

Ep. 28: Second Adolescence w/ Jen Isher-Witt (she/her)

Wed, Oct 26, 2022 12:14PM 51:56

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

friends, feel, dated, queerness, adolescence, gay, thinking, middle school, remember, people, high school, person, college, crush, younger, knew, kiss, healing, queer, happened

SPEAKERS

Adam James Cohen (he/him), Jen Isher-Witt (she/her)



Adam James Cohen (he/him) 00:09

Hello, and welcome to this week's episode of the Second Adolescence Podcast. I'm your host Adam James Cohen. On this week's episode, we have guests Jen Isher-Witt. Jen was so generous with her personal story, which was such a great example of what it means for us queer people to navigate through Second Adolescence. Before going into Second Adolescence, we talked about first adolescence, navigating middle school and anxiety and those first indicators of queerness. Jen shares how when she first started having those queer feelings, there's a lot of dread that came in response to them. Due to being socialized within this anti queer world. She goes on to share how during the rest of her adolescence, she really put a lot of effort into trying to pass a straight and make straightness take over and how it wasn't until college that her queerness really began to come out and her second adolescence could really begin, I felt so much personal resonance with her and her story and feel so beyond grateful that she wanted to invite us all into it. And as with each episode of second adolescence, I want to invite you as a listener to listen with open curiosity, knowing that each of our stories are different and unique. You might hear some guests share things that really differ from your experience, whereas other guests might share things that really speak to what you went through or are currently going through. And I really hope that all of this happens, and that together, we can continue growing and expanding our awareness of what life and queerness and healing can be for folks, if after the show you want to connect further head on over to second adolescence. pod.com for shownotes and more. Or you can follow the show on Instagram at at second adolescence pod. All right. Welcome to the conversation. Thanks so much for being here. Welcome to Second Adolescence. I'm so excited to have you here and really curious to see where this conversation goes. And I guess before going anywhere, I'd like to invite people on your end just to give a little mini introduction to who you are just to give some context to the listeners for who the person is behind the voice they hear.



Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 02:19

Yeah, sure. Hello. I'm really excited to be here. My name is Jen. I'm a 34 year old queer woman. I use she/her pronouns. I am a mom to two young kiddos. I grew up in New Jersey, but I now

I use she/her pronouns. I am a mom to two young kiddos. I grew up in New Jersey, but I now live in the south. I do lots of public health work for my pay.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 02:39

Cool. Cool. And I have to comment, the listeners obviously can't see this, but I'm just seeing like this like very cute cat tail like kind of rushing around you. Oh my gosh. Okay, so listeners this beautiful cat in front of me. I wish you could see it too. Awesome. Yeah, let her kind of come in and out as much as possible. Cool. Okay. Okay, let's dive back into you. So first off, thank you so much for being here. I'm so excited to have this conversation. And I guess Yeah, why were you pulled to want to come on to second adolescence and share your story?

J

Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 03:09

Yeah. So one of the things that I've always done is I've journaled and written in my diaries as a kid growing up. And then throughout my 20s, I started transforming that writing into like memoir, style essays. And I've really used it as an opportunity to reflect on my queerness and like my coming out experience, and then like really going back and being like, Oh, wow, there were a lot of things going on in my childhood that I like had a sense of, but like, wasn't ready to deal with. So I really kind of pushed it down. And so that just the concept of second adolescence itself really resonated with me, particularly when I listened to you know, the first few episodes and was like, Yes, this is what I write about. So I thought it would be interesting to share my story and hopefully help others feel less alone. Oh, cool.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 03:52

Okay, I want to hear all about your writing. I have so many. i It's so hard on my end, because I just want to go so many places at once. So let's just maybe start towards the beginning. Maybe that's an easy way to just kind of stay. Yeah, you mentioned a little bit about growing up and your own awareness or lack thereof of your identity. Like where do you start when you tell your story about your journey? Hmm,

J

Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 04:15

that is a really good question. I think I usually start in middle school. There are definitely things earlier than that. But Middle School is where I sort of first had the like, initial sort of, oh my gosh, is this No, no, I can't I can't be gay. I'm not going to let this happen and sort of pushed it down and then would sort of consistently like re push it down further whenever it would come up again in high school and then college until I finally came out at like 2021 So middle school probably feels like the most sort of logical part to start at but then when I sort of reflect back I can think of other earlier memories too.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 04:49

Yeah, I think that's that's probably true for a lot of us right we look back in hindsight we're like oh yeah, I could see how yeah five year old me six year old me three year old like these

different points in our story that kind of, we see maybe our queerness beginning to bloom or to show up or different parts of our identity. Yeah, absolutely. So okay, so Middle School, like, how would you describe Middle School for younger you?

J Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 05:12

Well, I mean, I feel like middle school is like pretty across the board terrible for a lot of people that but yeah, I think it was confusing for me. I was a really anxious kid, I always have been still am. But yeah, so I was really anxious in middle school. So everything sort of felt like a very big deal not in like the sort of like dramatic type way. But in like terms of like physiologically, you know, I had a strong response to a lots of different social events and school, I was very, very focused on getting good grades, and being a straight A student being in all the sort of top classes that I could possibly be in. So I think it was hard to sort of try to navigate that. And also, as puberty was happening, I was like, really good at fitting in and doing what my friends were doing. But I could tell that I didn't maybe feel the same way inside that they felt about things. And so on the outside, I probably looked like things were great. And I was doing well. But on the inside, I was like, What is going on? Like, why are people mean, and why don't I have butterflies in my stomach? Like my friends said they do about this person or whatever?

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 06:13

Yeah, it sounds like you're very internal kid, like your internal world was very vast. And I still relate with that. I think very similar middle schoolers in a lot of ways. And also feeling like, yeah, why do I feel differently than the people around me are feeling? Why are they talking about things? And I'm and I just like, can't feel it in my body? Yeah. Yeah. And so yeah, where does your mind go in terms of like, illustrations of that?

J Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 06:38

Yeah. So I would decide which boys I was gonna have a crush on. And it would be sort of the felt like popular boys, but not too popular. You know, they had to be sort of like, maybe within my potential possible dating pool. And I say that in quotations because it's Middle School, right? And so I remember this one boy picked who was seemed like this really sweet kid, I don't know, I sort of like started the process, which meant like, trying to learn everything about him. And like, I would like write down his class schedule and memorize it, show my friends and be like C and they're like, you're so funny. You're so obsessed with Jimmy, like you have such a crush on him. And I was like, Uh huh. Yes, yes, I do. I love Jimmy. I would do things like that. And I was just looking through my middle school journal. And I had quite a few entries where I talked about my close friendships with some of my female friends, or like female celebrities or older female friends I looked up to, and how much I admired them and thought they were so cool. And then almost always, the next page was like an ode to like a male celebrity who was like a heartthrob, like it almost always followed it up, you know. So it was like, even to myself, I had to sort of like keep up this facade of being this like straight girl.

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 07:46

I mean, that just so speaks just like the power of I mean, I don't know what type of messaging

I mean, that just so speaks just like the power of I mean, I don't know what type of messaging you were, you remember getting as a young kid around kind of expectations around romance and sexuality. But it just speaks to like the power of that messaging to like, it shaped like what we perceive as quote unquote, normal and how we quote unquote, should be that it can really even on like, an unconscious level, come and intercept us completely. And I think your your journal is such evidence of that. And also, like, how cool to still have your journals from middle school? What is that like to go back and see little us writing? And what is that? Like?

J Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 08:20

It's really funny. And actually, I know, the viewers won't be able to see this, but so I'm a 90s. Kid. So Middle School was gel pens, and I'm seeing the

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 08:29

journal listeners. This is incredible. Yeah.

J Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 08:32

So 90s Yeah. So um, you know, it's funny, because I have these certain conceptions of what I was like, as a middle schooler, and as a kid and as a teenager, and they're pretty spot on, from what I remember, which doesn't always happen, you know, I think and of course, there were some differences. But, you know, I remember thinking like, I was never really a carefree kid, I was always kind of anxious about something, there was always something like the world just kind of felt heavy. And my my entries reflect that, even like the lighter ones, there's like this, like, layer. Yeah,

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 09:03

I'm sure it evokes, like a lot of compassion for your younger self. And it really is also really validating of your experience. Like, okay, yes, that has been true. My memory, my experience of that now as an adult looking back, I think, was reflected there. But yeah, as you're speaking to isn't necessarily always the case. Yeah. Wow. How powerful to be able to go back and see, little you, I wish that for all of us to be able to like step back in time just to really get to engage with their literal thoughts and their literal words. Wow. Okay, so then traveling through the rest of middle school in the high school. What happened next in that part of your story?

J Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 09:38

Hmm. So I would sort of get these actual obsession and crushes on these older female friends of mine, who I would know through family friends or through softball or whatever. And so I think this sort of like what feels sort of like a turning point for me was this one particular girl who was a year older than me, we were on the same softball team and we went to like a pool party. at her place to celebrate the end of the season, and I just thought she was the coolest like just that she was so smart and funny and pretty, and just all the things right? What a cool person to

be friends with. And we all went to her her house. And she was she had just graduated from middle school and I was going into eighth grade. So we weren't going to be at the same school the next year. And I was very, very upset about it. And I noticed that for the first time, I sort of like was in close proximity to her like in the pool or inside. And I got like the stereotypical butterflies feeling like I remember it just happened. And I recognized it right away. And I remember thinking, Oh, my God, why, like it was quickly replaced by this feeling of like, Dread, like this knot in my stomach. Because it was, I had had this sort of like, I knew that I wasn't feeling the way that maybe I was supposed to feel. And then that sort of feeling. So I remember going home and looking in the mirror and saying, no, no, you cannot do this. This is not what it's going to be like. And then I compartmentalised and I put it aside and put it away for as long as I could. And I did all the things and went through all the motions and high school to make it seem like I wasn't gay. So that involves dating guys. And they were all lovely, lovely boys. You know, and, but every time I had to, like go on a date with them, I would you know, get like this, like, pit in my stomach. Like, I really don't want to do this. And I was like, What's wrong with me? Why don't I want to like go on dates. And it was funny because like, I kind of knew what might be going on because I had had this like experience in middle school, but I was so able to compartmentalize it, like, I don't even think I realized I was in the closet. Like it's very weird. It seems like it contradicts itself. And I've talked to friends about it. They're like, Do you really think like, you really didn't think you were gay? And I was like, honestly, like, if you would ask me if I was gay in high school, I would have like, very, like confidently said, No, of course not. And, like, believed it. I didn't really sort of know how to parse that apart. So yeah, so I would go on dates. And then I had a couple boyfriends. And you know, it always be after sort of a certain period of time where I was like, Is it okay for me to break up with him yet? Like, it hasn't been long enough. And then I would, would do it and break up and just feel so incredibly relieved and be like, Okay, now that buys me a little bit of time before, it looks suspicious, and I like need to, you know, find someone else to date. And, you know, it's funny, unlike a lot of my like, actually straight friends. I didn't get tongue tied in front of boys, because I didn't really care. And so a lot of boys like liked hanging out with me. They were like, this girl's so cool and nonchalant. And I was like, yeah, it was because I didn't actually, I didn't really have any feelings for you. Yeah, so that was always kind of funny. My, oh, you're so flirty. And I was like, Okay, sure. Let's go with that. That's with what I want. Right?

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 12:50

I'm like, I'm smiling. Just because that was also me on the in kind of the reverse. So I feel like I used to say like, I peaked in middle school, because like, I had all the girls like, wanted to date me because I just felt so comfortable talking with them. I love to dance at school dances like, no part of me felt uncomfortable around them the opposite. I felt most comfortable around them. And so I remember all of my guy friends are like, how do you do it? How do you do? I'm like, just talk to them. I'm there. Yeah, again, in hindsight, because we're you're speaking to compartmentalization. Like I so connect with that I, that part that was so true. In my story. That's been true of so many people I've talked to story. And it does kind of not make sense to like, Wait, how did that happen? But yeah, like that just really speaks to the power of our minds to want to protect ourselves and what we think we need protection from and so on this deep unconscious level, I can put up these walls and separations and we just make sense of our experience in one way that totally like, keeps this queerness separate if that's where we're at. Ah, it just so get that. And I guess pulling back like, how do you make sense of how you knew it was so not okay. What kind of what do you remember in terms of being socialized into this belief system at work can't be gay.

J

Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 13:55

There weren't really like explicit religious undertones or overtones. I was raised Catholic, but my parents were like very culturally Catholic. You know, we like I did the conference and did the sacraments. And we would go to church on Christmas and Easter. And that was, that was kind of it. My mom has always been like, very pro choice. And you know, so I was never worried even like fast forwarding a little bit. When I was figuring out how to come out to them. I was never worried that they would like disown me or like kick me out, which I know is a huge privilege. I knew that. Like the fact that I didn't have to think about that was was incredibly lucky, which is so messed up that that's a lucky thing. Sure. Right. It was just not really part of the conversation. People just weren't gay. It wasn't a thing. It wasn't like that was when friends and Seinfeld were sort of very popular and like, gay people were like on there for visibility, but it was always like the butt of a joke. And so it was like, oh, yeah, gay people like well, you know, like, yeah, they're around but like, Thank God, they're not really in the you know, in the mainstream. Yeah, I knew one gay person growing up well, to one of them was my mom's childhood friend who I knew about I had never met her. And then another was like another friend that they had known growing up. And so, for me, it was this very distant thing. And I was like, well, so few people are gay. I mean, what are the chances that I would be gay? And I remember also thinking, like, I do really well in school, and I'm smart, and I'm athletic, and maybe being gay. It's just like, the bad thing that has to happen to me. You know, maybe that's just the thing that has to balance it out. Because I have all these other good things. Which is so sad. So sad. Yeah. I don't know if that totally answers the question. Oh,

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 15:31

my God. No, absolutely. And I just I guess, doing having these conversations is a whole journey for me. Because I feel so strongly for the younger people on the like, the younger selves and of the guests. And I'm just feeling so much for younger you. Oh, my gosh, and yeah, just like trying to make sense of it all and, and how to make it okay. And oh, yeah.

J

Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 15:53

And I was like, why would it be me? What? Why would I be the one that has to be gay? So I think that was sort of like, that was sort of it. There wasn't really anything. I was thinking about middle school, there was this movie. So my parents had HBO, but only in their room. So it wasn't in any of the other TVs. It was only in their room. And I was allowed to go in there and watch TV like it wasn't off limits. So I don't know if you remember, but like maybe they still do this. But like in the early aughts, HBO would like rerun the same movie like for like, a couple weeks or something and then they would cycle out. And HBO started running Lawson delirious, which is with Misha Barton and Piper Perabo, and they're like these, like two girls at a private boarding school that like, get into this relationship, but like, it doesn't end well. It's like, pre sort of happy ending. But there were a couple scenes where they kissed Mischa Barton is like the friend observing this relationship happening. And I would like sneak in to my parents room when no one else was around to like, see if the movie was on. If I could, like, try and catch that scene. It's so funny, because it sounds so cliché, but I've heard it described so many times by so many other queer people, just this feeling of like, seeing two women kiss like I knew I just had this instant connection. It just felt right, you know, and by feeling right, it felt so like wrong.

The fact that I knew I had some kind of weird connection to this scene that was happening. So it was a very shameful thing that I did. To go and train see this movie. But yeah, that's another sort of example.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 17:26

Yeah, totally. And like, Yeah, I think so many of our listeners are going to think back to different points they can remember whether it's yes, sneaking in to look at this one show or this magazine, or like there's there's a sneaking element, that it's tricky to not have shame come with the sneaking and all of that and, but of our queerness trying to come out and kind of show us like, Hey, here's who you are. Here's what you're curious about. And that's okay. But oh, yeah, the sneaking element. We had to we had to sneak in a lot of ways because we didn't feel like we had any other option to, again, younger you I'm just feeling a lot. Okay, so then it sounds like the rest of high school you were trying to Okay, I'm gonna be straight. I'm kind of going through the motions of it all. What happened next in your journey,

J

Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 18:10

so I will also add that in high school I definitely overcompensated by being a perfectionist, which I know is kind of a thing. I was in all honors and AP classes. I played varsity softball, I didn't drink. I babysat. I like you know, I did all the things you were supposed to do. I went to a small liberal arts college. That was a very good college. And it was a competitive admission process, which was something that was important to me because I needed to show that I was worthy that I had worse. And then yeah, I same sort of pattern in college where I dated sort of like one guy each year. Until I came out. I was incredibly homesick when I first went off to college. So I think it took me a really long time to sort of adjust. But I started dating this guy pretty early on freshman year, because we had met on a college tour of another school like two summers prior. And so I had sort of stayed in touch and like exchanged admissions essays and like provided feedback. And and so we started dating when we ended up at the same school and he was a really handsome guy. I mean, objectively, and you know, in my head, I was like, Oh, this is great. Like, maybe this will be like the cute story where like we met two summers ago and like he'll be the one and even though in the back of my mind, I knew this probably wasn't the case. I I made so many. I don't know what the word is not quite allowances, but like I was still so open to the possibility that it could be different that maybe this was the one who would change it. I just haven't found the right person. And I was so young, I hadn't dated that many people. So anyway, he was sort of there for me when I was like feeling pretty homesick. And then we eventually broke up a few months later. We were just you know, we were not compatible. And in other ways I actually actually one of the things that we thought about I'm remembering now it turned out he was a fairly moderate conservative and so One of the things that we fought about was when there was some kind of legislation passing in New Jersey, where I grew up about like same sex marriage or civil unions, like I don't remember the exact date, and it was somewhere in the tri state area. And he was like, Well, I don't think they should be allowed. And I remember like, being like, How could you think that like, I was so horrified and mortified, like on so many levels, so we broke up pretty soon after that, because I was like, I can't be with someone who doesn't support this, because I was a very proud ally.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 20:30

Totally. I'm not a part of that community. But I'm an ally. Right. Right. Yeah. Again, compartmentalization, the power of that. Yeah. Yes. And yeah, just jumping back. I hear you kind of mentioned this overcompensation story through line through adolescence, being a really good student really leaning into that. I really appreciate you sharing that. Because I think again, yeah, that is a component that can be a lot true for so many of us. And it's both because it also serves us it got you to this great school, it like gave you a lot of esteem. Probably this was your place where you had value. And on the flip side, like when it's offsetting potential shame, it's yeah, it's tricky. But got it. Yeah.

J Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 21:06

Yeah. The other sort of piece that's I'm also a little bit heavier, maybe is I also struggled with a little bit of an eating disorder in high school in college, which I know is, you know, that all goes hand in hand. But there was a lot of pressure in my immediate family, and also my extended family to, you know, be thin, and to look very attractive. And it was just sort of this expectation, it was the norm. And my frame is sort of traditionally small and petite. And I wanted to make sure it stayed that way. So that I would get this sort of external validation and fit in. And that was another aspect of my life that I could control. Yeah, so that was something that I struggled with for a few years in high school in college, and eventually was able to, like, get some therapy, outpatient therapy, and in sort of, like, adjust some of my thinking, and so that's, that's a piece too,

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 21:53

totally. And in that treatment, did queerness come up at all? Or was it still kind of separate at that point?

J Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 21:58

No, it was separate. And it was all my sophomore year of college, the people I was friends with, at the time, who they were sort of friends of proximity and convenience, they staged an intervention. And basically, we're like, we've noticed that you've gotten really thin. And we've noticed that you pick up your food at the dining hall, and we think you need help. And I remember being really, really upset naturally. And it was right before winter break. They were like, we really think like you need to gain some weight, you need to get better. And I went home and just sort of relaxed my restrictive habits and let myself eat whatever I wanted. And I did, I gained some weight. And I was like, Okay, this is more manageable than I thought. So that sort of like got me back on track. And then the eventual follow up sort of therapy was with a lot of like nutritionists and nutritional therapists just making sure that I was eating enough and managing my you know, my thought process. So no long story short, no queerness did not come up. And that conversation. Yeah, those conversations.

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 23:00

So when did queerness kind of start to become more of the forefront for you?

J Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 23:04

So I had had sort of like a couple larger like, waves of like, Am I gay, like throughout high school, which were separate from the other experiences that I described? And I'd always be like, no, no, no, and I would push it down. It happened once or twice in college before my junior year, which was when I did come out. But each time it came back stronger that feeling and I think my mind was just doing this like self preservation defense mechanism thing where like, I would push it away because I wasn't ready to deal with it yet. And I kind of remember thinking that like the last couple times before I finally was like, Okay, I need to deal with this. There's something going on, I think I think I might be gay. That last time I was I remember thinking like, you're not ready, just like hold it off for a little bit longer. The brain is incredible. Yeah, so one of my best friends from college, who I'm still in close touch with, I was actually just visiting her last weekend was gay and pretty openly gay in college. So I started becoming friends with her and her friend group, the end of my sophomore year, so I was about 20. And I thought she was really cool in a truly actually platonic way. Like, we are just very, very good friends. And I was like, Amanda's gay, like, it's okay for her to be gay and like, look at her and like she's doing all right. And so I think that sort of started like worming its way into my brain. And then halfway through my junior year, pretty much all of my friends except for one were abroad. And so I really had this like very introspective semester where I had a lot even more reflection time than I typically would have. And once again, had a crush on this girl who it sort of became an obsession. She again was a year older than me. We had a class together. And the sort of kicker is that I knew she was queer. I knew she had dated a woman and so that was very like titillating to me. And we had a class together and I like couldn't even look at her without like my face. He's just like, turning bright red. And I was such a mess. I was such a mess. And I was finally like, I think I have a crush on her romantically. And I'll back up one step. So, prior to this crush, I had dated slash had this, like brief sort of fling with this guy, friend of ours. And I remember thinking to myself, listen, this is it, if things don't work out with him, you really got to figure your stuff out. And then I, you know, sort of like became attracted to this, this other woman and I remember it, I would listen to the same song every night for like, several weeks, like just like thinking about like, Okay, what am I going to do? Like, who am I going to tell is this really something that like, just like thinking forward, like thinking of like, all the things that I would be like, quote, unquote, giving up, if I sort of, like, listen to this truth that was becoming more and more clear that like, this was really who I was, I don't know what it was about her. And I don't know that it was her specifically, or just the time and how old I was, and ready to handle it. But that is when I finally was like, I'm gay. And at first it was like, Maybe I'm by, um, by, like, I want to keep it open. You know, I didn't wanna like totally shut it down, which I think is terrible for like, truly bisexual people, because there's like, you know, a lot of erasure and a lot of like, Oh, it's a phase. For me. It was a phase. But it was really because I was like, hiding this other label. Yeah. And the first person I told was, my friend Amanda has girlfriend at the time who was on campus because she hadn't gone abroad. She was a year younger. And she was the very first person I told. And I remember, you know, she felt like a safe person. She was really supportive. Yeah, it was actually in the bathroom at a girl talk concert. That just feels very random. But anyway, yeah. What was that? Like? I think the reason I was able to do it is because it was so loud there that like I was in the bathroom. So it was muted a little bit. But I was like, Okay, I've been thinking about this, I'm not ready to sort of come out to everyone. But I can tell this person I know that she is safe, I think that she like will have a good response. And like, at least, like I won't be alone. Just the fact that there was all this noise happening out there, I think, like, allowed me to feel like it wasn't, there wasn't such a big spotlight on me. And I think the reason

I decided to tell her at that moment also is because this other person I had the crush on was at the concert, and I just seen her and like, gone into a tailspin and was like, I can't keep this to myself anymore. So yeah, that was sort of the first.

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 27:34

And so then I guess first off, what do you ever feeling the next morning? Like, I'm always curious about like, the day after the first coming out. And maybe I'm just projecting, but I remember for me, after I told my my best friend when I was 2122, I had like such an emotional hangover of like, whoa, what does this mean? What do I do now? So I'm just curious if anything comes to mind around that initial after period.

J Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 27:59

Yeah, you know, that's so interesting, because I don't have particularly vivid memories of like, the day after, when I what I do remember is when I told my friend, Amanda's girlfriend, Ashley, when I told Amanda and my other friend over AOL Instant Messenger, I feel like there's so many like dated references in my story, that really just speak to like, where you know how old I am in my generation. They were abroad. And so I remember thinking, like, I'm going to tell them and I remember my fingers shaking as I like, typed it out to them. And I remember just like, yeah, it was just like this, like total like adrenaline rush, and then this like, release, and my body was just like, it was like a, like, run a marathon. You know, I was just exhausted from like, expelling this this truth. So, yeah,

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 28:44

yeah. That's it. Yes. Wow. Okay, so then, like, what happened on the other side of coming up for you? Like, I often think of the beginning of second adolescence as the coming out, that's kind of the initiation into this next phase of life. And what did come next in that chapter? Hmm.

J Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 29:03

Yeah, so I dove headfirst into queer culture at the time. So this was 2009. So that L Word had sort of just come off the air maybe. And so you know, my friends came back from abroad, and we had a couple days before everyone had to leave campus. And I was like, giddy and excited like that. I could tell them I knew some person now I'd had some time to process like, or that I could share it with them in person, I'd already told them and I was like, What can I consume? What kind of media like what can I want to learn all the things and and I was introduced to the L word. And so I went home that summer, and like, didn't have access to it. So I would like watch it in like clips on YouTube and like, in my bed, like under the sheets, because I still wasn't out to my parents. So you know, it was sort of like this like, processing journey of like, okay, like, even though I knew that it was a TV show, and it was very unrealistic. It was very cool to see lesbians living their lives and that was the norm and everyone knew prove that they were gay. And they could just there were multiple of them. You know, like, it wasn't just the token lesbian and like seeing some of the sex scenes for the first time, like just kind of like, just sort of like familiarizing, orienting and being like, okay, like some version of this is what my life

could be like, you know, dating a woman and living together and all of these things. And I think I just sort of continued to gradually tell people, I have a younger sister, who I'm pretty close with. And she was the first family member, I told and I remember I was with a bunch of my high school friends at a beach house grew up on the Jersey Shore, and we went to a beach house for a weekend trip, it was my friend's parents place drinking or underage. I don't know if that's okay to share. Actually, I may have just turned 21. So there you go. We're good. But I was a little tipsy. And none of my high school friends knew. And I felt really lonely and isolated and just felt like I had to tell someone I just felt like I was like, all alone with like, all these other people. And so I called my sister and I was like, you know, that friend I told you about that. I was like, really nervous about friending on Facebook. And like, she took a long time to respond to my requests. And I started being like, oh, no, should I not have friended her? All of which was true. I was like, so that girl, I actually like, like her, like, I have a crush on her. And my sister bless her was like 1617 at the time, and she was just incredible. And like said all the right things. And I asked her to be with me when I told each of my parents to a few months later. Yeah, so that that's sort of what the process was like, it was sort of slowly like telling more and more people and then I didn't tell any of my high school friends until the next summer. What I do remember feeling that summer, it was the summer I'd also turned 21 So there were sort of all of these like, freedoms that I that I was having, I felt lighter than I had in years. Like even though I hadn't told everybody. I remember feeling like yeah, just this like buoyancy. It was incredible. And at times, you know, it felt like a like a kind of like this like sweet little secret that I had for myself. Like when like, like, it wasn't like this like terrible sad thing. It was like this is a little secret that I'm like actually going to share with like these friends I'm with but like, I know about it. And I and like exploring it and yeah, yeah. So that's kind of how it played out.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 32:08

Yeah, who and buoyancy that word just like so I could feel that word. There's just such. Yeah, just like a lightness and a freedom and like a relief that comes with buoyancy? Oh, yes. Yes. Totally. Totally. Okay, so then, like, in this, you know, I often think about in second adolescence, like, there's like, we gain these experiences we miss out on there's so much healing that happens. There's like this expansion, and this healing that happens simultaneously. And I'm curious, like, Where does your mind go, when you think about how that's shown up for you in your story in that next phase?

J

Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 32:41

Yeah. So you know, I felt like I was finally getting to be who I really was. So along with my anxiety when I was younger, how that manifested was like, I had a really sensitive stomach, and I would get upset a lot and get an upset stomach. So I would be like, nervous because I was like, I don't want to feel sick and like, do these social things and feel sick and, and so I held back a lot, even more than I wanted to, for that reason. But then also for like, the hiding the queerness reason. But as I got older, I had anxiety management techniques that I had sort of learned. And now that I was out, I kind of was like, I can do what I want, I can say what I want, like, I can just sort of figure out what I want and who I am and, and it was incredible. I just felt like there were so many options that were open to me. And I think that I've really done a lot of sort of processing and healing and like, understanding throughout my 20s and now that I'm you know, Partway into my 30s I think like even more like healing has happened in the last probably eight to 10 years as well. For sure.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 33:40

And ongoing. Like I think for a lot of us, right? Uh huh. Totally. Yeah. And then Okay, so like, also backing up on thinking about when dating and relationships maybe came into play here? Limits? What was that like for you?

J

Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 33:54

Oh, my gosh, okay. So I was so excited to kiss a girl. I was like, so ready. And I went back to college senior year, and I was like, I'm going to date someone, I'm going to find someone and I went to this small liberal arts school. And so there were gay women, but it was a very small pool. So I knew like a couple different people. And one of the women was one of my friend, Amanda's good friends. And I had had a crush on her since I was a sophomore, which in hindsight, I realized it was a crush at the time. I just thought she was this very cool, like person who I just found very, like I was just very attracted to her energy. You know, I was like, Oh my gosh, here's this this person who I have, like always been attracted to and just by happenstance, I mean, it was like, Rom Com like, meet cute. My friend Amanda and I were going out for drinks on a Friday night and this woman came out of her door and we were walking by with a bunch of books. She was like, gonna go to the library and a Friday night she was like working on her philosophy thesis. And we were like, come out with us and she was like, Okay, and so she did and I dropped so many L word references. I was like, I need her to know that I'm gay. I need her to No. And we had a great time all hanging out and then went back to my dorm suite. I lived with a bunch of my friends, a bunch of us went back when we were all watching TV and, and then you know, everyone's like, Ah, it's getting late, I'm gonna go and I was like, I think I'm gonna keep watching TV. And she was like, Yeah, I think I'm gonna keep watching TV. And so then it was just the two of us. And I just remember that like electricity of like, our like arms like touching and just being like, this is what people are talking about. This is it. You don't have to make this up. You don't have to force this. This is like so natural and, and we ended up kissing and I was totally gone. I mean, I just fell for her. And finally understood, like, all of the cheesy references. And I was like, How did any of my peers any of my straight peers get anything done? Like in high school when they had these crushes, and these, these girlfriends, because, you know, I, my boyfriend's in high school, like, I dated this one guy for, I don't know how long, maybe six months or so. But he went to another high school. And so we would only see each other on the weekends. And you know, one time he brought up, he's like, I would love to see you more. Can we, like, hang out during the week sometimes? Or maybe like Fridays and Saturdays? And I was like, No, we can't, right? No, we hang out on Fridays, that's when I see you. And then I was like, having this first experience and realizing like, well, I want to spend all my time with her. And I was just like, ah, it was so reassuring. Because I had gotten to a point in high school where I was just feeling really numb. I just felt sort of across the board numb. And I was like, you know, I'm not ready to sort of handle this. And like, I'm probably just gonna get like, married to a man and have kids and like, I'll just, I probably won't just be truly happy. But that's okay. Because I will be accepted. Right? Like, I was just like, that's what has to happen. But then realizing that I could actually feel things that you know, you see, we read about, you hear about like, it was, it was incredible. I was like, if there's not something wrong with me, I'm not I'm not numb, I'm, I was just dating the wrong gender. Yeah. So and we dated, I dated her for probably about six weeks. I mean, we didn't date for very long, but then we stayed friends throughout that year. And this is funny, and then lost touch until a few months ago, she and I have recently reconnected as friends. And we both have recently gone through

some separations with our long term partners. So we had something to sort of connect over. And she also lives where my my best friend lives. And so I got to see her in person. It was so surreal. It was wild. Yeah. And we're I mean, we're friends again, it's it's really kind of incredible. I'm like, if she listens to this, she's really like, Oh, my God, you're talking about me.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 37:35

But also like those first relationships, if we're calling that are experiences or feelings, like the candles a tender part in our heart in our story, because they were the catalyst for like opening us up to new experiences and to new feelings and like you're speaking to like removing that numbness that was there and just like allowing for the fullness to be their full feeling. And like how special I had like my first fling, maybe it was like five weeks. I was 25. And we've lost touch. But like I think of him so fondly as just like what a gift that experience gave to me and my younger self. And I can hear that the way you're talking about this person to like, gosh, like what a special six weeks to have. Oh my goodness,

J

Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 38:16

it really was I was just so excited. I was so excited. And you know, it wasn't totally without some obvious, like growing pains. You know, like I remember after we went out off campus for dinner, and she dropped me off at my dorm and she leaned in to kiss me goodnight. And I kind of was like, like, because we had never kissed outside of a dorm room. And I was like, so self conscious and nervous. And she was like, oh, sorry, because she had been out for a very long time. And also like, she's less sort of self conscious about that sort of thing, or at least you know, seem to be and I was mortified because I really wanted to kiss her. But we were right next to another dorm and anybody could walk by and I remember like she was like it's okay, it's okay, but I remember saying goodnight and walking into my dorm and like just like bursting into tears being like I messed it up. She's never gonna want to date me like she's you know, just because I was I wasn't quite ready yet for that aspect of it.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 39:10

I mean, yeah, totally. I mean the Yeah, those first experiences can really like force us to or like we get confronted with the walls of our fear and the walls that we had built up for so long keeping us protected so whenever someone like she was leaning into kiss I remember when I was on my first date with this guy this feeling like I was paranoid that everyone knew I was on a date with the man and like so my walls were still so intact. And though I was trying to like let my queerness out they were still doing their job of like, wait, you flush out this isn't safe. And it sounds like for you like that same panic or that resistance you felt when she was coming in to kiss you was you encountering those walls and that's like such a part of that chapter of our stories is learning how to gradually let those walls down and feel more comfortable. What was that process for you of letting that comfort come in and feeling more okay with okay, maybe can kiss her in public. Or I remember the first time I held the guy's hand in public was like wild and scary and all of it like, you know, what was that like for you?

J

Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 40:09

Yeah, it was a very slow growing process. You know, I was thinking back to the rest of my senior year of college after the first woman I dated after we had broken up. And, you know, I had a lot of really great and formative experiences, like dating and hooking up with other other women and like figuring out what was okay and what wasn't okay, I had this very brief fling with this older woman that was like, kind of exciting, but like a disappointment in a lot of ways. And I remember having a lot of like, moments of discomfort and growing pains in the sense that, you know, I remember one particular time I was at a party, and I was kind of like, very casually sort of seeing this friend, we were, you know, just kind of having fun, we would kind of hang out while we were partying and we went up to a bedroom to start hooking up. You know, before anything really happened you we had chosen the room where all the bags had been placed, which fit but anyway, we were making out and some girls I had class with busted in to get their curse. And I flew up and like sat up so straight and like was like, so shaken and like embarrassed. And the person though a woman I was with, like, she's she was very sort of like, laid back and chill and like, understood where I was coming from, but didn't really feel the same way. And I kind of was like, I have to go, I have to go. And I like freaked out. I was like, I need to I need to get out of here. And she was like, no, no, stay sane. I was like, no, no, I can't I need to I need to leave. I went back to my dorm. And one of my roommates was up and I kind of like talked through what had happened with her. And she was really validating it was very, very college moment, cuz it was like to aim and she was up like folding laundry. Yeah, it was just sort of this like moment of like, I'm ready to do a lot of these things. But I'm not ready to do some of these other things, or I'm not ready for other people to know that I'm doing these things. And that next week when I had class with the girls who had walked in, I was so embarrassed. And, you know, it took me a long time to kind of say, well, like Foghat, you know, doesn't matter what they think. Yeah. So that's one sort of piece. And then the other sort of element that I was thinking about was, after the person I just referenced after she and I sort of called it quits, I was interested in this other person. And like, we were kind of flirting, but then she stopped talking to me, because she was friends with the girl, but I didn't realize they were friends. And so it was, you know, very sort of like typical real like relationship dating drama. And as much as I hated being in the middle of it, because it felt terrible. There was a tiny, small part of me that was like, Oh, I get to experience this too. Yeah. And like that tiny, small part of me was like, kind of excited or validated, affirmed, which is silly, because it was painful, and it hurt. But it was this feeling of like, oh, I can have these experiences, too. I'm not as much of an outsider weirdo as I thought. And I really just, I learned a lot from them in another piece.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 43:04

Yes, this I get to have these experiences to even these ones, as you're speaking to are painful and crazy making and not comfortable. But they are these experiences that many of us missed out on getting to be in the drama getting to be in that adolescent, teenage drama of navigating feelings and relationships and all of it. Yes, something's gained when we get to have those experiences in second adolescence, again, despite how uncomfortable they may be. Totally. So then, uh, yeah, what happened popping next in your story.

J

Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 43:40

After college, I immediately moved down to south for grad school, and had my first serious relationship that lasted about a year and she had given me this, we were hanging out, and I had to, like, run to the store. And she was like, Here, put my shirt on, which, like, you can use

this, you know, you can wear this and it was the like, gay, fine by me shirt, the one that like sort of became that like, sort of spread across college campuses. And I was like, I can't wear that to the store. And she was like, Wait, why? And I was like, because it's like, gay, like, people might think that I'm gay, which is funny, because like, at the time, I was, you know, I had been out for I guess, about two years, year and a half. And I, it felt like it had been very long. In hindsight, I was still very newly figuring things out. But I was like, No, I can't. And I remember her being like, I want you to feel okay about this. I want you to feel like you can go to the store, like, like, she wasn't like, don't you don't have to wear the shirt. That's fine. But like, let's talk about this. And I was like, No, I want to talk about this. And so I think it was just sort of this like, gradual process. I can't really pinpoint like any sort of explicit like, thoughts that I had around it, you know, which I know that I did. But you know, just like fast forwarding to now I am very free with my affection in public appropriately. How Get a hold hands and sort of like, give it like a kiss on the cheek or whatever, you know, I have no problem with it. It's pretty Yeah, it's pretty incredible to reflect back and think about how I used to feel. Yeah. So

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 45:13

yeah, what does that been like? Even on this call going back into your story looking at these different points, he's different younger us, what is that like?

J

Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 45:20

Now as an adult, you know, I always want to hug my younger self. You know, I I've been I've been in therapy, like pretty consistently to do a lot of a lot of this sort of healing and reflection and self acceptance, you know, what to think everyone can benefit from, from some therapy. Yep. And I'm sure you strongly agree with that. Absolutely. In your career. Yeah. So, you know, I've done like, a few exercises with some of my therapists, like, think back to pick an age. And think back to that younger self, like, what would you tell her? What does she How does she respond, and then like, you know, talking about what that process was like, and it always, always brings tears to my eyes without fail. And so you know, I just feel really protective of that girl. And I feel really sad that she had such a heavy weight that she felt she had to carry. And, you know, she did what she had to do to survive and get through. And that sort of, yeah, it's sad, but that's true. So I just feel for her, she had a lot going on.

A

Adam James Cohen (he/him) 46:21

Yeah, totally. And yeah, I too, have done a lot of that similar healing work. And it is hard and sad. And it brings up so much, and it's so fruitful. And so whether people are able to find therapy as a space to do that, or otherwise, find ways to kind of connect with these younger versions of them, and kind of feel what they were feeling and let that be seen and heard and be able to offer that compassion and care now, like that is the juice of healing. And it's so profound and so important. Thanks for sharing that part of your story. Gosh, I'm sensitive your time I want to talk all day long. I always get to this point where I just want to keep going. But is there anything that hasn't been shared yet, or brought into this conversation yet? That wanted to be before we look at winding down?

J Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 47:03

Yeah, so I mentioned in my intro, that I'm a mom. So I've got two young kids. And you know, I think that they're very little, they're a year and a half, three and a half. And I didn't realize how much of my childhood I would sort of be reliving even more so than I already was, because I'm already this introspective person. But I think especially in the last few years, as I've sort of been raising my my kids had a chance to reflect even more and just sort of be really cognizant of the ways that I want them to feel and how I want them to feel safe and accepted and supported. And, and my parents never did anything explicitly not to make me feel that way. But you know, it wasn't, it wasn't explicit. It wasn't it wasn't part of the conversation. And I mean, these kids have queer parents. So I mean, it will be part of the conversation for them. But yeah, so I think that's been also really, really healing and interesting.

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 47:51

Yeah, like through parenting. Like, there's this re parenting of your younger self. Yeah,

J Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 47:56

exactly, exactly. And then the very last thing that I'll add is when I came out to my dad, so I came out to my dad first, my sister was with me, my parents were together, I just, I was really nervous. And my dad and I might relate to both my parents very well, but my dad and I have some similarities where I felt like I wanted to tell him first. And when I told him, he said, Yeah, you know, I always thought you might be gay. And I was like, what? And then he named a couple of things. And I was like, Huh. And apparently he had said to my mom, once or twice throughout high school, like you think Jen might be gay. My mom's like, no, no, of course not. Because again, it was just not a thing. Right? So of course not. That was both sort of like validating, but also like, Wait, really, I wasn't hiding as well as I thought I was. It's interesting. It's like he saw me, but I didn't know it. And I didn't want him to or anyway, but it's also kind of a funny story.

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 48:49

It's all it's so many things. It's funny. It is yeah, that that element of like, oh, yeah, what's I not hiding? Like? Oh, then like, also, it's also tricky to be like, oh, this person I've had in my life for so long, almost maybe had some awareness of this thing? Maybe I still wasn't fully aware. Like, that's a weird thing. Yeah, there's so much in that. And also, like, sounds like really tender interaction you had with him? Wow. Yeah, it was. Yeah. Yeah. That's really cool. Well, and then, is there anything you want to say about what you're up to in the world now? Or is that not part of your story? And or if people wanted to connect with you, how might that be an option for them?

J Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 49:24

Yeah, so currently, I work in public health, which is very different from sort of my grad training, which is in social psychology, and classmate and I from grad school are currently working on reviving a social psychology blog that we had going that translates social site concepts and

applies them to everyday current events and to you know, keep up with the current world we're now going to be doing reels and and videos and so that's something that folks can check out if they want to go on Instagram or or tick tock it's @SocialPsyQ. We'll learn some more things about social psych. You can check us out there.

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 50:03

Cool. Let's end this has been so special on so many levels. I feel like I have so much personal resignation with a lot of your story. And so just selfishly, I feel like it's cool. I so appreciate getting to connect and have this conversation.

J Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 50:17

Thank you so much for having me.

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 50:18

Oh my gosh, thank you so much for doing this and for offering your story for the listeners who for those folks who had similar experiences maybe had different ones and it's but it's just helpful to hear other people just traveling through it. We all have our own journey that takes lots of different twists and turns and requires different types of healing different types of things we need. And so by sharing and hearing other stories, I think that's how we as a community continue to like thrive and heal and support each other. So I just feel so touched that you wanted to contribute to this really, really cool. Thank you.

J Jen Isher-Witt (she/her) 50:51

Absolutely. My pleasure.

A Adam James Cohen (he/him) 51:00

Hey, thanks for joining us for today's conversation. Feel free to head on over to www.secondadolescencepod.com for show notes and more. And you can connect further by following the show on Instagram at @secondadolescencepod. If you're interested in being a future guest on the show and you want to come on and share about your own second adolescence visit secondadolescencepod.com/beaguest and you can submit your interest there. Alright, that's it for me for now. Whether it's morning, afternoon, night, wherever we're finding you and your day go on out there and keep doing things that would make younger you absolutely thrilled. That is what it's all about. Alright, take good care.