



## Episode 21: MDA Let's Play – A Community for Everyone

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Mindy Henderson:

Welcome to the Quest Podcast, proudly presented by the Muscular Dystrophy Association as part of the Quest family of content. I'm your host, Mindy Henderson. Together we are here to bring thoughtful conversation to the neuromuscular disease community and beyond about issues affecting those with neuromuscular disease and other disabilities, and those who love them. We are here for you to educate and inform, to demystify, to inspire, and to entertain. We are here shining a light on all that makes you you whether you are one of us, love someone who is, or are on another journey all together. Thanks for joining. Now let's get started.

Today, I have three guests with me to talk all about the MDA Let's Play program. In a nutshell, MDA Let's Play is a welcoming online gathering place for teens and adults where they play together, forge new friendships, share similar challenges, learn new skills, and sometimes get to hang out with celebrities, sports athletes, and professional creators. More than two million viewers have watched MDA Let's Play online events on Twitch. First up, I have Larry Lieberman who is the founder of MDA Let's Play. He is a longtime entertainment industry veteran having produced several top albums and television shows as well as hundreds of concerts, festivals, and gaming events. Larry is the former Chief Operating Officer of Charity Navigator. Next is Kenny Small, more commonly known as Beaniez. He is the program manager and host for MDA Let's Play. Beaniez began his career in gaming with collegiate esports where he acted as team manager for Rutgers University Overwatch while producing event hosting and commentary. Nowadays, he spends his time streaming on the MDA Let's Play channel and creating enjoyable memorable experiences for the members of the MDA Let's Play community.

Last, but certainly not least, I have Charlie Mabry. Charlie lives with Duchenne muscular dystrophy and has been part of the MDA ambassador program since 2017. In 2020, he became a streamer and content creator, and started a TikTok account called Keep Charlie Moving that focuses on sharing his life story with Duchenne muscular dystrophy. He got interested in gaming and decided to get into streaming on a platform called Twitch, where he is known as Charlie Harley. It's there that he discovered the MDA Let's Play community and has been involved in MDA fundraising events like MDA Takes Vegas. Holy cow, you guys. I am so excited to talk about this gigantic thing you have all created. Welcome.

Larry Lieberman: Thanks for having us.

Kenny Small: Thank you. Thank you.

Charlie Mabry: I'm excited.

Mindy Henderson: Awesome. Well, Larry, let's start with you. Would you tell us anything I missed about you. I covered a lot of ground with all of you, but feel free to share anything about us, and how you got connected with the Muscular Dystrophy Association, and how the MDA Blitz Play program came about.

Larry Lieberman: Sure. Gaming is such a wonderful, wonderful platform for people. It's a great uniter. So many people game. In a lot of ways, it's hidden. Right? We think of gaming, the three of us at least on this side of the call, think of gaming as being universal because it's just part of our day to day activities. As someone who interacts with a more mature world, who may have grown up without video games at a time when technology was three or four channels on the TV set, I have an understanding that there are lots of folks out there who are not familiar with things like Twitch. Twitch is an online platform. It's owned by Amazon. It's a wonderful space. There are more than 140 million users every single month on Twitch. Okay? I like to describe it to people is that it's almost like cable television except you get to make your own channel.

With all these viewers, think of it, there's over eight million channels every month providing live content on Twitch, and the people watching, about 75% of them are between the ages of 16 and 35. I spent years and years at MTV and Comedy Central as an executive there, and we look to the future now, and the reality is that people are watching Twitch today the same way most folks remember watching cable television, as you sit down and you spend an hour or two watching your favorite creators on Twitch. With an audience that amids, I started meeting with MDA in 2018 about growing the organization's reach to the next generation of both folks who would become volunteers and folks who would become donors, as well as the community of folks within the MDA universe that the Muscular Dystrophy Association serves so brilliantly. With an audience that large, our community is there and we are really, really happy to have such a big presence to be part of our community's lifestyle and fun, frankly.

Mindy Henderson: Fantastic. I come from the generation of three channels on television where there was no such thing as a remote control. I'm curious about Twitch. You talk about the content creators and things. What kind of content are they creating and where does gaming come into play?

Larry Lieberman: That's a great question. Twitch, more than half the creators on Twitch are folks tied to video gameplay. Right? Either they're experts at the gameplay itself, and it's a wonderful way for viewers to learn tips tricks, and just have fun watching some of their favorite players explore a game and even compete. It's also a great place for people who have stories to share, or music to share, or crafting, or skills. There's a real diverse array of creators available who make their content available on Twitch, and the magic is that so much of the viewing happens live. It's a world where anything can happen, and surprise and delight is really the order of the day on Twitch because this is a generation that's accustomed to spontaneity. They grew up on reality television where anything could happen. It wasn't scripted. Twitch is the ultimate unscripted reality television. It's happening live.

Mindy Henderson: Cool. Okay. I'm going to go check out Twitch. You've definitely sold me. Beaniez, let's go to you. Can you tell me first where the name Beaniez came from?

Kenny Small: The name Beaniez comes from in high school I took pride in having a different beanie I could wear every day in the month, and I wouldn't have to duplicate it. I had 30 to 40 different beanies, which are similar to these hats that we have with MDA Let's Play. I had a whole collection of those, and in high school I really liked the idea of a simple one to two syllable name, easy, no numbers, so I just went with Beaniez and it worked out. I've kept it since, so it's what, since 2013, I think, I've gone by Beaniez, maybe 2014. It's been a while.

Mindy Henderson: Okay. That's not what I thought you were going to say. Nothing to do with kidney beans or pinto beans or chili of sorts.

Kenny Small: No. I've had my fair share of time eating interesting jelly beans, but that's about as close as we get to it.

Mindy Henderson: Okay. Okay. Fair enough. Tell us a little bit more about yourself then and what drew you to MDA Let's Play.

Kenny Small: I guess a little bit about me and what drew me to MDA Let's Play, it was mentioned at the start that I had a time where I would host and commentate with esports and collegiate esports events. The way I got connected with MDA Let's Play is a close friend of mine who used to be involved with the program, his name's David Chen, he goes by Haunts, he brought me in to host a game night one off in the summer of 2020. I guess even before that, I got brought in to do a commentary, which I had to pull out because I was sick. My first actual event was Fall Guys, where I hosted a game night for that in August 2020. I kept in touch. They brought me back around in October when there was the big Kevin Hart, Zed streamathon that happened.

Then after that, their previous game night host stepped down, and then I was brought in to host the weekly game nights. From there hosting weekly game nights grew into being a part of the greater MDA Let's Play team, which then grew into me now running the program and still hosting.

Mindy Henderson: Nice, and the rest is history like they say, huh?

Kenny Small: Exactly. The rest is history.

Mindy Henderson: Fantastic. Charlie, Charlie Harley, so clearly a prerequisite for participating here is you've got to have a really cool name or pseudo name. Right?

Charlie Mabry: Yes.

Mindy Henderson: Let's talk September 7th is actually Duchenne Awareness Day, and I want to talk to you also about MDA Let's Play. Would you mind telling us a little bit about your diagnosis for anyone who's listening and how it manifests?

Charlie Mabry: Yes. I have Duchenne muscular dystrophy, and basically not all the medical terms, but basically how I describe it is, is basically everybody's body produces a protein called dystrophin. Somebody with my disability, our bodies don't produce dystrophin, so therefore over time instead of our muscles becoming stronger, they end up becoming weaker. Basically we lose all of our muscles instead of gaining muscle as we get older. It is a very progressive, very, I guess, severe form of muscular dystrophy. All the research that's been going on, people are living into their thirties and even forties with this disability so it's amazing.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah. There's a lot of really exciting stuff happening in the medical space with Duchenne, I know. Let's talk about some more fun things. Let's talk about your involvement with MDA Let's Play. Tell me what it's meant for you.

Charlie Mabry: Yeah. I'll explain how I found out about MDA Let's Play. How I found out about it was is we get the Quest magazines in the mail and my mom's like, hey Charlie, look at this article. I'm like, what article? She's like, look, it's a MDA gaming community. I was like, well, that's cool. Then I joined it, and then I've been a part of it ever since. I've met so many amazing people. I love it so much because I enjoy playing a game called Rocket League, which is soccer. I've connected with people with my same disability that enjoy playing Rocket League just like me.

Mindy Henderson: Nice.

Charlie Mabry: That is one of the best parts I think.

Mindy Henderson: Great. What do you enjoy the most about, tell me a little bit about what MDA Let's Play is from your perspective and what you enjoy the most about it. Sounds like you've made some friends, but tell me more.

Charlie Mabry: Yeah. MDA Let's Play is, I would say it's a community of gamers, not just gamers, just people that have the same views on things and also like playing the same games, and they can have a conversation about the games they like to play with each other. Then also it connects the families. You can connect siblings, their siblings have the neuromuscular diseases and volunteers like what Larry said earlier. There's so many different connections, and even some of the firefighters are part of the community, so it's awesome. Literally the entire MDA community is in one place and the MDA Let's Play community playing games and hanging out with each other. It's so much fun.

Mindy Henderson: Wow. That's fantastic. I love it. I wish that everybody could see the video of us talking to each other right now, Charlie. You have this smile that just doesn't stop. You're not a happy guy at all are you?

Charlie Mabry: No, not at all.

Mindy Henderson: All right. Well Larry, let's talk a little bit about the success of the MDA Let's Play program. It sounds like it's grown like crazy. What is special about it and how have you seen it grow? Is there a secret sauce that you can share with us that's made it successful?

Larry Lieberman: Yeah, I won't be shy. I mean, the secret sauce of the MDA Let's Play community is the caring within the community. Frankly, and I'll embarrass him in front of all of us here, but the compassion with which Kenny leads this community, the innovation, the creativity, he's really a unique voice in allowing and giving space for everyone. It's allowed the community to grow. We now have over 2000 members within our community on our Discord, which is how we communicate all day, every day. The programming that we began back in '20, we went live in 2020 one day a week for three hours with a game night every Saturday night. Today, most weeks we are live seven days a week, playing games for all ages, including every other Sunday with Charlie leading us in Rocket League. It's a wonderful community that's both guided and fully integrated in the community members themselves.

Mindy Henderson: That's amazing. I love it. Just the MBA community itself, I think there's something, I've never really been able to articulate it, I think there's something so special about it. If you're part of it you know what I'm talking about. It sounds like that's really translated into the program. Beaniez, we've mentioned some celebrity participation and that sort of thing. It sounds like this program has captured the attention of some celebrities. Can you talk a little bit about that and maybe who's participated or made some cameo appearances in the games?

Kenny Small: I mean, we have quite a list of people who we've been fortunate up to work with. We've had some great support from celebrities and streamers, content creators from all different avenues, from people that the community may well know like Nyheim Hines, national spokesperson. Kevin Hart with the streamathon telethon, along with the DJ Zed, and then even leaning into the content creation community creators like Al-Farid and Terrorizer. Recently, we

were fortunate enough to work with Shiv FPS who played some Apex legends with myself and Nyheim Hines. We've been able to work with people ranging from other creators with forms of muscular dystrophy. To name a few, we have Nega Greer. We have Hi Kiri. We have Sir Whip. I mean the list goes on. We have Perseus, a bunch of different streamers and careers in their own right who we've been fortunate enough to work with in these events to raise money while also working with some big names, creators, streamers, athletes, that fortunately enough have been able to raise money for MDA, interact and play games with our MDA Let's Play community during these events, which has been fantastic.

I guess helping to give away and create memorable experiences for our community members like with Nyheim Hines, he's been generous enough to help give away various signed memorabilia to members of our community and people who've supported and donated to MDA Let's Play. We've been very, very fortunate with the support we've received from celebrities, creators, athletes, all them.

Mindy Henderson: Nice.

Larry Lieberman: I want to throw out the support we get also from all the MDA folks in the regions and around the country. Our very first MDA, we started doing this as a live event. Our very first events came pre-COVID. Even before we streamed live, we had a celebrity streamer, Lord Minion, who's Wade Barnes, do an in-person event at the Microsoft Store in Cincinnati where Microsoft donated this space, and some games, and Wade came and played with our community members. Then when we went live, Wade was so generous, he came online and played with our community on the very first game night, which was May 15th, 2020.

Mindy Henderson: Wow. That's amazing. Such generosity out there in the community. I love hearing about things like this. I want to try and get a little bit better picture of what someone can expect. Did you say this is a once a week thing?

Larry Lieberman: Well, now it's seven days a week.

Mindy Henderson: Now it's seven. Okay. What's the lineup or the agenda, so to speak, if someone joins in, what can they expect to here, do, see?

Kenny Small: We have pretty consistent activities that we like to do in our community. Like Larry mentioned, we are streaming six, seven days a week, depending on the week typically. We like to have afternoon activities where we let people get together, Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. Typically at four o'clock Eastern, we treat it as an afternoon, end of day kind of session where people come and they'll just hang out while they're doing their homework, playing other games, just looking for that, I guess, without it being only for after school kind of activity. It's like after school social kind of environment where it's come by, get your work done, do what you got to do. We can hang out, chat, have a good time for a few hours. We have programming with our game night on Saturday nights, which is our staple night where we get together as a

community, play a lot of games that are low barrier to entry and high accessibility, so lots of free to play games, lots of cross platform games, lots of games that are friendly to people with limited mobility in their hands, anything of the sort that can really just reach a large group of people in the MDA community.

Then on Wednesday nights, we like to have ourselves an up-late gaming night, which is where we play games with geared more towards our teenage and adult audiences. That's where you'll see maybe games are like FPS's, like Apex Legends or Valorant. You may see games like Dead by Daylight, which is a hide and seek sort of game. Then recently we've had some fighting games like a new game, Multiverse, to our up-late lineup. Stuff like that where it's a little more geared toward an older community of people that would want to play it. Then even outside of Twitch, we have Discord only activities because some people just like the more community focused environment that we get when it's not streamed. It's just an intimate group of 5, 10, 15, 20 people doing the same activity.

We have moderators who host activities, like our moderator, Eric, who likes to host our weekly movie nights with our community. Our moderator, Merv, who hosts weekly Dungeons and Dragons activities with our community. We have our moderator, Cybil Thorne, who in the past have hosted Clue or murder mystery Monday activities for people. Just different, I guess, different activities or socialization routes that people can go to without needing to really leave the comfort of their home environment.

Mindy Henderson: My next question is, I think I'm wondering if there are age limits. Are there rules about who can join and that sort of thing?

Kenny Small: There are in terms of the software or the platforms that we use. We use Discord as our online community. With Discord, similar to a lot of other online interaction platforms like with Fortnite, Rocket League, stuff like that, it's 13 and older or with the parent's permission/guidance. We welcome all ages into our community, and when you join Discord and you check out our MDA Let's Play section of the website, we have a little setup guide for enabling the top safety settings for your account to make sure that if you or your child are going to be using Discord, you can prevent unwanted people from messaging you. You can limit yourself to just the Discord server that we use, our MDA Let's Play server, stuff like that. We personally don't have an age limit, but there is parental guidance suggested for using Discord or playing online games.

Mindy Henderson: Perfect. Okay. If someone wants to join in, do you need to be an experienced gamer, or can someone who's new to games join in? Charlie, why don't you take that one.

Kenny Small: Charlie, give us your perspective.

Charlie Mabry: Yes. Anybody new can join. We love playing with new people. Playing a new game, it is awesome playing a new game. You're learning something new. Also,

what I realized from being in the MDA Let's Play community, I was like, hey, I'm going to try playing a mouse and keyboard game. Now I'm addicted to mouse and keyboard game.

Mindy Henderson: Oh wow. If someone knew joins, do you help teach them how to play the games or is that not really part of the line up?

Charlie Mabry: Oh, I would say, I like helping people play Rocket League. When we play Rocket League at game nights and stuff, we all just go into custom matches. If we see someone, I guess like, oh, I don't know how to fly in the air. Basically we'll tell them a tip or something and then they'll be like, oh, and then yeah, basically it just happens while we're playing games, I guess.

Mindy Henderson: Nice.

Kenny Small: If I could just add on to your first question. Even outside of gaming, we have a really strong community of people who aren't exclusively into gaming and we have a really creative community. We just recently had our second annual talent show, and we had 25 or so different community members submit everything from works of art, from paint to graphic design, to colored pencil, to baking, to jewelry making, music and singing. We have a really wide range of people and talents and interests in our community. While we really started and have grown as a gaming community, it's not just limited to that. We have people sharing their art in our community art channels. Every week we highlight the art and pictures people shared on our game nights. We have people who range from having worked in a professional setting who actually came in and taught Intro to Graphic Design to our community members. We have community members who pursue it as a hobby or pursue it as a potential career. We really have a foundation in gaming, but we are certainly not limited to just gamers in our community.

Mindy Henderson: Awesome. Larry, let's talk about the plans for the future. What's coming down the road?

Larry Lieberman: I think what we're really excited about is getting out there now and growing this community right across the country into more and more of the regions. We also have a wonderful opportunity. We've been doing some activities tied to the summer camps, and that's a really great fun opportunity for us. It's like Kenny said, whether you're a gamer or not, so much of the time we spend, we're playing word games and jacks box games. There's so much of that going on. Now, really that we're just a little more mobile, we're going to have an opportunity to get out into the community and meet one on one with more of our community members, go to more of the really large national gaming events and show what the MDA Let's Play community can do. There'll be that hybrid activity just coming on in the future. It's exciting. It's just really exciting. To say every day is different is not an understatement. Every day is different in this community. It's fabulous.



Mindy Henderson: Nice. Oh, that's so great. I'm going to round out the conversation just by asking anybody who wants to chime in, for anyone out there who's listening, who's not already sold, I mean, I can't imagine that would be the case. It sounds like there is something for everyone, but what would you say to someone who's considering joining in, and how do they get started and join in?

Larry Lieberman: Kenny, you want to take him through the how, and I'll take him through the why?

Kenny Small: You got it. The way you join in our community is we are predominantly on Discord is where our community meets. For anyone who's unfamiliar with it, Discord is a lot like Microsoft Teams in the way of functions. You can be put into a team similar to how you get put into a Discord server. You can message people. There's different chat rooms and voice rooms within there for you to access and interact with each other, so it functions very similarly. It's just geared towards gamers, and I guess Twitch viewers, online communities like that. You join Discord. You create an account which is totally free. You setup the account. One of the safety features we have in our community to make sure no spammers or bots get in is you have to have an active mobile number connected to the account. This is just used as a text verification to make sure you're really human.

Then you get into the server. Once you're in the server, you accept our rules and you can see everything that we have from our different posting channels for art and gaming clips, our voice channels, where we meet for our gaming activities and our off stream activities. You can find links to all our different content creators because our community's filled with them. That's really where you get the whole shebang. Then our streams happen on our Twitch, which is [twitch.tv/mda\\_letsplay](https://www.twitch.tv/mda_letsplay). That's where we're streaming six, seven days a week with all our different activities.

Mindy Henderson: Perfect. That was a great overview. I think that probably on the [mda.org](https://mda.org) website there's a section there too for anyone who questioning, who wants to go and look that information up. They can, I'm sure, go there and get more information as well.

Kenny Small: Yes.

Mindy Henderson: Larry, I'm going to give you the last word here.

Larry Lieberman: Listen, I would just say I'm a parent. As a parent, we run this program to be the safest, most wonderful community for all of us, for compassionate adults, for apprehensive children, and for people of all abilities. The real message is as an adult, or a parent, you don't have time to know what Discord is. You may not know what Twitch is. Give it a try. Bring your family with you. Let them explain to you what's going on because they know better than the parents do often. Give it a try. It's just so wholesome and supportive, and you get to hang out with folks like Charlie.

Mindy Henderson: There you go. That's reason enough for me. Awesome. Well, thank you guys so much for being here. I have really loved talking to you. I'm going to check it out. I'm going to go join in all the fun.

Larry Lieberman: Thank you so much.

Mindy Henderson: Thank you for listening. For more information about the guests you heard from today, go check them out at [mda.org/podcast](http://mda.org/podcast). To learn more about the Muscular Dystrophy Association, the services we provide, how you can get involved, and to subscribe to Quest magazine or to Quest newsletter, please go to [mda.org/quest](http://mda.org/quest). If you enjoyed this episode, we'd be grateful if you'd leave a review. Go ahead and hit that subscribe button so we can keep bringing you great content, and maybe share it with a friend or two. Thanks everyone. Until next time, go be the light we all need in this world.