



NHF InSights™ : Migraine Career Catalyst Award

Katy Oakley:

Welcome to NHF InSights, the National Headache Foundation's podcast developed with our industry partners. This is where we talk about what's new in migraine and headache care, from the latest studies to real world experiences. This podcast was created with the support of AbbVie. I'm Katy Oakley. I'm the CEO of the National Headache Foundation.

And on this episode, I am pleased to speak with three of the awardees of the AbbVie Migraine Career Catalyst Award. The award, it's designed to support migraine patients, and they can receive up to \$2,500 for use towards professional development. We're going to hear from three of the speakers today, and I'm very excited. Many of them have taken the route of entrepreneurship with the funds, so there's some common threads. They'll be sharing their migraine journeys and how this award is going to impact them both professionally and personally.

So, let's get started. Garcie Champagne is from Massachusetts. She is an educator, researcher, and advocate, redefining what it means to balance work, motherhood, and disability with dignity and purpose. Welcome, Garcie.

Garcie Champagne:

Thank you.

Katy Oakley:

We also have Laura Miller from Idaho, who is a passionate communicator and designer who's turned her experience with chronic migraine into a source of purpose and advocacy. Hi, Laura.

Laura Miller:

Hi. Thanks so much for having me.

Katy Oakley:

Thanks for being here. And then, Athena, last but not least, is from Michigan. She is an educator, a curriculum leader, and a lifelong learner whose career has spanned continents and classrooms. Welcome, Athena.

Athena Stanley:

Thank you. I'm so happy to be here today with these ladies.

Katy Oakley:

Me too. I'd love for us, let's just set the groundwork and let's just get to know each other a little bit better. All of you have such powerful stories, and you're doing such incredible things. So, Garcie, can you describe your migraine journey? And let's start there.

Garcie Champagne:

Yeah. Thank you. So, for me, migraine is something that I started experiencing in my early adolescence. So, my first memory of, like, really beginning to struggle with migraine is when I started to become a young lady and my body was changing. And so hormonally, some things were happening there that started to create headaches for me chronically. And then in my 20s, unfortunately, I experienced some head traumas, and from then on, it kind of went from bad to worse, and it became something that the severity really increased for me in terms of like how often I began experiencing the headaches.

And then I would say a great shift happened for me around Covid. And I mean, who knows? It was definitely a very, very stressful time. But during this time, I can remember I was still in the classroom at this point. I can remember spending my entire day really at the computer thinking about all of the ways we were having to adapt our work and teaching and learning. And during that time, I started to experience syncope episodes, which was a little bit before a migraine episode. I would have a fainting spell. And that was really very scary because it was kind of a newer symptom, but it really forced me to have to reckon with how I was living my life and my lifestyle and the way that I was working and what kind of schedule I had. All of the things that maybe I had taken for granted before were kind of magnified in a way that I couldn't ignore.

Katy Oakley:

Thank you for sharing. Laura, I know that you also had migraine attacks that started at a younger age. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Laura Miller:

I was in the middle of college when I first started getting migraine attacks. I just out of nowhere started getting these really sudden, intense, one-sided headaches. And it was also accompanied by nausea and sensitivity to light and sound. And it was just unlike anything I'd ever experienced before. I tried all over-the-counter medications, which of course didn't touch the pain at all. So, I ended up going to the university health center, and there I was luckily quickly diagnosed with migraine. And I know that lots of people struggle for years before actually getting a diagnosis, so I was fortunate to get diagnosed really quickly. I was sent with a baggie of a bunch of different samples of migraine medications and was sent on my way. And that was kind of the beginning of my migraine journey, which was 20 years ago.

Katy Oakley:

Wow. Athena, I know you were just diagnosed just a few years ago, so the opposite side of the spectrum. Can you talk about what was happening for you? What led you to talk to a provider about it?

Athena Stanley:

When I started experiencing the migraines, it was a confusing situation for me. I had never felt anything like that before. It would start first thing in the morning. It was a pain behind my eye, and it wouldn't go away, and I would be nauseous after a couple of hours. Sometimes I couldn't get out of bed. And I was working with students at the university level at that time as an assistant professor, and there wasn't anyone to replace me. I had teaching assistants for support. But when it comes to being there online for the students and getting the project feedback back to them, it was only myself I had to rely on. And I started seeking answers. And when I went to the doctor, they did some tests, they did some blood tests and some other physical examinations. And they said, let's treat this like a migraine. And sure enough, that helped and that's how I received that diagnosis.

Katy Oakley:

Thank you for sharing. Hearing all of your journeys, I think it's no surprise to anybody who's listening right now that this, I mean, it can significantly impact your careers. And I'd love to dig into that. Athena, maybe let's start with you and we can talk about maybe the day-to-day perspective of what it was like to work while having migraine attacks.

Athena Stanley:

It was really frustrating because I think as any professional, you feel responsible for what you're doing. And especially working with learners, I was very passionate. And I didn't want to fail them, but sometimes I simply couldn't get out of bed. And that started to transfer over into my family life as well, because I was losing personal time with my husband. I wasn't able to be there for my family in all of the ways that I wanted to, and they also needed my help and support. And I started to question whether or not I was going to be able to work, especially because so much of what I do is remote, and the lights from the computer and a lot of screen time are one of my triggers. So, I felt really discouraged, and I needed my doctors to help me find some ways to be able to continue.

Katy Oakley:

Yeah. I think that that is a shared experience among so many people. Laura, your migraine journey also impacted your career path and your decision in getting a degree. Can you share a little bit about that?

Laura Miller:

I had this vision laid out for what I wanted to do in my life, and migraine definitely caused me to change course on what I wanted to do. So, the last couple years of college were incredibly difficult, but I did graduate with my bachelor's degree in political science. And it was my dream to go on to law school, and I decided I still wanted to pursue that despite migraine. And so, I did take the LSAT. I did apply to law schools, and I was accepted. But ultimately, I decided not to go. At that point, I had developed chronic migraine, and there were several days each week where I was just completely unable to function. And as much as I wanted to, like, be optimistic and hope that like, okay, this has got to be better, I'm going to find a solution to this or something's going to change. I had to really kind of balance the practicality of moving out of state, taking out loans and entering like a really challenging program while being realistic with myself about where I was health wise. And it was ultimately just like listening to my gut and saying, like, this isn't the right time for this, and being able to, like, know that I'm putting this on hold and having to go a different direction.

Katy Oakley:

Yeah. I mean, those decisions are so tough and they're heartbreaking, especially when you have a vision for what you think your life is going to be. And then it turns a different direction because of something out of your control. Garcie, I know you've experienced this. You made a tough decision to leave the classroom. I'd love to hear more about that moment for you where you realized that something really needed to change.

Garcie Champagne:

Yeah. So, for me, I was a classroom teacher for many years, trying to do the math real quick here, definitely like maybe 13 years or so before I made the decision to leave the classroom. And so, when folks asked me, oh, why did you leave the classroom, I'm always really clear with myself that I absolutely loved my work. I loved my students. I loved supporting my school community. But what made it hard for me was not the work, but the job. And so, the distinction for me is that while I was very passionate and had the skills and the desire to continue working in this way, having a condition like this and dealing with the kinds of symptoms that you all described chronically, I had to really reckon with myself what matters more. Am I going to sacrifice what feels like my well-being, my children, the very tiny ounce of energy I have left at the end of the day. It felt like it was becoming really unsustainable dealing with my different symptoms. And I have about a 90-minute commute at the beginning and end of my day.

And as you all know, sometimes the beginning of the day can be the hardest part, waking up with nausea and waking up and wanting to just not see light whatsoever. I had to push myself beyond what I knew was good, comfortable, and safe for my well-being. And after those syncope episodes started, I knew that something had to change. And the biggest moment I would say for me is I also became a mother again after Covid. And during my pregnancy, you would have thought it was magic. Poof. The migraine symptoms that I used to experience, I didn't experience them to the same degree during pregnancy, but after pregnancy they came back.

And so here I was now, having to be responsible for two young children, feeling always like my body is betraying me. And when I went back to work, I had a moment where I experienced a migraine episode at work and rushed out to get my baby. I made it to care, but I never got inside because I passed out outside in the parking lot before I ever even made it in. And so, for me, I knew that there was no way I could continue working the way that I continued. And I felt like perhaps I'm going to have to leave this career that I've worked so hard at because this job, not my work, is just not working for me anymore. And now it's putting me in a very real concrete way, putting myself, my family at risk. And so, I had to change something and I did.

Katy Oakley:

I just want to say thank you for being vulnerable, because it's not easy sharing your story like this. And I think it's so important and it's so powerful because there's a lot of people who have had parts of your experience that they don't really know what to do. So, I'm grateful for all of you for being vulnerable and sharing.

I would love to shift to talk about where you all are today and what the future holds, because you're on the brink of doing some really incredible things. Laura, you've been a stay-at-home mom for 11 years now, and now you're launching a business, which is so cool. Can you share a little bit about your plans with the award, and how you think this will help you to do it on your own terms?

Laura Miller:

Yeah. I have been a stay-at-home mom for the past 11 years, so right now, I'm kind of at a transition point and I'm ready to start a new chapter. And I really want to start a business doing communications consulting with a focus on legislation and advocacy. So, my goal is to help businesses and nonprofits be able to track legislation, help them kind of break it down in a way that is accessible and easy to understand. So if there's for example something that's moving through the legislature, something that would either positively or negatively affect a nonprofit, I would help them with making social media graphics, videos, email campaigns, kind of breaking it down in easy to understand terms and letting people know how they're able to take action on this.

I think that the political process can be so cumbersome and be really difficult for people to understand, and I kind of see that as a point for me to be able to step in and help with being able to break it down in a way that that makes sense to people. I'm excited to be able to do this opportunity. I want to use the funds from the award to do some kind of training and software. And winning the award kind of gave me the confidence to be able launch this and really, really dive into to wanting to start the business.

So, when I first found out that I had won the award, I was all in. I was so excited. I was like, I'm going to do this. I'm going to get all these things done by this date, and I was just going for it. But then I had a series of really rough migraine days that kind of forced me to slow down and pull back. And that's something that I experience often with migraine is kind of this push and pull where it's like, I'm having a good day and I'm like, okay, I got to accomplish all these things and kind of just overdo it. And then a migraine day comes and it's like, I have to pull back. And so, in the business planning and everything, it feels like it's constantly a learning process where it's like, okay, next time I'm not going to overdo it. It's going to be okay. But yeah, definitely a learning process.

And then with the business planning as well, it's like I was very excited to get to doing it. But now I'm kind of slowing down, taking it at a different pace. I'm working with somebody with the Small Business Development Center to work on a plan that's sustainable, something that will go at my own pace, that I can do slowly where I don't feel like I have to rush and get like this giant checklist done by a certain date. So, it's kind of about making things work at a pace that works with my lifestyle and works with living with chronic migraine.

Katy Oakley:

Yeah, that makes so much sense. I mean, I think that for many people out there, it's not that you can't do it, but sometimes you need some accommodations, or you need to change the pace. And I think that's such an important thing to talk about. And I'm really glad that this award has allowed you to be able to do exactly that, to be able to do it on your own terms. Athena, you're also starting a business, which is which is so exciting. Can you tell us a little bit about that and how the award impacted you making this decision?

Athena Stanley:

Yes, I'm also starting my own business and I'm very excited about it. As you mentioned, I had been overseas for 14 years in Ecuador, Turkey and China, working primarily in K-12 and curriculum writing and teacher leading. And when I came back to the US, I was working as an assistant professor for a couple of years in an applied workplace leadership program helping to combat the teacher shortage, which was an incredibly awarding experience. And the position was grant funded. So, when the funding was ending for that position, I found myself trying to sort out what I was going to do. And then on top of that, having just newly gotten diagnosed with migraine, and I thought I wasn't necessarily ready to just jump into a new full-time job, especially one that was going to have a really rigid schedule for me. So, I was looking for something a little bit more flexible. And I also wanted an opportunity to continue applying my knowledge and expertise that I have grown and built over the years.

So, I came up with an idea to open my own company called Athena Global Learning, which I just registered back in September of 2025, and we kicked off in January of 26. The company is aimed at supporting learners to close gaps in their learning. And this is especially important post-Covid because we do have a lot of learners who are especially struggling in literacy. So, literacy is one of the areas that we focus on building and working on students with. And I have found through this transition time, I also have a passion for AI, so I am an early supporter of it. I am a pioneer of AI, and I would like to use the tools in a positive way. So, part of that's also parent training, which is something we also do at Athena Global Learning. And the focus there is on integrity and ethics. And we try to teach parents to have no secrets about AI in the house, start making it something that you talk about routinely, and start using it in positive ways to help your children grow.

Katy Oakley:

Wow, that's really incredible. And I mean, AI is such a complicated thing, especially when we're talking about kids. So being able to support parents on that is, I think, such an important thing to do. So, I'm glad that you're able to use the funds for something like that. Garcie, you are last but not least, but you're our third entrepreneur, which while we have three awardees who are entrepreneurs, you don't necessarily need to be an entrepreneur for the award. But I'd love for you to share how your outlook on work has changed, and how this award allows you to lean in on that. You have such a great story as well.

Garcie Champagne:

Yeah. Thank you. And I don't think it's a coincidence that just the three of us here that we're leaning towards entrepreneurship. Because for me, I think this journey with migraine, one major thing that has changed in me is how I see work, the world of work, and the future of work. I think the most important thing that I've learned is that work needs to work for everyone, and that work in the way that we, the infrastructures that we build within the workplace needs to consider the needs of the very real people who are upholding organizations and companies. And that policies are made for people and not people for policies. And so, I really believe in advocating for the kind of policies that center care, that center flexibility. As an educator, I think Covid taught me that there were so many things that we thought would not be possible in the world of work. But not only did they become possible during Covid, they became a necessity.

So, it really pulled the veil on what work can look like now. And I think all the time that if we think back to the eight-hour workweek where that came from, right? The world of work did not always look like what we know it to be right now. And so I deeply believe that we're at a place in history, in society, where we need to start thinking about redesigning work in the workplace so that the different intersections of people's identity can be honored, whether that be, for me the intersections that I live in constantly are disability and motherhood and race and gender.

So, I think that those are some of the lessons that I'm learning. And what I'm also realizing is, I don't know if the perfect workplace as I need it to be in this moment, in this season of my life exists. And that can feel really disempowering, discouraging. I have so much in my mind and on my heart that I want to do, and so much that I know that I can give. And sometimes I feel limited by the current structures that exist in as they are. And so, my feeling is, well, if it doesn't exist, as Toni Morrison says, then you create it. And so, for me, I'm figuring out how do I create my own table if there's no room for me as I am as my authentic self at the tables at which I'm currently sitting.

And so, Third Space Works is a venture that I launched August 2025. When I saw this award, it felt like I've got all these ideas, but not necessarily the resources to execute them. And so, when I saw this opportunity, it was really a little kick from the universe to take a leap of faith. I might not know all of what it's going to look like, but I am excited to try and to let the steps emerge. I'm really passionate about doing work that continues to center care. And so, Third Space Works is kind of a creative studio. I'm still figuring out all of the things, but children's biliteracy is something that I'll be focusing on, so developing books, children's books for the ages of 0 to 5, early literacy and biliteracy in Haitian Creole, French Creole, as well as English. And then in the meantime, while I'm developing those things, I've been doing some consulting work as well where I am offering organizational strategy. But again, always with care, well-being, and equity at the center.

Katy Oakley:

Oh, I love that. All three of you are so incredibly inspiring. I just can't wait to hear where you're going to go from here, so thank you. I'd love to end the conversation with a question for each of you, so you can give our viewers a little bit of advice and to help them on their journeys.

Laura, let's start with you. What's something that you would tell someone who's living with migraine, who's questioning their career path? You intimately know that so well. What advice would you give them?

Laura Miller:

I would say if someone is questioning their career path, that there's definitely probably a reason they're questioning it and that it's worth doing some exploring. I think that a lot of times we have like this traditional career path, and if that's not going to work for us, then there's nothing and we have to suffer and struggle. But I think that there's so many new opportunities that have happened just in the past several years with what work looks like, what it can look like, different kinds of flexibilities that are available. And even the being able to look into workplace accommodations because maybe you have something at work or like the job itself isn't the problem, but if maybe the workplace and if those accommodations could help. And I think a lot of it is being okay with maybe taking a shift or doing a different path. And maybe it's not forever but taking a different path and being okay with having to

deviate from your original plan and knowing that you can go back. Or maybe you might discover something completely different that you didn't think would be possible.

Katy Oakley:

Athena, you have also talked about that loss of missing out on your career or maybe times with loved ones because of migraine. If someone out there is also experiencing this, which I know many have, what advice would you give them?

Athena Stanley:

Firstly, I would tell anybody who is experiencing symptoms that could be consistent with migraine, to not suffer it in silence and don't go it alone. Make sure that you talk to your community. That's something that I have discovered going through this in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, is that there are actually a surprising number of people who do have migraines and live with them and have families and jobs and work. And they find ways to make it happen.

And I have found strength by speaking to some of my friends who have gone through this too, and have tried different remedies, or who have leaned on others to support them when they're not feeling well. And that emotional support has been really helpful. And I think also taking that step and going to your doctor as well, because that's where you'll start to get those assessments and really start learning about what's happening. And there's so much that we don't know about migraines, but there are things that we do know. And we have to just go with what we do know and try to keep moving forward.

Katy Oakley:

Yeah, that's such great advice. I know for me that support system was so helpful and there's such a strong migraine and headache community out there that if you don't feel that connection with your family and friends or you don't feel comfortable talking to them, there are so many folks out there who would be happy to be a listening ear.

Garcie, I am curious for you. You are such an advocate in the workplace. If someone is out there who's struggling to advocate for themselves to get accommodations, what advice would you give them?

Garcie Champagne:

This is going to be such a layered answer, because I think I am still challenging myself every single day to be that advocate that I know I deserve and that I want to model for others, so that when I am saying to somebody else, advocate for yourself, I have something to stand on, right? I think it can be so uncomfortable to advocate for yourself. The road for advocacy for me has been fraught with fear, lots and lots of tears, lots and lots of self-doubt. And so, I'm still not there yet. But I feel much stronger now that even when I'm uncomfortable, that I can challenge myself to still advocate whatever that might mean in the moment.

And so, what I would say for someone else trying to figure out the same, for me, the first concrete thing that I advocated for was accommodations. When that moment comes when you realize something's got to give, something's got to change, and you don't quite know what, and maybe you're not quite ready to make a big change or switch your job or throw away your career. For me, it was going to my

care team and developing a good care team. So that was my primary care physician who connected me to neurology and who got me developing a good relationship or a relationship with the neurology department and having a good routine with getting myself checked out. So developing a good relationship with your care team, partnering with the very people that you have to face at work. I very much agree with the sentiment that it can feel isolating, but you can't let yourself stay silent. And so, in the world of work, making sure that you're figuring out who are your allies, who are your allies at work and at home.

For me, therapy was a major way that I learned how to advocate for myself. I can't think how many of my sessions ended up being about figuring out my feelings around navigating this condition at work. Role playing with my therapist what I'm going to literally say to my boss. And using that support to get through the angst and the anxiety that can really be a constant when you're dealing with this. And so, I would say learning to advocate for yourself on the inside and on the outside. Right? So that's those structures that you have to figure out, but also thinking about what is it that I need and building those like internal muscles to be able to support yourself.

And then lastly, I would say to remember, as you're figuring out how to advocate to yourself, that your worth is not tied to your productivity. There's so many times where I have to check my own internalized conditioning about worth and productivity when a migraine day or a migraine week or maybe it's an episode that took you out, and now recovery feels just as bad as the episode itself. Being able to release yourself from the guilt that you can feel. I think that's really important, and knowing who you can go to when that comes up. Because I think someone mentioned it earlier, but the mental health aspect of living with a disability, I think any disability, and for sure, for me, living with chronic migraine has been a major part of this, is it can be really depressing to live with migraine and to live with disability and to have to figure out how to reconcile the vision that you had for yourself and the reality of what you really have to do. So, I think when it comes to advocacy, tackling it from the inside out is the advice that I would give.

Katy Oakley:

Oh, that's so beautifully said. Thank you. I also could not agree more. I think there's so much work, that doing the work for yourself and internally first. I mean some people are built where it's really easy to advocate for themselves and some people you may need you may need some extra support, whether that's from a therapist or a loved one. But that first step I feel like is missed sometimes and then it prevents people from doing any of the steps. So, I'm really glad that you said them.

I just want to stop and say thank you to all three of you. On behalf of the viewers out there, I know I learned so much from all of you and we're so grateful for your vulnerability. And congratulations to all three of you on being award recipients. I'm excited to see where you go from here.

Garcie Champagne:

Thank you so much.

Laura Miller:

Thank you.

Athena Stanley:

Thank you.

Katy Oakley:

And we hope that our viewers that you stay tuned and you watch future episodes of NHF InSights. We also want to say thank you to AbbVie for the support of these three incredible women, and for allowing us to bring this episode to all of you. If you are out there and you have any questions on any of the topics that we discussed, please let us know in the comments. We really want to hear from you. We really want to help you in whatever way that we can. So, thank all of you so much for listening and we hope you have a great day.

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