the quiet things out loud. We have just entered here in August and when this is probably coming out, we will have just ended. But this is Fat Liberation Month. And I'm excited that there is a lot more people talking about fat liberation and talking about space for fat people.

Maria Pendolino

[56:51] I'm really glad that there are podcasts like The Maintenance Phase that are breaking down all of the anti-fat bias and stigma and all of the fucking junk fads that we don't need in our lives and are putting out truth and fact and science. And I'm always glad to have resources like that to clap back at people who are giving the old also-ran bullshit about fat people and being fat that are all based on non-truths from the 60s and 70s. So I'm grateful for the advocates who are continuing to push in that space. I'm grateful for organizations like Disability Belongs, which used to be Respectability, the National Association for the Advancement of Fat People, the American Association for Disabled Persons. I'm grateful for all of these amazing organizations that are having conversations at, you know, the White House level about what we need. I'm grateful for Secretary Pete Buttigieg, like, finally taking on the cause of wheelchair damage by airlines and taking disabled people and disabled travel seriously. I'm sad that it's taken so long for some of these issues to become things that mainstream folks and media are talking about. But I do think we are at the precipice of both fat people and disabled people actually getting some goddamn respect in this country, in this place. And I'm really excited to see that conversation continue to grow.

Maria Pendolino

[58:13] I love all of that. If.