

#73: Betsy DeVos!: the Musical!

Jennifer Berkshire: Welcome to Have You Heard. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Jack Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire: And Jack, I thought that rather than telling you about the topic of this episode, I thought I would...

Schneider: I'm glad that you started by saying that because, you know, listeners might like to know that I'm coming into this unprepared, not by choice.

Berkshire: All right, well I'm going to give you a little sneak listen to the topic and let you take it from there. Are you ready?

Schneider: Okay.

Berkshire: Are you ready?

[Excerpt from "Shake Things Up"]

Berkshire: So Jack, admit it. I saw your little feet tapping there. You were snapping your fingers a lot. You're excited about Betsy DeVos!: the Musical! aren't you?

Schneider: I mean on the one hand, it was surprisingly good. On the other hand I couldn't help but think like some of that stuff is intended as satire and it could be lifted straight from transcripts. And I think that that's so telling about the times we live in where like The Onion isn't funny sometimes anymore. Or at least it isn't funny when we're reading it about politics and governance because it actually could just be the news listening there to quote unquote Betsy DeVos singing about, you know, disruption or the classrooms of the future or, you know, how schools haven't changed in forever. These are like, these are things that she says and it's funny, but it's also like kind of sad. This is like a tragic comedy that we're listening to.

Berkshire: Well, you can imagine that when I heard that there was a teacher in Ann Arbor, Michigan who was working on a musical about Betsy DeVos I...

Schneider: Got on a plane?

Berkshire: Well, no, but you can imagine how this would excite me. I'm trying to think of...

Schneider: You got in your Winnebago?

Berkshire: What the equivalent would be for Jack Schneider. I think only if you learned that one of your own books was being adapted by Netflix as a series. It's like that level of excitement.

Schneider: "In a time when test scores were used to measure school quality, one man wants to go beyond them...." You weren't expecting that were you?

Berkshire: Well, I'm not sure yours is quite ready for prime time, so I'm going to suggest that we skip ahead to Betsy DeVos!: the Musical! which is pretty close to being ready for prime time.

Schneider: Okay. All right. Let's do it.

[Excerpt: "She's the Most Controversial Woman in the World"]

Berkshire: Well that was the start of the opening number of Betsy DeVos: the Musical. I was lucky enough to get to see a staged reading performed this fall. And I also had a chance to sit down w/ the creative genius behind setting the story of our Secretary of Education to music. Quinn Strassel teaches theater at Ann Arbor Community High School and I talked to him a few days before and his troupe of performers were about to take the stage.

Just a note about our conversation. If you hear birds chirping or the wind ruffling the trees, that's because we're outside in Quinn's backyard. There is a lot going on inside the Strassel house right now. Three little kids are racing around. Quinn's wife Adrienne is rehearsing for an audition, And of course there is a musical to put on, So WHY a musical about Betsy DeVos? Quinn says the idea dates back to the summer he and a group of teachers spent trying to get their colleagues to take action around what was happening to education in Michigan.

Quinn Strassel: The things that were fun were the things that people...we just got big numbers of people and somebody said, you should write a musical about public schools. And I was like, yeah, that sounds like a barrel of laughs. People are going gonna love that. Right? And so I was like, I'll never do that. And then Betsy DeVos was appointed secretary of education and it was truly a gut punch for anybody in Michigan who really cares about public education. That was a really difficult thing to take.

But an interesting thing happened, which is that people...I noticed first of all, the Senate confirmation hearings—I don't think those went well for her. People, even like friends of mine who I might describe as conservative, we're going 'what is with her? You know, I don't know if I'm on the same page here.'

And then over the course of the next year, a lot of jokes about Betsy DeVos from people who I don't even think of as public school advocates and people who I never talked about public schools with would say that these for-profit charters are really a problem. I'd go, 'Oh yeah? Right. Oh my God, you get it.!

And so I remember two years ago thinking, you know, if I wrote a musical about Betsy DeVos that would actually work because there are things that she says that people find funny and it kind of helps explain these really complicated issues. I'll never do it, but I should write a musical about Betsy DeVos.

Berkshire: Quinn's idea was pretty much stuck at the pipe dream stage until last spring when he happened to mention it to his sister.

Strassel: My sister went through a lot this past year. She had chemo and as she was coming out of treatments, we got together for lunch one day and we were talking about things that would inspire her as she's getting back into work and what could be a spark. And she said, 'well what about you? Do you have a pipe dream?' And I was like I have this crazy idea of writing a musical about Betsy DeVos.

We had been talking about our high school experience at Ypsilanti—we both graduated from Ypsilanti High School and we talked about our drama teacher, Diane Hill. And it just hit me like, I have this pipe dream of writing a musical about Betsy DeVos and my drama teacher could nail that part. She is an incredible singer, actress. She doesn't look exactly like Betsy, but she's close enough. She's blonde. She's, you know, she's maybe not the same age, but she's close and she's incredible. She's a ringer—an incredible singer, actress and very funny too.

She's like an award-winning professional actress now and I thought 'Diane Hill can play Betsy DeVos!' So the first thing I did was call her and say, 'I've got this crazy idea. I shouldn't do it cause I don't have time, but I'm now feeling like I'm obligated to because you would be amazing.' And she says, 'well I'm really busy. I'm doing this and that. But boy that does sound like a lot of fun. Okay, I'm in.'

Berkshire: So you heard Diane Hill in that bit that I played for Jack, that 'I'm a Disruptor' number, and you know that DeVos is the most controversial of women in the world, but you still haven't officially met "Betsy." And one of the things that Quinn had to figure out was how to tell the audience everything they need to know about Betsy DeVos and all within the confines of a single song.

Strassel: So we need to know that she's important. That's part A. Part B is establishing this idea that Betsy is going to tell her own story. We're going to get access to what Betsy really thinks and so even then I had 20 different things I wanted to say and I just kept..I mean a lot of this show has been cutting, cutting, cutting. I got it down to we need to know that she's important. We need to know that she's had a significant impact on Michigan schools, that she feels like she has been mistreated and misjudged and she's going to prove everybody wrong tonight. I need to accomplish those things in this song. I got rid of all this stuff about Trump that I used to have. I got rid of all that. We have to establish that Betsy DeVos is telling her own story. She's letting her hair down tonight.

[Excerpt from song]

Berkshire: Okay, so this is also a personal story for you. Regular listeners to the podcast may recognize your voice. You appeared several episodes back in the episode that I did about schools of choice in Michigan and you grew up next door to Ann Arbor and the theater program in which you cut your chops is no more.

Strassel: That's true. I hear actually that they may have hired a new teacher who's trying to get things back up, up and going. But as far as I know, the last number of years, there hasn't been any theater at Ypsilanti High School. And that's, I mean, it's just heartbreaking for me because, Ypsilanti High School had incredible performing arts, not just good. I mean we looked down on Ann Arbor. We were the working class next door neighbor, but we looked down...We thought we... We had a world class choir. We toured Europe, you know. We were on Prairie Home Companion. We sang on that.

And our theater program was incredible, and part of that was Diane Hill, my drama teacher, my high school drama teacher. So it's very strange to have left Michigan, come back and to be teaching, and this choice thing has just taken over. And because I grew up there, it's my hometown, I see the impact when I go to visit my parents. I see the kids. So many kids are going from Ypsilanti to Ann Arbor for school. My paycheck, and I said this on your last podcast. My paycheck benefits from the demise of Ypsilanti Public Schools where I grew up. It's heartbreaking.

Berkshire: Quinn spent most of the summer writing songs and scripts and more songs until the musical really began to take shape. But he had a problem. Telling the story of Betsy and introducing all of the characters around her—like her father, Edgar, her brother Erik Prince, and her husband Dick—was taking way too long. And then there was the challenge of trying to explain the tenets of DeVos' religion, the Calvinist tradition that she grew up in. So he just kept writing and cutting and trying to figure out what should stay and what should go well here. I'll let Quinn tell the story.

Strassel: My original version of the show was a story about Betsy DeVos telling her story as you see her growing up before your eyes kind of thing. And I wrote half a script and had to throw it all away because it wasn't funny enough. And so I just thought, it's an evening with Betsy DeVos. We can just jump right in. I don't have to do character development for Erik Prince or Dick. They can pop in and out. But I thought I lost this song because I had a song where her dad sings, "Jesus Wants You to be Rich." And I thought I have to get rid of that unfortunately because it doesn't fit the new thing. And it wasn't till two weeks ago that I thought, wait a minute, she could sing "Jesus Wants Me to be Rich." And wouldn't that be funny if you can get a puppet out and she can explain predestination...You know, a lot of my research was about Calvinism and predestination and so I adjusted the lyrics, rewrote a little bit, but the next song in the show is her telling the students that she's talking to that "Jesus Wants Me to be Rich."

[Song: "Jesus Wants Me to be Rich"]

Berkshire: So there are lots of kids in this show. That's a key part of the story and I think that's important too, right? That DeVos gets painted as kind of, you know, like all she cares about is money, that her interest in the schools is primarily driven by, you know, profit hunger. But you capture a piece of that as well that, you know, that more complicated story about her volunteering in schools and the, you know, the complex role that she and her husband have played in Grand Rapids.

Strassel: There's two things here. One is that I have a former student I taught. I used to teach in Brooklyn, New York, and a former student of mine, Gina Femia has become a playwright and she is just kicking butt as a playwright. And I called her and I said, 'can you give me any advice?' And she said, 'whose story is this?' And I thought, well, it's Betsy story. And she said, well, Betsy is like, she's the villain in a way, right? Who's, whose story is this? I thought, oh my God, I guess it's the kids. Right? It's because really that's what this is really about. The fact that this has a significant impact on the lives of kids. And so that was a huge shift for me. And so I decided that there would be an ensemble of kids from a for profit charter school.

Betsy DeVos has told these kids if they do a good job in tonight's performance, she's going to do a \$200,000 renovation of their theater. She's going to fund that and she's going to fund their next year's season of shows. And so these kids are kind of performing for their lives. And so that was a really important transition when I was writing the show, to realize this show is really about the kids. And so we get to see the kids respond to Betty's policies, right? Like Betsy's ideas, Betsy's agenda kind of. You get to see what a kid thinks of it. And that was, you know, I think that was a big turning point because otherwise this is really just a Saturday night live skit. You know, it's funny for five minutes and then like what more is there? But I think the kids give the show substance.

So we get two things. We'd get all these kids from a for-profit charter school and we find out things about their experience. And you and I both know that there's a lot of problems with for-profit charter schools. But to hear a kid articulate it, I think, provides an important perspective. And then the other thing is I decided there's one kid who Betsy rescued from, quote unquote rescued, from the public schools and paid her tuition to go to a private school. And I am realizing as I tell you this, my whole life is based around podcasts, but This American Life did this podcast about Betsy volunteering at a Grand Rapids public school. There's this misconception that she never set foot in a public school. She barely has set foot in public schools, but she did volunteer at a Grand Rapids elementary school.

And at least in the This American Life podcast, there were two different moments where she removed a kid that she was mentoring and paid that kid's tuition to a private school. She removes this kid from a public school and pays her tuition to a private school, which in a way allows for me as a storyteller to find something good in Betty's heart. She is doing something good for this kid, but it presents two problems, which is that it removes funding from the school.

Her job was to come in and help this kid and help the school and instead she's really hurting the school. And it also provided a really important story arc for me, which is Betsy helps some kids, but what about all the kids? And I will say that that was for me, listening to that This American Life episode was really helpful for me because I have to get inside Betsy's brain, inside her heart. What is motivating her? And to find something that is kind of positive but also flawed is really helpful from a storytelling standpoint.

Berkshire: That episode of This American Life that Quinn is referring to was called "Vouching towards Bethlehem: and it came out in September of 2017. You should definitely listen to it. So part of Quinn's goal with this musical is to open our ears to the Betsy DeVos who we don't necessarily know. But of course, there are also the public controversies that have dogged her throughout her time in office and that haven't gotten enough attention. Take for example, her rollback of the Obama administration's effort to do something about the disproportionate number of black students being suspended from school.

Strassel: She used the Parkland shootings as an opportunity to get rid of these protections for Black students. And she supports vouchers going to schools that discriminate against homosexual and trans kids and families. And so there's just like a lot of...there's just a lot of really bad stuff that I had a hard time fitting into any singular song. I thought I need one song that sort of sums it up. So I thought like... the other thing is these online charter schools, so like a futuristic song where she's talking about schools of the future, autonomous classrooms, you know, like I wanted a song and, and, and so in all in on her website, she calls herself a disruptor. So I thought, oh, I'm a disruptor, let's shake things up. So I now have a song, I'm a disruptor, let's shake things up. Which allowed me is sort of a greatest hits of all of her worst policies in one place.

[Excerpt from "Let's Shake Things Up"]

Berkshire: In addition to writing all the songs you've been enjoying, Quinn also performs in the musical. He plays the part of Betsy's husband, Dick DeVos and does a number about Amway, the company, his father cofounded, called Pyramid Dream, get it? Pyramid dream instead of pyramid scheme? And Quinn also makes an appearance as another member of Betsy's family.

Strassel: It's hard to talk about Betsy DeVos without mentioning guns. It came up in the Senate confirmation hearings. It has come up in a number of interviews since she finds this way of sort of dodging the question by saying, 'well, this is really for states and locales to decide for themselves, I don't, you know, I'm not sure if I would have a gun like that. But you know, some schools need guns.' Well, I, I decided to force the issue and have her brother enter the scene. So Erik Prince makes a cameo and they have a conversation about it where she is really convinced that the best kind of teacher is a teacher with a gun.

[Excerpt from "Arm the Teachers"]

Berkshire: So I was lucky enough to get to be in the audience for that performance. And as is obvious, I thought it was amazing, but I was curious to get Quinn's take. After all that time spent writing and rewriting and rewriting again, what was it like to get to see his creation go live?

Strassel: Describing the show is almost impossible because I, I feel like I lived outside my own body for the entire experience. It was incredibly vulnerable. I've directed dozens of shows and I've felt nervous before, but because this is the first thing I've written and presented to an audience, the stakes seemed much higher. I felt much more vulnerable. It felt like driving off a cliff. And so the first laughs were, it was like an emotional to hear the audience laugh. All of this hadn't been in my head. And so to all of a sudden hear it out loud and hear that people responding positively, enthusiastically, and to hear that sustain itself over the course of an hour and a half, happiness doesn't begin to describe it. Joy doesn't begin to, I feel like the deepest level of fulfillment.

Berkshire: Now obviously you have a question at this point. When are you going to get to see Betsy DeVos!: the Musical! for yourself? Well to make that happen Quinn needs a little bit of help.

Strassel: In terms of supporting this show, I could use help in three big ways. Funding, spreading the word and making connections with professional theater organizations. In terms of funding. I've got a Go Fund Me page: Betsy DeVos!: the Musical and believe me, any amount is so, so appreciated. In terms of spreading the word I'm on Twitter @QuinnStrassel and I will be sharing the development of this show and video clips and sound clips throughout the year. So follow me there and help me share that stuff with the world. And in terms of professional theater organizations, it just takes one person or organization who believes in public education, believes in the cause, is willing to take a chance on a crazy comedic, absurd satirical musical about Betsy DeVos and we could change the conversation about public schools in this country. So any help making those connections is very, very appreciated.

Berkshire: That was a theater teacher Quinn Strassel. You can support his work at Go Fund Me. Just search for Betsy DeVos!: the Musical! Also put a link up on the Have You Heard blog. And Jack and I will be right back to wrap things up.

[Excerpt from "I am Chosen"]

Berkshire: So Jack, have you ever seen me looking this happy before?

Schneider: I once saw you after you had played a game of what's the little mini tennis where you take air out of the balls and you are playing on a tiny little court? What's that called?

Berkshire: Are you talking about paddle tennis?

Schneider: Paddle tennis. I once saw you after you had finished a game of paddle tennis and you were almost this happy. So I think we've found a couple equivalents here.

Berkshire: Well, I am beaming, not just because I enjoyed Quinn's musical so much and I loved getting the chance to share his story with the world, but also because episode after episode, I think I've come up with some topic that you will not be able to reach into your education history grab bag and turn out to have known about for 200 years. I think this time I've finally done it.

Schneider: Well Jennifer, unfortunately for you, I know about the long history of musicals about education reform.

Berkshire: This cannot be true.

Schneider: In 1903, the musical Dewey and Me was produced in Chicago by a group of local school children. I wish people could see your face. No, I think you got me. I, I have nothing on this one. But I will take the opportunity...I mean, you know, it's a bit far afield, but it's something I've been thinking about a little bit lately and that is the connection between music and education reform and to turn this one in its head. I've just been thinking a lot lately about how little we pay attention to things like music education and was having a conversation with someone recently about the fact that my daughter just got a school issued violin and will be getting music lessons.

Music lessons are once a week during X Block, which is what you get if your test scores are adequate to not necessitate intervention. And it seems like this is a really telling factoid about the times we live in where something like music education, which has been historically supported by Americans across time as something important to do in schools, not only so that young people can learn how to play music, but also appreciate it and have it be a part of their lives, that has now been relegated to the role of, wait for it, second fiddle while we focus on quote unquote 21st century skills, which often means job ready skills, which often means whatever it can be measured by a standardized test, which, you know, may not actually align with what people need for jobs. And I think that the kind of irreverence here in this musical is evidence of the way that a broad comprehensive education can lead to the kinds of creative individuals we want in our society. Not only because they make life more enjoyable, but also because they bring a new way of seeing the world.

Berkshire: Jack, your little story there made me happy and sad at the same time.

Schneider: It's like when I watch my daughter play violin.

Berkshire: Well, so we obviously want listeners to chip in and support Quinn's work, but this is that special time. Jack is already rolling [his eyes].

Schneider: Oh, here we go. Go ahead.

Berkshire: Every episode I surprised him with how stealthily I lead people to the paywall and then encourage them to climb over it.

Schneider: You almost said "payroll." That's the opposite.

Berkshire: Well, we're going to, we're going to talk in our In the Weeds segment that is available for our Patreon subscribers about something slightly more serious, although an issue that I would argue is causing our Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos to have a little spring in her step these days. There is a big school choice case headed to the Supreme Court. It's going to be argued in October. It's getting very little attention, but advocates and proponents of vouchers seem to feel pretty confident they're going to win and the implications are going to be huge.

Schneider: For those of you who won't be sticking around for in the weeds, you know, please remember that there are lots of ways to support the show. The best way I think is for you to tell people about us, you know, share a link or just share your point of view with somebody. If you want to tweet at us the podcast's Twitter handle is @HaveYouHeardPod. And go ahead and give us a rating on iTunes or Stitcher or wherever you're getting the podcasts.

Berkshire: And of course, if you would like to become a member of the Patreon family, all you have to do is go to Patreon.com and search for Have You Heard. And then you'll see a list of the cool extras you can get by giving us a little extra support every month, including coming in with us into the Weeds where we're now going to discuss, what is it?. Espinoza versus the Montana Department of Revenue?

Schneider: You act like you don't know.

Berkshire: Oh I know...

Schneider: "Oh is that what it is?"

Berkshire: Until next time, I'm Jennifer Berkshire

Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire; This is Have You Heard.

