



## Transcript: Episode 5

### Designing with Heart: Jason Champion on Inclusivity, Creativity, and Community

#### *A Conversation with Jason Champion*

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**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** Welcome to Rising Together, a podcast on the art and design of inclusion. I'm Dr. Elcin Haskollar.

**Curtis Anderson:** And I'm Curtis Anderson.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** Each month, we'll have a special guest, and we'll learn from their personal stories and experiences about how to create change. From thoughtful working discussions to real life strategies, we'll explore the transformative power of inclusion and discuss how to create a world where every single voice matters.

**Curtis Anderson:** We hope you can join us as we dive into the art of creating inclusive communities. Let's embark on this journey of transformation one story at a time. Stay connected, stay engaged, and more importantly, keep rising with us.

**Jason Champion:** When you stand strong and hold your guard is when you can really succeed. Because at Ringling, I mean, these are creatives. And creatives can be super fragile as well. And so when you can take that vulnerability and authenticity, you're able to build something that you may never thought that was capable for yourself.

**Curtis Anderson:** You can catch the latest episodes of Rising Together on the first of every month on Spotify, YouTube, or your preferred streaming platform.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** Welcome to another episode of Rising Together. We are so excited to speak with Jason Champion today. Jason is an interior designer, a nonprofit executive, a husband, and the president of Project Pride Sarasota. Welcome to the show, Jason.

**Jason Champion:** Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** We're so excited to have you.

**Jason Champion:** It's gonna be fun. Get ready.

**Curtis Anderson:** Yes. We will be. Okay. So, Jason, you wear so many hats. You are an interior designer by training. You have a day job as a nonprofit exec. You've done so much for the LGBTQ plus community here in Sarasota. Like, tell us who is Jason Champion?

**Jason Champion:** Oh, good question. That's for me to know and you to find out. Who is Jason Champion? I would say that I am a motivated, determined individual that has a high level of empathy, that loves to support people and watch them succeed.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** And you are an interior designer by training. Right?

**Jason Champion:** Yes.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** So what does it mean to be a designer to you?

**Jason Champion:** Oh, wow. That's even a better question. What does it mean to be a designer? Besides creating unique, environments for people to enjoy, if it's a hotel lobby or a retail store or a restaurant or their own personal homes, being a designer means that you've been able to successfully produce your trade, your craft, your skill, that other people are able to enjoy that.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** And then you used to be an adjunct professor at Ringling College teaching interior design. So, and you're you have a day job. Right? You are also a nonprofit executive. So, like, how does styling a living room or styling an event, you know, have to do a bit do with being an executive for a nonprofit?

**Jason Champion:** Yeah. So being able to infuse creativity into the nonprofit world I think is key because in general, nonprofit executives are fighting for kids' cancer, women's rights, LGBTQ issues. So it can be a daunting task. And when as a designer or a creative can step into the nonprofit world and bring color, it brings everybody a little joy and it gives everybody a little more hope that moving forward you can successfully achieve the goals by attracting the new folks that you're looking to raise money from. And creating those environments is no different from creating a living room to a ballroom. It's the same thing. It's creating that immersive experience where you can feel it. And you know at that moment everything is right. Everything is perfect, and you don't really have to understand that it's perfect. It's just happening.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** And Jason is also a reality TV star. He was on HGTV.

**Jason Champion:** I was. So

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** how is reality TV?

**Jason Champion:** Honest Kiki here.

**Curtis Anderson:** We're waiting for this.

**Jason Champion:** We're waiting for this. We're waiting for this. Reality television is not necessarily reality. It is in a lot of ways very scripted but you are able to infuse your personality within that. One thing that I learned from being on the show and being selected out of the group that was selected and to land where I landed on the show, the more authentic I was, the better I was produced.

When I got my stride into about mid season, I really had made a connection, not with just doing my design and my work. I had made a connection with the crew that was there with us as long as we were on set, and building those relationships. And therefore, it really benefited me in the long run as being a contestant that was easy to work with and could be moldable into what they're looking for, but still being able to infuse my own personality into it.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** Yeah. And you were in top 4?

**Jason Champion:** I was. I was on season 4 Design Star, and I made it to the top 4. And when I got eliminated, it was not surprising. I was also ready to come home, but it was, just one of the most brilliant experiences I've ever had.

**Curtis Anderson:** That's incredible. Like and you talked a little bit about, like, your personality and your approach to design. So I would like to just skip a little bit to, like, your project pride.

**Jason Champion:** Yeah. You know,

**Curtis Anderson:** We wanna talk about that for a second. You know, as the president, you know, project pride means you know, it's a significant part of your life and your work. So I was just wondering if you can share a little bit about the mission of Project Pride and how it aligns with your personal, like, goals and your mission.

**Jason Champion:** Yeah. I mean, that the mission with Project Pride aligns with my personal everyday life. It's to celebrate, unite, and support. And it goes back to saying that I love to see people succeed in careers where they've used their creativity or their skills in other ways, and that mission aligns with me on a daily basis. I love to organize and unite folks and support them to move forward.

And it's very important at this time in Florida to be ready for anything that could potentially come toward the LGBTQ community. And when we've been able to unite people together, we've realized that we're much stronger in numbers and not as segregated and separated as what it may have potentially been in the past.

**Curtis Anderson:** So that's cool because you've put some work in. Can you talk about, like, regarding some of your projects, like, what are what's the impact you've seen and, like, have you seen that over the years?

**Jason Champion:** Yeah. The impact that we've made, through Project Pride has been shocking to us in a lot of ways, and I go back to that Field of Dreams movie, If You Build It, They Will Come, because we created safe spaces and unique outlets for people to come and enjoy and express themselves. One of the events that we've just poured gas on and made it successful of what we're doing is our Grand Carnival event, which is the kickoff to June Pride Month every year. The last 2 years we've had it at the Sarasota Circus Conservatory Arts and it's been a great partner of ours, you know, and the responses that we get from that event, Of course you get the, oh, God, this is beautiful. Oh, I love this.

I had so much fun. But there's always 1 or 2 comments that always stick out to being something really unique. After our first one that we had done at the circus, I had actually a really long-time friend come up to me, single female, and say, This is the first time I've been to an event and I felt celebrated as a woman. Wow. And that speaks volumes for the fact that we have women's organizations that put on women's events here.

The fact that she was a straight woman that said this as well. The second one this year was we actually had a donor, had been working in their yard all day, wasn't sure if they were gonna make it that night, and then said screw it. Let's go. Threw on some clothes, came, and she said her and her husband, another straight couple, were sitting there. And about 45 minutes in, they both looked around and they were nodding their head and having a good time and smiling and laughing.

And what's the best part about it is, she was an army brat and grew up all around the world. And she said, I've lived in Paris and Rome and London and all these places, and, you know, I walk down the street and I would smile just because I'm a happy person. And people would be like, why is she smiling? Or look at me really odd. She goes, last night, when I looked at people and I smiled, they smiled back.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** That's exactly right. Because we were in the middle of a a move, actually, and then I had purchased tickets to come to Grand Carnivale. So I told my husband, let's just go. Let's, like, take a break from the move, and then let's go. And then we dressed up, and I was able to, like, find a dress at the last minute.

And when we arrived at the Grand Carnivale, the vibe, the people, the energy, I'd never had so much fun in my life. And people were so happy and dancing. Your costume was absolutely phenomenal. Can you tell us a little bit about, like, the production process and how it came together?

**Jason Champion:** Yeah. You know, this year, we did the theme of In Bloom, which happened to be very on trend with the Met Gala. And then, of course, miss Beyoncé with her country album. We had picked 2 wonderful country artists to be there with us this year. And, you know, I always wanna go out of the box because I want people to come in and either see me and go, oh my god, that's amazing, or this is crazy.

I could have worn this. And it gives them ideas for next year. And we wanna build an environment where people feel free to express. If you wanna come and drag, if you wanna do with your hair purple, orange, green, do that. That's what we want to be able to build those activities.

And so I was in New York, earlier in the year and went to Mood, plug for Mood here, and found some beautiful hot pink silver gold metallic chevron, fabric with this beautiful see through overlay lace floral with some sequin wound into it. And luckily, I have some friends that are costume designers here in town that I reached out to and said, Here's what I wanna do. And I had pulled images and went for fittings, and we were able to create that in about 3 months. And it was something that I hope to see in The Met Museum one day, but it will definitely be hanging in my closet, and you will see it again. I will make that happen again.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** To be in The Met Museum. But it's absolutely right because, you know, after I showed up at Grand Carnivale and saw, you know, all of the people and their costumes, I felt like I could dress up, you know, in however way that I wanna dress up, and I could be whoever I wanna be at Grand Carnival, and I would be welcome without any judgment. So thank you so much for creating a space like that.

**Jason Champion:** Yeah. I mean, that's important. I mean, we need representation, not just for the gay community, lesbian community, trans community. We need representation for everyone. Right now, it is hard to live and just be comfortable because everybody's looking to have an argument and a fight with people. And when you can just live peacefully and happy, people just get along so much easier. And, you know, going back to the mission of Project Pride, you know one of the things that we really really really try to do is one heart one mind at a time. And when you can sit and have a conversation like we are right now, you start to break down those preconceived notions of what people think you are or what they thought that you were gonna be. And, you know, I have so many unique things.

My husband and I have lived here in Sarasota for 18 years and in Florida for probably about 20 at this point. You know, we move in. We go meet the neighbors. We just introduce ourselves. Hi.

This is Jim and Jason. We live next door. If you need something, let us know. And it's having conversations. We wouldn't believe how many neighbors we have had over the years of older that are retired, late seventies, late eighties, that we have the phone numbers of their kids.

So if something happens, we're a direct connect to make sure that they're taken care of. We fix them food. We take them things. And and we've had so many of the younger generation of those parent those kids' parents, you know, say this is not what I thought a gay person was. This is not what I thought you would be as a neighbor, and you're so nice.

**Curtis Anderson:** Yeah.

**Jason Champion:** And it's not an act. It's just real. I mean, we're real people and we're authentic, and this is how we live.

**Curtis Anderson:** I think there just needs to be more, like, conversations where people of opposing opinions can exist in the gray because then you realize it's like you're saying, like, this is not what I thought this conversation would be or this relationship would be.

**Jason Champion:** Exactly.

**Curtis Anderson:** It's so much more human, so much more authentic. So I really love that. Right? Because I strive for, you know, that in my own life where I you can't just have you can't come in. It's hard to listen when your mouth is moving.

Right. You know? So there is a lot that can come. There's so much power in just listening and understanding someone's story.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** And also listening to understand, but not listening to response. Right.

**Jason Champion:** I was I was just gonna say that. It's actually listening. Right. It's not, like you said, listening to respond to what they're saying or thinking, okay, this is what they're gonna say, so this is what I'm gonna come back at it with. When you actually have a real conversation, you break down those walls.

One heart, one mind at a time.

**Curtis Anderson:** A 100%. Yep. So you talked about the carnival, like the high of, Project Pride. Like, it wouldn't be the high of the high if there weren't challenges. You know, could you speak into some of the more significant challenges that you guys have faced?

**Jason Champion:** Yeah. I mean, definitely. Look, we face challenges every day through politics, laws. You know, what's crazy is the Sarasota itself is not as hateful as what it's made out to be on the news. And Florida is not as big of a dumpster fire as what everybody else in the world sees, which is which is sad.

So, therefore, we at Project Pride try to represent Sarasota with beauty, with color, with love. But, you know, we face challenges with the school board. We face challenges with our commissioners, our governor, you know this instance of the summer of the lighting the bridge, you know DeSantis passed a law saying we're gonna have a freedom summer. We're gonna light the bridge from Memorial Day to Labor Day in red, white, and blue, which, you know, I can say that Pride probably was the impetus of what caused all of that because of the Skyway and everything else. We knew that was coming about 2 months before it ever happened.

So that's why we dropped back and said, okay, we have a 700-foot progressive pride flag that we're gonna walk across the bridge because it's our freedom as well to express ourselves. And that was our Freedom Summer. So challenges like that bring opportunities for new things to happen. And when new things happen, you bring in new audiences, allies, new gay people, new lesbians, new trans people that are saying, okay, I'm not gonna fight, but I'm coming and representing. And because we don't we don't protest.

We lead with love.

**Curtis Anderson:** Right. It's like it's not like conforming or denouncing who you are or trying to conform to someone else's, like, version of what they think of you. It's who you are in existing, coexisting in the space.

**Jason Champion:** Exactly.

**Curtis Anderson:** Like like you're yeah.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** It's a beautiful message. So we talked about some challenges and allies. So what are some of the things that the allies can do in order to help y'all overcome these challenges?

**Jason Champion:** Yeah. That's that is a great question, and we get asked that all the time because sometimes the allies feel, you know, I can't really hook my flag to your flag, so I can't really just jump in and be like, full on, here's here's how it runs. I think when people take a stand with 1 heart, 1 mind and have conversations is what starts to change people's mind. I look back to last year of a major brand in this country that had a Pride section. And there was a lot of fringe on both sides that gave a lot of pushback to that company.

And that company then moved their Pride merchandise to the back. Now look, you supported us. You came out there. You're gonna take hits. It's the same thing if you have African American groups that you showcase, Christian groups that you showcase, you're gonna take hits from somebody.

So when you take a stand, take a stand and stand behind it. Don't don't shrink back because we've got TikTokers or politicians that are saying this is wrong. You've gotta make it and say it solidly. I have conversations with local papers here all the time that ask us, how can we better represent you all? Write a fluff piece.

Write a fluff piece that these people are just living. They're having a great time. What is wrong with what they're doing and why does it bother you? Mhmm. It's not in your house.

It's not in front. Do your own thing. So when you take a stand, take a stand. Get ready to take the hits, but know that you've got people behind you that when they see you take that stand, you're getting more support than what you thought you would.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** I love that message.

**Curtis Anderson:** Yeah. Can you talk about some upcoming projects that you guys are doing that you're excited about?

**Jason Champion:** I am super pumped. We have October Pride Festival coming up, October 19th, in the Rosemary District, and our tagline is lead with love. We have some amazing entertainment coming from LA and New York that are going to be there with us all day. We have amazing vendors, probably a 150, I think, is what we've got about, to come. Pride Market, straight, gay, black, white, green, purple.

There's something for everybody. There'll be amazing food trucks, awesome cocktails, and we're doing something a little different this year. We're pushing Pride a little later, so it's gonna start at 3 in the afternoon. And the vendor fair will go up until 8 o'clock, and then at 8 o'clock, DJ dance parties.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** Oh, I love that.

**Jason Champion:** Street party. Here we go.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** That's great.

**Curtis Anderson:** Where in the Rosemary? Like, right outside of Owen's Fish like, where Project Coffee is and

**Jason Champion:** Boulevard of the Arts. Okay. We will be from Florida Avenue to Lemon, and we'll also have the new park that's just been recreated. It's amazing. Okay.

Yeah. That's where our office is as also.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** We celebrate pride as a family, you know, in our family. So I have 2 kids, and they've been attending Pride since they were born. So we were, at the October pride last year, so I look forward to attending it this year this year as well. We do have a significant LGBTQ plus community at Ringling College. So what message would you like our would you like our students to hear?

**Jason Champion:** Not allowing the noise and the distraction to creep into you as a person. When you stand strong and hold your guard is when you can really succeed. Because wriggling I mean, these are creatives. And creatives can be super fragile as well. And so when you can take that vulnerability and authenticity, you're able to build something that you may never thought that was capable for yourself.

And so just just block out the noise. And that could be friends. That could be family. That could be politics, that could be the sunshine, whatever that it may be. Block that stuff out.

Don't let it bother you. Stay authentic to yourself, and you'll be able to achieve way more than you ever thought you would.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** As the Associate Dean for Diversity and Inclusion at Ringling College, I work with all of our majors, like, to see what are some of the ways that we could incorporate diverse voices, but at the same time make, you know, our spaces as inclusive as possible so that all of our students can feel like they can be whoever that they wanna be. So in the field of, like, design, interior design, what are some of the opportunities for, like, designers to be able to create these spaces that are welcoming for the LGBTQ+ community?

**Jason Champion:** Yeah. I always tell interior designers and peers in the industry to do every project. Mhmm. Don't just say, I am a traditional designer. This is what I do.

This is how it works. I work with great 18th century antiques. I don't say that I'm just glass, steel, and metal. I want to only work with leather. Open your own mind of being a designer because you're creative.

Because you were able to create something that's gorgeous in that period, you can do it in others. And so having the ability to shape shift through your career because I mean look I've done interior, exterior. I've designed furniture. I've sold furniture. I've created all kinds of unique spaces from super traditional to super modern, and I think that is what's given me the ability to walk into a space, see an empty room, and say, here's how this could lay out in my head and here's how the things that are going to make people comfortable because you know you never know what you're



designing for who you're designing for in some of the cases and so having little vignettes where it could be someone that's kind of an introvert that needs to be able to have their own little space is the best way to do it instead of a communal lobby of how to do things.

So it's really unique. And I'm actually working with the Senior Friendship Center right now. I'm on the redesign committee for position the building on Brethren Geehan Way over there on 41. We're about to go under a major remodel and redesign and to think healthcare because it's a Senior Friendship Center, sustainability, durability, creating unique spaces for elder LGBTQ or just elder LGB period. This is a way that you can kind of have some fun and showcase new things to that demographic that may not potentially be there because not all of our older groups of folks are tech savvy. So building a space that is nonthreatening around tech for them to be able to use, that it's approachable is really truly some of the challenges that you face in design of building things that are approachable.

**Curtis Anderson:** Do you that's such an interesting take. Do you find that designers aren't willing to take those because they just don't know? Those types of being open to take all the jobs because they don't know or because they're just been trained traditionally in this way, and it's been that tradition for so many generations that they just like, how talk about that a little bit. Like, is it something that you don't think they'd wanna do or they just don't know how to go about going and getting to those spaces, doing all saying yes to all those projects?

**Jason Champion:** You know, I think everybody becomes self-conscious of their own stuff sometimes. Right? And when you've become so familiar with doing the same thing similar and repeat it kind of wash and rinse and repeat, you become comfortable in that. And so when a new challenge may come, you may be hesitant in using your creativity. But when you let that go and move forward and I think that is what's kept me relevant in the design field is to be open to those unique projects because there's been plenty of projects that I took and I'm like, check.

I'm gonna crush this. And then there's projects that I take, check. And I'm like, how am I gonna make this happen? You know, what am I doing and how am I pushing myself here? And that challenge to push yourself through those kinds of things are what keeps you active and not stagnant in a career.

And that's that's why I feel like I've had a great diverse career from working in nonprofits to doing design work to manufacturing, importing, exporting, television. Like, I've been open for that experience. And I think that's what everybody really needs to start thinking about, being open for experiences regardless if it's in your comfort zone or not. Like, figure out how to do it because you have plenty of connections that you could tap on to say, can I bounce some ideas off of you? Can I look at this?

I mean, design, while we all wanna say we've come up with the most original creativity, A lot of it's just recreating something that may be there with just a little twist to it. So research, study, look, participate in the world, and see what's going on. Don't just stay focused on I'm looking at design right here in the United States.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** You know, I loved what you had to say when we were speaking earlier about when you were teaching, you know, your class. In interior design and then how you took your students to a thrift shop and then asked them to shop for an item. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

**Jason Champion:** Yeah. So when I was a professor here at Ringling, my dean would always get frustrated because my syllabus for the year would just say reality. And that reality is what an interior designer has to go through, an architect has to go through. It's not something where you walk into a client and you're like, this is what we're doing. So always our 1st class, I would take them to Goodwill or a thrift store or wherever and say, find 2 items that you love, and we're gonna work off of those this year as your project.

That's great. They'd go search. They'd find great things, and they would come back. And they're standing there with 2 of them. I'm like, okay.

Now you got to pick your favorite one, and that's what your project is gonna be. And they'd get all excited. And I said, oh, wait a minute. Here's the twist. Hand that piece to the person next to you.

And you can just see their face go, what? And it was the immediate thing that they learned right then that you're gonna have to work around other people's treasures that they may have collected over the years or this is the challenge that you've got to overcome. And when you when you put them in an immediate situation, they realize real quick that, oh, I'm not gonna be able to just go shopping for fabric and pull all this together and make this work. No. You you've got a challenge now that you've gotta incorporate what this may be, whatever that piece is, to making a finished design and making that piece look good.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** That's amazing.

**Curtis Anderson:** That's incredible.

**Jason Champion:** That's reality.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** I wanna take that class.

**Curtis Anderson:** That's incredible. I have one last question for you. This is really for our audience. Like, where is Project Pride Sarasota located, and how can we as an audience, find out more about what you're doing?

**Jason Champion:** I love that. Thank you very much. This has been a lot of fun. I've really enjoyed chatting with you guys. Project Pride is located in the Rosemary District at 1370 Boulevard of the Arts.

We have a physical space that is open. Please come by. Hang out. It's a safe space for everyone. The next biggest thing we have is October Pride, October 19th, and you can find all of that information on our website at ppsrq.org.

So [projectpridesrq.org](http://projectpridesrq.org).

**Curtis Anderson:** You said you got you you've been in Sarasota for a while. Can you talk about the evolution of the city that you've seen, You know because it's not common that people will want to stay here. You know someone so young and so talented would want to stay here. So what is the evolution? What's kept you here?

**Jason Champion:** Yeah the evolution of Sarasota has been really interesting. We've definitely seen it grow. We've seen it slow. We've seen it grow. We've seen it slow.

And I I love the progress. You know, I love that we are bringing in younger clientele, younger talent into town. I think it's been really interesting to see our hospital system grow and be more successful in a lot of ways. But, you know, the reason that I wanna stay is this community is very easy, and it's art focused. It's convenient.

It's easy to get around, and it's super philanthropic. Most of the folks that live here have second homes here sometimes. You know, they come from bigger cities, so they bring a little different flair than just from the middle of the state of Florida to the beach side here, and it's got a level of sophistication that has maintained over the years, and I've just really enjoyed being here. It's very comfortable. Yeah.

It's very integrated. Yeah.

**Curtis Anderson:** Yep. That's so true.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** Thank you so much for being with us today.

**Jason Champion:** Yeah. Thank you.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** We really enjoyed our chat with you.

**Jason Champion:** I appreciate it. Thanks for having me, and congratulations on the podcast taking off the way it has, and I look forward to being a guest in season 12. Thank you.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** I love that. Yeah. I love that message. Exactly. Thank you.

**Curtis Anderson:** And that concludes today's conversation. Thank you for tuning in and joining us on this journey of design and inclusion. You can find all of our episodes, transcripts, and other wonderful resources on our website, [ringling.edu backslash rise](http://ringling.edu/backslash/rise) it together. Join us next time for more insightful conversations, and remember to stay connected, stay engaged, and keep rising together with us. Rising Together is produced at the sound stage in partnership with Studio Labs and Art Network at Ringling College of Art and Design.

The show is produced by Dr. Elcin Haskollar, Curtis Anderson, Nick Palladino, Troy Logan, and Marquee Doyle.