mélange

July 2021

Accessibility for All

" See me first as a person who is blind and not as a blind person"

KERRYN GUNNESS

Information Technology Instructor
Trinidad & Tobago

REALWHEELS THEATRE

VANCOUVER, CANADA

Theatre for Everyone

Yuval Wagner Founder and Chairman of

ACCESS ISRAEL

" We need to teach people with disabilities how to use technology"

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SHARING THE HUMAN SPIRIT THROUGH FRIENDSHIP

. . . Through friendship — by accumulating bonds of camaraderie and developing strong ties of trust — we can contribute to the fundamental shifts that are urgently needed to achieve lasting stability, weave a safety net that will protect us all, and generate passion for a better world where all are united for the greater good.

www.un.org

JULY 30

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF FRIENDSHIP

The International Day of Friendship was proclaimed in 2011 by the UN General Assembly with the idea that friendship between peoples, countries, cultures and individuals can inspire peace efforts and build bridges between communities.

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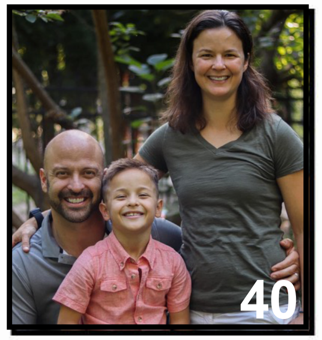

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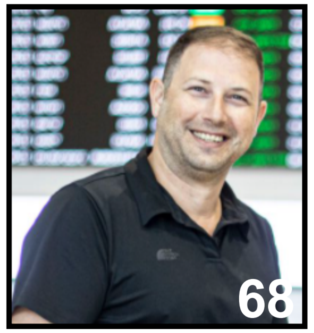

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Editor's Note

Fred Maahs, Jr.

Greetings!

Welcome to our July issue of Melange Accessibility for All, magazine.

It's summer here in the United States and in many countries and we are already experiencing some of the worst heat. States out west, including California, Washington, Oregon, Arizona, and even Colorado have set record high temperatures. Hopefully this will not last very long.

The great news is that the United States and countries around the world are opening up again as more people are vaccinated against the coronavirus. Travel is beginning to return in many regions and travelers are flooding airports and the highways. But there are still so many people who have not been vaccinated and are still being impacted by variants of the COVID-19 virus. So, for the sake of everyone's health and well-being, let's commit to follow the rules and guidelines set by our governments and continue to wear masks and keep our distance where it is required. If we all do our part, we can get through this terrible epidemic safely!

I am excited about this issue of Melange, Accessibility for All. On our cover is friend and colleague, Yuval Wagner who lives in Israel and founded Access Israel. Please make sure to read his story. We also have stories about incredible innovations to help people with disabilities live more independently. And, we cannot forget the stories like the one about a young man who wrote a letter to a famous shoe manufacturer because he couldn't wear their shoes and wanted to feel like all the other kids. Or the story of a veteran who began a nonprofit organization to help people stay active after he became disabled himself. And, so much more!

Everyone at Melange wants to thank you, our readers, for your continued support and readership!

We want to make it all real, all relevant, and we certainly appreciate your thoughts. Let us know if you have a product you want us to try and write about. If you have an idea for an article, or you want to invite us to visit your city, country, resort, or place of interest so that we can write about it and share it with our audience, please let us know at: fmaahs@readmelange.com

Thank you for reading!

Warm regards,

Fred J Maahs Jr @FredMaahs - Twitter

Fred J. Maahs, Jr. is an internationally-renown disability and civil rights champion who believes in and advocates for the rights and access for all! A recognized leader and former corporate executive, he's also an International Keynote speaker, collaborator, and an international accessibility travel expert.

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We try to present information that is current and accurate, but errors can occur. If you've found an error in the magazine, please
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Should I say 'disabled person' or 'person with a disability'?

Arisa Chattasa /Unsplash, CC BY

Listen to how people refer to themselves.

Recently, an Alberta woman with an obvious physical disability was asked to leave a grocery store and not come back because she could not pack her own groceries quickly enough. According to the report on CBC's *Go Public*, the checkout clerk said she was slowing down the line as she struggled to bag her groceries, and the store said no staff were available to help her. Presumably, neither were other patrons.

This story is consistent with what many disabled people say they experience. The Human Rights Commission says that almost 60 per cent of all claims cite disability as the basis for discrimination. People with disabilities are routinely denied the rights we all know they are entitled to. A poll commissioned by the Rick Hansen Foundation found that 90 per cent of Canadians agree that accessibility for people with physical disabilities is a right, not a privilege, but there is still a clear prejudice in how disabled people are treated.

Disability is a sensitive topic. Fear of saying the wrong thing prevents people from saying anything at all, and makes us avoid having important conversations about disability. This avoidance in turn creates the kind of toxic environment that leads to situations such as the one described above.

In our research at the Canadian Disability Policy Alliance, we worked with disability advocacy groups to assemble some guidelines to help readers gain confidence in their ability to participate in positive ways in the dialogue with people with disabilities.

Here, we share those guidelines:

Listen to how people talk about themselves

The Canadian government has advocated "people-first" language which emphasizes putting the person first and the disability second: for example, saying a person with a spinal cord injury, or a person with a history of depression. Many disabled people, however, say the disability is not inside of them: they are not a "person with a disability." Rather they are a "disabled person" - someone who is disabled by a world that is not equipped to allow them to participate and flourish. But they are a person either way. Avoid objectifying people by referring to them as "the disabled." Our advice is to listen to how people talk about their disability themselves, and take your cue from them.

Avoid euphemistic language

Language like "differently-abled" or "diverse-ability" suggests there is something wrong with talking honestly and candidly about disability. It might even suggest to some people that there is something shameful about disability; or that we can't talk about it directly unless we make it cute or pretty or funny.

Avoid unnecessary emotional tone

Disability is a fact of life for almost one-quarter of Canadians. Having a disability doesn't make someone a hero, a saint, a victim, a burden or a soldier. This type of hyperbole gets in the way of having authentic relationships with people with disabilities. These words suggest one-dimensional characters. Instead, think: complex, interesting people, just like everyone else.

Avoid 'handicap'

The word handicap or handicapped is viewed as having a negative connotation - an implication that people with disabilities are disadvantaged in society. That social disadvantage is something we should fight against, rather than merely accept and enshrine in language.

Avoid calling a disabled person a 'patient'

A patient is a passive individual who has turned over responsibility for important decisions to a health professional. People with disabilities for the most part live independent lives in the community. They are no more patients than anyone else getting on with their lives in the community.

Avoid calling non-disabled people 'normal'

If non-disabled people are normal, then that means that disabled people are abnormal. Yet disability is the norm for some people. It is alienating and marginalizing to classify someone as "abnormal."

Refer to a person's disability?

Is the disability a pertinent issue in the conversation you are having or the introduction you are making? We don't specify a person's gender, ethnicity, occupation or many other personal details when introducing them. Disability is a condition of life, like those others. It will be salient in some conversations and not in others.

Here are some 'dos'

Do look people with disabilities in the eyes and address them courteously, as you would anyone else.

Do ask if you can help, and how you can help.

Do assume that people with disabilities have something to say, and be prepared to hear it.

Do talk about disability. It's a fact of life for 22 per cent of Canadians.

The more we talk about it, the easier it gets to have the important conversations we need to have with disabled people, and to ensure that the rights we promise to all Canadians are extended to them.

Author: Mary Ann McColl Professor, Queen's University, Ontario

This article is republished from *The Conversation* under a Creative Commons license. Read the *original article*.

Accessible Ventures
Transportation

Sint Maarten

Accessible Ventures Transportation of St. Maarten (AVTS) has been redefining the meaning of special needs transportation services since February of 2005 when they were first founded. They discovered a niche in the market for professional, caring, special needs services, driven by personnel with expertise in the field. They set out to minimize limitations by delivering the tools and services that would restore mobility and independence to physically impaired clients.

This niche in the market was discovered by Mr. Louis Jeffers, CEO and Managing Director of the company. His mother was a double amputee, and being the only boy amongst his siblings, he was tasked with the majority of the lifting and moving of his mother as it was too strenuous for his sisters. At that time there were no transportation services on the island for persons with special needs. And so, Accessible Ventures was born.

Over the years, AVTS has been the transportation source for many locals and visitors and they have expanded their non-emergency medical transportation services to the physically impaired residents on the neighbouring islands of Saba and St. Eustatius.

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In addition to providing non-emergency medical transportation, the company also offer tours for locals and tourists visiting the island.

Occasionally, they would take the seniors of the sole care home on the island, White & Yellow Cross, on island tours, to watch parades, visit the island's Festival Village during carnival and other activities.

The owner and staff of Accessible Ventures are very proud of their progress over the years. Their transportation fleet consists of tour buses, ADA vans, minivans and sedans.

If you are planning a trip to Sint Maarten, Saba or Sint Eustatius, telephone or email the date and time of your arrival and they will be waiting to transport you to wherever you need to go. If only wheelchair assistance is needed at the airport, that is usually arranged with the airline and they will inform Accessible Ventures on your behalf. While vacationing on one of the three islands, their services are available at any time.

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Yuval Wagner

Founder and Chairman of Access Israel

Early Life

I am from Ramat Hasharon, Israel. My Dad was a handicapped IDF veteran so I was exposed to the idea of accessibility from a young age. And back then, very little was accessible. I studied Business Admiistration with a marketing focus, at the Management University in Tel Aviv.

I first was injured in the army and then went to study. It was a very good experience. Of course, I needed some help with accessibility so I could study. I needed to make sure there were tables accessible for wheelchair users and I needed to have access to the elevator. But of course, once that was taken care of, everything worked out. I enjoyed studying a lot and I was the only with a disability.

Accident

After high school I joined the army, finished the pilot's course and became a fighter helicopter pilot. I served in Palmachim AFB. On March 16th, 1987, I went for a training exercise in the Golan Heights. We flew from Palmachim to the Dead Sea and from there made a turn North. A little before Beit Shean, the helicopter began shaking wildly and suddenly we crashed in the fields. We fell from 400 meters and it was a miracle I am alive. The head of the flight squadron died on the spot and I became paralyzed from the neck down. I needed to be in a wheelchair which is where I am at presently.

After the accident, I spent 1 year in rehab where I had to learn everything again. Everything. I was in a wheelchair and had to learn what this meant for me, I had to learn to eat, get dressed, to learn everything from zero.

Towards the end of the rehab I was asked if I wanted to come back to the army and contribute. I learned coding and went in that direction and became a commander in the coding department for the air force. I held many positions, serving for another 31 years, and finished as a Lieutenant Colonel.

Access Israel

My dad was a wheelchair user. After my accident, I began to understand accessibilityand I understood Israel had little accessibility for wheelchair users. No sidewalks or ramps, etc. Stairs instead of ramps to get into stores. No accessible beaches, or stadiums, or restaurants. Basically, zero accessibility. I felt I was under house arrest.

Later, I got married and started my family, raising children. I couldn't do anything with my children because nothing was accessible and I began wondering . . . why has nothing been done about accessibility?

In 1999, Ezer Weitzman was the President and I wrote him a letter about accessibility in Israel chastising Israel for not doing anything about it. A day later I got a call back from the President's Office. They said the President read the letter and wants to speak to me. We began speaking about my army service - he was also a pilot. He asked me about accessibility which he did not understand as there was really no word for it in Israel at the time.

After talking, he said, I put on you the responsibility of starting an organization that will make Israel accessible in every way possible. And he said that in another year and a half you will come to the President's House and make it accessible. So I went back to the army, told my commanders about the conversation, and everyone said to me "as long as you do your military duty and finish your tasks, we allow you to create this organization".

I got some friends together: one was a lawyer, a journalist, a marketer, a coder, and we made a business plan on how to make Israel accessible to everyone. We showed it to the President.

Our first project was making a website that showed accessible and non-accessible places in Israel. We did this because people with disabilities are often scared to go places because if it isn't accessible it isn't fun to go. And while this is cool, we wanted to make a bigger impact. 20% of people in Israel have a disability. So we made another business plan, one that was better and deeper. We decided to go down three paths: awareness, consulting to organizations, and legislation.

Access Israel's Programs and Services

Our goal is to make Israel accessible to all people with disabilities in every aspect of life. So we help everyone: NGOs, private businesses, municipalities, etc. We also work with government offices to promote accessibility as a reality. For example, working with the Health Ministry to make a healthcare system that is accessible. Working with the transportation ministry to make accessible transportation.

I am very proud of our educational awareness training with schools, universities, the army, and educators so we change stigmas. The message is not just talking about it but to have them feel and experience it by seeing people with disabilities first hand.

The government does not fund our progams. 60-70% of our money comes from projects and ventures that push accessibility and we are paid for, that is: training, building accessible things, etc. The rest is from donations.

Vision for Access Israel's next 100 years:

Accessibility is developing. In the past, it was focused on physical and urban accessibility. Building parks, sidewalks, etc. that were not accessible and making them accessible. Basically, making things accessible, up to now, has been retroactive work. It's very time and resource intensive. Now, we are at a time where we see things becoming digital and less physical. So we came up with a national project called "Making the Future Accessible Early". The idea is if we make accessibility a priority now, then we do not have to do it retroactively (saving money and time) and we prevent social gaps from things not being accessible at the start. And of course, technology will be a major part of every facet of life.

As the President of Access Israel, I like working hard for an organization that literally doesn't stop working, ever. The victories with awareness and legislation are nice of course, but the best part is meeting someone in the streets who asks if I'm Yuval and when I say yes, then they tell me how much I have made their life better through Access Israel.

Many changes are still needed for people with disabilities - a lot still needs to change. But first, we need luck and money, since legislation and awareness are key for changes to be made. But ideally, with our plan for the future, we will make a situation where 18% of the population can live normal lives. Ideally though, we need to also teach people with disabilities how to use technology. Like, how does a blind person surf the web? There are ways to do so, but it requires using a special software. And it isn't intuitive or accessible enough yet. So ideally, we can help make this a reality for people with disabilities.
It is important to have a more inclusive world so people understand and are aware of the lives people with disabilities lead so they can see these people living normal lives. We intend to also lessen societal gaps between disabled and non-disabled people.

Although I do not have a role model, I like Bill Gates' approach to Malaria in Africa - the fact that he has tried to solve this pressing health issue, and try to fundamentally change the status quo in Africa in relation to the disease. I wish someone like this would understand accessibility and the need to fix it and make it better.
No one wants to be disabled, but it can happen to anyone at anytime. You can fall, get into an accident, and it especially happens as you get older. Anything you do now to help the situation with accessibility will make life better in the future.

We focus a lot on tourism through the organization, both on domestic and foreign tourism. We also focus on private vacations and organized tours. We want Israel to be a leader in accessible tourism. It's the holy land and a beautiful country. And the question is, how do we make it accessible for tourists and tours? What we have done throughout the years, including legislation for hotels, public transportation, and attraction sites to be accessible, these are all making more places accessible. And of course the result is that there can be more revenue for the tourism sector. And we are working with the Tourism and Foreign Affairs Ministry to promote all of this. So, we are working with places to promote their accessibility and make it public so that when someone like Fred comes to Israel he has it easily available to him to understand how accessible a hotel/restaurant/attraction is.

We are also working with the top 100 attractions in Israel to make it 100% accessible, and with tour guides on how to make accessible trips.

Outside of work, I am a workaholic. I work around the clock for this organization. I like being with my family, my kids and grandkids. I love travelling and more and more there are hikes that are wheelchair accessible, which is nice. I love going to concerts, especially blues shows, and restaurants too.

People can read about us and our activities on www.aisrael.org and they can also donate.

Special thanks to **Jordan Kastrinsky** of **JB Upscale** for interviewing Yuval Wagner for this article.

Angela Lynn

Angela Lynn is a deaf American Television Talk Show Host of the Angela Lynn Show, a new and exciting talk show based in sunny Las Vegas, Nevada, USA.

She is also a motivational speaker, and educator.

Early life

Angela Lynn was born in Des Moines, Iowa. At six months old, she began life with a silent struggle, contracting a cold that progressively became worse and was accompanied by an extremely high fever. After numerous visits to her pediatrician and ultimately to the hospital, her fever was brought under control, but Angela was left with permanent damage causing a sensorineural hearing loss.

She had a good life growing up even though challenges were faced from time to time. No matter what, she continued to do her best in life and enjoyed many amazing experiences.

Angela Lynn attended mainstream schools (had classes with non-deaf students with interpreting supports) and lived with a well-educated hearing family. She loved to learn and took her education seriously. As a result, she garnered a BA in Education from the world-renown Gallaudet University and an MA in Deafness Rehabilitation from the prestigious New York University (NYU).

Independence

Angela Lynn came from a family that traveled extensively around the world to Africa, Asia, Europe and Australia for business and pleasure and they initially were overprotective when it came to her independence. She is their first child and they worried that her deafness would put her at risk. Later, they realized that Angela Lynn was quite independent and capable of doing many things on her own with a minimum of help from her family. She experienced highs and lows on her journey but even today, is grateful for the wonderful support of her family, especially her mother who has supported her every step of the way.

She has accomplished a lot but her dreams are far from over. Angela aspires to become an influencer for good, like Oprah Winfrey on an International level, and become a role model for young people. She is even entertaining the idea of one day becoming a deaf actress in a Hollywood movie. In addition, she loves the concept of giving back to the community. Two of her favorite quotes that motivate her dreams: "One moment can change a day, one day can change a life, one life can change the world" and "be the change you want to see".

Talk Show host

After much internal debate, Angela Lynn decided to follow her dream of becoming a talk show host. She is now proud to have a positive and uplifting internationally diverse television talk show, the first of its kind, with a deaf, female host. It is her team's goal to create a compelling, entertaining television show for the deaf and also for people who who can hear. By focusing on the similarities we all share, and highlighting the accomplishments of influential people such as motivational speakers, chefs, comedians, actors, and entertainers, the show helps to EDUCATE, INSPIRE and MOTIVATE their viewers to follow their dreams. Angela Lynn's exceptional perspective and insights stem from national and international travel that connects her with people from around the world. She also went the extra mile to ensure that her show is available to everyone. It is broadcast in sign language, with closed captions and voiceovers. For that reason, she has been called *The Voice of Inclusion.*

Angela's first show was released shortly before the Coronavirus pandemic outbreak. Although she was forced to take a hiatus, Covid has not derailed her. She, like so many others in the entertainment industry, are patiently waiting for the pandemic to end so her broadcasting can resume. She is now looking for grants to help facilitate the relaunch.

You can watch her first show here.

International sign language

According to the World Federation of the deaf, there are roughly 72 million deaf people in the world and over 80 percent of them live in developing countries. More than 300 sign languages exist throughout the world.

Sign language is a visual way to communicate using hand signals, gestures, facial expressions and body language. There is no such thing as a unique sign language in the world. Similar to spoken language, sign languages have developed naturally through different groups of people interacting with each other. International Sign Language is the visual language of communication.

Angela Lynn loves International Spoken Language and Sign Language which she finds fascinating especially when meeting people who do not speak entirely in American Sign Language. She admits to being a bit rusty from not using it very often, but hopes to master it in order to communicate with deaf people from different countries who do not know American Sign Language. No universal sign language exists but Angela Lynn is familiar with a number of international sign languages: Malaysian, French and Arabic She is also familiar with spoken and written languages in French, Malay, Spanish, and Arabic.

Differences between sign languages in each country

Every country's sign language differs depending on their culture and dialect. Different sign languages are used in different countries or regions as the international spoken language. Angela Lynn has observed that some countries are embracing American Sign Language functionality in their sign language. Interestingly, most countries with the same spoken language may not have the same sign language as others. For example: There are three different sign languages in English: American Sign Language (ASL), British Sign Language (BSL) and Australian Sign Language (Auslan).

Sign languages in different accents

Sign languages are natural languages which have the same linguistic properties as spoken languages. They have evolved over the years in various deaf communities throughout the world. Again, each country has its own sign language, and the regions have dialects, similar to the many languages spoken worldwide. If you were to travel to another state and have an opportunity to sign with a person who knows American Sign Language, you may notice that s/he will use some signs differently than you. These signs are known as "regional" signs, and you may think that they are equivalent to an "accent". This does not mean that people in your state sign inappropriately. It's just a natural variation of American Sign Language, and such regional signs add flavor to your understanding of American Sign Language in the same way as tones do to a spoken language.

Teaching yourself sign language

Many of the individual signs are fairly easy to learn. Like any spoken language, American Sign Language has its own grammar and syntax rules. To learn enough signs for basic communication and sign them comfortably, it can take approximately 6 months to a year, or longer. Everybody learns sign language in their own way and if you are patient, you will learn it. The reward is worth the effort! "Oftentimes, people fail to realize that signing has many advantages over spoken languages," Angela said.

Basic things one can do in order to communicate with someone who is deaf

There are several ways to better communicate with a deaf person. Angela Lynn's insights include:

1. Stand in front of a deaf person. Make eye contact and keep the conversation going with gesture communication.
2. Use your body language and gestures – deaf people do it all the time.
3. Keep your distance so you can improve lip reading and body language.
4. Take turns. Give each other a chance to respond
5. Repeat and re-phrase, if necessary
6. If you don't understand, write on paper, or use a computer to communicate

more effectively.

Angela Lynn's internship in Malaysia

When she enrolled at Gallaudet University, Angela decided that she wanted to teach deaf children. With her mother as her role model, she hoped to follow in her footsteps and become a teacher. In Malaysia, Angela supported Gallaudet's Summer English Program and enjoyed working with the children so much that she returned the following year for her second internship. At the start, the hearing teachers said they did not think deaf students could learn English. Angela disagreed and continued to teach it throughout the summer, and at the end they did learn English!

The deaf children inspired her to be a better person and teacher. While she enjoyed the teaching experience, initially she was disappointed to see signs of audism. Teachers did not value the brilliance of the deaf students but the students were eager for more literacy opportunities. The teachers did allow her to experiment with sign language and at the end of the summer program, the benefits of having used this instead of only oral teaching methods were visible - learning occurred at a faster pace. One of the most rewarding outcomes of her second visit was the positive impression she made on the hearing teachers. They wanted to work with her because they were inspired seeing the way the deaf were taught in sign language. At the end of it all, audism was no longer a factor. The positive results were that deaf students were learning English/Malay and teachers were teaching in sign language, not using the oral method. This brought Angela to joyful tears knowing hers was an accomplished mission.

International globetrotter

Being a deaf international globetrotter has been Angela Lynn's passion her entire life. While in high school in Phoenix, Arizona, her first vacation experience was to Hawaii. During her college years, she fell in love with travel, visiting many countries: Egypt, Australia, Mexico, Canada, Europe, Barbados, the Bahamas, and others. During her travels, no communication barriers were experienced. Why? Because, she always let people know that she was deaf, and it worked out smoothly, she said. Angela communicates with paper and pen, through text messages, Google, over the phone or by using informal gestural communication. She continues to have positive interactions at all destinations she visits.

She suggests the best thing to do before leaving home, is to do your homework! There are many travel-friendly information sources available before you get to an actual destination. Angela Lynn always does her research for communication access in advance to make her travels successful. "If you want things to go smoothly, you must prepare," she advises. "I continue to have never-ending gratitude for the experience and growth that comes with the ability to travel around the world. My dream destination is to go to Dubai," she shared.

Personal accomplishments

Angela Lynn has experienced many personal accomplishments in her life that she is proud of. Her first personal achievement was becoming the first person in her entire family to graduate from college with a B.A. Degree. That was an exciting moment!

Angela Lynn's second accomplishment was attending New York University (NYU) for her MA degree. "This is especially meaningful because it almost didn't happen," she said. "One week after arriving at NYU in September 2001, the World Trade Centre was attacked. New York and the entire Nation was shaken. It would have been easy to leave, and many said that I would have been justified to leave, but I stayed true to her plan." Angela shared. Living in New York City at that time was difficult at first, but in 2003, she graduated with her family and friends gathered around her. It was a terrific experience! Four weeks later, the Helen Keller National Center contacted her regarding a job working with deaf-blind people. She is grateful to the Helen Keller National Center for giving her insight and experience on such a national level.

Employment Challenges for people who are deaf

Angela Lynn believes there is work to be done when it comes to employment for many people who are deaf. One thing that stands out is access to communication - the ability to communicate freely and clearly, peer to peer and employee to employer is imperative to workplace success. Oftentimes, deaf employees do not have communication access for the simplest conversations or tasks because they may be the only one who speaks their language (sign language) at work. That is problematic because it leaves room for conflict, mistakes, and misunderstanding.

On the other hand, a positive example of communication access that got Angela Lynn's attention was Amazon when they started providing ADA support to deaf workers with access to communication. "While it is not 100% perfect, it is a step in the right direction," said Angela. "Many deaf workers at Amazon are receiving communication due to ADA. If other businesses copy the concept of what Amazon is trying to do, then there won't be any communication challenges for deaf individuals in the workplace."

Angela's advice about the best way to communicate with someone who does not know sign language

She is extremely interpersonal, always finding a way to communicate with someone who is unfamiliar with sign language. She believes the best way to communicate is face to face, while speaking slowly and deliberately, with gestures. Repeat and re-phrase what you say and never hesitate to write things down.

Angela can read lips with about 99% accuracy, and voices simple words with clear formulation that helps people to understand what she is saying. Check Angela Lynn's website for updates on her new sign language class! By popular demand, she has agreed to create classes that are informative and entertaining in 2022.

Technology she currently uses

Her phone allows her to comfortably communicate with hearing, hard of hearing, deaf blind, and deaf people and "I can't live without it," she said. E-mail systems, Google Live Transcribe app, video chat platforms, video relay platforms, online chat platforms are all technologies she feels blessed to be able to use.

Angela's hobbies and interests

Angela Lynn has yet to figure out a single hobby but "if doing something that gives me immense pleasure is the definition of a 'hobby', I'm happy to say that I have many," she said. Angela likes trying out different things and hers is, as she describes it, "a rather adventurous lifestyle, but I remain an ambivalent person." She is especially interested in being an international TV host like Oprah Winfrey and continuing her travels around the world. In college she was honored to be cast in a Rom-Com, and she would like to one day become an actress in Hollywood.

Some of the changes she will like to see implemented the world over for people who are deaf to make their lives easier

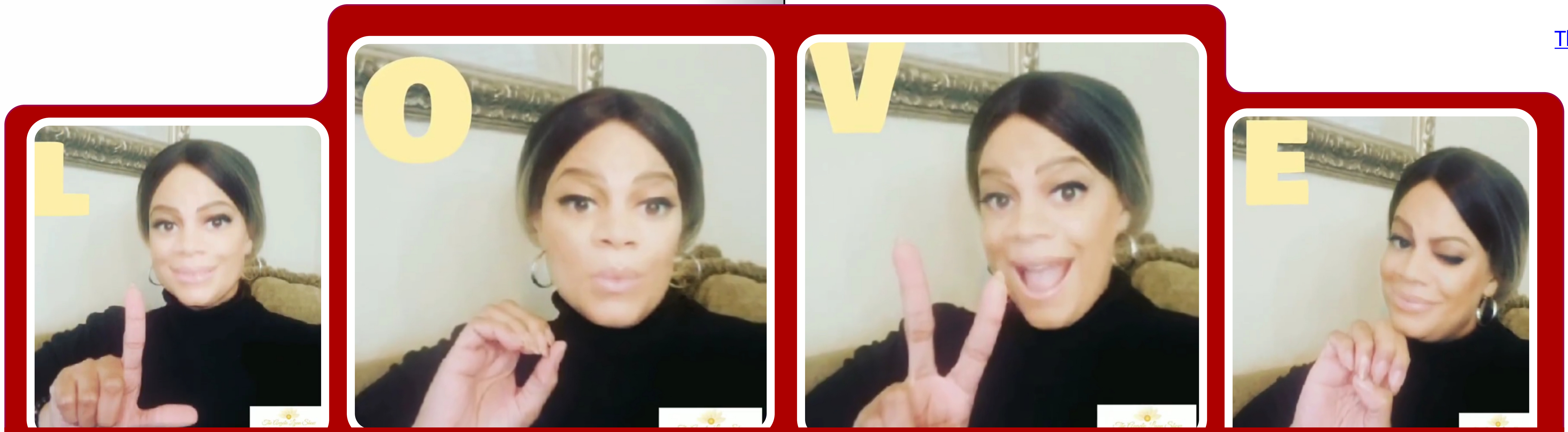
Angela Lynn continues to believe that often the media presents genuine representations of the deaf community and its members, but unfortunately, there is an under representation of deaf *people of color* in the media; in the news, on television, in movies and on Broadway - sadly there is only about 2% representation. Angela Lynn would like to see these numbers change to a more acceptable level. By eliminating language barriers, media outlets will allow society to see deaf people of color as they truly are, a beautiful, intricate, complex community that has its own culture, perspectives, and customs, just like any other community.

Angela's passion is to uplift, educate and inspire people all over the world.

Please reach out to Angela Lynn if you would like to be a guest on The Angela Lynn Show

Email
AngelaLynn@
TheAngelaLynnShow.com

Website
TheAngelaLynnShow



BLIND SOUTH AFRICA

Promoting the interests of the visually impaired

www.blindsa.org.za


Reading braille

Led by Jace Nair, Blind SA exists to do whatever is necessary or conducive to empower visually impaired people to become economically self-supporting and to live a full and meaningful life as citizens of South Africa. They promote the interests of all visually impaired people through the provision of appropriate services. Their mission is to create an informed blind society; enable the blind to gain meaningful employment; enhance their quality of life, and incorporate them into everyday life. Approximately 2.1 million people are blind and partially sighted in South Africa.

There are 23 Special Schools for the Blind in the country and about 12,000 children with visual impairments are at mainstream schools. The majority of the learners at mainstream schools, however, do not receive assistance to cope with their disability. They do not have learner teacher support materials, assistive devices such as braille writing machines or low vision aids. Blind SA works assiduously to raise awareness and provide assistance for learners in special and mainstream schools. They also assist with students' registrations for tertiary institutions.

Cultural, religious and community stereotyping and beliefs provide a platform for discrimination and negative perspectives of the blind in South Africa. There is progressive legislation but implementation is slow.


BrailleMe

Tatrapoint

Although an inclusive approach to disability is usually taken, a specific Disability Act is not yet in place but a White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disability was approved by Government in 2015. The country is in the early stages of developing a Disability Act and Disability Development Agency.

Some of the main challenges facing the visually-impaired in South Africa are accessing employment, accessible learning and teaching materials in braille, large print, audio and daisy, access to assistive devices and adapted technologies.

Although about 3% of blind and visually impaired persons are employed in the open labour market, public sector, private sector or in sheltered/protective workshops, unemployment remains one of the more pressing concerns. From the Gauteng Province only, the smallest in South Africa, Blind SA has a database of over 500 blind and visually impaired graduates both skilled and unskilled seeking employment. To assist with the unemployment situation, the organization initiated Start and Improve Your Business (SIYB) which is accredited by the International Labour Organisation. They trained 14 trainers using the Training of Trainers concept, four of them to be accredited as Master Trainers. The SIYB has the following components: Generate Your Business Ideas; Start Your Business; Improve Your Business. These have been adapted for online e-Training with accessible formatted training materials.

As a result of Covid-19, some of the main services were halted temporarily but other awareness raising, poverty relief and counselling services were introduced. Covid literature was printed in braille and circulated electronically.

Blind SA encourages advocacy and self-representation. They lobby for the rights of the blind in South Africa while providing meaningful services to empower, build self-confidence and self-sufficiency. Among other things they facilitate daisy, audio and Braille production of literature in UBC (unified braille code) in all 11 official languages. Also:

- Provide study bursaries and loan facilities for the purchase of work and study related items.

- Train in accredited braille and orientation and mobility services and placement in skills training, entrepreneurial training and placement in employment.

- Awareness raising, information dissemination and distribution of information through various publications: Blind SA News, Braillorama, Braillorette, Braille Trumpet, Young Stoners and Parents Network.
- Assistive devices: white canes, liquid level indicators, Mali-Bhala, braille paper, Tatrapoint brailler and the Braille Me.

This organization was established in 1946 as the South African Blind Workers Organisation (SABWO) and became Blind SA in 2004.

Blind SA 000-606NPO

Kerryn Gunness

IT Instructor: *"See me first as a person who is blind and not as a blind person"*

Information Technology(IT) is his passion, and at his job with the Trinidad & Tobago Blind Welfare Association, Kerryn Gunness gets to do what he loves every day. He is an IT instructor, teaching the visually impaired how to use various forms of technology. Be it computers, mobile phones or tablets, Kerryn is the Assistive Technology expert on the team, teaching children and adults how their daily needs and activities can be enhanced by technology.

He is sought out to test websites and apps for accessibility and is the go-to person for the blind and visually-impaired in his community who need assistance with simple technology tasks. He sometimes also travels to other Caribbean islands to facilitate workshops with the Caribbean Telecommunications Union. Kerryn admits that helping the blind brings him joy and gives his life immense purpose.

A resident of Trinidad and Tobago, Kerryn was born with optical nerve atrophy and is legally blind. This, however, has not prevented him from pursuing his passion. Through continuous learning, he is keeping up-to-date with the constant changes in technology and using that knowledge every day to benefit the blind community in Trinidad. He fervently believes they can be productive members of society if given access to relevant technology, and he is proof of this. The Trinidad & Tobago Blind Welfare Association is the main employer of people who are blind and of low-vision. There are very few employed in the private and public sectors which Kerryn attributes to a lack of awareness among potential employers. "A person who is blind will most likely work harder than some sighted persons," he said, "because they know it will be difficult to find another job so their dedication is almost certain."

Too many misconceptions still exist about the capabilities of people who are blind. Kerryn confidently pointed out that a blind person can effortlessly host Zoom meetings, enter and exit its breakout rooms and navigate shopping and booking websites; can prepare PowerPoint slides from start to finish and make presentations. Admittedly, these are made possible by accessible technologies, but he believes too many people, at the outset, immediately think a person who is blind is incapable of doing things the sighted can. Kerryn shared there are times when he is typing a document and someone will ask him if he is sure it is being done correctly. He takes no offence, but instead views such a question as an opportunity to have an awareness conversation with the hope that at least one additional person will have realized that yes, a blind person can type an error-free document. He teaches his clients that they should not be afraid to make mistakes, but be confident that mistakes can be corrected.

Kerryn believes a lot more should be done for the blind in Trinidad and Tobago but is pleased that the Government is taking steps to help, such as the recent change to textured polymer bank notes, making it easier for the visually-impaired to identify their money without assistance. He is glad that some local websites are accessible. Many others are not but he admits that things are improving on his island.

Thanks to technology, limitations, to Kerryn, are few. In addition to his laptop, necessary screen reading software, his smart watch, phone and apps, he attributes his confidence today to the people he is fortunate to have in his life. He attended mainstream school and teachers, principal and friends were very supportive. Today, co-workers and friends continue to have a positive, confidence-boosting effect on his life. Central to all of this is his tight-knit family, who has, since birth remained his greatest allies, source of strength and on-going encouragement. Through the years, they have supported his efforts to further educate himself and continues to stand by his side as he reaches for the stars. Kerryn is considered to be a huge inspiration to others and gracefully accepts this accolade. He is thrilled to have an opportunity every day to make a difference in someone's life through technology.

Although IT is where the bulk of his interests lie, Kerryn also enjoys listening to audio books, playing card and word games online, is an avid sports fan and plays goalball with team mates on the island. He has a keen interest in airplanes and loves to travel. His enthusiasm for life results in positive connections, and with an ever-expanding network, Kerryn is eager to learn the new technologies that are coming on stream. There are so many people to teach, and lives to enhance with the advancements that are being made!

His eyes are set on enrolling in website accessibility courses, so he is on a pursuit to find the most suitable.

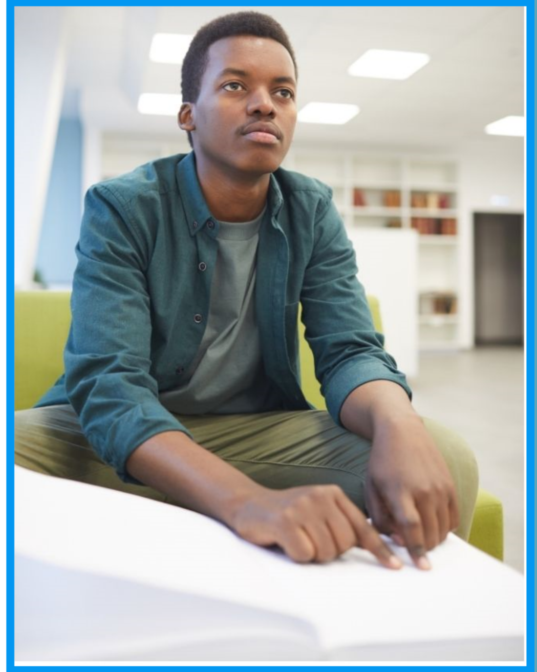
Do you need IT help or advice? He will be happy to assist.

Contact Kerryn:
By phone/What's App:
868-397-5307

By email:
kerryn.gunness@gmail.com

He will love to connect with you.

Too many misconceptions still exist about the capabilities of people who are blind.




ARE YOU READY?

Blind Students and Online Learning

by Jubilee Paul

For students across the world, distance learning has become the new normal and in- person classes are now a thing of the past. Although this new way of learning has presented many opportunities, it has placed some persons with disabilities at a disadvantage, specifically those at the primary school level. It's almost as if they have been forgotten and left to fend for themselves. Students who are blind and visually impaired have experienced a number of challenges in adapting to remote learning.

To begin with, at the primary school level, parents must now attempt to educate their child who is blind, with minimal assistance. This process can be very frustrating for both parent and child, especially if they lack the necessary skills and training for the task. Prior to the pandemic, teacher Aides played an essential role in providing additional help to those who needed individual attention in the classroom. However, with the suspension of physical classes, this is no longer available. Many parents and guardians have taken time off or are even unable to work, in order to assist their child with school.

Since the commencement of online learning, children who are visually impaired have been receiving the short end of the stick, as tactile learning cannot be taught in this way. For persons who are blind, touch plays an essential role in learning. As a result, tactile methods are vital in acquiring the necessary skills which enable them to function as independently as possible. Without the element of touch, subjects like Science and Math can be difficult for students who are blind at different levels of education. "They can't just listen to a Math book," one teacher said.

This leads to the next point, which is that online learning can be fast paced. One teacher mentioned that it can take a while for students with visual impairments to manage their technology or read braille at the same rate as those who are reading print. In addition, learning a different language can become a tedious task since the assistive technology software reads in English.

Another challenge is that some students may not have internet access or a device to use for online learning. During this time, many schools offer the option of providing packages for those who are unable to learn virtually. However, these packages aren't available in braille.

Based on the challenges mentioned previously, students with visual impairments at the primary school level have it harder than those at the secondary and tertiary levels. This is because they are now learning fundamental skills and need more guidance and supervision.

Since the majority of schools have gone completely online, tertiary education has become more obtainable for the blind. In the past, resources such as books, were solely available in hardcopy which had to be converted to an accessible format to be used by persons who are blind. Whereas now, all learning materials are uploaded online, making it more or less available for students with visual impairment.

Suggestions to assist Blind Students with Distance Learning

Distance learning can be less challenging if schools provided packages which include braille and other tactile materials for students who are blind. In addition, a hybrid education system which uses both tactile methods and virtual learning should be established, especially for those in primary school.

Furthermore, teachers can suggest alternative tactile methods to assist parents, using items found at home where possible. One teacher stated, "If we were in class, I'd have a tactile circle and guide the student's hand to feel the circle. But now I'd ask them to get a cup from at home and place their hand in the cup to feel what the shape is."

Some students don't have internet access but may have access to technology such as a DVD player or computer without internet. Recordings in the form of DVDs or on a flash drive can be shared with them if possible. Educators can also contact families to show parents and guardians how to use the technology and accessibility features for their child. If they encounter difficulties or need further assistance with online learning, parents can contact the Trinidad & Tobago Blind Welfare Association.

If you would like to provide a student who is blind with an electronic device, please contact the Trinidad & Tobago Blind Welfare Association via phone or the email address listed below.

This column is supplied in conjunction with the **T&T Blind Welfare Association**

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118 Duke Street, Port of Spain, Trinidad

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Kwizinn Restaurant in Montreal serves delightful

Haitian cuisine created by visually impaired chef, Michael

Griot Verdun

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After the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Michael Lafaille went to Montreal to seek treatment for his macular degeneration, a condition that has left him with only 25 % of his vison.

For five years, he worked at the dine in the dark restaurant, Onior, where he learned a lot, but in spite of his sight issues, he had a desire to do more than just work as a head waiter or magager.

Encouraged by his supportive wife, Claudia, Michael decided to venture out on his own and they opened their first location, *Kwizinn,* Plaza St. Hubert in 2017. During the Covid-19 pandemic, another location, Kwizinn in Verdun, was opened in their neighbourhood.

At the start, this venture was a bit overwhelming for Michael, especially working in a kitchen with others who at times did not fully understand his condition. It all worked out, however. He built a great team, and with his supportive wife and family, the business is now a known name and popular place to eat.

The location on Plaza St Hubert has now been transformed into a take-out counter only with no seating - catering to Ubereats, Skip the Dishes and Door Dash orders. The Verdun location, however, is spacious, with a nice bar serving delightful rhum cocktails such as O'zanana. Kwizinn recently launched their own beer called *Anbyans*, a collaboration with Donmaine Berthiaume Brewery.

Michael loves good food and great flavours. He's travelled with his wife to expand his knowledge and taste buds while exploring different cultures. His nanny in Port au Price, however, still remain his main food influence. She taught him about cooking and impressed on him the delightfulness of her traditional recipes filled with lots of love and infused with fresh spices. He has taken these with him to Montreal and they can all be found at his restaurant.

The restaurant's decor takes you on a journey to Haiti. Michael's wife has incorporated the look and colours of the country in and outdoors. Window styles are reminiscent of Jacmel, fun swings, beautiful art work and wall paper are all geared towards capturing the essence of Haiti and the Caribbean, which, when blended with good food, drink and company result in good vibes. Every weekend, there are live bands, steel pan, DJs, themed nights such as Cuban night or jazz.

One of the traditional dishes Michael serves is *Griot Verdun*, which is tender pork cubes, marinated in Haitian spices and then fried. It is served with rice and beans (Riz Cole), bananes plantain, pikliz (spicy cabage salad) and papaya and chayotte salad. There's a delicious creation on the menu - a plantain burger (gluten free), considered to be a finger-licking, must-order item. Another popular dish is the tasting platter that changes every month based on whatever inspires them at that time.

Plantain Burger

"I always tell others no matter what, always look towards the positive side and never give up. No matter what, anyone can do anything, as long as you put your mind and heart into it. Have courage and you can accomplish anything." Michael advised. "Kwizinn's projects will never stop. My wife and I have created this from the ground up and with support of family, we will continue to bring new flavors, and great vibes so stay tuned. There will be more in the future."

Kwizinn Express Take-out: 6670 Rue St Hubert || Kwizinn Resto Verdun: 4030 Rue Wellington

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Tali Maron

Blogger with a disability

@rollwithasmileblog

I consider it to be invasive when people ask me about my disability

Most people have the privilege of hiding their struggles. Could you imagine a world where every traumatic event a person went through would be visible to others and constantly addressed by strangers in social settings?

"Oh, I am so sorry you lost your baby! How did it happen?"

"It so sad your husband left you! Are you seeing a therapist?"

"You can't conceive? Let me pray for you!"

"You have this illness? You are such an inspiration for not giving up!"

Disability, in many cases, is tied to trauma, loss, painful experience, etc. And even if not, it's not the only thing a disabled person is about.
I understand that in most cases, there's no malicious intent behind the question. Still, it's invasive, tactless, and dehumanizing.

First, one needs to consider the fact that such questions might cause the disabled person to talk/remember/relive a traumatic event or experience. Repeatedly. In front of complete strangers.

Second, just because my "struggles" are visible to everyone doesn't mean it's ok to address them.

And **third**, it makes the disabled person feel invisible, a medical curiosity. If the first thing addressed is their disability or mobility aid, what about the person?

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Ableism - sometimes unknowingly, other times deliberately expressed:

I want to first define my understanding of ableism. It's when bodies are placed on a spectrum based on their looks, abilities, and productivity. A person like me, for example:

First, I don't look like the "norm." This automatically makes me less attractive, less desired, unworthy, understandably single/childless. And my partner instantly becomes a hero for being with me.

Second, in order to be productive in a society that was initially built only for "normally functioning" bodies, I require "special" accommodations. This automatically makes me a burden on society, a "less than." And, if I thrive despite the obstacles, I am viewed as an inspiration.

Being brought up in such a society without any disabled people around, these were my views. I felt sorry for the disabled, made assumptions about their lives and abilities. Although somehow, intuitively, I knew that asking invasive questions was a no-no, I never treated them as equals.

When I was first diagnosed with Facioscapulohumeral Muscular Dystrophy, I believed my life was over. My family did as well. I believed that no one will ever want this broken version of me. I believed it to the point that to avoid heartache, I sabotaged every potential relationship. That's one example of internalized ableism.

Travel and my appreciation of nature:

I have been traveling for two decades, in Israel and around the world. Since 2018, I started traveling in a wheelchair and only made it to three countries before the pandemic began. Since my Instagram page exits only two years, most of my latest travel posts are from Israel. If I had to choose one place, it would be Jerusalem's old town. Although not very accessible, so very special!

Israel as an accessible country:

For a tourist, Israel is mostly accessible. There are quite a few accessible transportation options (taxis, trains, city buses). Most National Parks and Nature Reserves were made accessible along with beaches, museums, tourist attractions, and hotels.

For someone who lives here, it's a different story. Along with some positives such as equal healthcare and partial mobility aids funding, there's still much work to be done. But we're moving in the right direction.

@rollwithasmileblog

CHATS Antigua

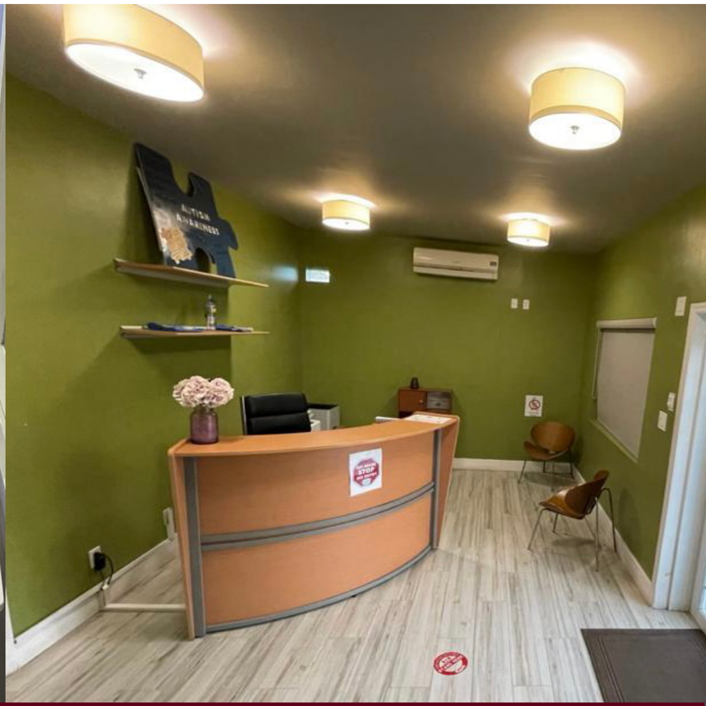
Changing the Invisible Disability Narrative

Mona Gardner

Mona Gardner is a speech-language pathologist on the Caribbean island of Antigua & Barbuda. Her Center for the Holistic Advancement of Therapeutic Services (CHATS) is the only such practice on the island where for the past five years, she and her team have been diligently working to change the invisible disability narrative on the island.

Her journey with speech-language pathology started within her household. Eighteen years ago, after her younger brother was born, daily she observed the difficulties her mom endured, knowing that something was a little bit different about her son, but not having access to resources for a diagnosis. Finding a professional to give advice or a diagnosis was challenging and hope within her household began to dissipate. At three years old, her brother showed the typical signs of a child who had delayed communication skills and was at risk for developing some sort of learning disability. He was a late talker, had constant ear infections and also had issues socializing at preschool. He then went on to Kindergarten and there too he was not succeeding academically - the teachers wanted him to repeat Kindergarten. Mona remembers the pain of watching her mom cry in despair as an institution blamed her for being the reason her son was not able to accomplish certain milestones, as expected. Specifically, it was a note telling her mom that it was her fault he had to repeat Kindergarten, because "you are not spending enough time with your child." Her brother was moved from school to school – four primary schools in total - and it was while he attended an international school on the island that had teachers on staff who were trained in special needs from Canada, that they were able to meet his learning needs. Although her brother changed school due to the closing of the international school, while at his next school he continued to flourish. Focus was then placed on his abilities, they concentrated on his strengths and from within him an entirely new personality and confidence emerged. Hope was restored to her family and Mona knew she had found her profession!

Her brother's diagnosis lit a fire in her to help families in similar



situations. The career toward speech-language pathology was birthed, but it was not a straight forward journey. She was a biology major at Fairleigh Dickinson University, New Jersey, en route to becoming an otolaryngologist. While visiting her speech-language pathologist cousin, Mona decided to shadow her at work for a few days. Career-curious discussions with her ensued and Mona then realized conclusively that she wanted to diagnose, play an integral part in the intervention, the turnaround and provide help holistically and meaningfully to people who needed speech-language pathology remediation. But she was already three years into her biology program, it was difficult to change her major and the university she attended did not even offer speech-language pathology! That fire, however, was now lit, and fueled with determination, she found another university that offered the prerequisites for speech-language pathology and did an overwhelmingly taxing credit overload. It was difficult, but she persevered and succeeded. Her Master's Degree in Speech Language Pathology was thereafter obtained with distinction from the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago. In 2016 she then returned home to Antigua and opened her private practice.

CHATS is housed in what was once just a building with a wide-open hall. Mona's vision for a functional, therapeutic, accessible space was brought to life by Antiguan Interior Designer, Charmaine Werth. Visual, sensory, therapy and observation rooms were all expertly designed to cater to the needs of her clients. Observation rooms are both visual and audio so parents do not have to sit in therapy sessions with their children as this can sometimes be a distraction. But Mona likes them to see what is being done so they can continue the therapy at home, so the rooms are inviting, comfortable, practical and functional. Her building is also fully accessible.

The range of services offered by CHATS fills just a small portion of the speech-language pathology void on Antigua & Barbuda. Families come to her directly but referrals are also sent from schools, pediatricians in the hospitals and private clinics, the Special Needs unit of the Ministry of Education and also Social Services department will identify families in need and send them to her. There is a lot of people to be helped and with her being the only practice on the island, many are not able to receive her services directly, but she tries to assist as best she can. She would go into the classroom of her clients to see how the environment can be made more language-rich. She'll coach the teacher on ways to support the children and advise on modifications that can be made in the classroom. Mona works with the entire lifespan, from babies to the geriatric. Catering to that wide demographic, public education plays a big part in helping her to change the narrative and there have been collaborative efforts with the media to that end. She is also educating families, her staff and her friends, hoping knowledge can be spread through that medium. Mona and her staff at CHATS are also exposing their client-children to different activities, such as taking them horseback riding, swimming, tennis - and by so doing they are teaching the children functional skills, and persons in the community, how to deal with the challenges that interacting with a person with an invisible disability may bring.

CHATS teaches parents to be their child's biggest advocate, empowering them so their hope will remain. In addition to speech and language services, CHATS offers early intervention services where they focus on the global development of each child. This program was birthed as many families come to them with the notion that their child will never be able to do a specific thing and that breaks Mona's heart, so she reminds her staff that, "Through our early intervention program we're holding the hands of all families and advocating for and with them so their child can achieve functionality within society. We're going to make them functional." And her promise: "if it takes me 10 years to make your child function, I'm holding your hand until then." 80% of the people she sees are children with autism.

Mona's practice is run with genuine care for her families as she knows first-hand the heartache of parents or guardians seeing their child live with an invisible disability. Her own family having lived through a lengthy emotional rollercoaster before and even after her brother's diagnosis, she is determined to change the narrative on the island. Society's insensitivity, lack of awareness and acceptance is a constant source of immense stress for families that are already learning how to raise a child with a developmental disorder or learning disability. Support is needed, not shame or blame.

Mona says proudly, "my brother is severely dyslexic but does that mean that he can't learn? Absolutely not! My brother's vocabulary is more extensive than mine. He's an auditory learner and does things differently. He's a good at drawing and he's amazing! He has so much to contribute to society and we refuse to let anyone limit him. We are his biggest advocates. He is now a college engineering student and we're so proud of him!"


Building before CHATS Antigua moved in

CHATS Antigua After Mona's vision was brought to life


A room inside CHATS Antigua

Chris Kaag with his wife Gretchen and son Carter

IM ABLE >>> foundation

Chris Kaag is a warrior. He grew up in Reading, Pennsylvania and moved to Canton, Ohio and went to Penn State Berks Campus, majoring in Business and Marketing. Following in the footsteps of his grandpa, uncle, and his father, he joined the Marines when he was 17. He credits the Marines for defining what he is now able to do. Just weeks after his 21st birthday, he noticed his feet were dragging while out on a run. His doctor rushed him back to the US where he spent nine weeks at Walter Reed National Military Medical Cenrter and was diagnosed with Adrenomyeloneuropathy (AMN) - an adult form of adrenoleukodystrophy (ALD) that primarily affects the spinal cord, which is usually characterized by weakness and stiffness in the legs. AMN is a genetic condition that was accelerated from a head injury that Kaag sustained while in the Marine Corps.

As a Marine, he now fights to keep people with disabilities active, physically and mentally.

Kaag is the founder and CEO of the IM ABLE Foundation, located in Wyomissing, Pennsylvania. When he was young, he saw a doctor at a children's hospital, and it was there that he also saw children who were on breathing and feeding tubes and confined to beds. This had a huge impact on Chris. He was fortunate to have had a typical childhood and to achieve his dream of becoming a Marine. When he started the IM Able Foundation, he had the kids who were in the children's hospital in mind – "to take those obstacles out of the way in order to provide kids with a 'typical' childhood so they could do things like riding bikes." The mission of the IM ABLE Foundation is simple. *We remove obstacles that keep people with challenges on the sidelines, providing them access to programs and equipment tailored to their needs and a community of all abilities to support them.* The IM ABLE Foundation has helped so many people since its inception with many different kinds of athletic events, triathlon, mountain bike rides, hikes, weightlifting, and more. Kaag feels the appeal comes from the way all of the participants are treated. Kaag says, "I don't treat them as different, but instead create a team environment where everyone can thrive together despite their differences." He goes on to say that, "Creating a social experience is just as important as the physical one. [Some of the people who come] have noticeable differences such as Down syndrome or cerebral palsy and may not have many friends. But, building friendships is the type of atmosphere IM Able builds with all who participate. Plus, it's also rewarding for our volunteers who create lasting friendships with these young people!"

It's obvious that Kaag is no stranger to challenges, as a veteran and as a civilian. And many veterans continue to face challenges long after their service, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), dealing with the loss of life of close friends, and especially getting acclimated back into civilian life. It can also be difficult for someone like Chris who now has a physical difference. Many try to "feel" or "be" like they were before they suffered an injury or disability. The loss of independence can be difficult to accept. Veterans in the United States are fortunate that the government has programs


IM FIT Winter 2020 Group Photo

and services in place to help with their needs after services, especially when they are injured or suffer a disability. While there is much room for improvement in these services, many countries provide little or no support to veterans once they have served.

Kaag also knows you cannot do it all alone, so sometimes you need to collaborate. The IM ABLE Foundation has collaborated with other organizations in the past on events and also started "Operation Lead from the Front" where IM ABLE teams vets with their adaptive population. The integration forces attention to the adaptive population and not the challenges vets themselves may be facing. Many veterans return from service with burns, paralysis, loss of limbs, traumatic brain injuries (TBI), or other forms of trauma.

The IM ABLE Foundation has come a long way. Once providing adaptive equipment grants to now having adaptive programming and more expansive ways to provide opportunities for people of all abilities to thrive. While the Foundation can really use your financial support to help all of these programs continue to benefit the veterans and adaptive participants served, Kaag feels the best way to support the Foundation is to get involved and volunteer. "We like to have emotionally connected donors."

As you can probably guess, Chris and his family are very active. He, along with wife, Gretchen, and 8 year old son, Carter, can usually be found working out, mountain biking, taking a walk, or some other sport. As life returns to normal, Chris and his family looks forward to interacting with the wonderful community where he lives and has shown its support.

For more information about the IM Able Foundation, or to make a donation, go to www.imablefoundation.org

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2021 Donation Campaign

IMABLEFoundation.org/donate

We redefine what's possible.

There's no question that being physically active is good for your physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Most people fulfill this need by going for a walk, joining a gym, or trying an exercise class. It's not that simple for people affected with physical, cognitive, and/or behavioral challenges. Getting access to fitness equipment and activities that are safe and suited to their specific needs and abilities is often times difficult, expensive, and isolating.

The IM ABLE Foundation mission is simple: We remove obstacles that keep people with challenges on the sidelines, providing them access to programs and equipment tailored to their needs and a community of adaptive individuals to support them.

> > > No excuses. Just move.

Jill Holt

Behavioural Parent/Teacher Consultant

Being a parent comes with its own fair share of joy and challenges. Having a child diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can amplify challenges when no clear strategies are available.

5 Tips to help encourage positive behaviours in children

1. **GIVE CLEAR AND CONCISE INSTRUCTIONS**
Ensure the language you are using is appropriate for the chronological and cognitive age of the child. The expectation of the instruction should be attainable and the instruction should only be stated once to avoid future non-compliance when instructions are stated.

2. **FOLLOW THROUGH**
Once an instruction is given, allow the child to start the task within 3-5 seconds. Once 5 seconds have elapsed, redeliver the instruction with the necessary prompt to complete the task.

3. **VISUAL SCHEDULES**
Visual aids provide a picture representation of the events that are to come and in return can lead to a decrease in anxiety and frustration of the child.

4. **REWARDS/REINFORCEMENT**
Reward desired behaviours when seen with social praise and paired with a preferred item for more difficult tasks. Remember to fade rewards when the desired behaviour becomes more fluent.

5. **TOKEN BOARDS**
An evidence-based strategy using a visual aid to indicate when regards will be available. Delaying reinforcement is a key component to generalizing wanted behaviours. Tokens indicate to the child the correlation between wanted behaviours and access to wanted item, foods, place etc.

To Table of Contents

Lilith Fury

Horror actress, disabled plus size model, and body positivity activist

Background

I am a gay, disabled, plus size indigenous and Latinx model, and actress. I got into horror at an early age because my family were brujas, we lived in a former funeral home, and horror movies were always in abundance. I was obsessed with all things spooky. That obsession has only grown. Once I became an adult, I wanted to be as close to my favourite genre as possible, so to me, that meant getting into acting. I knew it didn't matter if I had any lines or not beause that wasn't the point. The point was to be part of something magic.

Now that I'm fat, I actually do want more prominent roles because I think there needs to be some representation. There are so many fat male actors, but almost no fat women or women presenting actors. Think of every fat man that is successful in TV, movies, or music. Think about their size. Now think about fat women. How big are they allowed to be? We're told they're fat, but they aren't. Not really. I want to change that.

Advocacy

There is so much bad in the world, and it feels hopeless at times. I think a lot of people are so overwhelmed by it, that they think they can't make a difference, and so they either don't try to fight it, or they become part of the darkness. I want to do the opposite. I want to make things better having existed in this world. I think that is the meaning of life. To have done something to make the world a little bit better just by having you in it, then not having you at all.

I want to help make things more accessible. I want to help fight for a positive change. LGBTQA+ rights, disability rights, fat liberation, intersectional feminism, income inequality, etc.

Dealing with criticism

There are always going to be people that don't like you, just because of the way you look. But their opinions don't matter.

Think of it this way . . . people who hate you because of your size, race, ethnicity, disability, orientation, etc, have a certain weakness. Their hatred is like an addiction. It is some all-consuming force infiltrates every aspect of their life. Some go so far as to seek us out, follow our social media, search our hashtags, check our friends list, create special groups and forums, go to certain websites, and obsess about us, and how much they hate us. They talk to others like them, seeking

approval for their hatred as they all make assumptions on what we eat, whether or not we are happy in our lives, questions of our health, and staying up to date like they are paparazzi.

They want us to know how much they disapprove of us, because nothing angers them more than seeing us happy, or having us succeed.

So . . . that means that we have the power to completely ruin their day just by existing. Why would the opinion of someone like that matter to you? Someone whose entire day can be ruined at the mere sight of someone they don't find attractive. That's hilariously pathetic. They have no power.

Lipedemam, its effects and my upcoming surgeries

I'm one of those people who unfortunately have the majority of symptoms. Extreme pain, nausea, tachycardia, swelling, weakened immune system, easy bruising, easy dislocation, hypermobility, brain fog, and the list goes on and on and on. My Lipedema first appeared at the onset of puberty, but it wasn't that bad. My legs are little bit bigger than other kids my age, aside from that it wasn't too noticeable. I had a little bit more growth after I had my son, but it was still pretty mild. But . . . when my daughter was stillborn in 2016, the hormonal change sent my condition into overdrive and everything progressed rapidly.

I am in pain all the time, and I feel like my life was taken from me.

The past few years there are so many things that I wanted to be able to do but couldn't, because of my condition.

I just want my life back.

My upcoming surgery will be the biggest one in a series of about 6-8.

This one they will be removing the Lipedema nodules from my stomach. My doctor believes that Lipedema has become so extreme there, that it has replaced all actual fat in the region, so I could either end up having only a few nodules removed . . .or having my entire abdomen cut off.

Once that is removed, the pressure and build up in my lower extremities should be relieved, shrink somewhat, and the progression should slow down.

They think that my stomach is actually causing the diseased tissue in my legs, hips, but, et cetera to get worse. So I really want the surgery to hurry up and be done so that I can start to get better, even though I know I am going to more than likely look pretty weird.

Going public about my lipedema diagnosis

I have had over a dozen people come to me, and let me know that they have been diagnosed with Lipedema thanks to my posts. There are several more who have appointments scheduled to speak with doctors in order to hopefully get their diagnosis. It makes me feel incredibly happy knowing that so many people who had been gaslit by doctors, and everyone else in their lives for so many years, are finally able to find out what is wrong. Now they can finally begin to be able to work on treating it.

Source of self-confidence and determination

With me it started when I was doing web modelling. When I realised that even though I had gained weight and become what I thought was the epitome of undesirable, there were still hundreds of thousands of people who thought I was perfect.

And it helped me understand that no matter how you look, there will always be people who think you're beautiful, and always people who think that you're not and that trying to fit into the ideals of others was just a waste of my life.
I didn't respect any of them, and couldn't justify putting any value to their opinions on my looks.

I just one day realised that I didn't care what anyone had to say about how I looked. Once that happened, it was the most amazing feeling in the world. It was true freedom.

Importance of having representation from people with disabilities and different body types in the media

When I was growing up, the common consensus was "thinner is better". I literally started starving myself in first grade, and developing an eating disorder because everywhere I looked, I was told that the only way you could be beautiful is if you are thin. If there had been plus size models, and fat women being represented in a positive fashion well I was growing up, treated like actual people, and not like a cautionary tale, or something to be feared/pitied, then I might have been able to have had an actual childhood, and teen years.

So much of my life was wasted, thrown away, and ruined because of this lack of representation. I know that I didn't think I could be pretty, until I was in 5th grade and saw a Native American Barbie doll. Looking at its long black hair, tanned skin, dark brown eyes . . . it was the first time I saw a doll that looked like me. (I was darker then than I am now). I still thought I had to be thin, but the first time I thought I had at least a chance at being beautiful because of that doll.

Please, kindly donate to my surgery

https://linktr.ee/Lilithfury

Thank you.


Spine


Emily Grace Brook, Mason Temple

REALWHEELS
THEATRE | PIVOTAL PERFORMANCES

Realwheels Productions is focused on breaking down barriers and destigmatizing preconceptions around people with disabilities. They are about normalizing one of the many equity-seeking groups that is still marginalized and pre-judged. Race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation are attracting ongoing movements of recognition, yet persons with disabilities are still discriminated against or seen as "other" despite being one of the largest of these marginalized societal groups. As Artistic Director of Realwheels, Tomas Mureika expressed, "*rather ironic, considering we may all at some time in our lives live with a disability.*"

This 'integrated' theatre company, located in Vancouver, Canada, includes those living with disability and others who are TABS (temporarily able bodied). *"We see disability on a spectrum, affecting all our lives in different ways and at different points of time,"* said Managing Director, Cadence Konopaki. *"Some are born with a disability; some acquire it later in life. Some have large barriers due to systemic inaccessibility in our world, some have smaller barriers. But in some way and at some time, disability is part of all our lives."*

Realwheels' professional performances always consist of an integrated cast and crew and their community-based projects and programs primarily involve those living with disabilities. Their staff is also integrated - co-leaders, Cadence Konopaki (Managing Director) is able-bodied, and Tomas Mureika (Artistic Director), lives with Parkinson's.

Professional productions at Realwheels Theatre

Performances are geared towards deepening the audience's understanding of the disability experience. Over the years, some of their major productions have included:

SKYDIVE (2007): A multi-award-winning production performed in regional theatres in eight cities across Canada.

SPINE (2010): A playful multi-media exploration of identity in the face of a sudden life transformation, pushing the boundaries of technology along the way

WHOSE LIFE IS IT ANYWAY? (2014) ignited dialogue around right-to-die issues while garnering six Jessie Richardson Award nominations and winning two.

CREEPS (2016): The first fully-integrated performance of David Freeman's play in its 45-year history, garnering five Jessie nominations and winning three, including Outstanding Production and Artistic Achievement.

SEQUENCE (2018): The first integrated production of this play, featuring an actor who is blind portraying a blind character and an actor with autism portraying a character with another disability.

ACT OF FAITH (2019): A new play inspired by an actual and controversial event in Vancouver's disability community. ACT OF FAITH featured an integrated cast and included wheelchair dance (also referred to as mixed ability dance) as part of our storytelling vocabulary.

Community Productions

The "Wheel Voices" projects are similar to a collective theatre company within a company, with work often devised and performed by artists who identify as living with disabilities. Though there are variations in the cast, they often remain for multiple successive"Wheel Voices" shows, giving these community-based performances an identity of their own and the feeling of an ensemble company. A variety of material under a unifying thematic link is usually presented, such as:

COMEDY ON WHEELS with a stand-up comedic bent

SEXY VOICES a burlesque-type show focusing on disability and sexuality

WHEEL VOICES: TUNE IN!, their most recent, which is framed as a musical variety show encompassing material ranging from original musical numbers, emotional poetic monologues to TV-styled comedic sketches. The "Wheel Voices" productions are themed under a common banner but they are representative of the ideas, writing and performances of the wide variety of participants. These are then shaped by a supportive, creative team into cohesive productions.

Audience Experiences

Realwheels is interested in creating professional world class art that stands up against any other theatre companies. "Although since inception Realwheels has always been a haven for artists who identify with a disability, we are crafting inclusionary integrated productions that reflect the reality of the world around us, both on and back-stage," Mureika said.

> ***"With 25% of Canadians identifying as living with a disability and that number only poised to grow, Realwheels wishes to create barrier-breaking productions that represent this population – and stage a wide variety of shows where disability need not be the driving conflict of the story, but rather, forms the landscape on which universal themes are debated on stage."***

Their interest is in creating unique, multi-media audience experiences, incorporating cutting-edge digital and streaming technology alongside inventive stagecraft while supporting the human element and the power of the written word. The theatre's goal is to create entertaining and exciting new productions which audiences would be thinking about and discussing long after the house lights have gone up. The integration of digital and streaming projects also greatly increase accessibility and reach to new and existing audiences and more inclusive demographics. These core values were set out in Realwheels' founder and first Artistic Director, James Sanders' official mandate for the company.

Actors with a disability and their role in raising awareness

Raising awareness is always possible. This is dependent on the roles performers with disabilities are given and the intent of that casting. Compare and contrast Michael J. Fox in *"The Good Wife"* and Alan Alda in *"Marriage Story."* Both actors play lawyers in these dramatic works. Both actors are actually living with Parkinson's Disorder (PD) and are outspoken advocates for awareness of the cause.

In his role, Fox uses his Parkinson's symptoms to deconstruct negative preconceptions about PD to his advantage, by focusing on his symptoms as deliberate character traits, which, based on how his character has been scripted, he utilizes as an actor's tool to define the character, manipulate and intelligently outwit his legal rivals. He effectively uses his PD as a "secret power" to best his opponents by using their

Danielle Klaudt

preconceptions of disability against them. In his portrayal, Fox utilizes his PD as just another part of his actor's toolkit the way any other performer would use what is in their own individual repertoires.

In stark contrast, Alda's character is radically different. He is a brilliant lawyer who may be living with PD, though it is not in any way key to the character or plot (as far as the storytelling goes). Alda's performance challenges PD stigmatization by "normalizing" his lived experience and not drawing any attention to it whatsoever. By not addressing it, PD is therefore never an important trait that specifically informs his character - it is just part of the movie's landscape, not needing to be a plot or character point. By not incorporating Alda's PD within the character he plays, the creators are making a much larger statement, indicating that his disability does not define him.

Though polar opposite, both performances are important – both portray super-intelligent self-aware attorneys living with PD in widely diverse ways, but, most importantly, they represent inclusion of artists with disabilities into the artistic world to mirror our own. *"And, Alda being an actor actually living with a disability but being cast as a character that may or may not have a disability is obviously the most hopeful in full inclusionary integrated casting -- a Realwheels priority!"* Mureika shared. *"Why can't the part of the brilliant lawyer – or any other role, for that matter – be played by an actor with a disability? It is all about breaking down barriers so our artistic world represents the one in which we live… again, a Realwheels priority!"*

Inclusive theatre and its contribution to community integration

At Realwheels, the goal is to continually expand audiences and demographics so there is ultimately no perceived barrier between 'disability theatre' and 'theatre.' Barriers are continually broken, making quality art compatible with any other theatre company. They aim to tell all types of stories in brand new and exciting ways – stories that have universal themes and ideas about the human experience, which will entertain and reach the broadest possible audiences and leave them thinking long after the shows are over. *"Inclusionary integration is a huge part of that. If we can bring in increasingly inclusionary and integrated audiences to our integrated productions, we will have accomplished something essential at the societal level."* Mureika said.

Opportunities for artists with disabilities

Until now, professional theatre has largely viewed accessibility from the standpoint of the audience member and mostly limited to physical disability; ensuring there is space for a wheelchair in the audience, for example. In the past couple years, this has been changed to incorporate more accessibility for audience members with disabilities such as providing audio-described performances for blind audience members, or relaxed performers for those that are neurodiverse.

Opportunities for artists with disabilities to be on stage in productions has been next to none, until recently. This is for 3 reasons:

1) Professional theatre companies pigeon-hole artists with disabilities. Directors typically cast an actor with a disability in a disability role but very rarely will it be done the other way around. And of course, the number of shows with characters with disabilities are also extremely limited. Usually used as a token to instill audience pity or fear. For example, *Shakespeare's Richard the III* or *Tiny Tim in Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol*

2) Professional theatre companies are unaware of how to accommodate artists with disabilities. Traditional theatres normally run for long 10-12 hour days, six days a week. With such schedules, this can be a huge barrier for artists with disabilities who face issues with stamina, pain or other such issues.

3) Artists with disabilities have not had professional actor training made available to them. This is due to traditional methods of actor training and the inaccessibility and rigidity of the academic institutions and curriculums.

Realwheels has been working on all these areas but now, most significantly, in their new professional-calibre, three-year actor training program which will be launched in September 2021. This will be the first of its kind in Western Canada. Details can be found here: realwheels.ca/academy/

Covid's Impact

Due to provincial guidelines with all arts and cultural performances having to remain closed, all programming has been online since mid-March 2020. In the last year Realwheels delivered:

- a playwriting workshop and public reading online
- completed a playwright-in-residency program culminating in a livestreamed reading of the playwright's work
- wrote, rehearsed, recorded, and live-streamed a musical based on the stories and lives of 14 community artists living with a disability.

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Interview with

Danny Weissberg & Sara Smolley
Co-Founders of
VOICEITT

Voiceitt provides independence to its users

What is Voiceitt, how is it used and how does it help people with disabilities?

[Danny]: Voiceitt is an AI-powered speech recognition app for individuals with speech impairments, which translates atypical speech to allow users to communicate in their own voice with loved ones, caretakers and others. The app also facilitates communication with smart home devices such as Alexa, enabling those with speech impairments (which are often coupled with other disabilities) to perform daily tasks independently such as turning on lights, turning on the TV, playing music and more. Voiceitt is integrated with Amazon Alexa Services, meaning that users can control Alexa-connected smart home devices seamlessly with the Voiceitt app, offering them a whole new level of independence.

[Sara]: When setting up Voiceitt, users are prompted to train the application on specific phrases so that the app can learn each person's unique way of pronouncing that phrase. Voiceitt comes with suggested phrases for various environments and uses like schools or smart homes, as well as an option for a customized dictionary created by the user.

The Voiceitt app has two modes; Talk, and Smart Home. Voiceitt Talk translates atypical speech and plays the desired output using a unique automatic speech recognition (ASR) engine. Voiceitt Talk helps in everyday situations like allowing the user to order food in a restaurant or communicate with caretakers or loved ones using their own voices.

Voiceitt is integrated with Amazon Alexa, allowing users to control their voice-activated connected home with their own voice independently. The user can send a command to the smart assistant, e.g., Amazon Alexa, through an integrated API. The desired command is relayed to the smart assistant seamlessly through the Voiceitt app, allowing the smart assistant to carry out the task. In this way, users can perform daily tasks such as controlling channels on their TV or turning on a light – offering them a new degree of independence they never had before.

What led you to start Voiceitt and when was it started?

[Danny]: I grew up very close to my grandmother, when suddenly, as a result of a stroke, her speech became impaired. After a number of visits to see her, I realized that the nurse who cared for her was able to understand her speech. It was then that I had an epiphany: if a nurse can learn to comprehend difficult-to-understand speech, why can't technology? That began my mission to create Voiceitt, an app that makes speech recognition technology accessible to everyone, giving a voice to all. I formally co-founded the company with Stas Tiomkin in 2012.

[Sara]: I joined Voiceitt as a Co-Founder a few years after Danny and Stas started the company. I was always interested in combining business with social impact and finding ways to use technology to truly improve lives. I continue to be inspired by his and our team's passion and commitment to using the best that AI driven technologies have to offer to make lives and society better.

Voiceitt can help more people than just those with disabilities. What organizations are you working with to offer Voiceitt? How does it benefit the organization? Are there limitations?

[Sara]: We work with a number of organizations

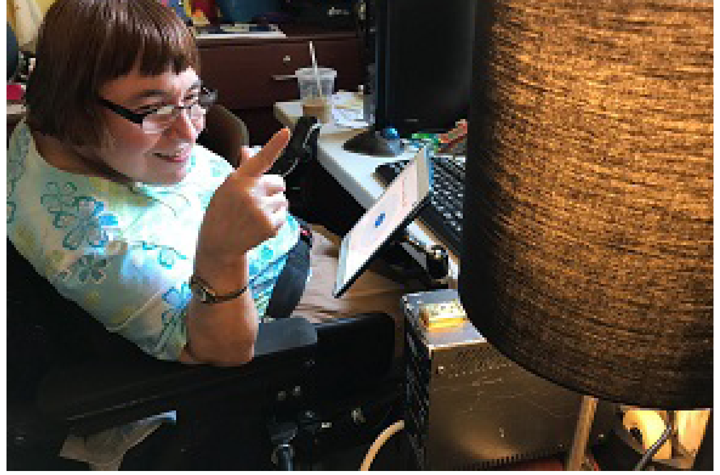
across the globe. In the US we are working with Easter Seals of Greater Houston, an organization that provides people with disabilities access to educational and therapeutic tools, which conducted a pilot with Voiceitt as part of their BridgingApps program. We also worked with the Department of Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities (DIDD) of Tennessee, which, along with The Arc of Tennessee, participated in a pilot of Voiceitt's technology. We also work with the Karten Network in the UK, IMEC in Belgium and other organizations globally.

[Danny]: These organizations share Voiceitt's vision of improving the lives of individuals with disabilities, and they look for technology or products that not only assist and help the communities they serve, but which also empower them.

We are currently working to have Voiceitt covered or subsidized by insurance and/or government programs so that the people who most need it can access it at no cost to them.

Any expansion plans?

[Sara]: We launched our app to the public in June this year, and are always looking to expand and bring Voiceitt to more people who need it around the world. A unique aspect of Voiceitt is that the technology is language independent, so you can use the app in Spanish, Japanese or Swahili. We have plans in place to partner with more organizations and companies, and integrate with other technologies. We are working hard to make speech recognition technology accessible to everyone, so stay tuned for exciting updates



Are you looking for investors? If so, how can they reach you?

[Danny]: We are always looking for investors and partners so we can expand our team, develop new features and ultimately provide the best product and service to the communities we serve. We also offer the option for corporations to sponsor Voiceitt on behalf of individuals with disabilities through non-profit organizations. You can always get in touch with us on our website.

In conclusion

Voiceitt isn't just an app, it's a way of communicating, promoting inclusion and independence through the power of voice. Voiceitt's mission is to help those with non-standard speech use their own voice to communicate and be understood as well as control their smart homes independently.

Being reliant on someone else has an impact on one's sense of self and independence. Using the Voiceitt app, individuals who once had to call someone to turn off a light can now turn it off themselves, change the TV channel, or play their favorite music, creating a sense of self-reliance that is empowering.

www.voiceitt.com

The sky is literally the limit when it comes to the practical use of this technology by anyone, not just someone with a speech impairment. And, Danny and Sara are pretty special, too. They are devoted to finding the best partners and the best uses of Voiceitt. I encourage you to visit their website at Voiceitt.com and to think of ways this technology can help others! ~ *Fred Maahs, Jr.*

Easter Seals Canada

Inspired by the formation of the National Society for Crippled Children (later Easterseals) in the US three years earlier, Easter Seals in Canada had its beginnings in the province of Ontario on November 28, 1922, when 10 representatives from seven Rotary Clubs throughout the province came together to form the Ontario Society for Crippled Children (later Easter Seals Ontario). As was the case with their US counterpart, this organization's concern was the lack of services and resources available to children with physical disabilities, and its goals were to ensure adequate treatment and raise public awareness about the needs of these children.

Over the next 34 years, similar organizations that would eventually become part of the Easter Seals family were established across Canada. In 1937, the Ontario Government turned to Easter Seals for expert assistance following a devastating poliomyelitis (polio) outbreak. That same year, Easter Seals in both Ontario and Nova Scotia opened the first Canadian adaptive camps for children with physical disabilities.

Today, Easter Seals and its ten independently governed provincial affiliate organizations have offices and provide programs and services to people living with disabilities in provinces and territories all across Canada, and plans are well underway to celebrate Easter Seals' 100th anniversary in 2022.

Easter Seals
Alberta

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Equipment and Support Services Program
Provides funding for specialized mobility and adaptive equipment, based on financial need, with full equipment grants, cost sharing, and interest free loans available. Long term equipment loans are also available through partnerships with other funding organizations.

AccessABILITIES Home Automation Program
This program provides Albertans living with a disability a means to move, communicate, experience the world, and to access life with the click of a button. Home Automation can control lighting, climate (thermostat), entertainment systems, and appliances. It may also include home security such as access control and alarm systems. The program precisely matches individual needs with technology that can be used from their smartphone.

Give a Kid a Lift Program
Through a partnership with Garaventa Lift, this program provides a residential elevator in the home of a family with a disability and is open to anyone with a disability that needs a residential elevator in their home.

Phyllis Davidson Easter Seals Scholarship
Offers post secondary academic scholarships to students living with physical disabilities that require a mobility aid (wheelchair, scooter, crutches, etc).

McQueen Home
This Home in Edmonton is a nine-bedroom home for individuals living with a disability and high medical needs who are unable to live independently without support. The residents are able to connect and actively participate in their community, including volunteering, attending courses, working part-time, and spending time with family and friends.

Camp Horizon offers a unique opportunity for campers with disabilities and medical conditions to build self-esteem and independence.

www.eastersealsbcy.ca

Easter Seals Timbres de Pâques

An automated wheelchair with an exoskeleton arm is designed to help people with varying forms of disability carry out daily tasks independently.
Image credit - AIDE, Universidad Miguel Hernandez

ROBOTIC ARMS AND TEMPORARY MOTORISATION – the next generation of wheelchairs

by Julianna Photopoulos

Next-generation wheelchairs could incorporate brain-controlled robotic arms and rentable add-on motors in order to help people with disabilities more easily carry out daily tasks or get around a city.

Professor Nicolás García-Aracil from the Universidad Miguel Hernández (UMH) in Elche, Spain, has developed an automated wheelchair with an exoskeleton robotic arm to use at home, as part of a project called AIDE.

It uses artificial intelligence to extract relevant information from the user, such as their behaviour, intentions and emotional state, and also analyses its environmental surroundings, he says.

The system, which is based on an arm exoskeleton attached to a robotised wheelchair, is designed to help people living with various degrees and forms of disabilities carry out daily functions such as eating, drinking, and washing up, on their own and at home. While the user sits in the wheelchair, they wear the robotised arm to help them grasp objects and bring them close — or as the whole system is connected to the home automation system they can ask the wheelchair to move in a specific direction or go into a particular room.

Its mechanical wheels are made to move in narrow spaces, ideal for home-use, and the system can control the environment remotely – for example, switching lights on and off, using the television or making and answering phone calls. What's more, it can anticipate the person's needs.

'We can train artificially intelligent algorithms to predict what the user wants to do,' said Prof. García-Aracil. 'Maybe the user is in the kitchen and wants a drink. The system provides their options (on a monitor) so they can control the exoskeleton to raise the glass and drink.'

MULTIMODAL SYSTEM

The technology isn't simple. As well as the exoskeleton robotic arm attached to the robotic wheelchair, the chair has a small monitor and uses various sensors, including two cameras to recognise the environment, voice control, eye-tracking glasses to recognise objects, and sensors that capture brain activity, eye movements and signals from muscles.

Depending on each person's needs and disabilities, the multiple devices are used accordingly. For example, someone with a severe disability such as a cervical spinal cord injury, who wouldn't otherwise be able to use voice control, could use the brain activity and eye movement sensors combined.

The user wears a cap on their head, filled with electrodes, to record the brain's activity which controls the exoskeleton hand's movement, explains Prof. García-Aracil. So when the user sees themself closing their hand onto an object for example, the exoskeleton arm actually does it for them. This technology is called brain-neural-computer interaction (BNCI), where brain — as well as muscle — activity can be recorded and used to interact with an electronic device.

But the system can sometimes make mistakes so there is an abort signal, says Prof. García-Aracil. 'We use the horizontal movement of the eye, so when you move your eyes to the right you trigger an action, but when you move your eyes to the left you abort that action,' he explains.

The AIDE prototype was successfully tested last year by 17 people with disabilities including acquired brain injury (ABI), multiple sclerosis (MS), and spinal cord injury (SCI), at the Cedar Foundation in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Its use was also demonstrated at UMH in Elche, with the user asking to be taken to the cafeteria, then asking for a drink, and drinking it with the help of the exoskeletal arm.

Now more work needs to be carried out to make the system easier to use, cheaper and ready for the market, says Prof. García-Aracil.

But it's not just new high-tech wheelchairs that can increase the functionality for users. Researchers on the FreeWheel project are developing a way of adding motorised units to existing wheelchairs to improve their utility in urban areas.

'Different settings have different challenges,' said project coordinator Ilaria Schiavi at IRIS SRL in Torino, Italy. For example, someone with a wheelchair may struggle to go uphill or downhill without any physical assistance whilst outdoors. But this system could allow people using wheelchairs to have an automated wheelchair experience regardless of whether they are indoors or outdoors, she says.

RENTABLE

The motorised units would attach to manual wheelchairs people already have in order to help them move around more easily and independently, Schiavi explains. These could either be rented for short periods of time and tailored according to the location - an indoor or outdoor environment - or bought, in which case would be completely personalised to the individual.

The researchers are also developing an app for the user which would include services such as ordering a bespoke device to connect the wheelchair and the unit, booking the unit, controlling it, and planning a journey within urban areas for shopping or sightseeing.

'You have mobility apps that allow you to book cars, for example. Our app will allow the owner of a wheelchair to firstly subscribe to the service, which would include buying a customised interface to use between their own wheelchair and the motorising unit they have booked,' said Schiavi.

'A simple customised interface will allow wheelchair users to motorise their exact device, as it is used by them, at a reasonable cost.'

Customisation is made possible through additive manufacturing (AM) technologies, she says. AM technologies build 3D objects by adding materials, such as metal or plastic, layer-by-layer.

Schiavi and her colleagues are exploring various uses for the motorised units and next year, the team plans to test this system with mobility-impaired people in both Greece and Italy. They hope that, once developed, they will be made available like city bicycles in public spaces such as tourist attractions or shopping centres.

> 'We can train artificially intelligent algorithms to predict what the user wants to do,'
>
> said Prof. García-Aracil.
>
> 'Maybe the user is in the kitchen and wants a drink. The system provides their options (on a monitor) so they can control the exoskeleton to raise the glass and drink.'

This article was originally published in Horizon, the EU Research and Innovation magazine

Kayzie Sutton
"My Hidden Superpower Dyslexia-ADHD"

~ By Shana Jones

Kayzie with her diploma

I'm talking to her and she's fidgeting. She's talking and tapping away with that pencil. The orange-yellowish blur is driving me crazy and I want to grab her wrist to make it stop. Finally, it stops. Now I'm answering her and she's looking at my left ear, then over to the right somewhere, then at her book, then back at me, then out the window.… My voice trails off because my brain tells me she's bored; she's stopped listening…..Well, maybe not. OK, what she's saying makes sense. Maybe she WAS listening, after all, but really, she could at least TRY to appear interested in the conversation.

A young Kayzie Sutton may have been aware of similar conversations playing out in the minds of many people she interacted with on a regular basis. They simply didn't know, and neither did she, that tapping a pencil and looking around had unconsciously become some of the various actions necessary for her brain to even keep up with a conversation, let alone process the message and form a response. In elementary school, she never understood why she couldn't "get it" like the other kids did. Every day involved the mental gymnastics of using foggy interpretations of what was on the blackboard to piece together answers quickly enough to avoid being singled out as the "slow one".

Then she would go home and try to make sense of it all over again, attempting homework assignments that only prolonged the confusion.

In high school, extra-curricular activities provided an easy but legitimate excuse from class, and study groups were spent learning how other students arrived at answers so she could repeat it on tests. She continued to endure arduous, excessive hours poring over homework to barely get less-than-stellar grades. She remembers not "…comprehend[ing] why as much effort as I'm putting into something, the yield is… so minimal" and even more sadly, thinking that "only stupid people work this hard to only get a D." Add to this crumbling self-image the odds stacked against her: she was a black girl from a single-parent family in a low-income neighbourhood being taught by teachers ill-equipped to recognize different behaviour as anything but delinquent. Things finally came to a head when a senior-year teacher deflated her with the "revelation" that she wouldn't make it in university, so shouldn't bother applying. To someone who had always wanted to be a doctor and whose mother had made post-secondary education non-negotiable, it was the ultimate crushing blow.

The diagnosis of dyslexia-attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) early in Kayzie's communications/psychology program at York University was a sobering "aha" moment that pushed her further into depression. Now her long-term fears were "confirmed": she really was stupid and incapable of becoming a doctor. After all, if high school had been so difficult, how could she possibly get through university? At least now she could understand why letters danced on a page and words in a sentence seemed to change order at will. Now it was clear why written words had to be mentally registered as pictures with lively characters and vibrant colours to be even remotely understandable and finally, the struggle to spell even common words made sense. Fortunately, however, no dyslexia-ADHD could match Kayzie's natural spirit of determination or dislodge her non-negotiable goal to succeed in life. She would have to turn this oppressive monster on its head and convert it into fuel for the journey going forward.

Kayzie and twin sister, Kizzie

The mindset shift started during the completion of her TV/broadcasting program at Seneca College and blossomed well into her naturopathic medicine program at the Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine (CCNM). Having embraced her unique combination of dyslexia and ADHD symptoms, she was now learning to juggle it with a full course load and a very active extra-curricular schedule. The academic challenges continued and support services were available, but institutional bureaucracy often provoked a fight to access them. CCNM was new to students with learning challenges, so she had to educate and advocate (sometimes creatively) to get necessary accommodations such as note-taking assistance during lectures and the option to submit assignments in alternative formats. Justifying such concessions was often a struggle, but the experience made her pivotal in shaping the highly supportive learning accessibility program available to CCNM students today.

As time continued, she grew into self-acceptance and "loving [her] brokenness". Where initially she had questioned how a perfect God could make such an imperfect creation, she began to embrace her imperfection as preparation for a career in naturopathic medicine. Constantly being reminded of her imperfection had made her very comfortable asking for help and would make her hyper-sensitive to the needs of her patients. Her space would be as inclusive as possible and she would arrange her sessions to give her patients as much time as they needed. The very thing that had shackled her to frustration, confusion, and shame in childhood would bring out the empathy and passion for healing so critical in a healthcare professional, and the "square peg" who had survived a "round-hole" education system was well experienced in finding creative solutions.

At present, Kayzie is in the final stages of qualifying as a registered naturopathic doctor in Ontario, Canada and plans to start practicing by year end. She is still learning how to navigate the neuro-typical world but is now better in touch with what she needs to function in daily life and the tools available to meet those needs. Her diagnosis is no longer a burden but rather a regular reminder of the perseverance, internal strength and sheer grit necessary to accomplish any great feat.

Kayzie Sutton

The message of her story, she says simply, is to "be sensitive when someone tells you he or she is neuro-diverse. Listen to the person. It takes courage to share that I experience the world differently and that I need extra support because of the way my brain works. Don't minimize it [with statements] like 'Yeah, that happens to me too sometimes!'. Just ask, How can I support you?"

Lioz Amar

CEO of

Travaxy

Accessible Travel Solutions

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> **Travaxy takes this hassle away from platform users and travelers with a simple API call**

Lioz Amar

I got injured during my military service when I was 20 years old and the injury left me confined to a wheelchair. As part of my rehabilitation, I started swimming, which began as a form of physical therapy but very soon became professional and I represented Israel in the 2008 Paralympic Games at the Beijing Olympics in 2008. I got to the finals, placing 8th in the world.

Motivation to start Travaxy

Traveling can be a hard and exhausting experience for anyone, but for those with disabilities, it is more difficult. I had enough after getting promises from travel agencies that my next holiday will be perfect with the most accessible accommodation. After getting disappointed time after time, I decided that I am going to be the one to change it.

Challenges experienced on his travels

I have quite a few horrifying stories, but one would be a hotel I booked on one of the biggest working online travel agencies. I booked an accessible room and they did have one, but the problem was getting to it. The hotel had two steps getting into the reception area. They promised me that it won't be a problem, they will help me when going in and out of the hotel whenever I needed to do so, but basically, they didn't understand the concept of wanting to be independent.

Travaxy is different from other booking platforms

We have pivoted and are a B2B company. Travaxy Accessible Travel Solutions is turning travel agencies into accessibility experts. Travaxy provides travel agencies, For SDG10, we are on a mission to change the reality, help, and support planning accessible holidays.

Travaxy
accessible travel solutions

Travel APIs (Application Programming Interface) and Global Distribution Systems a means of booking worry-free holidays. Tailor-made bookings are offered according to specific disability types and needs within seconds, instead of hours and sometimes days. The system operates automatically with existing hotel and flight booking providers allowing travel agencies the added value by not needing to disconnect from existing solutions.

Travaxy is fully automated

We are fully automated for agencies: Hotel offerings by disability type and need + hotel accessibility certificate with more than 90 accessibility parameters, and airline notifications API.

Destinations

We have overall 15 destinations and we keep growing more and more destinations to be served on our B2B side.

Anyone can use Travaxy's services

Although our initial concept was catering to travelers with disabilities, senior travelers, and their friends and families, anyone can now book through partner agencies.

Most accessible city visited so far

(1). Berlin
(2). Los Angeles

Main priority areas the travel industry should focus on now that travel is resuming

Attractions and destination services are still one of the top untapped segments.

Patrick Mayer

I decided to continue with my life and try to make the best out of it

When Patrick was nine years old, he already knew he wanted to be a professional snowboarder. His passion was freestyle snowboarding. At 17, he went to Tübingen (Germany) to attend a boarding school for sports in the Swiss mountains. His aptitude for the sport quickly elevated him to the elite of German freestyle snowboarding. In 2000, during a competition, he crashed, injuring his back. Emergency surgery quickly followed. The resulting diagnosis: he would need a wheelchair and walking aids for the rest of his life.

His life changed on that day, but giving up was not an option. At 21, life was too valuable to surrender to fate without a fight so, he accepted the challenge life presented him and made a decision to live a full life.

Patrick is now the owner of "Nicon-Tec Ltd", a company that develops and produces innovative products for people with walking disabilities, giving them the ability to navigate any surface, in any situation. Patrick believes the concept of inclusion should not be limited to urban life only but that it should also include the outdoors and being able to enjoy nature. He observed that

there were few creative, inexpensive aids. From this his idea was born – use the advancements in the technical space to gradually improve the world of the handicapped.

PATRICK SHARED SOME INSIGHTS WITH MÉLANGE

Maintaining a positive attitude is allowing him to live a fulfilling life in spite of his disability

Three months after my accident, I thought about the options that I had and I asked myself: "what do I now want from life?" I decided there were only three options for me:

One: Suicide. Escape my inevitable situation

Two: Continue my life in bitterness because I can´t accept what has happened

Three: Continue my life and try to make the best out of it. Accept what has happened.

I concluded that in order to live a happy life I had to choose option three. Option number one was no longer an option at all, and option number two was the same - no option! For me, a life in bitterness was like a very slow suicide. Every single happy moment will drown in bitterness. Where is the fun? The quality and joy of life? So, I chose option three which means drawing a line and starting from zero, if not for myself at that time, but I had to do it for my loved ones. In Germany we say *"Du erntest was du säst"* which means "you reap (harvest) what you sow." If you give happiness, you will get it back. You won´t find friends or a partner if you live in bitterness. So basically, I made a very pragmatical decision. And I also concluded that nothing is forever! Maybe life will be "normal" one day when I am long enough in the situation. It´s always the unknown that frightens us.

Wheelblades: small high end skis for manual wheelchairs, strollers or walkers.

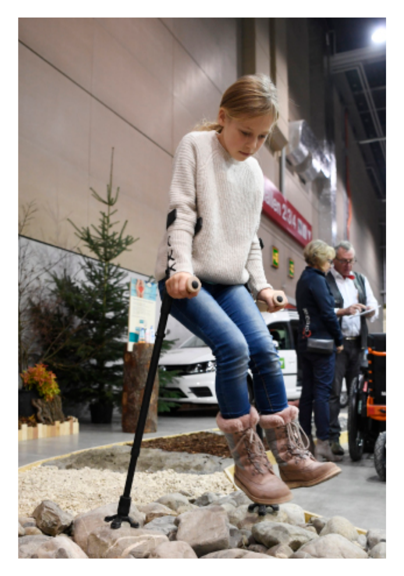
It offers safety and mobility on snow and ice in winter. Because of the easily adjustable binding, it can be attached to any conventional wheelchair model, stroller or walker. With the patented quick-release mechanism, you can switch from wheels to runners with ease in just seconds. The broad contact surface of the Wheelblades optimally distributes the weight on the ground, thus preventing the small front wheels from sinking into the snow. The runners move along the ground with very little friction, and even larger irregularities in the terrain can be easily navigated. To ensure that the tip of the ski always points forward, the binding was deliberately positioned in the front part of the ski. Stability while in motion is provided by two channels on the bottom of the Wheelblades that compress the snow and let you glide as if on rails.

The product was originally developed for manual wheelchairs but the bigger version WHEELBLADES XL can also used for any babystroller or walker.

Safety Foot: Innovative walking aid.

SafetyFoot is the first lightweight "trekking shoe" for walking aids like canes or crutches. Solid, anti-slip and stable for maximum mobility and flexibility on any surface. Quick and easy to install on any walking aid, the SafetyFoot helps users navigate both everyday life and recreational activities on a firm footing. Thanks to the innovative geometry of the foot and the careful selection of materials, the SafetyFoot feels at home on any surface and in any weather. The SafetyFoot also impresses with its attractive and sporty design. Thanks to extreme stress tests and continuous optimization of the material and production processes, SafetyFoot meets the highest quality standards.

The special choice of material and construction of the sole ensures maximum slip resistance on wet and slippery surfaces. The flexible rubber joint in the upper part of the SAFETY FOOT provides a secure grip even on uneven or



sloping surfaces and supports the ergonomic rolling of the walking aids. The special geometry ensures an even weight distribution and prevents sinking into loose and soft surfaces.

This product is also the right choice for elderly people because it prevents the walking aid from slipping on wet surfaces. Because I use fiberglass reinforced materials you can use it for any activity. On the one side the material is super lightweight and on the other hand it has a maximum capacity of over 600 kg.

How Wheelblades helps Patrick to enjoy nature

Inclusive cities aren't very helpful to me when my friends are going on the beach or for a winter walk. Those are the moments when I want to be with them. Thanks to the Wheelblades I am now able to go on winterwalks with my family and even ride downhill with my son side by side with his sled. Thanks to the SafetyFoot I can join my friends on the beach and go for a swim. It´s especially those moments, where I can completely forget all my worries and simply be free. After my accident, I studied psychology in order to help people with the same fate. Over the years I realized that I can reach and help way more people, if I develop products to increase the mobility. There is nothing more powerful than being outside, free, together with your loved ones. "Actions speak louder than words"

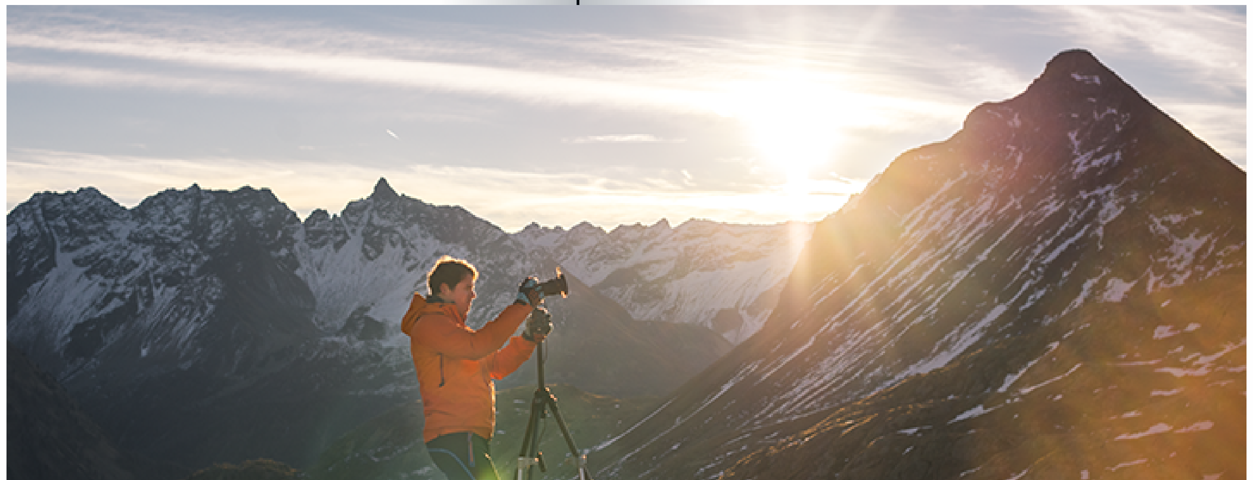
Wheelblades and Safety Foot are shipped internationally

I started in 2012 and I have now about 100 partners in more than 20 countries. If I find the best solution, I want to make it accessible for everybody else without any geographical boundaries.

Patrick, the Photographer

Being in a wheelchair means being different. People in society are curious when they see something different and you have to get used to their views. People watch me when I move around in a wheelchair or when I park in handicapped parking spaces. Nature, however, doesn´t care about me being different and I am just a part of it. When I am all by myself in nature taking pictures, I can be 100% myself without the feeling of being watched all the time. That is a very special and peaceful moment for me. Thanks to my Safety Foot I am also able to leave my wheelchair behind and move more freely in nature. I appreciate this privilege a lot.

Another thing was the death of my brother in 1999. The time we had came to an ultimate end and the memories about him are fading like the letters of a book that is laying in the sun. With landscape photography I am capable of freezing moments and time forever.



Patrick's accessible city

I come from Tübingen, a small medieval town in the south of Germany. At the time of my accident in 2000, it was not fun going into town because of all the cobblestones. But since then, a lot of things have changed in our favour and the city is now way more wheelchair friendly. They have replaced the big cobblestones with smaller stones and we are now able to go to town without being ejected from our wheelchairs. I don't complain a lot because I won't change anything by complaining. There are other ways to get to one's goal. If you are not able to go to one place, simply accept it. People always want to help. You just have to ask for help!

What's next for Patrick and Nicon-Tec?

I am currently working on an amazing new product that could have a very big impact for people with walking disabilities. At this time, I cannot provide many details because I want to surprise the world with a huge "boom." Thanks to my international partners, I will be able to spread this idea/product/possibility all over the world. We already have come very far and I hope that it won´t take too long anymore.

www.wheelblades.shop


Ryan Lundy

Ryan Lundy is making a difference
and his NVLD is no deterrent

> "I never thought I would be working with individuals with disabilities, but this is my calling,"

When Ryan Lundy was in middle school, he was diagnosed with a non-verbal learning disability (NVLD). Growing up, this neurological condition marked by academic and sometimes social difficulties resulted in many challenges. He received occupational therapy and accommodations in the schools he attended, with assistance from many tutors, counselors, and academic advisors. "School was not easy for me," Ryan said. "I got taken advantage of a lot and was bullied by kids. Many days I would come home and cry, thinking about why they were not including me." Ryan got used to attending games and events alone and through elementary and high school, always wondered why he was never invited to parties and outings. On the rare occasions when he was included, "the kids would take advantage of me. I would give them rides and they would not give me any gas money but I was too scared to say anything for fear of them not wanting to hang out with me," he shared.

During his college years at York College of Pennsylvania, things changed for Ryan. "I opened up," he said "I got involved in Hillel; I was the Basketball Manager and joined Best Buddies. I would go to the games and parties with my roommates and friends. I still stay in touch with my college friends. It was a great experience!"

Over the years, Ryan has developed mechanisms that allows him to live comfortably with his disability. Through therapy, he learned coping strategies such as writing things down, making lists on his phone and setting reminders on his calendar. Meditation, yoga, and deep breathing also helps. He now works with people with disabilities. "That is why I have compassion for the work that I do today.

Today Ryan is involved with the following:

- He is a teaching assistant at a special education school at the center for autism, with responsibilities for following kids behavior according to their support plans and tracking data, while contributing towards their structured learning environment
- He is responsible for helping individuals to become better both socially and academically
- Ryan conducts recreation programs for two townships
- He does community integration work
- Ryan is a proud volunteer with the Best Buddies program with his eBuddy and Citizens Buddy
- He recently joined the board of the William is Artistic organization in Virginia
- He is a supporter of Love Serving Autism, a tennis organization based in Florida. He is a regular donor and hopes to work for them part time teaching tennis to individuals on the spectrum
- He is an ambassador for the NVLD project based in New York City
- He has coached Special Olympics participants in the past
- During Covid, he remained busy conducting virtual fitness classes

"At times, things are still difficult for me," Ryan shared, "because sometimes I put all my energy into one thing, for example a company job, and if it does not work out, then I get upset at myself and upset with them for not giving me a chance." But Ryan now knows that he is making a difference in the world and in people's lives. "I want to reach as many people as I can and hope to inspire people with disabilities to let them know that they can do anything they want to do!"

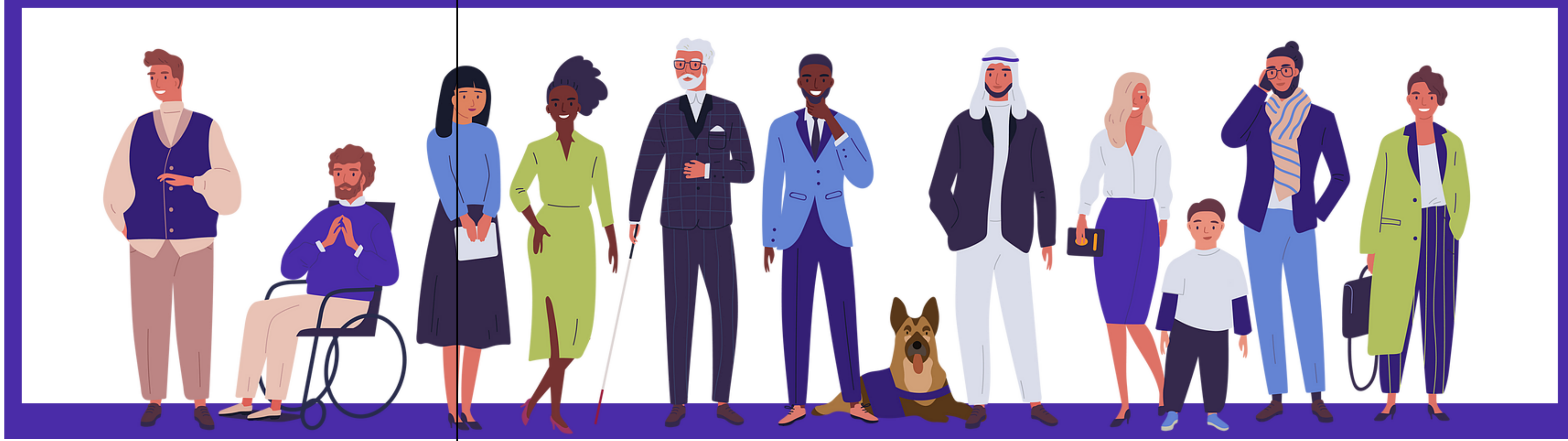
Ryan is interested in securing engagements to speak on inclusion in the workplace and recreation. He also wants to raise awareness about NVLD as he thinks more people need to hear about it.

To contact him, email
rhlundy85@gmail.com

He looks forward to connecting with you!

MaahsTravels

Accessibility Refined



Maahs Travels, **CONSULTING**

At Maahs Travels, our Consultants make the world more accessible. More inclusive. We works across the globe to provide accessibility, diversity, and inclusion training for corporations, governments, resorts, and entertainment, media and advertising companies. We show employers how to recruit, hire, onboard, and train employees with disabilities – the largest untapped source of employees available.

We work with entertainment executives, city planners, government officials, corporate leaders, and ministries of tourism, to identify and define market potential and strategies to grow market share for our clients.

And, our global team of experts provide on-site and virtual audits and assessments to determine the level of compliance of accessibility for businesses, parks, cities, and municipalities, and travel destinations around the world.

Maahs Travels, **EXPERIENCES**

Check out Fred's travel log and relatable articles from other adventure travelers with a point of view. Read Melange, Accessibility for All magazine at www.readmelange.com, for ideas and inspiration on the places you can go!

Through our partnership with Travel for All, Maahs Travels makes it easier for you to plan your trip. We can book accessible travel, accommodations, tours and attractions, plus everything that you require to ensure your journeys exceed your expectations so you can explore the beauty of the world!

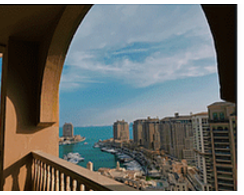
If you would like your resort or travel destination to be featured in Accessibility for All magazine, contact Fred and invite him to visit. He will share his experience with the millions of Accessibility for All readers in over 64 countries, as well as followers on his social media channels.

Maahs Travels, **FRED TALKS**

Fred has shared his personal and professional journeys with countless audiences around the world from D.C. to Dubai; Greece to Georgia; Israel to the Islands of the Caribbean; and brings his inspirational story to every engagement with his passionate and empowering presence. He engages audiences both large and small, from corporate engagements where he speaks to hundreds of tourism professionals or smaller settings with senior leadership or government officials.

Contact Maahs Travels now to book Fred for your next event.

www.maahstravels.com









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An ALIGHT (Actions Linking Gender and HIV Together) Project Activity:
Wheel Chair Basket Ball Competition

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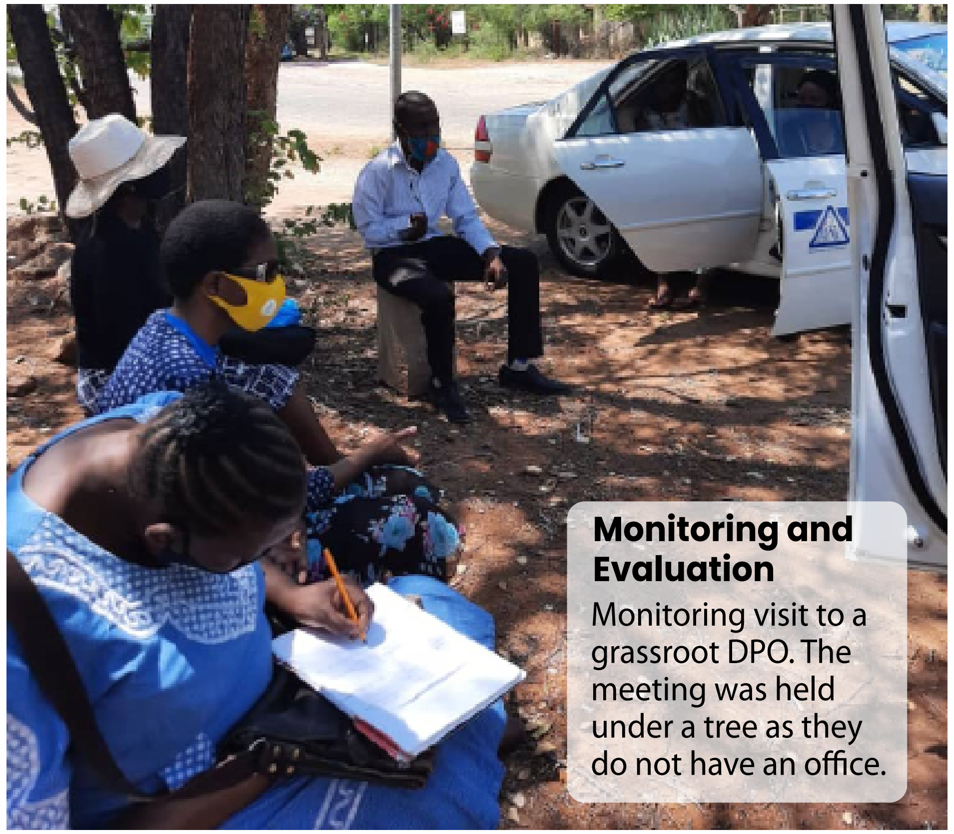
Botswana Council for the Disabled

HISTORY

Botswana Council for the Disabled (BCD) has been in existence for over 30 years. It was established in 1980 after the National Development Plan of 1973 -78 declared that there was insufficient attention given to people with disabilities in Botswana. A study was then commissioned to investigate the issue and come up with long term solutions. The commission was made up of government ministries of Health and Education together with three disability organizations which existed at the time. The organizations were formed by the churches.

The Disabled (BCD) is a Non-Governmental Charitable Organization mandated to coordinate all the organizations providing services to People with Disabilities (PWDs) in Botswana. There are currently 30 organizations of PWDs affiliated to BCD. The council is recognized by Botswana government as the official representative body for the NGO disability movement and for disability in general. It is also charged with the responsibility to advise and recommend to Government, NGO's and other organizations on policies, programs and issues on all matters relating to the welfare, education, training, rehabilitation, health and employment of people with disabilities.



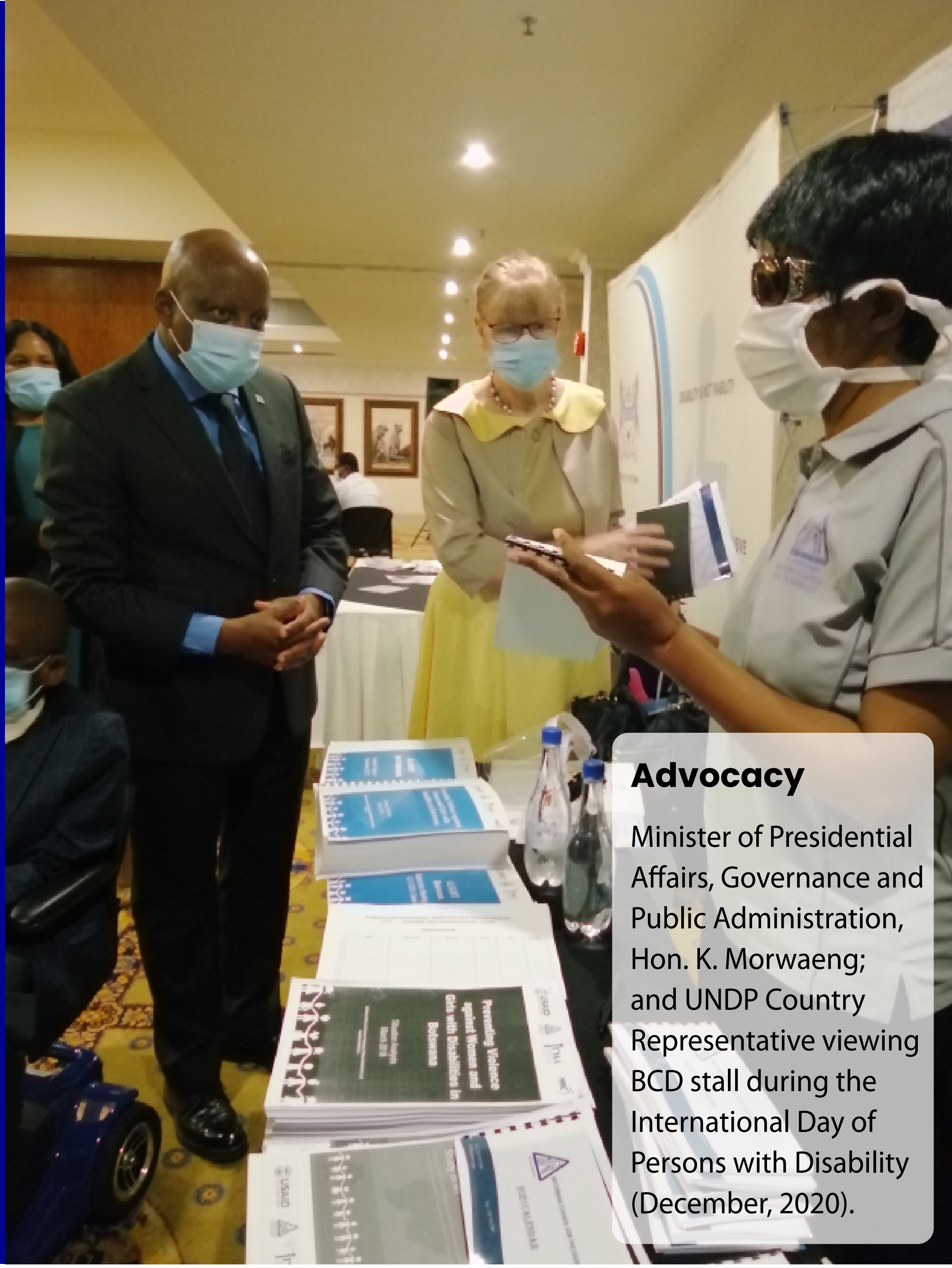
Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring visit to a grassroot DPO. The meeting was held under a tree as they do not have an office.

PROGRAMS

Capacity Building

- Provision of Technical Support to Disabled Person's Organizations (DPOs)
- Day care training
- Care giver/parental workshops on a variety of issues; understand what disability is and accept and love their children, how to care for the children with disabilities, Children's Rights and Disability Rights, Sign Language training for those with deaf children
- Governance training for Board of Governors for member organizations
- Resource Mobilization
- Capacity building for Safety, Health and Environment Officers. When COVID 19 Pandemic hit the world, Botswana was not spared. DPOs selected officers for SHE Officer role without considering prior knowledge and skills. BCD realised this and collaborated with Ministry of Health to empower them for their new role.
- HIV AIDS and Disability Workshops. Since the advent of HIV and AIDS pandemic, Botswana government has been funding BCD to build and strengthen capacity of DPOs to programme for HIV and AIDS as well as empower PWDs with and Prevention and control.



Advocacy

Minister of Presidential Affairs, Governance and Public Administration, Hon. K. Morwaeng; and UNDP Country Representative viewing BCD stall during the International Day of Persons with Disability (December, 2020).

Public Awareness and Education on Disability/ Advocacy

This aims to educate the public on issues of disability, change the society's mindset as regards disability as well as promote the rights of PWDs. Such activities are mostly through face to face (before COVID), social media, radio and television. We also search for opportunities where there are gatherings or meetings especially with decision makers since it is not possible to gather them. For communities, the most effective way of doing this at village level is where the villagers are invited to a meeting at the Kgotla. This is the traditional meeting place with the Chief. It is also used as the tribal court. It is a very important place where serious issues of interest to communities are discussed. Usually, an announcement by driving around the village and talking through a public address system is made a couple of days before and on the day in the morning to remind that communities.

Networking/ Benchmarking

The forums are at different levels.

a) People with disabilities meet to discuss general issues of concern and help one another and share information. Topics included are on advocacy, disability rights, success stories from persons with disabilities as well as government/private sector programmes available for PWDs.

b) The other networking forum is where leaders of DPOs often meet to discuss issues on disabilities. The forums provide opportunities for networking which is part of capacity development where they share knowledge and information for evidence based practice.

c) National, regional and international visits for mutual learning and benchmarking purposes. The current situation of COVID pandemic resulted in innovation ideas where there a quite a number of disability WhatsApp groups formed for information sharing in general.

Organizational Assessment/Providing support

Donating face shields: As it is the role of BCD to support unique needs, after the first lock down in April 2020, BCD undertook support visits to check how DPOs were coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. It became evident that government support was biased towards their establishments and inadequate in some cases. Some organizations needed a different type of protection from the usual covering of nose and mouth with a cloth mask. They needed face shields for various reasons.

Disability Inclusive Development

As part of Disability Inclusive development, BCD conducts research on inclusiveness and participates in national and international forums to make sure that we align with the world agenda on disability, therefore, leaving no one behind. A project was awarded to BCD by USAID after a call for proposal was advertised internationally which we responded to and won. *It was the first of its kind in the country.* **Outcomes included:** Increased knowledge and skills on disability inclusion in GBV programmes, enhanced capacity of participating DPOs/NGOs to develop their organizational strategies to address GBV as well as inclusiveness.

The Project: Actions Linking Gender and HIV Together (ALIGHT) Botswana Project (Jul. 2017–Jun 2019)

Project Aim: This was a research project which aimed to increase participation of women and girls with disabilities in GBV preventions programs. (Sites: Gaborone, Maun and Francistown). It was a participatory research study in which women and girls with disabilities were engaged in data collection, analysis and taught how to understand strategies to reduce GBV.

"Advocacy and Action"

Botswana Council for the Disabled

Executive Director receiving face shields for her staff

A boy, excited after receiving his face shield as he cannot wear a mask due to his disability.

School Head receiving face shields for Primary School children who are deaf

Project Team: Actions Linking Gender and HIV Together (ALIGHT) Botswana Project (Jul. 2017–Jun 2019)

© Neil Thomas/HI

humanity &inclusion

Helping the world's most vulnerable

Humanity & Inclusion (HI) is dedicated to helping the world's most vulnerable people. The organization uses a comprehensive approach to improve the living conditions of people with disabilities and vulnerable minorities who are often "forgotten" by humanitarian aid, to ensure they can access the support they need:

- Populations exposed to the risk of disease, violence, or disabling accidents
- People who have experienced severe psychological trauma
- Vulnerable populations, in particular people with disabilities
- Refugee populations and populations affected by or displaced due to crises, conflicts or natural disasters
- Populations exposed to the threat of weapons, munitions and explosive devices

HI's work is based on the value of humanity. They include everyone without exception and champion each individual's right to dignity. Respect, benevolence and humility guides their work. This organization advocates inclusion and participation for everyone, upholding diversity, fairness and individual choices. They value difference.

HI is active in 60 countries.

Here are a few of their projects:

Pakistan: Sexual and Reproductive Health Campaign

Under WISH2ACTION project, HI Pakistan launched a one-month Inclusive Sexual and Reproductive Health (ISRH) campaign. The campaign was launched in collaboration and consultation with Special Education Department and other key stakeholders in 8 districts where the WISH consortium is already working. The campaign focused on engaging students with disabilities (boys & girls), parents, teachers, guardians and other persons with disabilities to orient them on life-skills-based education and ISRH. Inclusion and disability mainstreaming was the core cross cutting theme of the campaign.

It was a unique experience to conduct this campaign with individuals having different sorts of impairment (hearing, visual, mental, physical etc.). It was the first time parents and teachers were engaged in an inclusive sexual and reproductive health campaign. Special Education departments, health departments and other key stakeholders took a keen interest and provided their support.

Nepal: Mobile Camp

"Many women and girls in rural communities keep their sexual and reproductive health issues a secret, ashamed of what family members and society at large will say," said Prerana, Health and Rehabilitation Officer with HI.

Humanity & Inclusion along with Jiri Hospital and its local partner organization - CSADB, recently conducted a free health and rehabilitation outreach camp to assess and provide physiotherapy and rehabilitation care to the women with reproductive health issues in Dolakha.

"We organized the camp at the community level so that women who are busy with household chores can come and get a check-up done," Prerana added.

Indonesia: HI provides nutrition care packages, assistive devices, and PPEs as part of COVID-19 response in Yogyakarta

Through the I AM SAFE, a COVID-19 response and recovery project funded by the European Union, HI conducted the distribution of food and non-food items on 22 March 2021.

The Head of District Office in Gunungkidul, key staff, head of village, and representatives of beneficiaries from local implementation areas attended the event. The activity included distributing nutrition care packages for 1,200 beneficiaries in the districts, 83 assistive devices for persons with disabilities in 2 batches, and personal protective equipment (PPEs) for health front liners. HI Indonesia was represented by Country Coordinator and I AM SAFE Project Manager.

Indonesia: Accessible recruitment processes resulted in the hiring of youth with visual impairment in Jakarta

The Forward Together project team in Jakarta worked closely with Gourmet Collection and Touchpoint Hotel Loyalty in analyzing these barriers and identifying ways to ensure the accessibility of the work environment for persons with disabilities. The process involved:

(1) Conducting awareness sessions on disability, accessibility, and inclusive employment practices;

(2) Physical accessibility audit of the office environment

(3) Support in onboarding and socialization and providing disability awareness to colleagues and supervisors; and,

(4) Coaching in reasonable accommodation and performance management.

Despite the challenges that the pandemic presented, close collaboration with the Gourmet Collection in every step of the way resulted in the hiring of five youth with visual impairment as telemarketers.

Maya Bororing, Supervisor of Gourmet Collection and Project Manager Touchpoint Hotel Loyalty, commented: "Since our colleagues started, we have not observed any significant challenges. They showed good performance, and they also do presentations. We found creative ways to support them when they engage with clients."

Andrea & Cara

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"Someone will love you
. . . just the way you are"

Andrea and Cara both love the outdoors. Leisure time is usually spent cycling, swimming, kayaking and hiking. They are an easy-going couple whose connection was almost instant when they met in 2014. As they got to know each other, they soon realized that there were many similarities between them which further solidified their connection. Now married and living in Kelowna, British Columbia, this couple continues to enjoy life together.

The fact that Cara is a wheelchair user does not hinder their lifestyle in any way. And, because of this, encounters with people who may ask what some might consider to be impolite questions, is sometimes met with a chuckle. It is not unusual for someone to think that Andrea is Cara's caregiver, or that they are sisters, not wives. Many inter-abled couples do face a barrage of assumptions, and being a same-sex, inter-abled couple adds to that intrusive list. Fortunately, however, they have not had to deal with much of that. Their families and friends are

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supportive of their marriage; they live in a country and city where communities are sufficiently accepting of same-sex couples, and wheelchair users, independently going about their day, are an everyday sight.

Cara is a very independent wheelchair user and Andrea jokingly says she sometimes forgets that Cara is a paraplegic. She drives herself around on her solo errands and would also enjoy a cycle or swim, unaccompanied. No assistance is sought as she moves around during her day. And, so confident is she, that no offence is taken if someone makes an erroneous assumption about her capabilities. She believes offers of help from strangers come from a good place and is very gracious as she declines. If they persist in lending aid, she shrugs her shoulders and does not make a fuss.

Opportunities to speak about disability usually present itself on a sometimes-frequent basis. Cara is a substitute teacher and her days at each school starts with an invitation to ask questions. As she rolls into a classroom, she anticipates the children's curiosity, and to put them at ease, shares her story and invites them to ask questions, and they usually have many! Both Cara and Andrea believe it is important that people, especially children, know that someone will love you just the way you are and that being a person with a disability does not matter, that disability will fade into insignificance. Andrea recounts, "a few days ago, I said to Cara, let's take the stairs. And then I remembered - oh, you're in a wheelchair." That generated quite a few laughs between them.

Speaking with Andrea and Cara, it is evident that they enjoy life to the fullest. Their Instagram page, @wheelationshipgoals gives you a peek into a life of travel and adventure, food and wine. Be it Thailand, Vietnam, Bali, Jamaica or Australia, they discover new places together, reacquaint themselves with old ones and make great memories as they go along. On their travels, however, not many of the places are fully accessible. They have booked rooms that claimed to be accessible, but on arrival, they discover the bed is too high for Cara to independently get on and off; or a shower which they expected to have been accessible turns out to be a step-in shower. In spite of these occasional travel inconveniences, they are not deterred, so follow them on Instagram to see where their next adventure will be. It may be an excursion close to home in their accessible city of Kelowna, after all, Covid has restricted travel, but staycations are still possible, and now that restrictions are being slowly lifted, they may just have another local adventure to share. Kelowna is a beautiful city and it is an accessible one, so those who are on the search for new places to discover post-pandemic, think about heading to Kelowna.

Living in a city that is accepting of all, whether you have a disability or identify as LGBTQ+ does have its benefits for a same-sex, inter-abled couple – the possibility for unkind, rude comments and reactions are significantly reduced. But this is not the sole reason for Cara's light-hearted, comfortable outlook on life. 10 years ago, when her fall from off a swing left her with a T6 spinal cord injury, it was a challenging transformation into her new life, but she carries no hint of despondence in her demeanour. She shared, "I'm actually living a healthier, better, more balanced life after my accident. Although I had my teaching degree, it wasn't until after my accident that I got into teaching. And, I met Andrea, my soulmate. I don't think that would have happened unless I had my accident. So, I think it was actually a blessing in disguise."

Someone will love you just the way you are.

Follow Andrea and Cara on Instagram [@wheelationshipgoals]

@lightandshadowsboudoir

Executive Director,
Mr. Koh Seng Choon

Project Dignity

A job. A purpose. *Dignity* restored.

In Singapore and Hong Kong, Project Dignity returns dignity to the disabled and disadvantaged.

In 2006, Engineer, Mr. Koh Seng Choon, desired to do something to improve the lives of people with special needs in Singapore. He conceptualized a social enterprise project aimed at providing an always-in-demand service to the public - people with disabilities will be the ones offering that service. His vision materialized in 2010 when Project Dignity was born.

Vocation with passion. Paid on the job training, skills development, employment and service. Project Dignity started in 2010 with one food stall. People with disabilities were taught how to cook. Food was sold to the public – walk-ins and delivered. As time progressed, this concept grew in Singapore and expanded to Hong Kong. Today, the number of food stalls have increased. Another facet has been added. Seniors at residential facilities are taken on daily outings to the Project Dignity location where they are treated to lunch and entertainment. From concept to reality, Project Dignity returns dignity to the disabled and disadvantaged and over the years, has won many awards for doing this.

Being engineers by training, Mr. Koh Seng Choon and his team customize kitchen tools to fit the needs of each type of disability in their program. The world's first customized noodle cooking machine for the disabled; point of sales machines the blind can use plus ones for use by people with intellectual disabilities; others that make the job of cooking much easier compensating for each person's inability - these are all an integral part of Project Dignity.

Not only are participants taught the skill of cooking, but they are also taught interview skills and guaranteed a job when all training is complete. Through the collaborative efforts of companies that support inclusive employment, Project Dignity's graduates are often able to secure employment. If not, Project Dignity will hire them.

Alongside Project Dignity which trains in food service, employs and integrates people with disabilities into society, *Dignity Mama* book stores provide employment. With the assistance of caregivers, these second-hand book stores are run by young adults with special needs, selling donated books, stationery and other tidbits.

This social enterprise initiative shows that sometimes the best innovations come from simple ideas. At their locations in Singapore and Hong Kong, Project Dignity hosts private events, accommodate social outreach programs, teach children how to interact with seniors and the disabled and also provide corporate employees with-a-day in-the-life-of-a-person-with-a-disability experience.

People with disabilities are at the heart of this initiative and Project Dignity welcomes every disability, race and age.

More about Dignity Mama

More about Project Dignity

Project **Dignity**

YAI Seeing beyond disability.

YAI has been providing innovative services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) since its founding in 1957, at a time when institutional living was the norm for people with I/DD. The nonprofit was launched in February of that year out of a small school in Brooklyn, New York.

Initially staffed by co-founders Bert MacLeech and Pearl Maze MacLeech alone, their pilot program served just seven people. According to Bert, from its very beginning YAI has been dedicated to providing innovative services for the I/DD community. MacLeech envisioned a "total life adjustment approach, emphasizing personal growth, social responsibility, employment goals, and the development of independence for the individual." This vision was nothing short of revolutionary.

Today, YAI has a team of more than 4,000 employees and supports more than 20,000 people in New York, northern New Jersey, and California. This extraordinary growth shows the ongoing need for holistic services for people with I/DD, and YAI's success in offering them. YAI programs include summer camp, occupational and physical therapies, crisis intervention, employment support, residential services, and everything in between. Through four affiliate agencies YAI also offers primary and specialized healthcare, and schooling for children with I/DD, including global developmental delays and traumatic brain injuries.

YAI is driven by its mission of living, loving, working, and learning. This applies not only to the people it supports, but to the staff as well. Commitment and passion for the work continue to unite employees and drive the organization forward. Empowering the people it supports to reach their goals remains at the heart of the organization.

To learn more, please visit **yai.org**.

Virtual Travel Nurtures Relationships and Sparks Curiosity Amongst People With Disabilities

by YAI.org

Omari Cohen and Ashley Smith both love to travel. The former is an experienced world traveler, while the latter is just beginning to experience group travel. Both have a disability and belong to *Leisure Trax*, a unique YAI travel program that carefully crafts enriching experiences for participants seeking adventure and independence. The program focuses on quality of life - rethinking what recreation looks like for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) - with inclusion being in the forefront.

"Travel normalizes that everyone really deserves to get a break and get out of town and see things beyond their community. And not only does that have value for the person in growing their own awareness of what's in the world, it can also allow caregivers a chance for respite," said Senior Supervisor of Leisure Trax, Kathryn Leonard.

When the pandemic hit, it forced the program, like many others, to rethink how to keep providing the much-needed service to a community that often gets overlooked in discussions of self-empowerment through travel. Although first met with hesitation, the transition to Zoom trips has yielded some surprising outcomes: friendships that began virtually more than a year ago are still thriving today, and the community's expansion of worldly knowledge is beyond what anyone could have fathomed. These undeniable pros make one thing clear: virtual travel is here to stay.

"We have totally changed the frequency of how often people have an opportunity to see one another," said Leonard. "Seeing someone once a year on a trip versus seeing someone four times a week allows you to deepen your connection in a different way and just have more things to talk about. I think we have seen people grow their social networks within Zoom."

Cohen, 47, is one of the participants whose heightened curiosity to see the world can be attributed to virtual trips. His thirst for knowledge and love of trivia have further expanded. For instance, during a recent online trip to Tanzania, he learned that Mount Kilimanjaro is the tallest mountain in Africa – a fact he proudly shares with a grin with anyone who asks.

Omari Cohen

"Virtual travel gives me happiness and something to do," said Cohen. "I felt less alone because I had these trips to look forward to."

The Bronx resident has been a member of Leisure Trax for 11 years. Pre-pandemic, his voyages took him on international trips to Italy and the Bahamas. In addition, he has also experienced national attractions such as whale watching in Alaska and visiting the U.S. Army Museum in Hawaii. The cruise enthusiast said he takes a "calm and cool" approach when embarking on his journeys and has no plans of stopping any time soon.

"I feel happier on the water and just getting away from land," Cohen said. "I feel more independent when I am traveling and experiencing new places that I've never been to before."

He hopes to check off some more places on his bucket list post-pandemic like New Orleans during Mardi Gras and Cleveland to visit the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

Currently over 60 participants are enrolled in Leisure Trax. Members range in age between their 20s and 60s. Trips are funded in a variety of ways, including private donations and fundraising.

"The group knows each other very well now," said Timothy Allan, Supervisor at Leisure Trax. "They know each other's interest and what each other likes, who likes to write in the group chat, who likes to answer using words or emojis. Everyone is so understanding about what other people need virtually and it's been great to have such a positive group."

Ashley Smith, 29, of Queens, joined Leisure Trax two years ago in hopes of getting out of her comfort zone and meeting new people. Her first trip was to Philadelphia. Her second to Frost Valley, an overnight camp in the Catskills that serves as a home for YAI's Mainstreaming at Camp.

"I was kind of nervous because I never left my mom for an overnight trip, but I wanted to be independent without my mom and make new friends," said Smith.

Smith credits the virtual trips for helping her consider getting on an airplane for the first time and traveling to Disney World and Puerto Rico in the future.

"Getting on a plane virtually makes me want to get on one for real," she said.

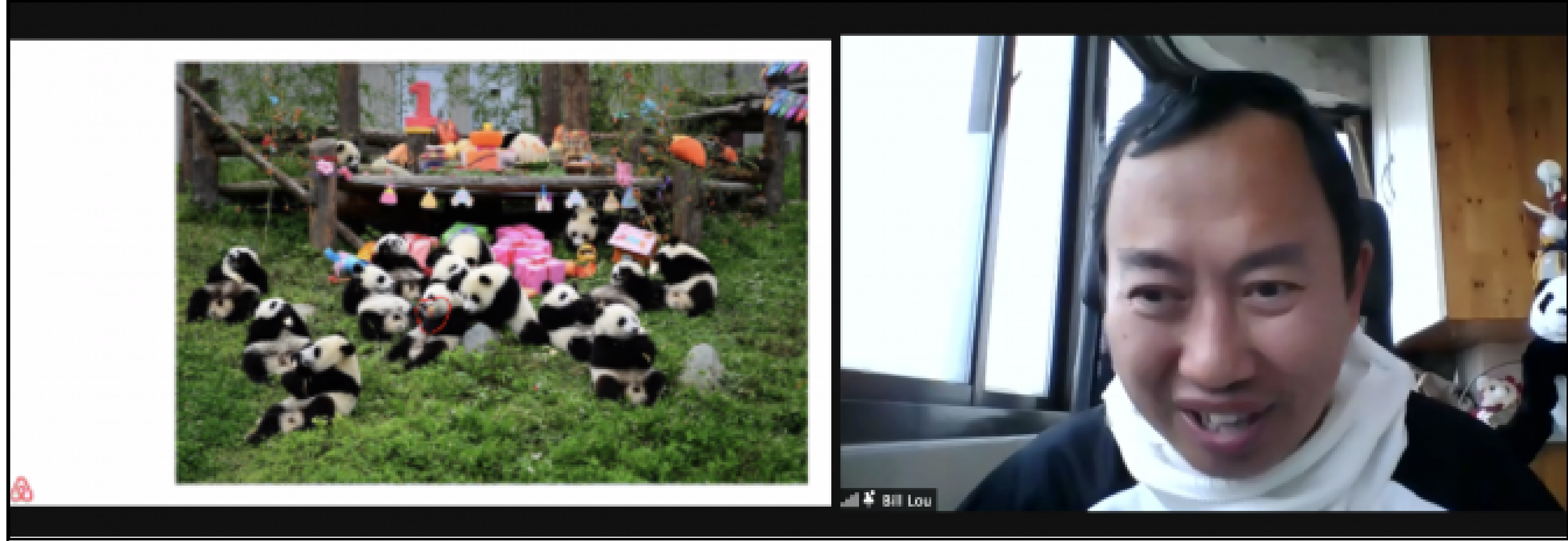
The travel industry was one of the hardest hit by the pandemic. According to U.S. Travel Association, since the beginning of March last year and through the end of 2020, the pandemic resulted in $492 billion in cumulative losses for the travel economy.


Ashley Smith

The crushing blow to the market altered how many offered excursions. Leisure Trax took the detour early on in the pandemic - switching the travel program into an all-virtual experience and rolling out its first online trip to Hawaii in April 2020. Since then, participants have "traveled" to numerous destinations, both local and international, and meet four times a week to explore new lands, getting a crash course for each destination.

"It's such a cool space because it leverages this environment where we don't have to be hierarchical and so it's really like a community of us and it doesn't have to be like here's the staff," said Leonard. "I will make a traveler a co-host on Zoom and so we are all members of the program and learning about a new place together. It really does feel like a community."

Weekly themed trips have jetted them across South America, the Galapagos Islands, Mexico to swim with the dolphins, and most recently a trip to China to learn about panda bears.



The group spent a Friday night with a nature travel guide who Zoomed in from Chengdu, China to teach them about the giant bear. The online experience was made possible by Airbnb. As part of its work to make travel more inclusive, last month the company rolled out a collection of 12 new online experiences designed by hosts with neurodiverse guests in mind.

"Our hope is these activities will help guests become more comfortable with a new activity or use them to connect with loved ones. Airbnb is committed to improving accessibility across our platform and we continue working toward our goal of making experiences as inclusive of as many needs as possible," said Suzanne Edwards, Airbnb Head of Hosting Accessibility Standards.

"My hope is we can get back together, go on new trips, and travel and see new places together," said Allan. "But being able to incorporate these aspects we've been able to use in the last year of long-lasting friendships, a travel community, ethical travel (learning about the places before we go there), are all equally important. I want to include putting the power in the traveler's hand of what we are doing and where we are going."

YAI Seeing beyond disability.
yai.org

Accessible Travel

Limitations in any form should not keep you from seeing the world, and having a family member with unique travel requirements, should not exclude *you* from traveling!

Accessible travel becomes more important every year. An Amadeus report on Accessible Travel says: "Millions of people with accessibility needs around the world want to travel more, be better connected, and have greater variety of personalized travel services and destinations. Above all, they want to be considered as *travelers* first, with the ability to plan, search, book and purchase their travel independently"

Travel spending in the disability sector has risen by 27% over the past 13 years and continues to rise with more destinations realizing the importance of having facilities that can accommodate everyone. Travellers with mental, cognitive or physical conditions desire and can share similar experiences as *every* traveller such as dining out, visiting the beach, sight-seeing, cultural explorations among other things. Be it cane users, slow walkers, hearing/sight impaired, wheelchair users etc., travel should be for all, and enjoyed by all.

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Travel can set you worlds apart from the everyday while enriching your life with memorable moments! Let the world be your oyster! A change of scenery and a break from the daily routine is always a welcome idea. However, as Alzheimer's disease or other dementias progress, changes in abilities can make it difficult to get away. Careful planning will help you manage the changes in surroundings and routines. Here are some tips to make the trip easier. When we plan holidays or even overnight trips, we recommend the following steps to make things smoother.

Tips for travelling with someone who has Alzheimer's/Dementia

1. Always work with a knowledgeable person for planning your flights, accommodation, transfers and tours. A professional will create an itemized itinerary that everyone should carry with them (especially the person with Dementia)

2. Keep a copy of the name and number of your hotel in a familiar spot in the person's purse or pocket, so he can ask for help if needed.

3. We suggest that you consider what stage the person is according to the Resiberg system.

Resiberg's system:

Stage 1: No Impairment. During this stage, Alzheimer's is not detectable, and no memory problems or other symptoms of dementia are evident.

Stage 2: Very Mild Decline

Stage 3: Mild Decline

Stage 4: Moderate Decline

4. We suggest that the traveler with Dementia be in the early stages (1-4) The earlier the more successful it will be.

5. When flying, we strongly suggest that 'wheelchair assist' be arranged with the airline. Although the traveler may NOT have any physical impairments, to ensure that the traveler not become frazzle with the size of the airport; it is safer to use this service.

6. If you are independently arranging the trip, consider booking a holiday package; which has everything pre-arranged for you.

7. Research the place that you will be visiting to make any changes and adjustments.

8. If you are planning on visiting friends or your family members, it is smart to give them an update on any changes that the traveler with Dementia has experienced.

9. Consider having medications 'blister packed' and keep a note from your physician detailing the condition, and a medication list.

10. Register the person with the Alzheimer Society's MedicAlert® Safely Home®. Members receive an engraved identification bracelet, which allows police and emergency responders to quickly identify a person who gets separated.

11. We suggest that you carry recent photographs, details of what the person is wearing, and preferred places of interest. This will help during a search if one is necessary.

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EZ4U offers a wide range of rehabilitation and mobility products, new, second-hand and for rent. They offer the most comprehensive range of rental equipment in Israel.

The ability to help people become independent and mobile brings great satisfaction to Shachar and his team and gives them the motivation to keep going. As they learn about difficulties each customer face they constantly think about additional products and services they can offer to help.

EZ4U is currently working on setting up an automatic system for renting mobility scooters in Tel Aviv.

www.mobilityrentalsisrael.co.il

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EZ4U

איזי פור יו

Shachar Hillel

Owner, EZ4U

In February of 2020, I needed to find a medical equipment provider to rent a specific type of shower commode chair. I was already anxious about the trip – flying to a new country for the first time and not knowing what accessibility, if any, I would actually encounter. Not having a shower commode chair was another thing to worry about. That was until I found EZ-4U Mobility Rentals Israel and spoke with a very kind man, Shachar Hillel, the owner. I explained what my needs were and the purpose of my trip. He said he would take care of this and meet me at my hotel upon my arrival. To my pleasant surprise, Shachar met me at my hotel in Jerusalem with the shower commode chair and even said he would bring it to the hotel in Tel Aviv for the second half of my trip. He did this at no charge for me.

I remember saying to myself that this would never happen in America. It never has!

~ Fred Maahs, Editor,
Mélange Accessibility for All magazine

Shachar was born and raised in Kidron – a small settlement south of Tel Aviv. His father had the only bicycle factory in Israel, and families approached him to manufacture unique custom-made bicycles for their children who had special needs. That was when, over 30 years ago, he began to learn and understand the world of people with special needs and their accessibility issues.

Today, his company, EZ4U specializes in mobility products. Over the years, he has developed relationships with manufacturers and suppliers worldwide and offer his customers in Israel the most suitable products for their mobility needs.

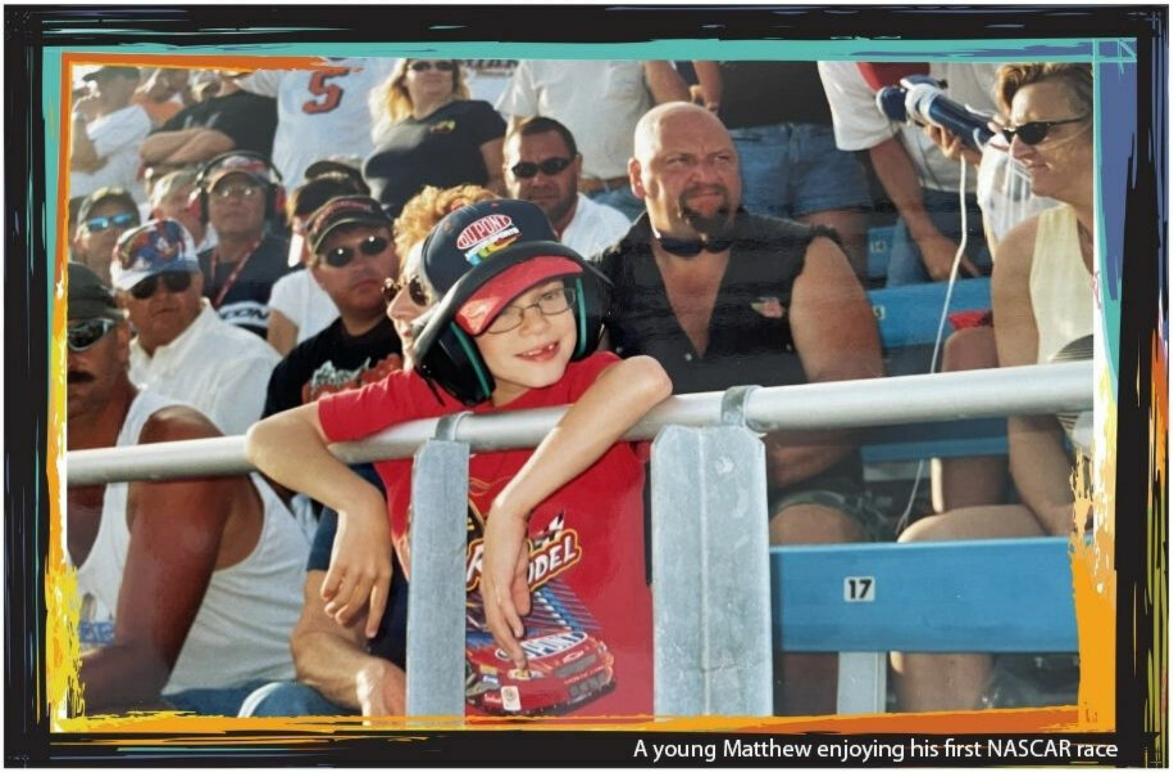
email: shillel@ez-4u.co.il

Matthew holding his first pair of Zoom Soldier 8 FlyEase

Matthew Walzer

From writing an open letter to becoming a disability advocate.

by Fred Maahs, Jr.



A young Matthew enjoying his first NASCAR race

I had the pleasure of meeting Matthew Walzer a few years ago when he was being honored with a Catalyst Award at the Annual Convention for The Arc. On that night, Matthew took the podium to be recognized for writing a letter to Nike. But really, it was so much more than that. You see, that night Matthew was being recognized for being a voice for the disability community and for changing a part of it forever.

I remember Matthew being very pleasant and polite, with a wide, contagious smile and a personality that people were drawn to. I know I was. And, thank goodness that hasn't changed. Each time I speak with Matthew, I learn something new and I realize all over again that this young man is going places and people will follow him. Mark my words!

So, what's all the fuss about? Well, let me share a little bit about Matthew and then you can decide if you have the same reaction as I did, and still do.

Matthew Walzer was born in Boca Raton, FL. two months premature in October of 1995, and was diagnosed with cerebral palsy spastic diplegia at around a year old. His cerebral palsy affects his walking, balance, vision, and fine motor skills. He went to school at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU and studied Business Management with a concentration in sports. And, like many teenagers, college was definitely a struggle, especially when you must navigate a campus with a disability like cerebral palsy. It forces you to grow up quickly and to learn on the fly. There were things within housing and transportation that needed to be, and ultimately were, worked out.

Matthew wants everyone, especially those within higher education, to know that, "Attending college with a disability is not a one size fits all, and that accommodations must be made to suit the needs of each student for safety and accessibility purposes. Each student has their own unique needs and deserves an education and that should be accommodated and respected." I couldn't agree more, Matthew.

Outside of the classroom, Matthew was very active with sports, including riding his bike, and swimming in the pool. When he wasn't in the action, you could find him watching or attending football, baseball, or NASCAR. Oh, and he loves a good action movie, "anything Spielberg, and yeah, I'm into Star Wars, too!"

They say with age comes experience and for Matthew, with age came experience and more independence. People are often taken aback as to how physically independent he is. Despite being legally blind in one eye, he can and does drive, and he uses a mobility scooter to get around as well. "A particularly funny, (or not so funny), thing that happens often is when I go out to eat at restaurants and people question how I got there and how I can even manage to eat food and order for myself."

But what about this Nike thing? How did it launch Matthew's position as a disability advocate?

In the summer of 2012, with college just around the corner and the goal of going away to school, Matthew wrote an open letter to Nike asking for shoes that everyone could put on, regardless of physical ability. The letter went viral (#NikeLetter) and what resulted was a three-year collaboration with Nike from 2012 to 2015.

"I would test and give feedback and insights on rear entry prototypes that Nike would send me and give my input on materials, fit, support, cushioning, and more," say Matthew. What resulted was the first FlyEase shoe that was released in 2015, the Lebron Zoom Soldier 8 FlyEase. "The independence that these shoes gave me allowed me to achieve my dream of going away to college. I graduated from Florida Gulf Coast University in 2018 with a Business Management degree with a concentration in sports."

Matthew is either going to be a very good and honest politician, or leading a major disability advocacy organization one day. His enthusiasm and passion exudes when you ask him about it.

In Matthew's own words, "Writing that letter to Nike as a 16-year-old boy, and now looking back on it years later as a 25-year-old man, I am proud to be a voice for people with disabilities. Through my letter and collaboration with Nike, I am so proud that people's lives have been forever changed, and now so many have freedom and independence that previously did not exist. I want people to view my letter as a source of hope and inspiration that anyone can make an impact. I have been fortunate enough

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to share my journey and continued desire to make the world more inclusive via various national multimedia platforms such as "The Drew Barrymore Show," NPR, Spotify, and Yahoo. I have also been recognized for my advocacy and spoken at events for United Cerebral Palsy of Los Angeles, The Arc, Runway of Dreams, Integrated Dreams Foundation, and CP Soccer. In 2016, I had the honor to speak on universal design and disability advocacy at the Obama White House for their Design For All Showcase. In late 2020, I spoke at a United Nations virtual summit on the role of advancing sport for development and peace. My goal is to continue advocating for change for people with disabilities across various sectors, including education, technology, transportation, and government." You can just feel, no, you know that Matthew is going to build upon his already very broad foundation of advocacy and create even more change.

I asked Matthew if he gets free Nikes for life and if he has heard from Nike and he replied, "Not recently."

He feels that the greatest challenges that people with disabilities face each day are being heard and seen and validated. According to Matthew, "people with disabilities are the most overlooked minority in the world."

Matthew stays active every day and he's even currently working on a book. "The book details my life story up to this point and details the struggles and triumphs of living with cerebral palsy." He's also the ambassador for people with disabilities for *AwarenessTies*, an online publication dedicated to making positive social impact.

Matthew is a force. A positive force. A force that will continue to evolve and make change for people with disabilities.

You can find out more about Matthew by going to his website at:

www.matthewwalzer.com.

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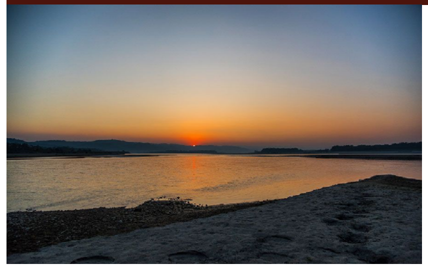

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