“That’s Understandable” Podcast - Season 1 - Episode 3
Living Immunocompromised
Final Transcript

Brendan 00:04
- Hello there. Welcome to "That's Understandable”. I'm your host Brendan McEvoy. At AstraZeneca, patients come first and we recognize that patients are people first. They're at the center of everything we do in specific and measurable ways, from discovery science, through clinical trials, to prevention, awareness, diagnosis, treatment, and post-treatment. The more we learn about the patient experience, the more we can do as a company to ultimately improve lives.

And there's no better way to do that than to talk directly to our patient communities. So today I wanna focus on the human experience, and we can all agree that the human experience is often complex, right? At least sometimes. Well, for some people it's more complex than meets the eye. Today we're going to explore what it means to be immunocompromised. My gut tells me many of you may have heard the term immunocompromised in the last three years as we've come to know this population of people has been impacted by the pandemic in ways others cannot relate. But does everyone know what it means to be immunocompromised?

I've invited Brittany Grant to join me today. She's a 35 year old woman, a partner, a daughter, and a lover of all things winter sports, especially skiing. Brittany's also 1 of the nearly 7 million Americans who are immunocompromised, meaning they have a diminished ability to fight off sickness compared to the average person. For today's episode, we're going to try and make living as an immunocompromised person more understandable.

(gentle instrumental music)

Scientists estimate that 3% of the American population meets the Center for Disease Control and Prevention criteria for being immunocompromised. That is having an weakened immune system, therefore having a reduced ability to fight infections and other diseases. Immunocompromised individuals face a variety of challenges throughout daily life in an effort to remain healthy and stave off illness, even things like the common cold. People can be immunocompromised for a variety of reasons. They're going through treatment for something like cancer, they have an autoimmune disease like multiple sclerosis, or a condition like HIV, or they've received a transplant like Brittany. And on that note, Brittany, welcome to "That's Understandable”. Thank you so much for joining me today.

Brittany Grant 02:13
- Hi Brendan, it's great to be here. I'm excited to talk with you today.

Brendan 02:17
- Fantastic. So let's jump right in. Maybe to start, you heard me introduce you, but tell me in your own words a little bit about you? Like what is your story? And talk to me about your diagnosis and what life was like leading up to it?

Brittany Grant 02:28
- Absolutely. So I think probably the easiest way is, let's start with life before my diagnosis. I was a three sport athlete, I was always healthy, very active with my friends and family, I always was probably the weirdo in college that was getting up at like 5:00-6:00 AM and always wanting to get into some sort of adventure. And then when I hit my mid 20s I started becoming very, very tired. I started becoming anxious. And when you're around other people in their 20s,

they're like, I'm tired, everyone's tired. So it's easy to sort of chalk off a lot of things that I now know are symptoms of my illness. I was always saying, hey, you know, this is what it's like being an adult, I'm an adult now. So by the time I was 30, I had my birthday, and then I went to, as a responsible adult, went to another doctor's appointment to get a physical, and I realized that my blood pressure was almost stroke level. And the doctor had said if I were older that they would send me to the ER immediately. I just brushed it off that, hey, this is probably just a weird incident. Well, long story short, I ended up getting diagnosed with IgA nephropathy, which is an autoimmune disease where it affects the glomeruli of the kidneys, so your ability to filter. And basically the organ ends up killing itself through protein intake. When I got diagnosed I had 24% kidney function, which put me at stage four. And to be honest, I didn't even know where my kidneys were, so this was a little bit alarming. I went to the doctor in DC, where I was living at the time, told me that he wanted me to go to the hospital and get a biopsy, and ultimately I had to maintain my function until eventually I went into end stage renal disease and received a kidney transplant on March 9th, 2020.

Brendan 04:28
- It's interesting, I mean, like you said, to be in your 20s, right, like probably not a care in the world, healthy, looking to take on sort of any adventure, and then to sort of have this turn your world upside down. If you take yourself back, what did you feel in that moment when you were diagnosed, and as you were seeking out help and trying to understand what this meant for you and the impact that this might have on your life?

Brittany Grant 04:51
- When I think back to being in my 20s, I was so focused on building a career, and working hard, and all of my very good friends, who I still am in good touch with from high school, you know, were all very career oriented. So all of the symptoms that I was experiencing, I just, like I said, chalked them up to being normal. And when the diagnosis happened, it was really, really overwhelming. I just couldn't believe that this was happening to me. And at the same time, I'm very thankful that I do have such a close network of friends and family that really rallied around me to help me understand what everything meant. It was certainly scary for me career wise as well, something I worked so hard for. At the time I was working in advocacy communications and advertising, “The Politico" publication, and I was very proud of the work that I put in to get to where I ended up being, which ultimately was to run the business side of the publication. So not having the energy to get what I needed needed to do done and still maintain a good face so that everyone didn't worry, that was really challenging and difficult.

Brendan 06:01
- So you talked about the great network that you had. What was the reaction as you were telling your loved ones about this diagnosis, how did they react?

Brittany Grant 06:13
- Well, I come from an Italian family, so everything is a massive overreaction,
but I think this one was kinda warranted. So there was a lot of yelling, but yelling from place of care, and everyone just kind of rallied around me and put on their focus faces and hats. I got in with doctors at UPMC, at Hopkins. Ultimately I went through with my treatment at UPMC because it was close to home where I'm from originally, despite the fact that I lived in DC at the time, and really set up a great network of care there. And that is in thanks to my family for getting me set up there. But everyone was stressed.

(gentle instrumental music)

Brendan 06:46

- Can you imagine being young and full of life and then getting this incredibly serious diagnosis? It makes my head swirl. It made me wonder what that mental shift was like for her. Did she have to rethink the roadmap of her life? You know, that fictional map we all have in our heads that makes life seem structured, even though something like this could happen to any of us at any moment.

Yeah, it makes you think. What sort of life changes did you have to make after your diagnosis? What new challenges were you facing on a daily basis that you hadn't previously?

Brittany Grant 07:23
- Well, I think what's interesting, even talking about when
you were diagnosed, for a lot of people that journey of being diagnosed can take a long period of time, but there is that one aha moment where everything changes. And for me, that diagnosis happened very quickly even though I was feeling symptoms, so hindsight's always certainly 20/20. But the diagnosis really flips your life on its head in a matter of seconds.
In terms of what changed, everything. Everything from how I cared for my body, my diet, I went from eating normally to no protein, no dairy, no sodium, no phosphate, you know, sort of the list goes on, and I had to continue to evolve and change as my body continued to deteriorate.
I had to start taking medication, which I never did ever in my life, 'cause I was presumably healthy. And then even, I love to travel, and taking precautions and having to take that extra step and be like, oh, well, what happens if I get hurt or I'm in a car accident here? Does that hospital system have the capacity to care for me given the state that my body's in? I was in a wedding where I was a bridesmaid in Jamaica and I was unable to go, just because my doctors and my family felt it wasn't particularly safe at the time for me, so everything.

Brendan 08:43
- Yeah, gosh, to add that extra layer of thought onto everything that you do, that you're talking about sort of the travel plans or a wedding, for many of us, right, we don't think about when we're traveling, or your biggest worry, right, is like is your plane gonna be on time, you know, are they gonna lose your bag?

Brittany Grant 09:00
- Right.

Brendan 09:01
- You know, really, you know, in the grand scheme of things kind of meaningless, right? But to actually think about planning your trip around where is the nearest medical facility or what if this happens or that happens, I guess maybe bluntly, could be life or death, right?

Brittany Grant 09:15
- Absolutely. And I think that's where when you get certain diagnoses like this that you weigh everything with that consequence, which is frankly just mentally exhausting. My eye was always on the prize of getting a transplant and making it through this without hopefully traumatizing my friends and family by seeing me deteriorate. So that was always, make it through, make it through, make it through. But also in your quiet moments, it's hard not to think of what the future implications are gonna be with your life after transplant or if you're even able to get one.

Brendan 09:49
- So you mentioned you had a kidney transplant, how long did it take and what does that process look like?

Brittany Grant 09:56

- Oh, I could talk about this for days. So what does the process look like? There's two fundamental, like schools of thought, with caring for kidney patients, and there's a lot of thought about the system overall being overhauled. My physicians really tried to avoid dialysis, which I know is not avoidable for a lot of people. Again, that's where I'm very grateful and thankful that I have amazing doctors and a smart network of friends that are also doctors that I can bounce questions off of or are able to think differently or use the most up to date research or data. But doing dialysis really takes some time off of your life expectancy and also has its challenges in terms of time and a million other factors that go into it. So what I did to start my journey is set up a list. I asked all of my friends and family if they're willing to donate. For someone like me, that I'm very much a people pleaser and I'm the one that gets joy out of like giving a gift or doing something for my friends and family, it was a really hard thing, like I don't even want people to help me carry my bags, let alone cut an organ out of their body to give to me. So it was emotionally taxing that way, but just something that was necessary. My indirect donor is my dad's very good friend and my very good friend, I always call her my angel at this point, her name is Jess. And she just nonchalantly was like, "Well, of course, let me get tested, I'll be your donor." And we developed such a great friendship and such an emotional bond through that, and she was a match. And then about a week before my surgery, and I think I had COVID actually,

Brendan 11:30
- Oh, wow.

Brittany Grant 11:31
- I'm 99.9% positive. It was late February, I felt terribly, terribly ill and had all of the symptoms. But anyways, the transplant surgeon called Jess and said, if you are willing to donate to someone else, we actually found a better match for Brittany. And so for her it was emotionally difficult to make that decision because she wanted that connection, that bond with me. But as a result of her being selfless and agreeing to give to someone else, I received, my direct donor is a single mother of two, she's 26, she's high school educated, and has two beautiful daughters and is a waitress.

Brendan 12:09
- Yeah.

Brittany Grant 12:10
- So our lives could not be more different, but her selflessness is just amazing. She initially tested to be a donor for her cousin who was a pediatric patient, and he received in December, my transplant wasn't until March, and she still answered the phone and agreed to it, which is, it still blows my mind to this day.

Brendan 12:30
- Yeah, I mean, you said it, selfless. And I love how you referred to, I guess you could say all sort of donors, right, as angels.

Brittany Grant 12:38
- They really are.

Brendan 12:40
- Maybe to stay on that point a bit, you know, these angels maybe gave you a second lease on life.

Brittany Grant 12:44
- Absolutely.

Brendan 12:44
- What would you say to people about being donors, about considering it, you know, generally or if being asked, like you said, it's a hard thing for someone put in a position to have to ask family, friends, acquaintances to consider it. Obviously you talked about the impact it's had on your life, but what would you say to people who maybe aren't aware or wouldn't consider being a donor?

Brittany Grant 13:05
- So I think that being a living donor is something that is easy to just talk about in concept, but a lot of people, they know it exists, but don't necessarily know that it applies to them or that they could do something like that. Because what you're really asking is someone to put their life on hold to help you continue to live. I would say that it is the most selfless thing that you can do, certainly there's risks. I mean, my donor has two little girls that are so sweet and she put her life on the line. Certainly there can be complications with any surgery, but what she gave me is the ability to have a family of my own, hopefully have my own family in the future, be able to still have a career and wake up every day and get to experience life. And if you have the chance to do that, I wish, knowing what I know now, if I had an organ to give, I would definitely test to be an altruistic donor. They'd call it the gift of life and that's really what it's.

Brendan 14:10
- Yeah, so powerful. So what was it like for you in 2020, either right before getting your transplant or right after having that procedure, and then also dealing with the start of the COVID 19 pandemic?

Brittany Grant 14:23
- This kind of goes back to two questions as well that you asked about what would you say to donors and also just generally about what life would be like after. The doctors tell you like you will live a very normal life with just minimal adjustments, like you can't eat grapefruit or pomegranate, you can't have lunch meat that's not cooked, like the biggest thing for you is food safety and also making sure that you don't have any open wounds, right? So that goes also for the donors as well, they don't have to take those precautions, they can be totally normal in their life, and my donor just always says, "This was the easiest thing for me, I recovered like this, and I get to watch you be alive again." So she lives a totally normal life. So that's something, it's like, a temporary pain for like such a great reward. But the week of my surgery is actually when everything started. So it was interesting because it was evolving as my stay in the hospital happened. So I checked in on Sunday the 8th, my surgery was Monday the 9th, and by Thursday night when I got out, things started to be weird. I had all of my friends and family, they were basically having a life party on the transplant floor. Everyone was in their masks already, so that was an easy transition for all of us once masking became a thing, because as a transplant patient you have to wear a mask anyways for, I think it's about three months.

Brendan 15:43
- Okay.

Brittany Grant 15:44
- But they didn't say three years. (laughing together) But my appointment was Saturday, the entire hospital was completely shut down, and it was like a ghost town everywhere. And the anxiety of not getting sick in the immediacy after the transplant from on a normal circumstance is high. Add in a pandemic that no one knows what this is, how to really protect yourself, what to do, it was incredibly stressful for I think everyone that was around me.

And I do feel guilty about that, that they had to adjust their lives, not only with the uncertainty of what they're experiencing themselves, but then taking that extra precaution for me just felt like an extra burden. And I know that that plagues a lot of people with chronic illness, that they don't wanna feel that way. But it was almost impossible not to during the pandemic.

(gentle instrumental music)

Brendan 16:39
- I remember when the pandemic first hit, you probably do too. Even as a totally healthy person, it was scary. We were all washing and wiping down every grocery pickup. The caution was extreme. Now imagine you just had a surgery where you already have to wear a mask for three straight months due to your weakened immune system. Add the COVID pandemic on top of that, the emotional toll would be heavy. I asked Brittany what extra precautions she ended up taking at that time.

Brittany Grant 17:13
- So I think couple things. My doctors told me to stay as isolated as possible, and thankfully I'm fortunate enough to have a place where I can go stay and still work remotely even though I wasn't working for about three months recovering. So I basically lived in the middle of the woods for what I thought was gonna be about two weeks and then it turned into two and a half years. So I'm finally out of the woods, literally and figuratively. And it was nice to be isolated in certain ways because I didn't have to feel that stress and pressure of being around people, or you know, oh, was that person around somebody else that had it, and then you know, are they sick and don't have symptoms? Are they asymptomatic? So that was nice. I also was probably first in line to get a vaccine, to get boosted. I was, you know, always there, and to take any prophylactic measures, and you know, advancements that pharmaceutical companies and scientists were making to make people like myself have the ability to stay safe as best as possible as the situation continued to evolve.

Brendan 18:24
- So that's interesting sort of being in the woods and sort of cutting yourself off from others, were you alone, did you have anyone in your support system, friends, family with you during that period of time?

Brittany Grant 18:40
- Yes. So that also, I mean, completely frankly caused a lot of issues for us personally. So I had the support of my father who had to leave his home with my two brothers and his partner, and then my partner at the time, he was with me there as well with our dogs. So it was a nice reprieve from the reality of what was going on for sure. But ultimately as time progressed and people got back to normal, that pace of getting back to normal was so different and it seemed to follow along party lines unfortunately. And somebody that had a background in policy and politics, it was particularly difficult for me to be, I wanna say sympathetic perhaps, to people that weren’t conscious of how their actions were impacting others or just didn't care and made the precautions that I was taking, and my partner, and my family, and friends were taking, made it more of a political issue rather than, hey, you know what, she's immune compromised.

But I think it goes back to your point about people not really understanding what it means to be immune compromised or how it really impacts your life, both physically, but also mentally.

Brendan 19:58
- Yeah, I recall reading the news, and reporters, and broadcast agents sort of making comparisons during the pandemic. We were all sort of adopting the measures, washing our

hand and mask that immunocompromised people were already doing, right, that were part of their daily lives already. You know, obviously I think it caused quite a bit of frustrations, right, people were annoyed with masks, and you know, all these new rules that were impacting sort of the freedoms that they had to go about their lives. And you sort of shared a little bit about like how did it make you feel or how does it make you feel to hear that, right?

Brittany Grant 20:35
- Brendan, this is starting to feel like a therapy session and I'm well versed in this subject. (laughing together) So what did it feel like? I think that the same sort of extra steps that I was taking prior, you know, once you get diagnosed your life changes, and afterwards those extra steps you still had to take. And what was disappointing and frustrating for me is I thought that as soon as I make it to the transplant, other than a few tweaks, like you can relax a little bit. And that just certainly was not the case, and it was incredibly frustrating, and the same weight that I weighed everything before being life or death continued. And some people thought it was dramatic or they just couldn't relate, and I think a lot of this comes down to if people are inconvenienced, they don't wanna do it. and I think whether it was wearing a mask or getting vaccinated, some of it's just people who felt that it was an inconvenience to them and they didn't want to. We mandated that anybody that coming to my house, or around me, or people that I'm around regularly, they need to be vaccinated and they need to be tested. We did have a couple people in our life at the time that refused to get vaccinated, and I would only see them outside. And what's interesting, if I'm being honest about it as well, is the same way that I took it personally that they lacked precaution. I think that they almost took it personally that I was putting them at a distance, but really, it wasn't personal, it was me that I felt I needed to do to protect my health and my life. 'Cause I want a lot of things out of life, and if you put yourself at risk, whether it's before or after, that's what you're jeopardizing. You're jeopardizing your career, your ability to have a family, your ability to see the world and meet new people. And I wasn't willing to do it.

Brendan 22:26
- Yeah. Do you think people were confused or just lacked the understanding of having gone through a kidney transplant, what the impact was and the challenges that you were up against or the risks that you had that were different than someone who didn't go through that or who wasn't immunocompromised? Do you think that played into it at all?

Brittany Grant 22:44
- You know, for me personally, I think part of it, and this is something I've experienced both when I was really sick and even now, I don't fit the typical what a sick person looks like, or someone with a chronic illness, or somebody that you think of that's had a kidney transplant. So even beforehand, when I was about to have my transplant, I remember I went to a meeting, it was in Washington, it was the head of a government affairs office for a healthcare company, not yours, and she was floored. I said, you know, I'm sorry I won't be able to make our next meeting, I have medical procedure. And we had developed a good rapport, I said, you know, I'm getting a kidney transplant. She almost fell off her chair. She was like, "Brittany, I have known you for four years, I can't believe I didn't know that you were sick." I was like, hmm, you know, it's not something I'm waving a flag around being like, hi,

Brendan 23:30
- Right, yeah.

Brittany Grant 23:30
- you know, I'm gonna die soon, hello?

Brendan 23:34

- Yeah.

Brittany Grant 23:35
- Yeah, and I think what's what's hard too is like you don't have to look sick. They call my disease, particularly, the silent killer, because a lot of people don't find out until they're really sick. I feel like what immune compromised people go through is very similar to addiction, right? Where there's a lot of issues with addiction, it impacts a lot of people from a lot of different walks of life and there's no one cookie cutter mold for what someone looks like. But there are considerations that you have to take to be around somebody that has addiction issues. Same thing with being immunocompromised. I think organizations have done such a great job of educating the public about cancer that there is a sensitivity to that. So I think you never have to say, oh, someone with cancer is immunocompromised, because that just is synonymous. Like, they're sick, whether they have hair or they don't have hair, that's an illness that the general public is very well aware of. But there's so many more people that are also immune compromised, and I think that aside from whether you're cookie cutter into the image of what you should look like are not, I do believe, regardless of the illness that you go through, that it's really hard to understand unless you go through, and it's not anyone's fault, it's just sometimes you just don't know until you have to plow through it.

Brendan 24:55
- So in your experience, did you look for a community of immunocompromised people or sort of a support system of folks? You know, it sounds like you had obviously a great support system from family and friends. Did you need some sort of a network or community of folks that had gone through the same experiences that you went through to feel sort of like, you know, someone fully got it?

Brittany Grant 25:20
- I think everyone's journey is so different that what I found helpful was sort of being like a little internet stalker where I would stalk the Facebook groups just to see what other people were experiencing, because there is a level of like, is this normal? Am I experiencing something I shouldn't be or am I making too much of a deal about this? But past that, I didn't really seek, I wanted to move forward in my life and be as normal as possible. And my nephrologist always would say, "I don't want you to act like a sick person. I want you to live." And she gave me no room to feel bad for myself, which was nice.

Brendan 25:54
- Sort of mind over matter. Mind over matter is great and finding the right support for your personality is great too. But what finally helped me relax in the midst of the pandemic was getting the vaccine. It was the first time I felt like I could really exhale since COVID arrived. I was curious if Brittany's life got any easier at that point, given her immunocompromised status.

You know, as I got vaccinated and I felt a little sense of relief. Did you feel a sense of relief or did you change any of the precautionary measures that you were taking?

Brittany Grant 26:33
- So yes and no. I was in some ways crippled by my fear of getting sick again, because I really, in my opinion, tried very hard not to let people in my family, or my friends, or at work know how much pain I was in or how sick I felt. So despite the fact of having the vaccines, I still took all of the same precautions. However, I did give myself a little bit more grace, like if someone touched something of mine, I wasn't like about to be on the verge of tears. But eventually I did receive a prophylactic treatment in addition to my vaccines and that gave me a great sense of

relief. And after that is when I started really trying to spread my wings a little bit, and I went on a trip, I wore obviously a mask and made sure that the precautions at the hotel I went to were insane as well. I engaged in some family functions that were larger groups of people than I had previously, and I ate at like two restaurants, and I was really proud of myself for that.

Brendan 27:41
- That must have been an incredible experience, right? To be secluded and isolated for two and a half years to then sort of experience those things almost like for the first time, right?

Brittany Grant 27:49
- Yes.

Brendan 27:49
- As a whole different person with, I would imagine, sort of a different perspective on life.

Brittany Grant 27:59
- Absolutely. Everything felt giddy. As soon as I was able to like calm down and be like, you're gonna be fine, you're not gonna get sick, you've done everything you need to do. We were as safe as possible, you need to enjoy. I was like giddy about not having to cook my own food and you know, where I was living, the grocery store was 40 minutes away, and I love to cook. I've cooked all my life, but I will tell you what, I have not made a meal for myself other than one time since I moved out of the mountains, 'cause I am just like giddy about trying all the new restaurants. I went from living in like downtown DC, right in Dupont Circle where I could walk to a million restaurants to the grocery store being 40 minutes away. It was a lot.

Brendan 28:38
- We've heard people talk about, and for many it feels like the pandemic's over, right? Like we've sort of long returned to, I say pre-pandemic life, but it's maybe like post pandemic life or it still feels a little bit different, but people are not by no means taking the same precautions or social distancing.

Brittany Grant 28:57
- Right.

Brendan 28:58
- But at the same time we know, you know, I was looking at recent data, a hundred thousand cases of COVID diagnosed each week, 5,000 hospitalizations, 2000 deaths. So do you agree with the assessment that the pandemic is over?

Brittany Grant 29:16
- Do I agree? I don't disagree, I think that there needed to probably be a more clear way to transition. And I think the hard thing with data or whether it's presented in whatever medium it is, it's hard to recognize the human impact that that has. So if you're a person who’s not working in healthcare or have somebody in their family that's immune compromised where you are actually being impacted by it every single day, the implications if something does go wrong, like last year I was hospitalized, I think four times, for an infection that I never would've had if I wasn't immune compromised. And that pays a toll on my family, and my partner at the time having to take off a work, or quickly get me to the hospital, or whatever it may be.
So do I think that people should get back to normal-ish, or you know, post pandemic life? Absolutely, we need to be able to live. I just wish that whether it was day one or right now today of the pandemic, I wish that there was more consideration and perhaps education about what the implications are for immune compromised. But sometimes I think

people just don't care unless it impacts them. So the onus unfortunately is on us as the immune compromised community to continue to advocate and protect ourselves and take the measures that we feel comfortable with.

Brendan 30:38
- I've heard of the immunocompromised population during the pandemic referred to sort of as the forgotten population. Does that resonate with you?

Brittany Grant 30:46
- Absolutely.

Brendan 30:47
- You talked about sort of the levels of awareness around cancer, right? And it's widely talked about everyone knows somebody that has been impacted, versus something like the folks who are immunocompromised, you know, obviously what we were talking about sort of 3% of American population meets the criteria for immunocompromised, you know, huge proportion of people. You said you agreed with sort of that categorization of the forgotten population, what does that feel like?

Brittany Grant 31:15
- It just feels like a lack of consideration, and that your life, whether or not the repercussions of somebody else's actions or whether it's inadvertent or not, it just feels like your life doesn't matter, and that's hard. And especially when it's people, like in my circumstance, my partner's family, none of them were vaccinated and weren't particularly supportive of the precautions that we were taking, didn't understand it and didn't particularly want to. And then I also had some people in my own family that just were like, well, you had your transplant, you're fine. Like, well, no, not really.

Brendan 31:53
- Yeah.

Brittany Grant 31:53
- You know, I am fine and I'm great kidney wise, but I have to take some extra precautions here. So it's two part, you certainly do feel a lack of consideration, like you don't matter or that you're not worth it. But at the same time, I understand, you know, if I were, you know, someone that had a really hard time understanding the precautions that we needed to take with my 21 year old brother. And I think back to when I was 21, I mean, even when I got diagnosed, I didn't know where my kidneys were, let alone when I was 21, and he's a crazy boy, you know, it's just hard to conceptualize what can happen and how real life is when you're that age. So you have to give people, I feel, like some grace if it doesn't impact them, they don't really understand. But also, it certainly makes you feel left out.

Brendan 32:43
- What do you say to society on behalf of yourself, on behalf of the immunocompromised community, what should we be doing to help ensure that those who are immunocompromised are seen, are heard, are cared for? What would you ask of everyone or what can be done?

Brittany Grant 32:57
- What can be done? You know, I just think the most simple answer when it comes to the pandemic is if you're sick or you're not feeling well, even if you think it's allergies, like take a test, or if you're sick, stay home, nobody wants you to breathe your sickness on them,

whether you're immune compromised or not. So I think some of that behavior has certainly, thankfully, been adopted throughout the pandemic and back into normal life, whether it's in consideration of immune compromised or otherwise. But the other thing is I just would ask people to be more empathetic, and you know, I think it's definitely a grandma phrased, but something I've heard my whole life, is you never know what someone else is going through, and that's really true. And I think empathy and taking the time to just realize that other people might be going through something. So if they're wearing a mask, or maybe take a step back, and realize they're needing some extra space, or don't wanna be as close, or again, if you're sick, stay home. Just be a little bit more considerate and empathetic to other people.

(gentle instrumental music)

Brendan 34:02
- Brittany has shared so much about her incredibly personal experience as immunocompromised, and a lot of it gets me pretty emotional. As someone who works in the healthcare industry, I was sure Brittany also had a point of view beyond her personal experience on how organizations might be able to better cater to the immunocompromised moving forward. Through your experience are there things, lessons learned that you would share or that you have for, again, I'll sort of say broadly like at maybe at more macro level organizations, government healthcare systems, you name it?

Brittany Grant 34:38
- A few things. So you asked me before about the transplant process, and I think this applies across the board to any type of organization, particularly coming out of the pandemic, one thing that the transplant system is lacking is transparency. And I think that transparency in terms of where you on the list, what your future looks like, when your surgery is, the whole nine yards, like there is a severe lack of transparency in that process, which causes a lot of unintended consequences, allows people who aren't fortunate to have their careers upended. You know, some people can't even make it to their transplant surgery because they don't have a ride, they don't have a ride to save their life. So I think having more transparency across the board. So if it's a government agency or it's a nonprofit, providing transparency and education into what people have to go through and really humanizing this issue, whether it's kidney issues, cancer, HIV, whatever it is, you know, livers, there's a million diseases that people are unfortunately plagued with and really impact their lives. And I think providing transparency into how it impacts them is really, really important. Because again, I think it touches on that part of, people don't really pay ttention until it impacts them, but maybe there's something in terms of the messaging or the person that they see telling that story that strikes the nerve and is like, oh, that looks like my daughter, or oh, that reminds me of my son, I hope he never has to experience something like this person's talking about. And that's why in part I try to do anything I can, I would be more of a private person and wouldn't particularly share a lot of people, you know, in my extended circle, or people from college, or even high school, none of them knew I had a transplant until recently because I didn't share it. And I felt that I was doing a disservice to transplant patients, to people going through healthcare systems in general, if I didn't use my voice and platforms to at least tell my story in hopes of impacting change, whether it's for myself, obviously, or others going through, myself, meaning kidney patients in general, or just anyone that's dealing with a healthcare crisis.

Brendan 36:57
- That's helpful. I think education, awareness, support, all vital, right, to help this community.

Brittany Grant 37:00
- And it seems silly, but like working from home is something that is so widely used now, but something for if you have a chronic illness made all the difference in the world. So I think from a

corporate standpoint, as businesses move forward, not from a messaging standpoint, but from an internal perspective, having that understanding of everyone's needs, whether it's for childcare, or for health issues, or whatever it may be, having that sort of flexibility really can make a difference in someone's life.

Brendan 37:36
- I'm gonna shift gears in a moment, Brittany, but I wanna sort of give you the floor. Is there anything else that you want listeners of this podcast to know or understand about what it's like to be immunocompromised?

Brittany Grant 38:00
- I think we covered a lot of it in our conversation today, which thank you again for having me here, it's always great to talk about these issues, and hopefully they help somebody else through their journey as well. I would just say that, again, a little bit of compassion goes a long way. Nobody wants to be immune compromised, nobody wants to be going through these issues. So anything that you can do to extend a hand to help someone in their healthcare journey, make sure that you do that, 'cause it goes a long way. And advocate for other people that might not have a voice to do so. I really remember, they have, it's called the transplant evaluation day. It's what you have to do for it's eight hours and you have to meet with everyone under the sun, from a psych eval, to the social worker, to the pharmacist, and they evaluate you to see if you are eligible for a transplant, if you can emotionally handle it. And what's something that struck me was that how fortunate I was to have an education, have a career, and there was a lot of people that were there that didn't speak English, weren't educated, and I can't imagine how overwhelming that process would be for them. So that's the only other thing I would do is really encourage people to dig in and help people in their community that do need help.

Brendan 39:08
- That’s great. So you thanked me, but really, thank you for, I mean, you've been so vulnerable and eloquent in sharing your story on such a public platform, and providing a peek into the reality that many immunocompromised individuals face. It's so important for us to rtecognize that we all bring a unique perspective and lived experience to any situation. So I'm really thankful for the opportunity to learn from you and to move forward with more empathy, and as you said, compassion.

It seems like living as an immunocompromised individual today can be a really heavy experience. I'm sure you welcome the opportunities, you know, as they come, to be a bit more lighthearted. And so in that light, we end each episode of the podcast with a fun little game of five rapid fire questions to get to know our guests a little bit better.
So are you ready?

Brittany Grant 39:57
- I'm ready.

Brendan 39:58
- Okay, here we go. Okay, first thing that comes to mind, when did you realize the career you have now Is what your calling would be?

Brittany Grant 40:04
- I should probably be doing something with dogs, but I love and I'm thankful for my career that I've worked really hard for.

Brendan 40:12

- Do you think like dog trainer, veterinarian?

Brittany Grant 40:18
- I probably should have been a vet, but that, you know, seemed like a childhood dream that definitely washed under the bridge, but who knows?

Brendan 40:23
- I don't think it's too late.

Brittany Grant 40:24
- But I do love my job. It's great actually because I get to meet awesome people. It always inspires me and gets me excited when I get to meet fun people, for sure.

Brendan 40:35
- All right, when you text do you use emojis and/or GIFs, and what's your most used emoji?

Brittany Grant 40:39
- So I think it really depends on the situation when it comes to GIFs or emojis. If I'm trying to make a big statement, I go with a GIF. But I would say mostly I use the cowboy hat smiley.

Brendan 40:47
- Oh, interesting.

Brittany Grant 40:48
- And the eye roll one.

Brendan 40:49
- I definitely, I'm with you on the eye roll one. I haven't used the cowboy smiley one.

Brittany Grant 41:00
- I'm a big fan.

Brendan 41:04
- Is there like a country reference to it or is it just of the smileys available, that's the one that just sort of grabs your attention?

Brittany Grant 41:08
- You know, I like it 'cause it's fun, a little wild with the hat, keeps people on their toes. I'm also a fan of “Yellowstone", so that also helps.

Brendan 41:18
- Okay.

Brittany Grant 41:18
- And during the pandemic I definitely overused the zombie woman, so it's a little more uplifting.

Brendan 41:22
- Yeah, you have encouraged me. I'm gonna use that, the cowboy smiley next time.

Brittany Grant 41:26

- I think you'll get a good reception.

Brendan 41:28
- Where is your happy place?

Brittany Grant 41:37
- My happy place. I actually wrote a paper about it when I was in middle school, goes way back. But my grandmother's porch is the best place in the world. It's so serene, it's beautiful. There's this one owl that sits up in a tree, and it's been there my entire life, and it always makes owl noises, and it's just the best, and it doesn't hurt if she always like wants to feed you, so.

Brendan 42:01
- Yeah, no, that sounds amazing. What is the last non-work related book you read?

Brittany Grant 41:06
- So I love reading self-help books, I'm a big fan. And I just read a book called "Drama Free", and I'm gonna mess up her name, it's Deirdra, or no, excuse me, it's Nedra, and I'm blanking on her last name, but she's absolutely amazing, and it's her latest book.

Brendan 42:28
- Okay, I'll go check that one out. I'm actually a big fan of the drama, like the "Real Housewives", like all reality TV. So I love the drama. So I don't know if "Drama Free" is the right book for me, but I'll still check it out.

Brittany Grant
- But lemme tell you, I read "Drama Free", but I am a big, big connoisseur of trashy TV.

Brendan 42:49
- Okay.

Brittany Grant 42:49
- Like I go as far as "Teen Mom", okay?

Brendan 42:52
- Okay, I'm glad we have that in common. All right, the fifth and final question is, what is a fun tradition your family has?

Brittany Grant 43:00
- So like I said, I come from a big Italian family, and a lot of our traditions are around food. So I would say just one, it's not necessarily fun, but one, like I love, it always brings like warm memories is my grandmother always made homemade lasagna on Christmas Eve, and it's always like a fight to who gets like it before it runs out. So that's probably one of my favorite traditions is her making that.

Brendan 43:28
- Well, you passed the test, the five questions, not that there was right or wrong answers, but I especially liked all your answers. So thanks so much for humoring me with that.

Brittany Grant 43:37
- Absolutely.

Brendan 43:37

- And really, you know, again, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today, for sharing your story. I've learned so much about you, about being immunocompromised, the challenges, the perspectives, and then what I can do. So I hope that the folks listening to this, similarly, are touched by your story and maybe do something a little bit differently or live their life a little bit differently, keeping that empathy and that compassion in mind. So again, thanks so much for joining me today, Brittany.

Brittany Grant 44:09
- Well, thank you. I'm so happy to be able to have spent time with you, and I love the podcast and I'm excited to be a part of it.

Brendan 44:17
- Thanks for joining me today. I did wanna make one note based on the book Brittany said she loved, titled "Drama Free". I wanted to be sure we gave the author some credit there. So if you wanted her full name, it is Nedra Tawwab. And again, that book is called "Drama Free". Aside from that, I just wanna reflect on the conversation you just listened to.

I hope Brittany's story helps you understand that maybe all is not always what it seems. We might not know or understand what someone else is going through. And as Brittany said, we need to give ourselves and others a little grace at times. That's a message I'll be carrying with me.

Until next time, be well, be healthy, be understanding. Explore our future episodes wherever you listen to podcasts and find out more information about us by visiting AstraZeneca-us.com.