

# S1E10. Desmond is Amazing

[00:00:00] **Samuel Smalls, Jr.:** As a queer youth who has done drag, what has it meant for you?

[00:00:10] **Desmond Napoles:** Drag has helped me become the person I am today, and drag has helped me find my true self.

[00:00:15] **Theme Song:**

*Woke up on the right side of the rainbow  
Feelin' bright, gonna put on a good show  
There's a skip in my step  
I'm doing my best  
And I guess that you could say  
I'm feeling queer today  
I'm Feeling Queer Today!*

[00:00:43] **Samuel Smalls, Jr.:** Hey, everyone, it's Samuel Smalls Jr. here, and I want to welcome you to a special episode of *I'm Feeling Queer Today!*, the podcast that amplifies the voices of queer youth. This past July, I got a chance to chat with the fabulous Desmond Napoles, better known as Desmond is Amazing, a queer teenager who has changed the world.

[00:01:12] Performing since the age of eight, Desmond first burst onto the national scene as an 11 year old drag kid, who RuPaul referred to as "the future of America." Since then, they have become a multi-awarded LGBTQ plus advocate, gender fluid editorial and runway model, motivational public speaker, performer, fashion and footwear designer, actor, singer, host, social media influencer, and published author.

[00:01:34] And while they have become a successful and well loved LGBTQ plus advocate, they have also had to deal with the same challenges and adversity that many of us queer youth face every day. In this conversation, we share our experiences of growing up queer on the East Coast, me having grown up in Florida, and Desmond in New York City.

[00:01:50] We also talk about our love of drag and the way it inspires liberation in all of us. I really enjoyed talking to Desmond as a queer youth that's also interested in activism. I thought it was really interesting that we had a lot of similar ideas and things that we thought about and things that we fought for.

[00:02:03] It was also nice to hear about the differences in growing up in a red state like Florida versus a blue state like New York and how the acceptance is different and the strides that are being made in New York and the things that Desmond has been able to do. It's really interesting to be able to speak to them face to face and really hear about the things that they've been able to accomplish.

[00:02:23] I hope you enjoy our conversation and stick around until the end of this episode to learn more about what Desmond has been up to since we first spoke.

[00:02:29] \_\_\_\_\_

[00:02:29] Hi, my name is Samuel Smalls Jr. I'm 18 years old. My pronouns are he, him.

[00:02:44] **Desmond Napoles:** My name is Desmond. I'd like to go by Desi and I use they, them, she, her, whichever one you prefer.

[00:02:50] And I am from New York and my main goal is to help LGBTQ youth and all LGBTQ people. So I guess I'll start off with the questions first. So as someone who lives in New York City, a blue city that turns the state entirely blue, do you think that there's ever a possibility that your state might turn, seeing that the type of restrictions are being placed on healthcare, education, the economy, due to your governor?

[00:03:10] What's it like there?

[00:03:12] **Samuel Smalls, Jr.:** Well, I think that, in my experience, I've lived in Miami and I've lived in Broward, which are two areas that are blue. However, the majority of Florida is not that way. And I think that I've been graced to live in very diverse areas, from diversity breeds progress, and I also live by Muslim manners, the queer megacenter in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

[00:03:36] So for me, I have an experience The terrors that are right down the street from me, but I do have hope. I have hope because of the areas that I've lived and because I know that Florida is a very diverse place. And I just feel like what the governor does is he weaponizes fear against marginalized groups and against people that are like me.

[00:04:01] And I think that most people that are not like me. are able to counteract their fear, I think that's when change will occur. And once there's a leader who changes the minds of these people that are not like me, I think there can be a step taken in the right direction.

[00:04:22] **Desmond Napoles:** Thank you. That's a very awesome response.

[00:04:25] Coming from New York, I see everything happening down south, and I just feel so bad for the young LGBTQ youth who are discovering themselves. Maybe at the age of 12, 11, or those who've known since they were little. And even, you know, the families who are forcing to leave their home because, you know, their kids might be taken away.

[00:04:41] You shouldn't have to leave your home because the government might want to take away your kids. It's insane.

[00:04:45] **Samuel Smalls, Jr.:** This kind of segues into a question I had for you. My, my experience growing up queer was not perfect. However, I think I was blessed in a lot of ways and I'm lucky in a lot of ways. I wanted to ask you what your experience growing up queer is in a state like New York and how it affects your activism.

[00:05:04] **Desmond Napoles:** Growing up in a state like New York is one like none other because you are in the biggest city in the United States. You are one of the most powerful cities in the world. And because you are in one of the most powerful cities in the world, there are powerful people there. And I feel like growing up in New York City, I've developed this sort of [the attitude], "I don't care what people say."

[00:05:20] Ever since I was young, you know, people would be like, "Oh, like, they don't like to, you know, play boys sports, or why do they like the color pink?" And it really took a hit on me up until high school. But high school, I just started not caring. And I think that's what really leads me to be like I am. It's just growing up in such a big city and the culture that NYC has.

[00:05:39] I definitely think that growing up queer in New York is definitely not like growing up queer in LA or Florida. And that's what's special about being LGBTQ in your own place. We all have different experiences from where we come from. And we are able to bond over those experiences and learn about each other's experience.

[00:05:55] So we can form relationships over trauma or, you know, parts of your journey being here. How about you? What is it like growing up in Florida?

[00:06:05] **Samuel Smalls, Jr.:** I think growing up as a Black queer youth, it's a different experience. Because queerness is not accepted widely in the Black community. I would go to my predominantly Black schools, my predominantly Black summer camps, and there was an expectation of me, as a Black boy, that I was supposed to follow.

[00:06:26] I did not know that I was queer at the time. I didn't even know that being queer was a thing that I could be. But because I was different and because I did not fit the mold that I was supposed to fit, it caused me to get bullied. I was called names. I was singled out. But I also found refuge in Black women.

[00:06:45] My sister and her friends, they kind of rallied behind me, and they stood up for me. And there were also boys that were different than the pack, and were able to connect with me. But, it affected me from like 7 to 10, like first grade, up until like third grade, when it was, it was really bad. And at this time I did not know that being queer was a thing, so I thought that being queer was just this, terrible thing that nobody is.

[00:07:10] And it's just an insult. And I didn't know why people were calling me it. It affected me so deeply to the point where I was trying to be something that I wasn't, even though I didn't know who I was. I think it was sixth grade when I realized I was queer. At that point, I was in a different space. I had moved and I was in middle school and there was a lot more acceptance surrounding me.

[00:07:32] So at that point I knew there was nothing to hide. And I think since then, I've been able to blossom. I've been lucky to be in spaces with people that understand and get it. And the scary thing is knowing that it was less scary to be queer in 2016 when I was 12 than it is now when I'm 18 in 2023, it's felt like we've taken 12 steps backwards because of the people in power.

[00:08:00] And that is the truth for a lot of queer youth. Growing up in the past is less scary than growing up in the present. I could not imagine what my trans siblings are going through not knowing what their future holds. And queer adults across the state don't know what the future holds for them because it's being criminalized to be queer.

[00:08:23] That is a terrifying truth.

[00:08:25] **Desmond Napoles:** When we look back on history, we see those type of things can lead to horrific things. That's where you realize, "oh my god, it's actually serious," you know? Coming up to the elections for me, it's been really stressful, even though I live in a blue state, I don't know what's going to happen.

[00:08:37] Really, it really worries me how much time my community has left before, you know, we start getting put in jail. If we don't stop this rhetoric of trans people being groomers or gay guys being groomers, because it really hurts everyone in the long run.

[00:08:49] **Samuel Smalls, Jr.:** Yes. Also, what's going on in Florida is the drag ban, which I believe, and I know a lot of people have believed and have realized, that it's a thinly veiled attack on trans people.

[00:09:00] And it's, it's scary because I think drag is a beautiful art form. And I'm a lover, I'm a lover of art in all kinds. As someone who loves to sing, dance, act, and lip sync, I find drag and fashion to be just something that I thoroughly admire. And it's scary that I was 16 watching RuPaul's Drag Race, and I was like, "I want to go see a drag show," because I was watching people make magic.

[00:09:28] They were creating art. And the fact that there's this attack on kids being able to watch art under the guise that trans people or drag queens are groomers.

[00:09:44] **Desmond Napoles:** Art, like paintings, can have nudity in them sometimes, and museums, like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, kids go there all the time, statues are nudes, but no one is complaining about that art, or modern art as well.

[00:09:55] But as soon as there's a drag queen doing it, you know, it's automatically inappropriate, which is like, a really big double standard. And it's just like, "we don't actually care about the children, we just hate you." And they're, they're just using children as a way to make people hate drag queens.

[00:10:09] **Samuel Smalls, Jr.:** And that's what I was getting at earlier about the weaponization of fear.

[00:10:13] Because if you tell someone that, "hey, these people are attacking your children," they're, they're going to do whatever it takes to protect their children. And if you spread that from person to person and family to family, it becomes opposition to the people that are trying to quote unquote "attack" your children, but that's not the case and I, like you say about art, I always say whenever someone tries to have a conversation with me and they say, "well, I don't think that drag is appropriate for children," I say, "well, drag comes in many, many shapes and sizes and forms." There's drag queen story hours. There's fashion shows. There's drag queens that sing, they dance, they act. There's all types of performances that happen in drag or through drag. That, and just to classify an entire art form as inappropriate, it's very disingenuous and it doesn't make a lot of sense to me when there are so many performances and nuances to the art form.

[00:11:15] As a queer youth who has done drag, what has it meant for you?

[00:11:20] **Desmond Napoles:** Drag has helped me become the person I am today, and drag has helped me find my true self. And that's one of the amazing things about art, is that it can help you learn about yourself. And that's why I think that, for me, drag was a very important part of my life, especially in my childhood, where it helped me realize you don't need to wear makeup and wigs to look pretty.

[00:11:43] It really just taught me you're beautiful the way you are. Most people wouldn't say that about drag, but for me, that was my experience. It helped me learn about me, and it helped me learn that you don't need to do too much to impress people. You just need to be yourself and be authentic. When you are around queer people since you were young, and it really helped you accept yourself for who you are at a young age and not have to worry about dealing with that when you're older.

[00:12:15] When you're surrounded by people that you can relate to, you learn more about yourself earlier, and When you do that, you don't need to worry about, "Oh, I'm in high school and all of a sudden I'm gay." You know, "what, what does that mean for my family? What does that mean for me?"

[00:12:28] **Samuel Smalls, Jr.:** Yes. I'll never forget. I actually, I think I have it sitting on, on my, in my bookshelf.

[00:12:35] But I'll never forget reading *The House of Hades*, which is a Percy Jackson spinoff. In the second grade, that was my biggest obsession reading Percy Jackson books. I'll never forget reading *The House of Hades*. Finding out that Nico had a crush on Percy and in the seventh grade is my first time seeing a gay person in a book and I will never be able to explain the joy and the warmth that I felt spread throughout my body once I read that.

[00:13:05] And since then, watching shows like *Pose*, watching *RuPaul's Drag Race*, reading plays or watching plays like *Choir Boy*, reading books by Adam Silvera like *More Happy Than Not*. It breaks my heart that kids like me won't be able to get that. In Ron DeSantis world, in some political leaders worlds, they want to rip that experience from kids like me to be able to read those books and watch those shows and experience those feelings of belonging that a lot of us queer youth don't get.

[00:13:39] We always feel like we do not belong. That's my safe place, and I feel like we're taking away Safe places from a lot of queer youth.

[00:13:50] **Desmond Napoles:** That's like a major FU to the kids that are just like you when you were young learning about yourself and me who was learning about myself at that time.

[00:13:58] **Samuel Smalls, Jr.:** Yes. So, in my research of you, I found out that you're not only a drag artist, but you're also a fashion icon .

[00:14:05] **Desmond Napoles:** It's definitely a humbling experience to be able to do that at such a young age. It really teaches you a lot and it prepares you for when you get older and you have to go in more stressful situations, you know. And still, I, every time I have to do runway, I get that little bit of feeling of stress and then I go on and I'm out and it's just the best feeling ever.

[00:14:21] So for me, being able to learn so many things at such a young age, Was really an experience Inspiring so many free things so many things that such a young age was such a humbling experience to me And I wouldn't have traded for anything else in the world.

[00:14:34] **Samuel Smalls, Jr.:** I love that.

[00:14:35] So before we close I want to play a little game.

[00:14:40] So my favorite number is five I was born on 5/15/05 so my life is built around fives. So we're gonna play a game I call top five. The first thing I want to ask your top five songs right now

[00:14:55] **Desmond Napoles:** Uh, Say Yes by Lana Del Rey and Princess Diana by Ice Spice featuring Nicki Minaj and Did You Know That There's a Tunnel Under Ocean Boulevard by Lana Del Rey, Video Games by Lana Del Rey and Radio by Lana Del Rey.

[00:15:08] I love,

[00:15:08] **Samuel Smalls, Jr.:** I love that.

[00:15:11] I want to also know your top five music artists. I'm assuming Lana Del Rey is number one.

[00:15:16] **Desmond Napoles:** I like Ice Spice. I like Kim Petras just because of what she's done for the trans community. Nicki Minaj and Lana Del Rey, and that's my favorite. I

[00:15:24] **Samuel Smalls, Jr.:** think that's iSpice, Kim Petras, Lana Del Rey, and Nicki Minaj.

[00:15:28] One more.

[00:15:30] **Desmond Napoles:** Lizzo, because I love the energy that she has.

[00:15:31] **Samuel Smalls, Jr.:** Love her. Last one. Who are your top five queer inspirations?

[00:15:39] **Desmond Napoles:** Harvey Milk, a politician, Billy Porter, Marsha P. Johnson, Magnus Hirschfeld, he's not really brought up in queer history because in the 1930s in Germany. Right before Nazis took over, he helped the first trans people get gender reassignment surgery successfully, and he was an innovator for like hormone replacement therapy, and all his knowledge was burned in the book banning by the Nazis, and he was gay and Jewish.

[00:16:01] Thankfully, two trans women who got surgeries were able to escape to other countries. But I just think he's so overlooked in queer history, especially what he's done for trans people. And then, Crystal LaBeija for what she's done for the ballroom community.

[00:16:14] **Samuel Smalls, Jr.:** Beautiful.

[00:16:15] **Desmond Napoles:** I had a great time talking to you today.

[00:16:17] **Samuel Smalls, Jr.:** And also, it was good to meet you. Would you like to tell the listeners what's next for you, where to find you?

[00:16:24] **Desmond Napoles:** You can find me on Instagram, and TikTok @desmondisamazing. And for me, what's next is my clothing store, Be Amazing NYC, which we are currently working on. We're working on our fall collection.

[00:16:35] Another thing I'm working on is also my personal life and an event. So thank you. I'm so glad to meet you.

[00:16:40] **Samuel Smalls, Jr.:** So glad to meet you too. I think you're doing such great things and I hope that That you inspire more people to be like you, and, and open doors for people like us.

[00:17:04] Since that interview, Desmond has still been busy advocating for trans and non binary people. Most recently, they've participated in the hashtag Speak Out for Trans Day of Visibility as part of Lambda Legal's campaign to elevate trans and non binary voices. Learn While they did

launch their store in New York City, Desmond closed Be Amazing NYC in December of 2023 so they could focus on college preparation during their non-school time.

[00:17:25] In the future, they plan to continue their fashion journey. Check out [desmondisamazing.com](https://desmondisamazing.com) for more information. Thanks so much for listening to our first season. Stay tuned for the release of season 2 coming in September. If you like what you hear, please rate us and share the show with your friends or family.

[00:17:38] Or both. And don't forget to ask yourself, how am I feeling queer today?

[00:17:45] We hope you enjoyed our episode today. For more information and resources about it, check out the show notes or visit the episode page at [thefutureperfectproject.org/podcast](https://thefutureperfectproject.org/podcast). If you or a young person you know between the ages of 13 and 24 is currently in crisis, check out [thetrevorproject.org](https://thetrevorproject.org) for LGBTQIA plus specific support through text and chat.

[00:18:03] Or call 1 866 488 7386. We'll also include this information in the show notes as resources. To learn more about The Future Perfect Project and all of our free arts programming for LGBTQIA plus youth, visit [thefutureperfectproject.org](https://thefutureperfectproject.org) or find us on social media @thefutureperfectproject. *I'm Feeling Queer Today!* is produced by The Future Perfect Project with support from Radio Kingston WKNY in Kingston, New York.

[00:18:25] Our theme song was composed and performed by Alex Masse and produced by Emma Jane Seslowsky. Additional music composed by Alex Masse, Frankie Gunn, and Epidemic Sound. Episode mixing and mastering by Julie Novak with assistance from Emma Jane Seslowsky. Special thanks to executive producers and mentors Julie Novak and Celeste Lecesne.

[00:18:41] As well as Future Perfect Project team members Ryan Amador, Jon Wan, and Aliya Jamil.