**BSing with Courtney Munnings (Episode 34)**

*Hit it. That's what I'm talking about.*

Wait. Okay, now, from the beginning.

Welcome to BS Beyond Stereotypes, a podcast about lawyers using their authentic voices to change the world.

Courtney Munnings: This was lifesaving, life changing information. And I know there are a lot of people on social media and stuff who say all this stuff is over diagnosed. All of a sudden, everybody got ADHD, everybody's autistic. They don't really get that it's saving people's lives and it's changing everything for them. Because imagine thinking that you're broken and you're failing and you're useless and you shouldn't be here. And then figuring out, oh, I'm exactly how I was supposed to be. And I can make a life that works and feels good, and I can thrive exactly how I am.

Merle Vaughn: Welcome to BS beyond stereotypes. I am your host, Merle Vaughn. Here to BS with me today is Courtney Munnings, whose story I find fascinating and who will no doubt inspire all of you to embrace your authenticity.

Merle Vaughn: Hey, Courtney. How are you?

Courtney Munnings: I'm great. How are you?

Merle Vaughn: I'm good, thank you. Thank you for joining us to BS today.

Courtney Munnings: It's my pleasure, absolutely.

Merle Vaughn: So, let me tell the audience a little bit about you. I don't go into great detail because there's this thing called Google and LinkedIn, and people cannot find everybody these days. But Courtney is an attorney. She describes herself as autistic, neurodiverse, advocate, a speaker, a certified life coach, and she's been a makeup artist, which I find very interesting. Courtney currently is employed with Diversity Lab. She's been there for about a year, where she specializes in the work that they do for the Mansfield Rule. And we'll get into that in more detail later. She previously was a practicing attorney and associate at Pepper Hamilton, also known as now Troutman Pepper. For about eight years or so in their trial and dispute group, Courtney received her BA at Temple University and her law degree at Rutgers Law School.

Merle Vaughn: Did I leave anything important out, Courtney?

Courtney Munnings: No, that's everything.

Merle Vaughn: Okay, great. So, let's just jump right in.

Merle Vaughn: I like to start out by asking folks to share with us, to the extent that you're willing to do so, your story, your personal story, as much as you'd like to your professional story, and also a little bit about who has been influential in your personal and professional journey.

Courtney Munnings: Okay. So me, as a person, I'm from Springfield, Massachusetts, which is the home of basketball. I always say that I recently learned well, I recently learned I was autistic, but something that many autistic people do, apparently, is script.

Courtney Munnings: And so I learned actually, someone said whenever you introduce yourself, you say you're from the home of basketball. And I was like, what? So, yes, I think that started when I moved away to go to college at Temple. I told everybody I was from the home of basketball, so I'm really proud of that. I guess it's part of my script. So that's me.

Courtney Munnings: I went to Temple when I was 18, and I thought I was going to be a dentist or an oral surgeon. Apparently, I was not. That was not for me, not meant to be. No, it was not in the cards for me.

Courtney Munnings: I didn't know at the time that I was Dyslexic. I had all of these things going on with me. I struggled. I struggled really badly. I kept on trying, though. I ended up spending six years in undergrad, doing every single summer session. I took calculus three so many times. I took it so many times that the third time or so that I failed it. They changed the policy to if you fail calc three, you got to go back and do one and two again. And so, I spent years trying to pass the math prerequisites so I can get to the more advanced sciences, so I can go be a dentist or an oral surgeon.

Courtney Munnings: And then maybe I think it was my fourth year in, my mom called and she was just like, look, it's possible that you might not become a dentist and you should just graduate college. And so I switched my major to Spanish and I graduated, and I let that dream go and I took a year off. I was working all through college. I was working as a makeup artist for Mac and then just on my own doing weddings and photo shoots and things like that.

Courtney Munnings: Once I finally graduated college, I ended up just applying, just trying to do something. Being a makeup artist wasn't great for me because of all of the uncertainty and you're going to a different place every day. And I later learned I really love predictability, so having to show up and meet these new people to do makeup and be in these sketchy places to do makeup for photo shoots and things, it was pretty stressful and I just wanted a regular job. And so I tried to get into law school and they really shocked me by letting me in. But I did get in. I went to Rutgers in Camden, like you said, and it was the best time of my life.

Courtney Munnings: I felt so empowered. I took a lot of classes that were recorded. I still didn't know at the time I was Dyslexic, but I took classes that were recorded and I would just take notes, verbatim notes, and just keep replaying until I got every single word that the professor said. And that really worked for me, and I did well. And my now husband, my friend then, who became my boyfriend, he would take all my classes with me because I was this prolific notetaker. So, we kept signing up for classes together, and I would give him my notes at the end because he wouldn't take one word of notes and I'd share them with him. And he was like my key to social success in law school and I was his key to academic success. So he was in my little study group, and we got through it. We got through law school. We got through the bar.

Courtney Munnings: Bar prep was another great time in my life. I just love to learn and study. But, yep, I married him a little bit after law school, and I went to work at Pepper Hamilton, where I was an associate for eight years. I didn't really understand everything was going on, but I was a great worker, and I got great evaluations because I would do anything for the job and the client and the team because I really just loved belonging. And that is my story.

Courtney Munnings: I burned out at the end. I burned out really badly. I was ignoring myself for a really long time, and I didn't really understand that. And it just got to the point where I couldn't anymore. And I ended up in psych care, unable to do the basic daily living functions. I wasn't taking very good care of myself. I was really down and I was unsafe, and I ended up taking a long leave, took six months leave. I did a partial hospitalization, which is like all day therapy. Like, it's your job in groups, learning all of these things, coping strategies and ways to communicate and get your needs met and all of these things. Towards the end of it, a friend was like, I need you to read this. And I just kept putting it off, but eventually I did, and it was just, like, about autism, and everything kind of fell into place. And I sent it to my mom, and I actually ended up searching for my text. And a year before that, my mom was like, do you think you could be autistic?

Courtney Munnings: It's weird. It's the kind of thing that when you know it, you kind of know. But as a person, you don't really think of yourself necessarily in those types of terms. You're just normal to yourself and you're kind of just living. But apparently all of this time, I have been kind of compensating for my differences and just fitting in anyway and doing whatever it took to meet everybody else's schedules and needs and expectations and looking and sounding a certain way, but really bending myself in a way that was detrimental. And now I'm recovering.

Courtney Munnings: I'm at a great job at Diversity Lab, which much different hours than law firm does, and different expectations, and the people are a little less stressed out because they're a little less at stake, and they really accept and embrace and protect me. And I'm recovering from all of those years of ignoring myself to just get the job done.

Merle Vaughn: Wow. I just want to say bravo to you, but I'm sorry. I feel very empathetic and I'm sorry that you went through what in some respects was a kind of torture just because our system has expectations that everybody be the same. But what I want to understand is at what point how long ago were you diagnosed as autistic? And how long ago at what point in this journey did you realize that you were Dyslexic?

Courtney Munnings: Okay, so this was all around the same time, and this was around May 2021, and before that, around December 2020 is when I just thought it was normal mental breakdown, kind of where everything is bothering me. I'm really sensitive and fragile and stressed out about the smallest things my phone could chime, and I'm nervous about what I'm missing or didn't do or I just thought it was just kind of a temporary issue, but I didn't know that. It was kind of the culmination of a lot of things being unmanaged for a very long time.

Courtney Munnings: On top of these things like ADHD, I also have all of the kinds of related, normally co-occurring type of conditions, like obsessive compulsive disorder. And my brand of it is just perfection, trying to be perfect all the time. So every single day, I have a full face of makeup. My hair is done, I'm presenting. Like I have it all together.

Courtney Munnings: I remember one day, my secretary said to me, it was a very stressful, crazy day. And she said to me, you are always so calm under pressure. And I remember thinking, like, what is it like? If you only knew, how could you think that? And now that I understand masking, I understand. So much of my effort goes into presenting a certain way, and that's draining.

Courtney Munnings: But I didn't get how differently I was kind of showing up than how I actually felt until because to me, I'm highly anxious, and I'm always stressing, and did I do the wrong thing? Did I say the wrong thing? I'm checking every email seven or eight times, and to the other people around me, I'm just so calm. So that was really striking.

Courtney Munnings: But as far as Dyslexia itself, it was around that same time where I learned, like, that's one of the co-occurring conditions for people with ADHD. It's a bigger chance that you're Dyslexic. And so, I did these tests, and I went to an optometrist too. And he's like, physically, my eyes are doing a ton of work to look at a word. And so a lot made sense because I remember maybe I was a second year associate. A partner came to my office. He had sent me an email and said, can I talk to you about this? And it was just like a billing entry. And I was like, yes. Like, what did I do wrong? That was what I was thinking.

Courtney Munnings: And so, he came in, and he was just like, this took a long time. And I'm telling you this because I don't want you to become known as a slow associate. And while that wasn't nice, it kind of was, because people don't tell you things. They just don't use you again, or they just write on your evaluation that you're slow. That day, it was like I had read a whole bunch of cases and written talking points for him for a phone call. And that took too long. And so I said to myself, no, I don't want to become known as a slow associate. What can I do?

Courtney Munnings: And that was the day I decided to if I put the text that I'm reading into a software that reads out loud, I can just see how long a normal, not slow person that was the words I use then how long it would take them to read. And I can bill for that. But in that process, I found like, whoa, hearing it read is so much better. And so that kind of changed my practice. I wasn't fighting through all of these pages of case law. I was just getting it read to me, billing for that time and moving on. I wasn't taking too much time on my task. I didn't know the term Dyslexia then I found out later, but I had been accommodating dyslexia for much longer than I knew I had it.

Merle Vaughn: So let me ask you this growing up, because I've known kids who weren't diagnosed with Dyslexia until maybe 6th grade or 7th grade or something like that, and it's a huge AHA moment for them and it just changes their life lives in their educational process substantially.

Merle Vaughn: There was no testing. You had no idea. And did you not have any extensions of time on tests or any of that? No accommodations your entire life?

Courtney Munnings: Right? So, I had no accommodations. One thing I learned is that your kind of just get more tired towards the end. And so, as I'm processing so much more, reading becomes harder. So that's one thing.

Courtney Munnings: But I do remember when I was in high school, I said to my mom, something's wrong. I can't read. And she was like, what? I'm like, I just can't read. I can read a whole page. And I don't know what was said. And so, she went up to the school and was like, my daughter can't read. What are you doing? And they were just like, well, she can clearly read because I did make good grades. And so she didn't have the understanding then that you can compensate for these things. And the teachers didn't either.

Courtney Munnings: And so now when I read about ways people compensate, one of the things that I would do is I actually got in trouble for this at school one time, is I would read ahead. If I'm in a situation where someone's going to call on me or could call on me, I've already read the page and kind of figured it out. And so by the time they call me, I've rehearsed. And so I was either just working harder, I just got through it. Nobody could help me when I said I had concerns about reading because I obviously could read.

Courtney Munnings: And now it's like, oh yeah, some people really would process it better if they heard it instead, or there's different fonts you can use for Dyslexia, but back then it was just, well, I don't know what to tell you. Your scores are good. You’re doing fine. And that was that was the basically, deal with it.

Merle Vaughn: I told you this when we talked before. One of the reasons this is really fascinating to me is because my daughter graduated from when she was in college. She was getting really frustrated. She got frustrated in high school, but she did really well. She got frustrated in college and then ultimately, once she graduated, was having issues with anxiety and was diagnosed with obsessive compulsive issues or I don't want to call them issues, but a diagnosis. And since then, I've been really interested and just follow these stories that people have and it's become much more especially since the pandemic, I feel like it's become much more talked about, particularly in the neurodiverse community.

Merle Vaughn: People are letting other people know that they're neurodiverse. So can you help us all understand what that means? What is neurodiverse? And I know you're not a doctor and all that, but from your perspective and your ability to help us, educate us, how do you define neurodiverse?

Courtney Munnings: Okay, so this is a big question, and it really depends who you ask. If you talk to a doctor, they're going to talk about it in terms of developmental brain dysfunction or something like that, and they're going to talk about it in terms of kind of dysfunction or impairment in your communication, sociability, learning, attention, mood, those types of things. But if you're just talking about it from kind of the neurodiversity standpoint where there's like a reason for all different types of people to exist, it's just that you may be diverging from the norm in some way from just a typical standard type of way to be.

Courtney Munnings: If anyone is that you're different, whether it's in the way you behave or the way that you move or the way that you're processing things, you're conforming a little differently to the standard and it shows up in different ways. And some people, they can kind of report to you that they're experiencing or perceiving things in a different way than it seems like other people are. And there are other people who you can see for yourself right away.

Courtney Munnings: It's more apparent to you that they're either moving differently or they're communicating differently or they're socializing much more differently. There are just a lot of ways that you're developing differently that it may stand out to the group and neurodiversity. And celebrating neurodiversity is the idea that everybody gets to be the way that they are and they should be included, and they should be respected and protected and accommodated where needed. And there's no one way that's better than the other.

Merle Vaughn: I love that. Celebrate it. And that's what this podcast really is about, right? And celebrating differences, authenticity, overcoming stereotypes, which you have to do if you're neurodiverse and let people know about if you're no longer masking.

Merle Vaughn: But talk about intersectionality. Girl, folks can't see you, but you're a beautiful black woman who is an attorney, who's Dyslexic, who's autistic, who's all of these, and successful. I can't think of very many more intersectionality or much more intersectionality than that.

Courtney Munnings: Right? So, thank you. So the thing is and I was talking about this recently, one of our Mansfield meetings, I was already a black woman going into big law. And so part of what they teach you is about how you can't be mysterious. And people have to like you and know you want to include you. And people are going to see your mistakes more just because a black person wrote a product. There are studies that show a black person writing a brief, people will catch more mistakes. Even the same written product, people will just see more mistakes on it if the person who wrote if they think wrote it was black.

Courtney Munnings: And they tell you that less than 1% of the partners are black women. And so all I had was all these statistics, and I had all these people calling me the wrong name and confusing me with the other one. And so it was just like I knew that it was supposed to be harder for me. That's just the way that it was. And then on top of all that, I have these kinds of differences in how I socialize and how I'm coming across that I didn't realize at the time were working against me.

Courtney Munnings: I don't want to go to mixers. I don't like it. I just don't like it. And I'm not just casually walking into knocking on somebody's office like, hey, I'm just coming by to shoot the breeze, my personality at all, whatsoever. I'm not doing small talk in the hallways. There were a lot of reasons why I was at a disadvantage just because of what people perceived of me and then my own skills, kind of in mixing and integrating and learning the unwritten rules and just climbing up that way.

Courtney Munnings: And so I really just had to work very hard and build a lot of hours and just do whatever was asked of me and be just liked and loved by everybody, because there were a lot of reasons that had nothing to do with me and my actual work, that I might not have been successful.

Merle Vaughn: Right? And so I've had this conversation with a lot of people, especially when you talk about firms that are requiring associates and other folks to go back to the office. And I'm sure you've seen the reports or articles by people of color or underrepresented, folks who have been thriving in work from home and zooms and phone calls and stuff and are happy not to have to worry about the whole water cooler situation. And it's just so interesting because there are a lot of us who are like, you know what? This is better. I'm not necessarily that person, although I can be that person because you're black. You have to code switch so much and it's exhausting.

Merle Vaughn: But what people aren't thinking about is how many people aren't getting spoken to at the water cooler because of who they are or who are not getting invited to happy hour or not getting invited to things. And so it almost evens the field to be where everybody's at home to a certain extent. What are your thoughts on that?

Courtney Munnings: Listen, work from home is one of the best things that ever happened in my professional career, aside from even the people. Before I get to the people, it was cold in the office. It was cold, it was bright, it was weird, and I was uncomfortable and I really didn't like it. But when you have the people in, especially after because I started in Philly and then I moved to another office.

Courtney Munnings: So, I was the only black person. I was the only black lawyer. So, it's just like are people looking at me? I got these long braids. My body type is a little different. I don't know if that's okay to say, but there's just like a higher anxiety level of knowing. I do not really fit in. And then people don't fully know me. They're not fully comfortable with me. And I don't know how to do a whole lot about that because, again, I don't know how to talk to you about small talk and the weather and so I'm not really building up these close relationships. It's just like you're just people who say hi to me and I don't know how you feel and I don't feel fully. A lot of people were very nice, especially when I moved to the smaller office, they were very nice, but they didn't know me. And so, I wasn't sure how they were judging me.

Courtney Munnings: And it was just another thing to think about. And that takes energy. And so it's so much better being at home. I'm comfortable. I can take a break. And my break doesn't just have to be in another weird, cold place where I don't know people. I'm just at home and I'm so productive. I'm not losing 2 hours driving. I am not worrying about things that have nothing to do with my actual job. I'm just being myself. I'm being authentic, I'm being kind of grounded. And I'm not stressing about the other things that people judge that aren't just my work product.

Merle Vaughn: Now, speaking of judged, to have gone into your 20s really maybe even longer, without knowing what was going on, once you rock that, I'm assuming you went to your family and said, here's what's going on.

Courtney Munnings: Yes.

Merle Vaughn: Did they judge you? Did they accept it? It's almost like you were coming out in some ways.

Courtney Munnings: So I text my husband, like, all this stuff I've been reading and I'm like, I think I'm autistic. And he's like, I'm processing, but that makes sense. Okay. I'm always so thankful when I talk about how accepting he was. He's a Caribbean man. He's old fashioned. He doesn't believe in a lot of stuff.

Courtney Munnings: But he's also the guy who lives with me when we go to a baby shower or something, he gets a plate and he gets it for me because I'm so awkward about being up in front of people. And he let me eat what I have to eat and then he'll eat the rest because I'm so picky about my food and I also don't want people to know, like it. And so, he has been accommodating me. We've been together eleven years, so it's like, I also have OCD, so it's like we can be anywhere. And I'm like, I got to go wash up. So it's like I'm having this big bag of deodorants and cleansers things. And he's witnessed that and he's helped me and he's watched the door for me at the bathroom. So, nobody comes in at the house party because I'm just nervous about everything.

Courtney Munnings: So it's like when you tell somebody who's seen you be very different from anybody who's known, it's not a crazy thing for him to kind of believe. And so, he was perfectly accepting and supportive. And he's interviewed me for certain events. And he's really into not just supporting me, but talking about it in public. He's not like, ashamed or weird about it, and that is really great.

Courtney Munnings: My mom is also like she can't stop telling everybody about it. And also I've had my nephew was autistic, so there are other people in our family who we've known and loved who were autistic, so we didn't have to overcome a crazy negative feeling about it. And so we kind of had a head start, which is great. But my mom called me last night and she was like, you just saved another life. And I'm like, what?

Merle Vaughn: Wow.

Courtney Munnings: She was talking to someone on the plane and she got to talking about her daughter, the woman. At first she was like, I think your daughter's neurodivergent. And then a couple of minutes later she said, I know your daughter's neurodivergent. And she talked about certain things that she was doing, like pulling her hair and just very stressed out these high anxiety behaviors and social differences. And everybody's been very proud that I figured this out, relieved that I don't have the same level of stress and wondering what's wrong with me. Nothing's wrong with me. I'm exactly how I'm supposed to be. And they're promoting it now.

Courtney Munnings: My father's a neurologist. His medical perspective is you have to be more impaired to be saying that. If you look for things, they're going to find it. And it's true. It's true. But why was I looking for things I was struggling with.

Courtney Munnings: There are many people who you could say have ADHD or Autistic or whatever it is, but they're not suffering and they're doing just fine. And they have a lifestyle that accommodates them and their needs, and they're not burnt out or anything like that. And so, they're not going to be doing online tests and going to the neurologist and getting all these diagnoses and that's perfectly fine. But some of those people, if they did go looking, they would qualify for these conditions because they are just built differently from what somebody would call a standard or typical neurotypical person.

Courtney Munnings: Some people say or neuroconforming is another way to say it, but it's fine as I've done more work and talking about accepting and kind of promoting people and building bridges between others who have different access to the privileges and skills that you have. He's been very proud of me. He's not thinking, I should have never said this or did this. He wouldn't have done it.

Courtney Munnings: But he's proud of the work that I'm doing to kind of uplift others who are suffering. And so, I really couldn't ask for a better family and a village. It's been really great.: I've changed. I've grown so much. Even people who knew me a couple of years ago at my old firm who are connected with Mansfield and see me on Zoom at my new job, one of the guys was like, you're glowing.

Merle Vaughn: That's awesome.

Courtney Munnings: So much better. And this was lifesaving, life-changing information. And I know there are a lot of people on social media and stuff who say, oh, this stuff is over diagnosed. All of a sudden, everybody got ADHD, everybody's autistic. They don't really get that it's saving people's lives and it's changing everything for them. Because imagine thinking that you're broken and you're failing and you're useless and you shouldn't be here. And figuring out, oh, I'm exactly how I'm supposed to be. And I can make a life that works and feels good and I can thrive exactly how I am.

Merle Vaughn: I love like, okay, I'm not going to. So let's switch to telling us a look, because you've mentioned Mansfield a few times and, you know, I know that's how we met, as a matter of fact.

Merle Vaughn: So, here's the deal. You do so well in person that two people with two of my colleagues came to me after we met at our function in La that you attended at the La. Coliseum and said you should interview Courtney for your podcast. So that's how well you present even though you're freaking out while you're doing. And but that was a Mansfield our Mansfield our fourth annual or it was either four or five fifth year Mansfield event celebration.

Merle Vaughn: So tell our audience to the extent that you are comfortable about Mansfield and what you do at Diversity Lab.

Courtney Munnings: Okay, I will be happy to. So, I work at Diversity lab. I'm a Mansfield Rule specialist. And the Mansfield Rule is designed to help boost and sustain diversity in law firm leadership. And it does that by making firms or asking firms to create systems that will kind of formalize their consideration of a larger pool of applicants for certain positions.

Courtney Munnings: So instead of just saying I think these people should be practice group leaders and just kind of going with people who are in the know already or friends of the managing partner or whatever it would be. We are asking firms to actually track who they're considering for those positions because historically a certain type of person is ending up at the top all the time across the board. And so we've found that we have data showing now that the early adopters of the Mansfield Rule are having an increase in their diversity and leadership at a much better rate than firms who are not doing Mansfield because we're asking for these certain positions.

Courtney Munnings: Can you make sure that you consider it's not a hiring quota, but just consider, like, look at the pool and make sure that 30% of that pool is historically underrepresented people. So that for us right now is underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, women lawyers with disabilities and LGBTQ plus lawyers. And so making sure that you're not just sticking with who's at the top of your mind, but who is actually at your firm, who is qualified to do this thing. And so every year, we change Mansfield a little bit, and firms sign on again to continue trying to push the needle in diversity.

Courtney Munnings: But the people on the calls every month talk about how it changes things. It changes things to just not have the usual suspects getting opportunities. And it's from the managing partner that's part of Mansfield. But even to pitches, who is being considered to be on pitches for new work, it can't just be your friend.

Courtney Munnings: You have to look at your firm and who is there, and you have to make sure that certain people are not just living along the margins for their whole career. And so, I help firms with their Mansfield implementation. And throughout the year, they have all these questions. We do all this work trying to support them to make sure that they're considering broader pools. And also, part of Mansfield is transparency. So it's not just making sure you're considering everybody. We also want the rules to be written down. Associates should know how to become a partner. They should know what is needed to be on the executive committee, what are the skills and what are the responsibilities.

Courtney Munnings: So, it's not just friends of people who are now on the executive committee. It's everybody at your firm can go on your intranet or wherever you have it and look at what does it takes to be in leadership at my firm. And because of Mansfield, we have the numbers on this that many firms did not make these policies written, let alone accessible they didn't have them written. They didn't have them before Mansfield. And so one of those categories that we're asking you to have is are the job descriptions and the election and appointment processes written down and accessible for your associates and everyone to be able to figure out how they can become a leader at your firm.

Courtney Munnings: And Mansfield is working, and I'm very, very proud of it. I was proud when I found out my firm was doing Mansfield when it first came out. And so now to be able to work on it myself is really.

Merle Vaughn: You know well, you know that I'm a proponent of Mansfield. I have worked with Caren for years in terms of making sure that we get the word out, and then it's celebrated. And that's one of the highlights of my years throwing that party. I think.

Merle Vaughn: Good for you for landing someplace that allows you to be you and be yourself and also do such important work. So, what do you like to do for fun?

Courtney Munnings: The best thing ever is going to the beach. My father lives in the Bahamas, and so on all of our school breaks, we would go visit him. And a lot of the times, he would take us to Atlantis, the resort, and we would just go to the beach. And so, I love water, period.

Courtney Munnings: Like, today, every day, I take a nice bubble bath or whatever. The ideal is just relaxing near water. There's this thing called a place called float, and it's kind of like a hot tub, but it's bigger, and it's like salt water, and it's so salty that you float when you get in it. And that is, like, a very relaxing thing that I love to do. Really, just for fun, I like to relax.

Courtney Munnings: I like to spend time with my husband, who's very funny. He makes up songs, even. That's why I said Bar prep was so fun because he was making up songs about con law, and we just spent all day singing and reading. But, yeah, I like to relax.

Courtney Munnings: I don't do too many wild and crazy things. I'm not, like, an adventurous person. I'm not doing a bunch of ziplining and things. I just like to have relaxation and time with my family, and I'm pretty low key.

Merle Vaughn: Is your husband a practicing lawyer now?

Courtney Munnings: Yes, he is. He works at a firm in South Jersey, and my husband is my opposite in a lot of ways. He's very courageous and confident. He's got a lot of criminal clients. Criminal law, they're not criminals. But he's in court every day. He does some family law stuff immigration. He's also an interpreter, so he speaks a whole bunch of languages. Speaks French, krill, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese.

Merle Vaughn: Wow.

Courtney Munnings: Yeah. I'm fascinated with him. Even before we were romantically involved, I thought he was like the bees’ knees. I admire him so much. He's so interesting and courageous and funny. Everybody loves him. I always thought he would be so successful. I was worried about myself, and I was like, but I know he's going to be good because he's just so magnificent to me, and he's a character. He's very interesting.

Merle Vaughn: Well, I'm not seeing you, but I can hear the smile on your face, and so it's adorable. And I get it. I'm the opposite of my husband. Everybody loves him, either love or hate me, but everybody loves my husband, so I can definitely relate. And I think we're about July 5, we will have been married 36 years, I think.

Courtney Munnings: Goodness.

Merle Vaughn: I think those opposites work. So let me ask you this, What stereotype getting back to beyond stereotypes? What stereotypes do you feel like you've had to overcome? And were they true or do you think they were unfair?

Courtney Munnings: That's a good one. So, it's mixed, I'll say socially, outside of work, I think it's based on my appearance. Like I said, I was a former makeup artist, so I'm always having kind of a full makeup look. I don't know, I'm a certain type of way that makes people think I'm better than them. They think I'm conceited. And so something that a lot of people will say, a lot of women will say is, I didn't like you at first.

Courtney Munnings: Just be like, what? Because I'm quiet? So I appear standoffish, because I'm kind of feeling out of a situation before I say anything that might be judged. And it's really just my own anxiety at play, but because I might not look like it's, shyness, because I look like I'm calm and I'm poised, they take it as being conceited. And I remember at work, a partner said to me, weren't you a pageant girl? I was like, no. And he apologized profusely.

Merle Vaughn: Wow.

Courtney Munnings: So sorry. And I didn't understand why that was an insult. Why are you like, I would love to be a bad girl, but whatever the perception he had of them, he felt like it was insulting if I wasn't that. And so that's the kind of vibe I'm giving. I wear Barbie T shirts. I'm, like, so into the stereotypical girly type of stuff. And people who look at me think that I'm really kind of poised and more aesthetically focused, and they may think maybe I'm missing something inside it before they get to speak to me.

Merle Vaughn: Interesting. So that clearly is not the case. But what's interesting is that people what you don't know about people, what a friend of mine likes to say is what they're carrying around in their backpack. Right.

Merle Vaughn: It's like you never know what somebody is carrying and how it's affecting them and whether or not what you see is really what you're going to get, right?

Courtney Munnings: Very much, yeah. You can't judge me by what you think people who look like me are. It just doesn't match people who and I don't even like saying that because what should I be based on? How I look, there's no correlation, but it's like people who do that are always wrong. I'm a very loving, compassionate person. I'm just sometimes waiting to feel things out before I say something. And when you fill in the blanks, you're usually going to be wrong, right?

Merle Vaughn: Yes. So, we're almost at the end. I could talk to you forever. I would love to talk to you forever, but I'm probably exhausting you.

Merle Vaughn: What words of encouragement or advice do you have for others about embracing your authentic self, either personally, professionally, as associates, lawyers, as a black woman, any of those things? What advice and encouragement would you like to give folks?

Courtney Munnings: My advice would be try to consider that the way that you are is the right way to be and that all of the things that you're trying to become or be more like or do differently, maybe you don't have to do all that. You can't sustain a lot of the things that you try to do to be like someone else or to be what you think you're supposed to be. There's a reason that you were built the way that you were, and it's easiest to be what is natural to you.

Courtney Munnings: And of course, you can't do a whole bunch of harmful things to other people and expect that to be okay.: But as far as who you are and kind of what you like to wear and what you like to eat and where you want to be, faking those things, it takes a toll on you. And you really can't keep it up forever. You really can't mask forever. You will burn out.

Courtney Munnings: And so just consider that telling the truth about who you are, whether it's what you say or what you do or where you work, all of those things that feel best to you might be the best thing for you to be doing.

Merle Vaughn: So, in other words, do you?

Courtney Munnings: Exactly.

Merle Vaughn: Awesome. Well, Courtney, I really, really want to thank you for being here to BS with me today. It's been enlightening for me, it's been fun for me, and I'm proud of you. I'm very proud of you. So, thank you for being here.

Courtney Munnings: I'm honored to be here. I've listened to several of the other episodes, and I can't believe I will be among those Greats. So, I appreciate you for even thinking that I should be here, and I look forward to knowing you more in the future.

Merle Vaughn: Absolutely, you deserve to be here. So, thank you again and thanks to everyone for listening.

Merle Vaughn: And until the next episode, remember that everybody is different, and different is good.

*Hit it. That's what I'm talking about. Wait. Okay. Now, from the beginning*.

We hope you enjoyed the stories shared in today's episode of BS beyond Stereotypes. Join us next time when another authentic personality unleashes their uniqueness on the world.