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Designing for Humanity

Episode 4: A professional “catastrophizer” brings creativity to crises, with Gabby Almon

Gabriele Almon: [00:00:00] Communicating stories well and understanding how to inspire people from a heart space to take meaningful action, all of that falls into design and creative thinking and imagination.

[00:00:18] [Music]

Rie Nørregaard: [00:00:18] This is Designing for Humanity, a podcast by SYPartners about designing a future that's made for all of us, and the best in us. I'm Rie Nørregaard and I'm talking with some of the most interesting people I know about how we, as designers, can tackle the most complex challenges our society faces right now. How can we use design to reimagine the ways we interact with each other and with the world? I'm here to start the conversation about what new ways of thinking and methods are needed.

[00:00:52] Today I'm so pleased to be joined by Gabby Almon. I first met Gabby last year when we both spoke at the Harvest Summit, an innovation festival for leaders in Sonoma, California.

[00:01:03] We exchanged cards—yes cards, really—and promised to reconnect which we did, and this is now the perfect opportunity. I thought, who would be better to have as a guest than someone who actually designs new systems and mobilizes people and finds new ways to use data and technology and design thinking to help human beings? Gabby has advised companies, governments and humanitarian organizations on large -scale emergency response strategies, and has even launched a grassroots accelerator called Rise of the Bulls to help mobilize organizations and creative communities to work together in solving our world's greatest challenges. I can't wait to learn more about this work and what you've learned lately. Hi Gabby.

Gabriele Almon: [00:01:48] Hi Rie, thank you for having me.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:01:49] Absolutely. I mean to start by asking you how you came to design. I don't know that you see yourself as a designer necessarily, but you are very well-versed in the

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process and in the language, so tell me about the time when you came into contact with design as a powerful force for change.

Gabriele Almon: [00:02:11] Sure. So I would say that that interaction happened really by accident. I had wanted to be an architect as a teenager, and didn't really understand the mechanics of what architecture is about but knew that I loved building things and understanding aesthetics, and having a sense that the built environment has an impact on how people feel about themselves in the world that they live in. But through a series of events that ended up studying international business and then pivoted into emergency response. But since that time I ended up dating and marrying an Imagineer at the Walt Disney Company, and really didn't appreciate what he did for a living until really a few years ago, when I found myself working with high-level decision makers in government at the federal level, state level, local level, at humanitarian organizations, at various agencies within the United Nations system. And all of them were saying the same thing, which was: We are in new times. We need to completely rethink how we do business, how we serve people, how we even view problems that we want to solve, and we don't really know where to turn to get new direction. And I realized that designers have a really unique way of uncovering issues and asking the right questions so that they get to the right problems, and that realization at that time started my journey in wanting to understand creatives, how creatives think, how to apply design principles in government and humanitarian aid, and in trying to find ways to support what I call public creative collaboration.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:04:06] That's a fascinating concept, public creative collaboration. And we'll come back to that when we talk about Rise of the Bulls. So how does that notion show up in your work today? How do you cultivate and grow that practice of planning for large-scale events with so many unknowns on behalf of humanity, and look at that and creativity at the same time?

Gabriele Almon: [00:04:34] Yeah. So I utilize my experience in my position on FEMA's National Advisory Council to start talking about different concepts and throwing out ideas about how design can and should impact what we do beyond just straightforward design thinking and human-centered design thinking, we in government know—and I'm not speaking on behalf of FEMA, I'm just speaking on behalf of myself and my colleagues—but we know we're really bad at a few things. We are really good at some things and we're not so good at others. One is communicating stories well, communicating ideas visually, and understanding how to inspire people from a heart space to take meaningful action in a couple different areas, and all of that falls into design and creative thinking

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and imagination. There's something happening where leaders are now aware of that, but also wanting to do something about it.

[00:05:40] And so I've been fostering a few projects to bring these two groups together to start having conversation. There's really interesting things coming about it and a lot of enthusiasm and as Oprah would say "Aha moments" happening. So I see a really bright future in this space.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:06:02] Great. So what tools do we need when we bring the practice of design thinking into space and into a culture that is aware that that is not space, not what they're good at? I know you talk about language and basically the translation of concepts from one industry and one way of thinking to another and that of FEMA, for example. Give me some examples.

Gabriele Almon: [00:06:25] Yeah, well first, having translators at the beginning of two industries or two groups talking to each other is really critical. I was pushing for FEMA National Advisory Council to take up the topic of storytelling. On the subcommittee I serve on, it looks at everything that can be done before a disaster happens; what can we do on a national level to prepare as a country. So one of the topics that I had thrown out for a long time was the importance of being effective storytellers and understanding what that means and how we can adopt some of the lessons that have been learned in entertainment. What I realized is I was ineffective in advocating for this idea because storytelling is a creative term, but if I had from the beginning used the terms "messaging" or "communications" which is more common in government speak, I could have gotten a lot further. So we use different words and it's important to explain what those words mean to each other not just from the creative to the public side, but if we're really collaborating from the public to the creative side.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:07:35] Absolutely. Very often we spend energy making our case, right, or trying to bring other people into our universe when it's actually we just have to find the connection and the space in between, and maybe develop a third language.

Gabriele Almon: [00:07:51] In addition to talking about storytelling, one idea that really excites me that I want to explore in this space that I work in is thinking about the processes that we plan for and the programs that we develop less as logistics issues, and more about experiences. When someone comes into a shelter after a fire or earthquake, a lot of times what we think about is, "Okay, the person enters here in this door, then they meet with this person to register, and then they find a cot

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over here, and then they grab their food over here." But really, the survivor is not thinking of their experience like that, so I'm curious to explore how we bring designers into the fold to help us think about it in that way, and to design our spaces and our processes to really, truly impact the people, the humans that we serve for the better.

[00:08:53] And actually, you know this brings me back to that moment that I had with my husband Billy when I realized, there's something here. So Billy is an Imagineer. They're all about designing experiences for children, and at that time I was working for a humanitarian organization looking at what we call "child-friendly spaces", so tents that are specifically built for children to come after emergencies and just play or be in school for a little bit. Where children can just be children for a few hours. And so I thought one day, how would this tent look different if Imagineers had a chance to redesign it from the layout, to what's actually in there, to how it looks? And the idea really excited me.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:09:47] Yeah. I want to go back just a little bit and talk about the time between when we met at the Harvest Summit and then you became really busy, and basically have resurfaced with some, you know, a great need to start an organization on your own! Tell me about the work that you've been doing.

Gabriele Almon: [00:10:07] Yeah, so about three years ago I started my own consulting practice, and since that time I've been working at the intersection of technology and humanitarian aid and government work, I realized that my interests were shifting and I think it was because I was starting to sniff out that the next wave of disruption wasn't going to be in technology, it's going to be in creativity and imagination. About two years ago I decided, okay I'm going to start this effort, and I want to start this community, I'm going to call it Rise of the Bulls and I'm going to mobilize as many creatives, creative thinkers, imaginative thinkers, people who are disruptive in their processes in the way that they view problems, and I'm going to present them to my network across all these different sectors and we are going to find a way to spark collaboration between these two groups. Because again, you have these leaders who need inspiration who want to completely disrupt what they're doing, but they don't know where to turn, and you have these immensely gifted creative people who want to make an impact in the world that don't have an avenue to do that.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:11:27] So you've come together to experiment and to solve problems. Can you bring us into that process? What is happening? What's actually going on?

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Gabriele Almon: [00:11:37] Sure. So one of the areas that's emerging in Homeland Security and Emergency Management is extremism. We talked to about seven different organizations that either gather data on extremism, that work with extremists, or convene thought leaders working against extremism to understand what problems they have in solving the rise of extremism and how do they even define that problem. And so what we found in interviews with these organizations is that there is a data problem that's out of Rise of the Bull's wheelhouse, but the second problem is, the greater extremism community—people fighting this topic—they're trying to understand, how can we reach people who are heading down the path of radicalization no matter what group that they're going to? How can we reach them and how can we give them a message that makes them want to pivot off of that path or at least reconsider? And so when I heard that, that rang a bell to me that that sounds like communications, that sounds like messaging, but in creative speak it sounds like storytelling. What if we got a group of creatives who work in graphic design, who are creative directors, who work in film, who work in music, and we brought them to the table to share what they know about creating an authentic message, about reaching people who are initially resistant to the story that you're trying to tell to explore what kinds of technology and avenues to reach people could be. And we, as a group, ideated a hundred and fifty different ideas as to how to reach people, and what that message could and should look like.

[00:13:45] One of the things that we found in speaking with an organization is that when it comes to extremists, one of the most effective ways to reach people that are being radicalized is to have former extremists talk to them about what that reality really is. Since that time, one of the people in that group who works in film has been pitching different Hollywood executives on a few of the ideas that we came up with in terms of shows and integrating extremist stories into our daily narrative. So that's one area that we've done.

Gabriele Almon: [00:14:23] The second topic that we looked at was looking at refugee migration and how that experience could be transformed. If you look at literature or poetry that refugees write, oftentimes for talking about home and the concept of home. And so we as a group wanted to look at well how could we transform the places and the spaces refugees migrate through to be more reflective of their homes, and how could that impact their mental well-being. So we gathered interior designers, structural engineers, and a few other people that work in the built environment and started to think about what would that look like, and how can we share our ideas with UNHCR, which is the U.N. agency that's in charge of managing migration flow throughout the world. And how can we

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share what we're talking about with Airbnb, which has an open homes program. What would it look like if hosts around the world who are opening their homes had guidance or instruction about how to make their home more reflective, or somehow speak to where these refugees are coming from?

Rie Nørregaard: [00:15:39] What is your community excited about or what are the things that they really want to address?

Gabriele Almon: [00:15:44] Yeah. So the design of technology and how that impacts our daily life. Looking at how to transform the foster care experience, either locally or nationally, is of huge interest. Looking at domestic violence and gender-based violence. But also a huge concern is related to empathy and how do we inspire mass empathy and the re-ignition of compassion, locally and nationally, is an interest as well.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:16:17] What strikes me as you're talking about it is that there are things that play out in the most intimate scale for all of us in all our lives right, and a systemic approach at the same time. The topic of foster care in that sense is really fascinating and it's connected in many ways to the feeling of home, and what does that mean and what does it mean to a child, and know that everything that you're learning and exploring feeds into each other and it gets so much smarter so fast by working the way that you're working.

Gabriele Almon: [00:16:49] And it's amazing, like you said, it's really incredible to see how everything is truly connected to one another. That never struck me before. When we look at extremism, the root causes have nothing to do with these radical ideologies. People find themselves going to groups like ISIS or the KKK or the alt-right because of trauma, a lack of identity, strong feelings of isolation. And when we look at bullying in school or we look at the educational experience, that has to be transformed. It's related to that, which is related to so many others... It's amazing. Do you see that in design at all? Do those connections pop up a lot?

Rie Nørregaard: [00:17:32] Yes, that is really what I'm exploring in these in this series of podcasts are the connections between all these different topics and how we can use design as the language and the point of connection that allows us to with empathy or compassion, because that would be operating right, like actually doing something very specifically affecting people's lives, even if it's on a one to one scale or in the smallest unit of community. But understanding that to see the change that we want to see, we also have to look at systems in the largest way possible. So when we're

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talking about migration that happens not just one place in the world obviously, but all over and what are the things that we can learn from each other and that we have in common. And what are the structures that are working against us.

Gabriele Almon: [00:18:25] I would love to talk a little bit about empathy.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:18:28] Oh absolutely.

Gabriele Almon: [00:18:29] The area that we are exploring on the council at FEMA, and I think in general, is the breakdown of community ties. Social cohesion is breaking down. And while that's troubling as an individual and a member of society, what we know in emergency management is the stronger the sense of community in a neighborhood the more likely it is to be able to recover effectively from a disaster. So when we're looking at a continued rise in the frequency and a worsening of the scope of disasters both in our country and around the world, seeing our connection with one another breaking down, seeing that divisiveness in this country on the rise, the rise of extremism in our country, we are worried that when the next Hurricane Harvey rolls through or the next huge wildfire rolls through, it's going to be even tougher for people to recover because they don't trust their neighbor. They don't like their neighbor. And truly, your neighbor is your first responder. It's going to take time for the fire department, the police department, whomever else to reach you, and so we're trying to understand how we can help rebuild a community ties even though that's so far out of our wheelhouse. But it has such a huge impact on what we do. We're trying to figure out like, how can we do that?

Rie Nørregaard: [00:20:06] You made me think about two things about design that I believe is true, and I think it's what you're experiencing and the approach of people who use design as their tool—the way they do their work, the way they contribute—is that it's inherently an act of service. It is something you do on behalf of someone else.

Gabriele Almon: [00:20:26] That's amazing. I never thought about it in that way but I as you're saying that I see such a strong parallel to a designer and a public servant, where you're creating for the benefit—as you said—of someone else, and what you create, what you design lives on potentially far beyond yourself. That's amazing. You know, I wonder what would happen if we all—speaking about my people—if we all looked at ourselves as designers, if we all acknowledged that that's actually what we're doing. I don't think we realize that's what we're doing and we are.

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Rie Nørregaard: [00:21:09] I see that that's what you're doing. I mean, that's how I see you. That's how I connected with you before knowing you. It's like you're an architect of systems.

Gabriele Almon: [00:21:19] Thank you for that. That's affirming.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:21:22] You've also been spending some time at Art Center in L.A. and you're super excited about this one class that you're taking around neuroscience and how that shows up in imagination and creativity. What are you learning? I want to take that class! I'm super jealous. So I'm just going to live through you while you're telling me what excites you.

Gabriele Almon: [00:21:44] Yeah I decided, when I started Rise of the Bulls, that if I'm going to rally creative people and I'm trying to advocate for creative thinking in government and humanitarian aid, I need to understand what creativity actually looks like and what that means on a literal and figurative level. And as someone who loves science and loves data, I found this course at Art Center called the Neuroscience of Imagination that actually looks at the biology and psychology of people when they are imagining things, when they're dreaming, when they're creating. And I took it because I envisioned coming into an office one day and saying this is your brain on a regular day. This is your brain on creativity and showing how that lights up and how it's different.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:22:41] It sounds so fun and what you're describing is another way of connecting data and the human experience and using science as the language that helps us understand both sides.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:22:55] So, many people who perceive themselves as designers describe themselves as inherently optimistic, that imagining a future demands that you think there is one and that it will be a good one, and you are going to take part in helping us get there. And so when your work is about imagining really difficult things were most of us have no control and maybe a future or not a future after it, what does that do to your your psyche? Are you a positive person? Or what is your approach here?

Gabriele Almon: [00:23:33] In the Art Center class, we went over five types of imaginations, daydreaming and a couple of other things. But one of the last ones that we talked about was the term "catastrophizing", which is thinking of the worst thing possible, and in the class that is

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mentioned as something that's really negative. And so it took me back because I realized that's what I do for a living.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:24:03] Yes, you're a catastrophizer, yes you are! (laughs)

Gabriele Almon: [00:24:04] Yes, I think of the worst thing possible at all times! And so it is, it is heavy. It's very heavy. But what I've realized just even recently in the last couple of days, is that for my fellow catastrophizers and the emergency management world, and humanitarian aid, in homeland security, the fact that we do this for a job speaks to our inherent creativity. We are creative people. And it's also made me realize that all of us are hopeful people. There's some nugget in us that is endlessly hopeful that we can overcome the kinds of things that we are imagining to be possible.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:24:55] Thank you. That was beautiful. Oh so Gabby I don't even know how to end this conversation! (laughs)

Gabriele Almon: [00:25:03] It's just the beginning.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:25:04] Just the beginning. We need to go do something for sure. Thank you so much for being here and for sharing from your heart your experience.

Gabriele Almon: [00:25:13] Thank you. And I really want us to mark a pin on this date because my mind is running with all the different things that we could do and collaborate on. So let's see where this conversation—just the beginning—goes.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:25:30] Fantastic. Thank you so much.