

Audio Title: Tiffany Hammond
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Transcript

Rebekah Borucki: Hey, friend! I heard you were looking for our spot and I'm here to help you.

So, you're going to go past the corner bodega and down the block from the fresh cuts barbershop, and there you'll find a brick row house at the intersection of Literature Place and Social Justice Blvd. That's where you will find the stoop.

Our host Amanda Lytle will be there to welcome you to the conversation. *The Book Stoop* is the place for the hottest takes on book culture, nerd culture, current events, with best-selling authors, change-makers, and risk-takers, our favorite kinds of people.

I'm Rebekah Borucki, President of Row House Publishing, and this is season two of our podcast. Thank you for listening.

Now, I'm going to let you get to Amanda.

Amanda Lytle: Thanks Bex. Hey friend. Let me be the second to welcome you to our spot, *The Book Stoop*. I feel incredibly honored to be the host of this podcast and I'm so grateful to have you here.

Today on *The Book Stoop*, I'm speaking with Tiffany Hammond. Tiffany is the creator and the voice behind Fidgets and Fries. She's a Black woman with autism, a mother of two boys with autism. She's an advocate and a storyteller.

Tiffany uses her personal experiences with autism and parenting her two boys to guide others on their journey. Her activism is rooted in challenging the current perception of autism as a lifelong burden, cultivating a community that explores the concept of intersectionality, challenges dominant culture thinking on matters of race and inspiring thought leaders through storytelling, education, and critical discourse.

In the conversation today, we hear how Tiffany's community online came to be and how she uses this space to share stories that encourage true feeling in response from her readers.

Tiffany shares the back story to Fidgets and Fries and how her online community has had her back as the platform grows. We also hear about writing while angry has a true purpose, holds important messages, and should not be dismissed or ignored but accepted, appreciated, and honored.

Before we jump in, I want to invite you to share *The Book Stoop* with your community. If you're loving this episode, grab a screenshot and tag us on Instagram, @rowhousepub. Every share,

five-star rating and written review helps us find more listeners and climb the charts. So we're super grateful for your help.

We start our chats on The Book Stoop with a rather fitting question. So what are you reading these days?

Tiffany Hammond: I'm reading *Where We Stand* by Bell Hooks. It's on class. I just love their books. It's kind of like the direction that I feel I want to head with what I'm doing right now because I feel like I've touched on so much already. Gender and sexuality and race. I only touched on class probably like a little bit in the past and I feel like we need to have conversations about that, and I was like when I saw that book – because I've had this book for like ever, like years.

Amanda Lytle: So you kind of alluded a little bit to it but I would love for you to just elaborate on. You said, "what I'm doing". So tell me more about what you do because I've got some questions to dive into, but I would love for you just to give me the answer to what you're doing.

Tiffany Hammond: Well, right now, I primarily share – I like to think of myself as like a storyteller. I don't necessarily love the word "activist" but it's just something that like until like you find a different way to kind of like describe what I am and what it is that I do exactly, I guess it fits.

But I wanted a way to highlight the entirety of my humanity and the things that I experienced in my life and then want to inspire people to want to help others like me or that are in my situation or go through the things that I go through and my family goes through.

I'm like, "What is the best way to do that right now?" I am disabled. I'm autistic. I can't work and I can't be in the streets marching. What is the best way for me to put my message out there, to inspire others that are able to do the things that I can't do, do? You know, so I was like, "I like to write. I like to tell stories," and I'm like, "What better way than to just come on to this big vast social media world and try my hand at it?"

I did that and I looked at other accounts and I didn't like what I saw. It all felt like very mechanical, very technical, very – there wasn't any feeling. There wasn't any emotion. It didn't really like inspire me to want to act. It was just like, OK, you taught me some things about autism today. OK.

Heart reacts. Move on. You know, and I'm like, wow, I'm learning something but I'm not learning that I want to do more for this community. I'm not learning that I want to be an accomplice to your community yet.

I write stories. So that's what I started to do. I started to share stories. I started to try to connect my experience with someone else who doesn't know my life, who doesn't fully understand what it's like to be disabled and it kind of caught on because it's like you can reach people that want to help but they don't know how, and they don't see all that well how we're so similar.

You know, yes, I'm different. You know, I [0:06:19] *[Indiscernible]* but we have a lot of similarities. So when they see my things and they're like, "Oh my gosh, I feel that way. I get it even though I'm not autistic."

But then they seem me more. I'm more visible when I'm not being so academic and so technical. A lot of that stuff is just trying to get people to feel. I wanted them to feel. That was like the primary thing. I was like I want you to feel me.

You know, and it took me this long to get to this point in my life where I'm OK with being different and different is OK. I share now my different human experiences that are also a lot like everyone else's experiences as well. Only they don't like *[Indiscernible]* so I had to like show them.

I'm not that much different in life. My needs aren't that much different than yours. So like everybody is like, "Oh, you have special needs." No, the needs aren't special. I have the same needs as you. It's how I access them is different.

I have the same needs. I have the same wants. I have the same desires. It's just I need something different than you need to access those same things.

I want to challenge people. I want to challenge their thinking on everything, on race, on disability, on the whole entirety of anything that would classify as a social justice issue. I want to challenge your thinking on it. There's a lot of really horrible things and it wasn't easy when I first started.

Nobody was listening. They were not listening. It was like, "Why is everything about race?" It was like because I'm Black, my experience with disability is shaped by me being Black. I'm not going to experience autism in the way that you do. Our disability movements are very White-centric like health. So it's so interesting to be able to see that the same things that I was saying when I first started and getting like thrashed for it is like now this isn't anymore and I'm getting less heat for it.

I still get it, I still get it. But it is interesting to see that. It's interesting to see a lot more people listening and trying to realize [0:08:58] *[Indiscernible]*, trying to be accomplices, trying to be co-conspirators. But it took another Black body lying in the streets for them to find me and to get it. I'm still trying to figure out how I feel about that because that still angers me. That still makes me mad.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. Actually that's a point that has come up on the podcast before is that, you know, it took another murder, it took another Black body being harassed, being mutilated, being killed, being killed by someone sworn to protect you and that's what it took for – I know even Charney had mentioned that, Charnaie Gordon mentioned that.

She's like so my – was I supposed to feel grateful that my following skyrocketed after the murder of George Floyd? Like would I – yeah, great, but no. You know, how do you accept that? So you hit a really valid point. Yeah.

Tiffany Hammond: Yeah. I didn't accept it well at all. Like I'm thinking [0:09:56] [Indiscernible]. I was mad at the [Indiscernible]. It made me so mad. It was like all these things that I'm saying, you threw it back in my face. It's not race. You don't get it. We're all in this together. We're all autistic. We're all disabled. We're all – you know, we all experience it the same way and I'm sitting there. I'm like, "We don't." Like we don't.

Yeah, and it's just like the majority of people who are victims with police brutality are Black. Almost half of them were disabled and it's just like – and of the ones that are disabled, that are victims to police brutality, majority of those are also Black and I'm just like, "How are you thinking we're experiencing life in the same way?" and then George Floyd happens and now all of a sudden, you knew what I was saying.

It brings you back to like when you're younger and your grandma is teaching you that you got to be twice as good, and you don't fully understand it yet. You're just nodding and you're just like, "OK, OK." You don't get it until you're older and then you're like, "Dang, we do have to be twice as good. We do have to be twice as smart. We do have to be twice as resourceful and twice as capable," and then you know that you're good.

Like in my head, I'm like, "I know I'm good." I know I'm good at what I'm doing. I know I'm good at writing. I know I'm good at helping these families both on and offline and then when you – and I said, I want you to – you will just reach one person that gets that.

But then when you get it, you get hit with all of the 9000 people in like a day. Then you doubt that. You're starting to doubt. Am I really that good? Am I really that good of a writer? Am I really that good of an activist? Am I?

And that's a big part of what it is that I'm trying to do now is I'm trying to highlight what it is to be not only just Black but to be disabled and Black. It's just like so many families they help and that's part of the reason why I went into social media in the first place because I wanted – I didn't want it to be primary mode of activism. I wanted it to be an extension of what I was doing in real life and I would spend so many hours and so many phone calls and meetings and everything with parents, helping them with their IEP needs, helping them with how to fight for those kids in schools or with judges and how to write letters to their – how to do all this and I'm in Austin, sleeping in hallways, waiting to do mock hearings, real hearings, meetings with our legislators.

All of that stuff and when I call on them to like – it was like hey, this has been another situation in which a Black autistic person has been subjected to this type of harm and mistreatment and discrimination and racism and all of this stuff. Then all of a sudden it's I don't think it's really about race, you know. So – and then you're [0:13:27] [Indiscernible] and that's part of what

sparks me sharing in a higher capacity than I was doing in that event in the beginning. It was, my gosh, this is a horrible way to think.

You're alone. You feel alone. All those people you helped and then they don't help you back and that was angering me, and it hurt and when I came on to Instagram, I was probably the angriest I've ever been.

Amanda Lytle: Uh-huh.

Tiffany Hammond: And I started to find my footing here [*Indiscernible*] exactly how to share it and how to post it. What messages I wanted to drive home. I figured out how to channel that anger in a different type of way and I'm always angry when I [*Indiscernible*] I'm not angry with. It's like I'm always angry, always angry about those, always am.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. Interesting that you say that though because that just – even emotion just in general, I want to just go back to something that you had said about the writing that you do, and I had written down the word “feel”. I also wrote down similarities, relatability, and empathy.

If you are able to have other people genuinely feel, that is such a powerful tool and the relatability in that is that's where other people's experiences can truly be felt and then that's where that genuine empathy stems from. But I want to come back to your anger and anger is totally valid. I mean a lot of people talk about how anger is a negative emotion.

Like anger serves purpose. Anger is necessary. OK. So coming back to the whole feeling thing, I'm really curious about when you feel most seen or most appreciated online when you're showing up because you keep showing up.

Tiffany Hammond: I feel the most seen when I share the most vulnerable parts of myself and people get it and when I share something – because I don't – like a lot of times, I don't like to talk about exactly how my disability works in me. You know, I don't want to tell you like how exactly a meltdown feels for me or anything like that. But I have or when I share something very challenging about anything in my life. That's not necessarily stories. It's just me sharing raw pain that hurts and when you read through the comments – and it's not just the people that like get it. It's also the people that stand up.

When I see someone else say something that is just completely out of pocket or maybe, you know, just even a little bit wrong or even if they say a word that's just out of place or something and you see someone say, “Take a step back, take a beat. She's hurting right now. Understand that. She's just sharing this and she just needs us to be there for her,” or if you have – recently I've had a lot of – I feel my followers just offer to open up their DMs to people that feel like they're either confused, hurt or angry about anything that I share and they're like instead of bothering Tiffany about it, you can come to my DMs and I can explain to you what she is meaning and what she is feeling.

So that's something that I don't have to take on and I'm like, "My gosh." Like how amazing is that? We never had that in our life outside of my husband. Like I have never like had that.

Amanda Lytle: Hey friend. We are coming straight back to *The Book Stoop* after a quick break.

Yeah, that's like truly showing up.

Tiffany Hammond: Yeah. It's like so amazing and it's just like I didn't ask for that. Like I always felt like I'm capable of standing on my own and like fighting my own battles and I have some boundaries in place where I'm like I'm not even about to argue with you. You will just be gone. You know what we want [0:18:00] [Inaudible] whatever.

But to have people in your community like show off like that and get it and understand you and try to help you through these certain situations is amazing. I'm like man, already, you're seeing me right now. Like all I ever wanted was that. It was like I want to be seen. I want to also take some of the most controversial things in our community and I want to put them out there and I want to talk about them, and I want to have a different response to them that I had when I first tried to bring them up. But I felt like I'm in a different space than I was when I first started. When I first started, I was angry. Then sharing the best way and people weren't really listening then.

So now that there are more people trying to listen and now that I've figured out my messaging, you've figured out how I share, I'm taking advantage of the fact that a lot of people are trying to listen. So I'm going to push those out because it's just like you go through this life as like – you start off as this little Black girl and you learn from an early age that not many people are seeing me. They're not seeing you and then you throw in the fact that you're different and then you don't know why they're still not seeing you.

You're a little older. Now you got a name for it. You know, why you're different. Say, "How am I going to make people see me?" Well, I thought, oh like people not wanting to see me. So it's just like I don't know. I'm going to try. I'm going to try something because there's just a lot of things that I can't do. So I got to try and work with what I can and hopefully it works and that's what I do.

I channel every single emotion that I have into everything that I do. I don't always – like I said, I'm always angry. Like I'm always angry because we aren't where we need to be and so I was always angry.

I will write the most angry post ever about anything. I don't share those. I just write them and so like – and then I sit on them and then – for a few days and then I come back and then I rewrite them, or I change some things and then I – like OK, this looks good, and I sit on it for a little bit more and then I will share it. I like to think of that as growth because, you know.

Amanda Lytle: Oh my gosh. The reflection that goes into that just on its own is incredible and ...

Tiffany Hammond: It is!

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. But the digestion in the process. I think writing from a space of anger is quite powerful because in a moment – well, actually this comes back to a conversation I had last week for *The Book Stoop* as well was safety to be angry. You need a safe space to be angry, right?

Tiffany Hammond: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: And the comment from the guest was that it's like, you know, the Black community has never been safe in anger.

Tiffany Hammond: No.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Tiffany Hammond: We cannot express anger in the way that like – we're not allowed to be upset and angry over things. Like just recently, someone took my words, literally. Not even subtle. It wasn't even like – you could tell. So when I – and I got – the only reason I found out was because I got messages from other people that said, hey, this is you. You know, it sounds like you, it reads like you.

So when that came out and it was like far larger than mine and they came to me, and I thought of them as a friend. So I wanted to understand their thinking and their motives and their things behind what they did. So I'm talking to them in DMs and trying to help them.

That's what makes me mad too is because – even me saying that makes me mad because I'm saying there – I'm saying, I'm telling you – I'm trying to help the person that hurt me, you know. So ...

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, right, right.

Tiffany Hammond: So that right there was kind of like dang, you know, and they didn't even really fully apologize fully. They just like explained that because I was going through difficult times with my son in the hospital and everything that they didn't want to bother me with this. So I'm like, "So, you didn't think you could come to me and tell me you wanted to use my words," because of – I would love for you to share the pain and the things that I'm going through with your audience. I would love that. I'm not going to say no to that. So just come to me, talk to me and they were like, "OK."

We retracted. They erased it. They explained to their audience kind of why they erased it in those stories and that – and they said they're going to do a follow-up post about why. They were going to hold themselves accountable. They were going to put that out. They were going to do that. That never came until I spoke out about it in my page and then all of a sudden, then they came.

They were like, OK, well, I will put mine out afterwards and say that's why I did it and this is what I did, and they tag me in it.

But it was like I couldn't be angry that they stole from me. It was like I was being too harsh. I was being too mad. I was wrong for drawing attention to it. I should have never said anything.

She's attacking them. She's being – and nothing that I wrote was mean or more blunt. It was just me saying that I was hurt by this, and it needed to be made right.

Amanda Lytle: And hurt rightfully so. Like of course you would feel hurt having your stuff taken.

Tiffany Hammond: Yeah, and it was just that the responses to it. It was just like I didn't mean that. I couldn't and then all of a sudden, it was they didn't mean it. They're autistic. They're younger than you. You're supposed to be better, that type of stuff. So it's just like no, we can't be angry. We can't even be soft with being upset. I feel like we – I feel like the only thing that we can express honestly in these spaces is some type of joy in – you know?

Amanda Lytle: The word that keeps coming to me was “assertive”. Like you're unable to be assertive in anyway.

Tiffany Hammond: Right, you can't. You can't. But I think I've come to the conclusion that I need to share in a way that I need to share and the people that need to be in my space will be in my space and I'm confident that I will. But I do have like some setbacks at the times when you go, “Crap, that's just too angry,” you know.

Amanda Lytle: Of course. It's because you're human. That's the humanity of it, right?

Tiffany Hammond: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Tiffany Hammond: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: Well, you just mentioned space. So I'm really curious about the backstory behind the space that you've got and the name Fidgets and Fries. So tell me about that.

Tiffany Hammond: Oh, man. When I first started sharing online, I wanted to focus primarily on being a parent, being a parent to autistic children. So I didn't really lean in to being autistic even though it dominated my world. But it's initially “2 Dollops of Autism” for my kids.

As time went on, I realized that it was just too difficult to not address other aspects outside of being a parent. I wanted to talk about more than just being a parent. I wanted to be myself, activism, poetry, stories, education, whatever. I wanted the room to talk about more things and I felt like there's a lot in a name.

I don't know if people like think about that. When you come onto this space and you have an idea of what you want to be in that space, I had a purpose here. I had a thing here and that purpose was to grow in advocacy, generate an awesome community that wanted to help others.

So a name is important, and I felt boxed in with *2 Dollops of Autism*. It just felt like it was just parenting only and autism. So when I said I'm changing *2 Dollops*, everything that I did, flipping it. So I said I wanted a name that was going to be reflective of who I am as a person. I wanted to be connected to this community without actually saying autism.

So I came up with Fidgets. That's a big thing in the autistic community. So it kind of lets you know that my account is going to talk about autism. It's going to be there and then Fries because we love fries. So ...

[Crosstalk]

Tiffany Hammond: I was like I wanted it to be – reflect my personality, be fun, not box me in. So now I have like the freedom to kind of like play around in different things that I want to do. So that's how the name came about.

Amanda Lytle: And you mentioned even in your role as a mom. So you have autism, and your boys have autism. So you're using this space also to educate. Do you enjoy being in that role as someone who's also kind of educating in a way of sharing your experience?

Tiffany Hammond: When you put it that way, no. Wait. No, because I – it's just like – I feel like stories are the best educator. I love doing poems more, poetry more, stories more. I love telling stories that have like a message within them and, you know, people seeing themselves in those stories and then they're like getting it. But then I realized that I do need to have a space for, you know, literal education because a lot of people aren't getting it.

So I kind of started around with this intersectionality. That was probably the first thing that I went into doing in an “academic way,” the way that I don't necessarily like to do. Yeah, I don't like to think for myself as an educator, but I do educate.

Amanda Lytle: No, that's right. It's great to distinguish the two because people often – oh, who was it? Leesa Renée Hall and had mentioned the fact that she has never once called herself an educator. She has never once marketed herself as an educator. Therefore if you are taking on the role as an educator, by all means, call yourself that. Advertise as that.

But I think it's really great to distinguish that in fact you are not an “educator”, but you are educating others based on your experience. That's a really powerful place to be too because it's from such a place of knowing and lived experience.

I think that coming back to what you had mentioned earlier about the relatability and the feeling in the sharing of your stories and your poetry, that's the relatability right there is that that's the connection to the heart space where people are like, "Oh, I feel that ..."

Tiffany Hammond: Yes, exactly. That's what I want that – I don't want to be an educator. I don't – because honestly, when you are a Black person, your entire life feels like you are a walking textbook for white people. Like you feel like your life is a message for them and you feel like your experiences and the things that you go through, especially when you're on social media, so it feels like everything you share about your life and about yourself, it feels like it's a message for them. Like it's an educational experience for them. Like for many in my community, I am literally their only resource, and I don't like that.

Amanda Lytle: That's a lot of pressure on you but that also just assumes that every person with a disability, their experience is different. It should be honored and seen.

Tiffany Hammond: Exactly. Everything that I share here, that even if it feels super like educational and anything like that, that is not your stopping point. Like don't hesitate that and then you're like, OK, I'm good. No, I'm good. I know everything. No.

Research. Google is your friend. There are other accounts out there that speak on the same type of topics. Like put it all together. Make a notebook out of it. I don't know what you got to do. But you got to not use one person as your sole source of information.

Amanda Lytle: And also like I just wanted to tap on one thing that you had said about inspiration. We are currently doing a workshop series with Mary Fashik, and she is from *Upgrade Accessibility*.

Tiffany Hammond: Neat.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, she's great.

Tiffany Hammond: She is.

Amanda Lytle: I know. We love her and something that – I call them another "Mary Mic Drop" when she has these one-liners. They're these short little paragraphs of things that she says that just hit you to the core. One of them was if it takes a disabled person to inspire you, check yourself basically. It's kind of like that's me paraphrasing what her comment was.

But it's just like we're not here to inspire. But what you've just said made me think of the flipside of that, is that if your content – again, this is coming back to that feeling thing. I keep coming back to what you're talking about, the relatability and the feeling and the genuine connecting and similarities when it comes to emotions and feelings.

If that is sparking something within someone that they are digesting and taking the time to work through on their own, I just wanted to acknowledge the power in that.

So you're doing great things. I love following along. I'm really appreciative of you and your time and I wanted to offer you the opportunity here to give a shoutout to an account, a person, an organization, disruptor, activist or change agent.

Tiffany Hammond: Oh, man! There are so many. No. The one I love and adore the most is another Tiffany at "nigh.functioning.autism" on Instagram. So it's like N-I-G-H dot "functioning" dot "autism" and they are another autistic-parents-with-autistic-children. They are also Black. They are big on communication. They are one of the first people that I've come across that I saw fight so hard for non-speaking people like my son.

I adore them for their content. It's amazing. They are training right now to be able to help other non-speakers find their voices through spelling, to communicate. They are amazing. I just adore them. We are always talking, chatting, trying to figure out what is next for us, what is it that we need more of and how we [0:33:51] [Inaudible] about doing it. I just adore them. I don't know what else to say.

Amanda Lytle: Well, thank you for sharing. I will definitely link that. Go give them a follow.

Tiffany Hammond: Awesome.

Amanda Lytle: That's amazing. Tiffany, thank you so much for being a guest on *The Book Stoop*.

Tiffany Hammond: Thank you. This is awesome. This is awesome.

Amanda Lytle: Thank you so much for being with us. Please be sure to follow us on your podcast app and leave a rating where you're able. Written reviews help us reach more listeners too. Be sure to check out the show notes for all the links and share *The Book Stoop* with your community. Talk soon.

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