

# the dots

a podcast about connecting.

## Georgia Van Cuylenburg Transcript

**Announcer:** [00:00:04] Welcome to The Dots. A podcast about connecting. The dots is a series of conversations with artists, community leaders, entrepreneurs, and change makers who talk about how they connect the dots and bring together their communities, companies and themselves for a better life. And now you're host, digital strategist, speaker, and entrepreneur, Kathleen Buczko.

**Kathleen:** [00:00:31] Georgia Van Cuylenburg is founder and executive director of Arts Bridging the Gap dot org. Their mission is to bring top quality arts programs and experiences to children in under-served communities in order to improve their quality of life, academic success, and future prospects. She's a believer in magic, children, the power of planning, research, and a smile. Georgia, welcome to the dots.

**Georgia:** [00:00:57] Thank you so. I love that intro. Can I have that everywhere I go for now on.

**Kathleen:** [00:01:00] Yes, So I'll just follow you around and say that every single time.

**Georgia:** [00:01:04] Thank you. That would help.

**Kathleen:** [00:01:06] Awesome. I love anybody who's a believer in magic. So tell me a little bit about your journey from actress, to speaker, and advocate and philanthropist and what I love the most as a doer of many fun things.

**Georgia:** [00:01:19] Oh yes. Well a little bit of that journey he is a hard one to capture. But I think that believer in magic is a good place to start with the journey because ever since I became a human myself I've believed in, not so much magic as far as hats and tricks and wands, but the magic of people. I just love human beings so much. I think the potential we have the way that humans can take hurt or questions or confusion or goodness even and turn it into with magical trick life changing things and the ability to help others and the ability to make a difference is the greatest magic trick of life. So if we start with the magic and thank you for mentioning that. I think that's where my journey really, I don't know what it is, but like literally since I was a little kid my mom apparently told me that I used to walk into every room and say "hello friends" when I didn't know anyone.

**Kathleen:** [00:02:24] So I think that's a very powerful tool.

**Georgia:** [00:02:27] Isn't that great.

**Kathleen:** [00:02:28] Yeah.

**Georgia:** [00:02:28] We'll do it now and it's a very funny thing of being an adult that walks into a room and just falls in love with everybody instantly. It's awesome seeing especially living in Hollywood. Maybe an innocent or ignorant approach but it works really well because if you actually decide you love somebody from the beginning they kind of tend to live up to it. In a way that even surprises them. So anyway that's a side story to the journey, but thank goodness for the magic of people.

**Kathleen:** [00:03:04] So tell me tell me about that magic right. You've taken a little side journey but that's ok. Every journey is comprised of many little segments and of and walking walking into a room, frankly can be an incredibly intimidating thing. And so how did you at such a young age decide to just welcome everyone in?

**Georgia:** [00:03:29] Well I think it's an interesting question and I'm not one to be shy with the truth. So I hope your listeners are OK with getting real very fast.

**Kathleen:** [00:03:38] We get real very fast.

**Georgia:** [00:03:40] Great because we kind of have to you for mine. Unless I work backwards, but it's just as real at the end as it is a start where we are now. I think it was the end and I should say. But for me I'm not sure whether I was saying hello friends before the first major life changing thing happened to me or not. But at two and a half my world was very clearly defined for me in a way that couldn't be more perfect. I come from a very comfortable, very loving, very incredibly fortunate upbringing and yet I was not, I was not left alone to have that childhood because I guess that wasn't the path. At two and a half, being the girl that wanted to always go out and do things and find out why later that she shouldn't according to my parents. Who were very afraid of their shadow along with everything else that came with it, went out to the front yard of my grandpas and grandmother's house when I was told not to and unfortunately I was met by a stranger. A male, who decided to do certain things to me that were extremely troubling and something that I wouldn't wish upon anyone but because of that I kept that secret. I didn't tell my family what had happened to me. And I came back inside and made a decision there and knowing the personalities of my mother and my grandpa that they would be so angry at me in the moment for doing that and going out there and that they couldn't handle it with what I decided. My my parents and my grandparents couldn't handle knowing what just happened, so I better keep it a secret. What. Without me of course knowing at two and a half, then was formed with this separation of me to other people. That I've only now as an adult and really knowing my journey and how clear it is seen how that worked. That at that moment I decided I had to take care of them and make sure they were OK. And I also got there and then that no child should have the feeling that I had of "I'm naughty". "I made this happen" and "it's my fault". And so I became so committed, even in that little moment. And from that age on to making sure that every child was happy and smiling and knew that they were perfect and that they were just OK and they hadn't done anything wrong. And that has defined pretty much everything that happened since. Through all the incredible twists and turn, I did decide at four and a half, in my first theater production, that I wanted to work in entertainment for the rest of my life because making people laugh and smile felt so good and was already achieving that little goal of mine just by having fun and playing. So four and a half so I decided entertainment was what I wanted to do and it was going to make people happy. And then at 12 and a half I decided that I wanted to move to Hollywood. I grew up in Melbourne Australia and I was very aware that the world was looking to Hollywood for their messaging and there's nothing quite like seeing girls follow Britney Spears around for her messaging and her way to be when she was doing all sorts of things like not wearing underwear and photos and things and I remember 12 and a half saying that's not what girls should know. That we shouldn't be doing that. So I made a decision at 12 and a half to never smoke. Never drink. Never do drugs. And to move to Hollywood to use entertainment to spread positive messages. So that happened. And to keep going on the light and fluffy for a second, I had developed through my confusion around who I was and what I was here to do in the separation and not feeling seen by the world. I developed anorexia very badly through all my teen years. I had a whopping case of it but was always very self-aware about it. I talked about it and shared with everybody what was going on. I wasn't denying it but ended up writing a play that became really well known in Australia which was the point was to have people talk about it. And I so desperately wanted people to talk about what they weren't talking about which I guess makes sense now to me so much. But also I just sort of thought if were going to be our best and make a

difference, we have to be honest and we have to be talking and just because I've got a sickness right now, it doesn't make me a lesser person. So did that and got the gift of experiencing what happens when you're honest. And that was I made this leap of faith of wanting to talk and people came out of the woodwork and men and young boys who wouldn't usually ever talk about this kind of thing wanted to share about their sister or their friend that had anorexia and wanted to share. And I saw the power of one person being honest how it could affect an honest response and so many who would say "I you know I haven't told anyone this" or something so that happened before I left. I moved to Hollywood at 18 and was so convinced that this was it I was going to use entertainment to make a difference and I was going to be the host and this and that and the other, and life created this perfect picture where I was working as a hair model of all things, along with hosting and doing a lot of stuff that was visual and using my appearance to make a living. And quite often still had such low self-esteem about that part of me that I always say the only thing I like about me is my hair. That's the one thing that I could hold on to. And I've been saying that so much.

**Kathleen:** [00:09:59] Now hang on. Hang on for a second.

**Georgia:** [00:10:00] Yes.

**Kathleen:** [00:10:00] So the only thing you liked about yourself was your hair.

**Georgia:** [00:10:03] Hair. Yeah.

**Kathleen:** [00:10:05] But you've made conscious decisions since two and a half years old to achieve your goals.

**Georgia:** [00:10:14] Yes.

**Kathleen:** [00:10:14] You hit new thresholds, appearing in your first theater production of less than five. Making a decision to move to a foreign country by the time you were 12.

**Georgia:** [00:10:29] Yes.

**Kathleen:** [00:10:29] And conscious decisions.

**Georgia:** [00:10:30] Yes.

**Kathleen:** [00:10:30] You have vivid memories and made distinct plans and moved here by the time you were 18 years old and the only thing you thought about was - people, I have good hair.

**Georgia:** [00:10:45] Yes. And it was sad.

**Kathleen:** [00:10:46] How, how bad. Yeah. How do you lose that power.

**Georgia:** [00:10:52] Well, what had happened, truly and thank you for asking that question because to the world, I seemed like the happiest, most bubbly person. And the only people that really knew that wasn't true were my family. Because they knew the real me. They knew that I was very sad and so desperately wanting the world to look the way I knew it could. What was missing was that I had completely pushed this memory from two and a half away. So I at that point was not cognizant to what had happened when I was two and a half. I was living this thing if I feel these feelings and I feel misunderstood but I didn't know why and that creates a pretty deep sadness.

**Kathleen:** [00:11:39] Yeah, No, a dark hole.

**Georgia:** [00:11:41] Yeah. So when you ask why the only thing is I had to latch on to something that would make me say that. But there was so much going on that I wasn't able to access yet. And I say yet very happily because the story is very different today. So yeah.

**Kathleen:** [00:12:02] So how did you find your voice, Georgia?

**Georgia:** [00:12:04] Well I found my voice by that very defining thing of the only thing I liked about me being my hair. That two weeks of my life in 2007, I lost all of my hair. It fell out. There was no way that that happened by accident in my opinion.

**Kathleen:** [00:12:27] I agree.

**Georgia:** [00:12:27] And it was so perfect. I got alopecia areata, the immune condition of active condition and in that one moment I had to start liking the rest of me. I had to start the journey of going well, you've been saying that that was the one thing you loved about yourself for how long now? Guess you going to have to change.

**Kathleen:** [00:12:47] Yeah.

**Georgia:** [00:12:48] And I went on this incredible journey from then on where I was told to keep it a secret for years working in entertainment quite a bit. And the advice was If you tell people you'll never work again. That experience was so horrifically not me that at the end of that year I decided to do the opposite and make a movie about it. And come out very loud and proud about my journey and the infallible nature of me as a human that I had trouble with it sometimes and sometimes I was fine. Made a documentary called Baby, Let Your Hair Hang Down and over the next few years ended up on a number of the major news, like 20/20, the doctors having to post all that telling the story. And each day I would get an e-mail at least once and still to this day. And that was 2010 and 11 that this was all coming out in the world.

**Kathleen:** [00:13:45] wow.

**Georgia:** [00:13:45] That I would get e-mails from people saying "I've never told anyone else this but..." And all of a sudden this world opens up to me to prove that I had always been right. But everybody's just waiting for someone to say "hello friend". And they want to share your thing too. And I mean their thing and be honest about what it is that they're challenge with and not be ashamed, and not hide the story. And during that time I was also integrating this. In 2008 with when I had the realization about what had happened and did this in a very thorough, thought out, tested way, that I actually didn't tell anyone at first what I believed had happened and tested my parents on occasions and events and things and most interestingly I'd been going to therapy; most of my childhood for my anorexia and I thought it was worthwhile going back to that therapist when I was in Australia. To tell him what I realized had happened to me when I was a kid. When I realized and I said to him, "you know I can't believe this memory I've had". And you know and I told him about and he said "Well now I can tell you that your entire therapy was defined by a statement I made to your parents when I first met you after a couple of months they I said I believe she's been sexually assaulted and I know that we have no proof and I don't want to point fingers. But I will be treating her that way because that is what she decides". So it was an incredible moment for me of going, I was right.

**Kathleen:** [00:15:20] Yeah right.

**Georgia:** [00:15:22] You know and what got to happen for me then was as opposed to so many

people who start therapy in the work begins. I really felt that in a way I was reading the book backwards. That for so long had been blame and guilt and shame around the feelings I felt and that lack of love for myself.

**Kathleen:** [00:15:41] Yeah.

**Georgia:** [00:15:41] Like you asked and I could finally forgive myself for that. I could finally say well of course. No wonder. And now it becomes a moment of healing. And what has happened since is just the most incredibly kind of ,, gratitude, That doesn't even capture it for the journey that I now get to go on because freeing myself from that has enabled me to realize the point of my life and everybody's life, in my opinion, and live for others. Because I'm done. Like, I'm good with my story.

**Kathleen:** [00:16:18] Yeah.

**Georgia:** [00:16:18] I know what happened and I know why it happened and I know why I'm here. And I've done the work to become totally OK with those twists and turns. And who I am and I love who I am. And I am so excited to use that to ensure that everybody in the world knows that they are loved. And that they are special. And that their journey with all the twists and turns is the part of them that was going to be able to make a difference for the world once they heal it. And once they own it and it sort of shifted to a thing of waking up every day not having want to go to bed and waking up early as I can to make sure that I'm around enough people and do enough work and all the work I do now is about being with and in front of and around enough people who are willing and interested to make a difference. To ensure that I can help them and support them and create that for them in any way. Whether it's the kids I work with, that I was working with this morning or the adult, I just had lunch with. We are all kids wanting to make a difference. And I'm so grateful that I had this crazy twisty turny journey up till now who knows what come for the rest. But that has made it possible and I could also tell you the story of why I'm so determined to do it. But that is the journey that I went on.

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**Kathleen:** [00:18:06] Well and that was kinda like going to be you know my follow up question is that your journey is far from over.

**Georgia:** [00:18:18] Yes. Here's hoping.

**Kathleen:** [00:18:18] And you know that twisty turny .... Here's hoping, exactly. But that twisty turny journey has brought you to this point where you're actively engaged in delivering amazing programs around the arts for kids who don't get that opportunity. So certainly how you've gotten to this point. Tell us how you think Arts Bridging the Gap will continue that that legacy of that journey.

**Georgia:** [00:18:47] Yeah. And thank you for that question. I think that for me I've always obviously from this story being invested in children but what has come clear to me since moving to Los Angeles. I, when I grew up in Melbourne it really wasn't a poverty the way it exists in most parts of the world. There wasn't homeless or undisturbed community the way that it is here and there certainly wasn't the immigration population because it's a very different world down there. And to move to a country where all of these things exist in mass and it's overwhelming for a

foreigner. Just like, but no this doesn't need to exist because I've seen it not exist somewhere else. And I started volunteering a lot with the underserved community, with children. Underserved, for anyone who's sort of wondering is there a PC term we use to describe people living in poverty. And seeing these incredible young humans. They were compassionate. Their resilience. They're grateful. They are mindful. They're empathetic because of the challenges that they have been dealt by just simply existing in the world they exist they have this natural ability to care for others and care about what really matters. You know in the grand scheme of things. So I saw this but then I also saw that they had a different kind of lack of resilience they don't have this resilience to rejection of possibility. They're not willing to ask for help. They're not willing to ask for something. They're not willing wasn't willing but they're just simply not going to be able to take up a number of resources and opportunities that children who grow up in affluence will take because there's no reinforcement around that being possible. So what I experience was if I was to say to these kids you can have this or let's do this. They wouldn't follow it up. They wouldn't believe it and they wouldn't ask for questions because their answer is usually always no.

**Kathleen:** [00:21:03] Yeah.

**Georgia:** [00:21:04] No, you can't get that. No, that doesn't work that way. No, they can't help. No, we can't do this. And when you get to NO that many times in your life, you don't want to ask again. And unfortunately the parents have experienced that too. That's their story. So they're not going to prime their child for disappointment in their minds. So I saw this and I started looking at what it was that we could shift. We use to shift this and in an incredible moment of taking one of my boys, Ravi, who was the most challenged in that way. He was always like bursting into tears whenever anything got hard. I got him into a silly dance competition that we always did with kids to try and you know break up their brain space when we were tutoring them and he was an incredible dancer. So I said to him I'm going to get you a scholarship to a dance school and I took him over at Brentwood from Inglewood.

**Kathleen:** [00:21:59] That's a very different world.

**Georgia:** [00:22:00] Oh, very different world. And it was one of the most magical experience of seeing him go to the first dance class and at that point, Ravi was in third grade and his math and English was at a first grade level. And we got him into this dance studio and in three months his math and English had gone up to third grade level and nothing else had changed. And my the light bulb went off for me that I think we found the thing that works. And I started researching and looking into the effect of arts education on the self-esteem and self-efficacy of children in poverty and found that he was by far and away the most effective way to bridge the achievement gap which is why we are called Arts Bridging the Gap was bridging that achievement gap. Which is hysterical because now we exist to bridge so many gaps. I mean I was literally doing art with police officers and children today. You know we bridge the gap between the affluent and the undisturbed communities. We bridge gaps between arts organizations and schools. Like the gap has been and the bridging is turned into so many wonderful things. But the original bridging that gap was the achievement gap. So I did all that research and then formulated what I thought was the way to attack this and what to do. And we now are running a number of very strategic programs that work like for example doing a street art initiative where we're going to be painting a massive wall in Hollywood which used to be the Hollywood Market, now its the Hollywood Community Center next to the police department there.

**Kathleen:** [00:23:42] Yeah I know where that is.

**Georgia:** [00:23:42] Yeah so we are painting one of those walls. The children are designing the piece with the police officers. And they're painting it together so that we can reframe the

conversation. But also we know that street art in a community reduces the crime rate around that piece and reduces the questionable decisions made by teens when they have art in their area. So it's not only a chance for these kids to express themselves. Like I cannot tell you today the things that we had them do in our piece about themselves and not to get political but I gave these kids the assignment and the first time I've ever met them. This is the first chance they've had to tell me who they are. And I said to them I want you to create an art piece about you with all these tools and all these different things create an art piece about yourself. 5 of the 16 boys did things about Donald Trump and ending the world.

**Kathleen:** [00:24:34] Yeah.

**Georgia:** [00:24:34] It gave them a chance to say this is what I'm thinking about whether whatever you're political or you know this is not about that it's lets talk about them.

**Kathleen:** [00:24:42] Fear and uncertainty and doubt.

**Georgia:** [00:24:46] Yup.

**Kathleen:** [00:24:47] Can create your definition of self and.

**Georgia:** [00:24:51] Exactly.

**Kathleen:** [00:24:51] These are very difficult times that are kids of all ages are living through.

**Georgia:** [00:24:55] Yeah. So to be able to give them a place to share this morning on a Friday morning in their summer. I do not take that lightly. I think that we have an incredible ability through these mediums to give them a chance to let out because you just don't know where that's going to come out in another way or never come out and therefore define them as you said. So yeah we now do that a lot. And then my world is extended beyond Arts Bridging the Gap to sort of this incredible position where I just exist to create things like this and whether it's A. we're doing a garden project on the rooftop of Skid Row to create fruits and vegetables for the friends and neighbors down there. Whether it's the safe ride program to get kids to and from school safely. Whether it's, you know, it doesn't have to be art anymore it has to be what's needed to create that change for people that we absolutely have to have.

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**Kathleen:** [00:26:14] So Georgia, what really motivates you at this point?

**Georgia:** [00:26:22] What motivates me?

**Kathleen:** [00:26:24] Yeah.

**Georgia:** [00:26:24] Is the incredibleness of people. The power of a person who has been empowered. And a side story that well it's not really side it's the exact story that explains that. And it's something that I've only recently connected to is the motivation I have would define for me in second grade when I was home from school and fortunately unfortunately the news was accidentally on. We weren't allowed to watch the news at that age in our house. And Mom left it on and I heard a news piece that said that Russia now has the ability to blow up the world seven times over by the push of a button. And within that second, I became engendered with a horrific,

bloodcurdling, fear that manifested in this nightly experience that my parents and I had where if there was a bang that went off, if someone shot their trash can loudly in the street I would freak out and go running to them and said I had this feeling, which was that same feeling at the blood just dropping from my body and I would tell them I'm having the feeling. I'd be crying and they would console me. What I didn't know actually until two years ago is that I never told them what the feeling was. They asked me and I finally told them two years ago but before this went on and it created when you asked about like what drives me today, and what inspires me is THAT fear.

**Kathleen:** [00:27:57] Yeah.

**Georgia:** [00:27:58] That we as a world may not exist tomorrow. And that's not because we couldn't. That it was undeniable but it could happen because that could be defined by somebodies inability to be okay with themselves. I believe that there's no bad people. There's just bad things that happen to people and that people do and those things are totally related. And my fear was because somebody hasn't been able to be OK with themselves and make peace with the hurt that they've experienced, they could push a button. And all of us who are trying to create a better world will no longer be. And that's even hard for me to say out loud without I totally still get THE feeling. But I from that second on committed my life to making sure that whatever I could do, but more importantly, whatever I could do to make others be in a place to create the change. I knew that together as an incredible world of human beings that can do anything if we actually loved each other and got over the fear and hurt and loved ourselves that when we worked together and when we created the change we might just beat that timer.

**Kathleen:** [00:29:18] Georgia, thank you so much for sharing your magic with us and helping us be a timer. Because I think that your story of incredible strength and empowerment is really changing the face of Los Angeles. I want to thank you for doing that.

**Georgia:** [00:29:39] Thank you. Thank you. I am just my biggest hope is that I I'm one of thousands and thousands. That's the exciting thing about our time right now is finally people are doing things. They're so afraid now and there's so much to be afraid of. That people are finally forced into action and despite all the devastation I think it's a very exciting time.

**Kathleen:** [00:30:08] It is an exciting time and I'm thank you Georgia for helping us connect the dots.

**Georgia:** [00:30:13] You are so welcome.

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