Fall 2023

mélange

Accessibility for All

TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHER

HOUSTON VANDERGRIFF

Art + Adventure + Advocacy

ISSN 2563-5697

To Table of Contents

Disability Awareness Days

October	Down syndrome Awareness Month (USA)
October	Dwarfism Awareness Month (USA)
October	Dysautonomia Awareness Month (Global)
November	Alzheimer's Awareness Month (USA)
November	Indigenous Disability Awareness Month (Canada)
December 1st	World AIDS Day (Global)
December 3rd	International Day of Disabled Persons (Global)

To Table of Contents

Contents


HERE YOU ARE
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Trade constant scrolling for winding trails.
Visit a new state of mind.
HEREYOUAREAZ.COM
ARIZONA
THE GRAND CANYON STATE

Editor's Note

Fred J. Maahs, Jr.

Greetings and Happy Fall!

Welcome to our October issue of Mélange, Accessibility for All, magazine.

I hope everyone had an enjoyable summer. For many of us, there were events and weather that impacted our daily lives, including our jobs and in some cases, our travel and vacation plans. Hopefully the coming months will be much better for all of us.

Here in the US, there were a number of Regulations and Rulings passed by our government which impacts the lives of people with disabilities, including the HHS Issues New Proposed Rule to Strengthen Prohibitions Against Discrimination on the Basis of a Disability in Health Care and Human Services Programs and Supreme Court upholds Section 2 of Voting Rights Act. Furthermore, the Supreme Court issued a ruling that protects the rights of Medicaid recipients.

As we enter the fall season, people around the world are traveling in record numbers and some estimates show numbers are even higher than pre-Covid in 2019. That's good news for all of us and for anyone with a disability or a special requirement, make sure that you do your homework and plan your travel with a reputable travel agency with the knowledge and experience to help you have an amazing accessible and worry-free trip!

In this issue of *Mélange Accessibility for All*, you'll see some great stories about people like Patty Cisneros Prevo and events, such as 2023 World Inclusion Day, and of course some amazing technology like AbilityNet.

As always, in every issue of Mélange Accessibility for All, we will continue to bring you stories from around the world about people, places, innovative technology, and companies that each make a difference in the lives of people with disabilities around the world.

And don't forget our sister magazine, Mélange Accessible Journeys. In this Mélange digital magazine, we share stories from all around the world about accessible travel destinations written and experienced by people with disabilities. In each issue of Mélange Accessible Journeys, you will find personal, firsthand accounts of what each traveler experienced during their journey. It's a resource for anyone of any ability who wants to take an accessible journey! We hope you enjoy it!

Keep using your voice and sharing your stories with us. We will continue to make it all real, all relevant, and we certainly appreciate your thoughts. Let us know if you have a assistive technology product you want us to try and write about, or if you want to invite us to visit your city, country, resort, or place of interest so that we can write about its accessibility and share it with our audience. You can reach me at fmaahs@readmelange.com.

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 email Marina Apperley at: **marina@readmelange.com**

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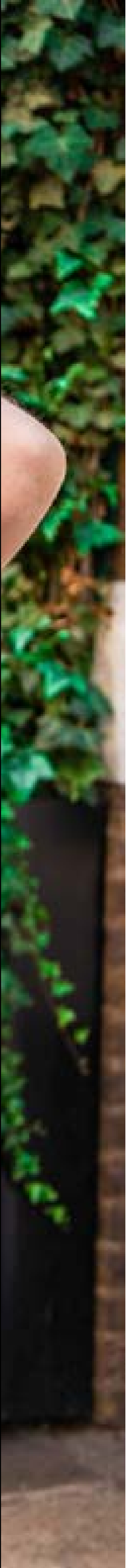
Mélange Accessibility for All magazine is published four times per year by Mélange Publishing Group 300-3665 Kingsway, Vancouver, BC, Canada V5R 5W2.

To Table of Contents

To Table of Contents

To Table of Contents



Chronically Jenni

An inspiration for others navigating the world with chronic illnesses

By Lisa Guthrie Deabill

A model, performer, content creator and public speaker—those are just some of Jenni Pettican's job titles. The young woman from the United Kingdom has already accomplished a lot despite suffering from chronic illnesses and invisible disabilities. In 2016, Jenni was diagnosed with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome (EDS), postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome (POTS) and a cerebrospinal leak. To raise awareness of what she and so many others face each day, Jenni has added activist to her resume and created the Chronically Jenni vlog.

Tell us a little about yourself and what brought you to where you are today.

I'm Jenni and I am a content creator, model, performer and public speaker from the UK. I live with my partner and our pets, a 3-year-old African pygmy hedgehog called Honey and our 1-year-old double doodle pup, Coco. Whilst I was studying drama at university, I was diagnosed with a cocktail of chronic illnesses which led me to start a vlog to share my experiences and found a whole community of others like me. So, I kept sharing and that evolved into the job and experiences I've had today sharing viral videos, educating businesses about disability and going down the runway at London Fashion Week.

You have done so much to raise awareness of chronic illness. How did you first become an activist? What has inspired you to open up about your own struggles and start the Chronically Jenni blog?

I actually started my blog when I was changing my diet due to intolerances as a way to share my recipes and there's still a little recipe corner on there today. But I first started sharing my experiences after getting my diagnoses whilst I was off at university and having surgeries. At first, it was just a way of sharing what was going on with people in my life because I'd left uni very quietly and kind of disappeared off the face of the earth. I went up to uni to visit my housemates and my friend Becky said to me you'd be really good at vlogging, maybe you should start one whilst you're off and so I did. It gave me something to work towards and was a way of getting back into the swing of things before I went back to uni and had deadlines again. As I opened up more and more about my experiences, I found a whole amazing community of people like me and vlogged my whole university experience as a student with disabilities. I then started sharing hacks and tips I'd learned through my experiences and people loved them which is when I started more on Instagram and TikTok with my hacks for spoonies series and mobility aid confidence tips and more recently have had a focus on educating nondisabled people about disability and helping disabled people have the right words for those difficult and ableist conversations. I've been so lucky and grateful to be recognised for my work with various awards and working with brands to be the representation for other disabled and chronically ill women that I didnt get to see when I was first diagnosed.

What is your most proud accomplishment to date?

There's no greater accomplishment for me than knowing I've made a difference in someone's life whether that's helping someone feel a little less alone, introducing them to a new hack or product which will help them, giving them confidence in their mobility aids or simply being that disability

To Table of Contents

representation that they needed to see. I also absolutely love when I'm able to change someone's mind about disability with my educational content. An actual project I'm really proud of is my EDS Awareness Month videos, I've dropped the ball the last couple of years due to my own health, but being able to make videos with people from across the world and share all our different experiences to raise awareness is incredible.

What advice would you give to other aspiring actors and actresses living with disabilities?

I think just try and be the representation you want to see in the world. But also know your worth and try to avoid being used and tokenised. The disabled community deserves SOO much more representation, and good representation in film and tv especially. I want to see more disabled roles on screen where the story isn't focused solely on the person's disability. So audition for all the roles, not just the roles specifically asking for a disabled character. Why can't there be a disabled James Bond or Doctor Who or Disney Princess?!

Do you have any advice for others hoping also to become disability activists, whether as a person with a disability or as an ally?

Disability is SO diverse so it's really important to listen to people with a wide range of disabilities and from a wide range of backgrounds including those with intersectionality. Speak from your experiences, but don't assume the disabled experience is the same for everyone. As a disabled person, finding a positive community of people who understand is so important. So, I highly recommend finding that place online which gives you that. As a disabled person or parent of a disabled person, it's also important to remember that you can still be an amazing activist without sharing every detail of your journey or medical history. You don't even have to share your diagnosis if you don't want to. I overshared a lot when I first started out and now I'm a lot more careful about the specifics I choose to share to protect myself

To Table of Contents

and my mental health. To a nondisabled ally, we really need your help. I'd say educate yourself, learn about disability pride and disability history and learn from disabled people. Share things on social media, ask your workplace to host a disabled speaker, ask if restaurants/ venues are accessible when you call, call brands and businesses and the media when you see they aren't being as inclusive as they could be. Us disabled folk are strong, but we are so tired of fighting and often being completely ignored despite being the biggest minority in the world that anyone can find themselves in overnight.

What can we expect to see from you in the next year?

Unfortunately, this year hasn't been a great one for me as I've been quite unwell both physically and mentally. So, my hope for the next year is to find more balance and to actually put myself and my health first for a change. I'm always coming up with millions ofideas for different things I want to do, but I'm not always great at being able to follow through. So, I don't want to make any promises. You never really can when you live with chronic illnesses. But I would really love to meet more of the community in person and I'll always try and do whatever my community would like to see from me as best I can.

What message would you like to share with the world about the importance of inclusivity and the power of the arts, such as acting, to unite people?

I think performing is such a powerful, important thing whether it's in the traditional ways of getting up on a stage or thingsI do much more of like making little video skits to try and educate non-disabled people about disability. It often makes a different impact presenting things to people in a different way so they can understand something differently. And the power of inclusivity especially in representation gives so much power to younger generations to have a much better self image and understanding of others than we did as kids. We can always use more positive role models in this world of every background and I think that will always unite people.

> **There's no greater accomplishment for me than knowing I've made a difference in someone's life...**
>
> ~ Jenni Pettican

To Table of Contents

To Table of Contents

Rebekah Taussig

To Table of Contents

- Rebekah Taussig -

"Disability is at the very heart of what it means to be human"

By Lisa Guthrie-Deabill

Tell us about yourself

I suppose I would begin with my curiosity. I am continually perplexed and fascinated by the world around/within me, and there is so much I long to understand. Finding words is the sturdiest way I've found to make sense of what often feels like chaos. And because I'm a disabled mother, daughter, partner and writer who grew up in the Midwest in the 90s, a lot of my writing looks out at the world through that lens. I first started sharing my writing publicly on my Instagram account @sitting_pretty in 2015. And in 2020, that writing evolved into a book by the same name. Before the book came out, I was also a teacher. But a few years ago, I pivoted away from the traditional classroom to writing, speaking, leading workshops and consulting full time.

You are an accomplished writer, having written dozens of articles, blogs and a book on living with a disability. Tell us what inspired your book, *Sitting Pretty: The View From My Ordinary Resilient Disabled Body.*

I've been paralyzed since I was a pretty young kid. I got my first wheelchair when I was six. It was the 90's, so of course it was hot pink. I've used a wheelchair to get around everywhere since, but it wasn't until my late 20's that I started to think with more curiosity about that experience. I'd inherited a lot of stories of disability – from my family, church community and media – but I'd never had the space or invitation to really think about what this embodiment meant to me. How would I tell this story? What felt important to me? What were the themes? What was the tone? It was actually in my PhD program, reading academic articles by disability scholars, that I first felt that prompt to consider for myself what my stories were. I found new language – like ableism and cripple punk – that felt uniquely true to my experience in my body, and it changed the way I saw myself and the world around me. Before that point, I knew next to nothing about disability history. I wasn't aware of disability community or culture. It was like I'd put on 3D glasses, and suddenly, there was an entire dimension available to me that had been invisible before. And when I saw that, my world exploded. So I started writing about it.

Instagram became the container to hold all the words. At first I just wrote tiny snippets about things like the ongoing, exhausting fight to find affordable/accessible housing, my growing affection for the aesthetic of my scars, the feeling of showing up to teach my first class of the year when I knew my students weren't expecting their teacher to use a wheelchair. I called these bits of writing mini-memoirs, and I didn't imagine they would be relevant to very many people. I was amazed to discover the opposite was true. I found so many beautiful humans in that space – like the ones sharing their own stories with disability, or the ones who weren't disabled, but genuinely wanted to understand the experience, or the people who showed up simply because they recognized something human in my writing. I'm still amazed by the connection, solidarity, friendship and community I found here.

The more I wrote, the more the writing itself evolved. The stories I wanted to write were becoming more complex and vulnerable, and I was struggling to fit everything into the tiny squares. At the same time I started longing for more space for these words to unfurl, I connected with my literary agent, Laura Lee Mattingly. She had the skills and experience to guide me through the process of imagining how to leap from mini-memoirs to a memoir in essays.

Rebekah, 1994

Rebekah, Summer 2016

Why is it important for you to put your thoughts into words to share with others?

The first part of this question – the drive to put my thoughts into words – might be something as simple as how my brain works. Writing is my mind and my heart. I don't know who I am, where I am, or what I think without the language to describe it. But I wonder if part of this drive to gather the words into stories that feel true started with growing up in a world that did not have the words or stories to fully represent my experience here. For the majority of human history, the stories of disability have been told by (written, directed, performed by) people who did not share that experience. And so, inevitably, those stories were flat and distorted approximations of something very real. It's important to me to put my thoughts into words, because I haven't seen them anywhere else.

To Table of Contents

And that is exactly why I want to share them with others. If I hadn't seen nuanced, full, complicated, dynamic stories of disability in the world, that means a lot of others hadn't had those stories either. I want to throw these stories in the world to insist that we are real and alive and part of this world. My hope is that we could fill the world with real stories of disability until the collective cultural narrative shifts and expands.


Rebekah, Summer 2018

You are also an educator with an interesting philosophy of teaching. Tell us about that.

I haven't been teaching in the traditional classroom since 2020, but it was my world for the previous eight or nine years, and that way of being in the world is in my bones. Teaching for almost a decade gives you so much perspective on the messy, vital work of learning. You have both a front row seat and a spot in the arena to look at the mechanisms of learning – what conditions allow that process to flow freely and what barriers impede it. Over and over again I observed two patterns:

1. learning is a risky, vulnerable endeavour and best cultivated in a safe community and
2. collaborative, active classrooms foster challenging, productive learning spaces.

Every time I lead a workshop, sit on a stage to speak, bring my insights as a consultant, or sit at my computer to write, I operate from this way of thinking. It's incredibly difficult to get to deep, lasting learning when we feel judged, defensive or ashamed. And conversely, there is so much potential for growth when we're actively engaging each other with respect and curiosity.

What can we expect to see from you in the near future?

I'm so excited about the children's book I've been working on. It's coming out in 2025. I've been dipping my toe in the world of film and television writing, which has been a fun challenge. As my son gets a little older, I'm becoming acutely aware of just how swiftly each day is passing, and I'm trying to find ways to tether myself to each tangible moment. Lately that has meant less time on the very app that has given me so much. I'm looking for new ways to create, connect and collaborate that don't rely so heavily on keeping me glued to my phone screen. Maybe a substack? A podcast? I'm curious and open.

What advice do you have for other people with disabilities looking to become a writer or journalist?

If I were to chart my path onto an actual map, it would loop all over that terrain. I've gotten stuck in cul-du-sacs, shot straight to the moon, and I never really know where I'm going next. I'm not sure that's the kind of path people want to follow? But, for what it's worth, here are the touchpoints that have guided my journey as a writer: read, read, read; say yes to all the things that interest you, even when you don't know where they'll lead; tune your ears to the sound of your own inner knowing and shake loose the outside chatter. We all have stories to tell, and the world needs those stories. That doesn't necessarily mean that you have to share them with the great wide world, but knowing them for yourself is an incredibly powerful act.

What message would you share with the world about living with a disability, and the importance of inclusivity?

For a very long time, disability has been framed as a sort of separate experience from the "normal, average" person. If you have a disability, suddenly you're catapulted into a distinct, distant category of human. In many real and tangible ways, we've built the world according to this way of thinking. What I've found, though – especially since my book came out a few years ago and I've had the chance to travel and meet with so many different groups of people – is that disability is actually at the very heart of what it means to be human. We all live in bodies that age, break, slow, scar, change and get sick. We move in and out of different levels of dependency from birth to death. And every human alive will experience disability if they live long enough. I think when we look to disabled folks – when we listen to their insights, stories and perspectives – we learn how to build sturdier, more sustainable worlds. When we build our spaces and communities to include disability, we build spaces that hold all of us.

Rebekah Taussig is a Kansas City-based writer, teacher and "human person" who believes that words and stories matter.

With a PhD in Creative Nonfiction and Disability Studies, she writes on disability, and the broader theme of being human.

She recently published a memoir in essays,
Sitting Pretty: The View from My Ordinary Resilient Disabled Body.

Find her at
www.rebekahtaussig.com

> **My hope is that we could fill the world with real stories of disability until the collective cultural narrative shifts and expands.**

To Table of Contents

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Autism Partnership Philippines

Opened in 2015 in Quezon City, Manila, Autism Partnership Philippines (APP) offer a unique style of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). Their child-centered, naturalistic approach serves families who have children with autism. Find more on their website.

What resources and support services does the APP offer to individuals with autism and their families?

Autism Partnership is committed to working with individuals with autism, together with their families and support system. We begin by arranging a parent consultation conducted by our behavioural consultant to identify the child's area of strengths, weaknesses, current skills and abilities. After this, we provide clinical advice about priorities of therapy, direction of the therapy (intensive one-on-one, group, with school support, etc.) and general guidance about autism spectrum disorder (ASD). We adopt our very own treatment called Autism Partnership Method (APM) which is highly individualized according to the child's current skills and needs. It is child-friendly, holistic and focused on in-the-moment-analysis and clinical judgment. This is integrated in all the services we offer. We create opportunities for them to practice the skills they learn in our program.

We also have APSparks, which is a resources website containing hundreds of videos with different training programs and suggestions. It aims to

To Table of Contents

provide high quality videos as well as articles of our applied behaviour analysis approach, Progressive Applied Behavior Analysis. In the videos, you will see different children learning similar skills but with different approaches individualized to their own unique personalities and learning needs. This website is also very helpful to teachers, school administrators and other education professionals to help them support their students with ASD in the school and other learning environments.

How does the APP raise awareness about autism and advocate for the rights and inclusion of individuals on the autism spectrum?

Autism Partnership is one with the community in advocating autism awareness and acceptance. Aside from promoting effective treatment, we want to highlight the need to improve quality of life for people with autism so they can lead full and meaningful lives as an integral part of society. We are dedicated to supporting families, providing training and strengthening the skills of parents, teachers and professionals caring for individuals with autism. We also conduct and support autism research and the development of programs aimed at addressing the social needs of individuals with ASD. Through our meaningful endeavours and continuous collaboration with different organizations sharing the same advocacy, we hope that the community will open doors that lead them to inclusion, employment, growth and success.

One particular event that we regularly join and support is the annual celebration of World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD), held on April 2. This is a great opportunity to gather more people from various sectors to educate them about autism, showcase the talents and skills of individuals with autism and establish more provisions on how to support them better.

Can you share success stories or testimonials from families who have benefited from APP’s programs and initiatives?

Yes, here are a few.

“AP continuously helps & trains us parents in dealing with our child. Before we knew AP we felt helpless, we panicked & did not know how to approach our child. Now we are firm & confident parents. Even family gatherings & Sunday masses become as typical as anyone's. Our child is now comfortable around people & behaves well during Sunday masses.”

“AP is an all-in-one package. They have a very holistic developmental approach. Not only has our child's speech been improving, but also his social and self-help skills as well. Our child has become more independent. Now I have a little helper - from tidying up toys, dirty clothes to the hamper, placing juice drinks back in the fridge, our child can now follow instructions. AP can customize programs for a child, on particular areas that we parents think also need improvement - like being comfortable during games or blowing out candles at birthday parties.”

To Table of Contents

“From being a non-verbal, our child uttered his first syllable on his 3rd month at AP. Our jaws dropped seeing our child for the first time imitate any one-syllable sound that teacher made. Now our child can speak & identify objects - juice, banana, car, basic shapes, alphabets & numbers, just to name a few. Our words list is expanding!”

How does the APP collaborate with schools, workplaces and communities to create an autism-friendly environment while promoting understanding and acceptance?

We are mostly focused on early intervention, as such we often collaborate with schools by providing consultations to teachers and staff to help them understand better how to help their students. In addition, we often send our staff to work in schools to support students' transitions and learning. We will work in the community to help our students develop skills that facilitate independence. For example: using transport, shopping, understanding rules and knowing what to do in various places are all important for families.

What upcoming events or campaigns is APP organizing, and how can individuals and organizations support them?

On October 21, Autism Partnership will have two of our behavior consultants share their professional expertise on ASD intervention with parents of children with ASD and other specialists. This conference, A Treatment That Changes Lives, will explore the key breakthroughs with the potential to significantly improve the quality of life for those on the spectrum. The five key themes that will be discussed are: school readiness for children with ASD, applying

ABA principles in small-group teaching, utilization of clinical judgment in the AP Method, effective strategies in handling behavioural problems, and teaching spontaneous communication and social skills for children with ASD. This conference will be held at Seda BGC Hotel, Taguig. For more details, click here.

Can you offer more about your perspective on autism in the Philippines and how APP helps communities to support families?

One major project we would like to devote ourselves to in the future is helping teachers in general classrooms know more about special educational needs (SEN) children. There are not many resources available in Tagalog and teachers receive limited training. We know that people in the Philippines are always keen learners, however, there is a lack of resources to help them gain knowledge. Unfortunately, early intensive intervention is also still only available to wealthy

> ”
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> **... we want to highlight the need to improve quality of life for people with autism so they can lead full and meaningful lives as an integral part of society.**

zipOns pants by befree Adaptive Clothing offer freedom and ease

Nicole Puzzo and Joanne DiCamillo co-founded befree to ease the everyday challenge of getting dressed for people with limited mobility. They remain committed to making adaptive and inclusive fashion that really works, products that provide freedom during a time when freedom feels far away.

Tell us about your company, befree, and how it came to be

The idea for zipOns® came to Co-Founder Nicole Puzzo when her daughter Stella, who was born with spastic quadriplegia cerebral palsy, was scheduled for surgery on both of her hips. Stella's post-surgical recovery was expected to take three months and require casts on both legs plus a bar between to stabilize her hips, making it impossible for her to wear traditional pants. Nicole asked the doctors and medical staff if they had recommendations on adaptive pants that she could dress Stella in to keep her warm and comfortable but there was nothing that existed. So, Nicole took apart a pair of pajama pants, adapted them and from there came the idea for zipOns®.

Nicole shared this story with her friend Joanne DiCamillo, who became impassioned by the lack of available adaptive clothing and the simplicity of the design that was so impactful for Stella. After only a couple of conversations, the friends decided to take the medical staff's advice and formed befree, LLC. Despite limited financial resources, they knew they had to work on

To Table of Contents

befree founders

evolving the design of the pants and bring the idea to market.

Nicole said, “After meeting with doctors and discussing the lengthy recovery process Stella would face after her surgery, I knew I had to do everything in my power to make her as comfortable as possible.” She added, “As a parent, when you see your child struggling your mind instantly goes into overdrive searching for solutions. The design concept for zipOns is simple, but it can truly change lives. I am excited to be able to provide other families with access to clothing that can make everyday living a little easier.”

Joanne DiCamillo, Co-Founder of befree, LLC said,"When Nikki first shared with me the idea for zipOns, I was shocked, like her, that she was unable to find pants with full zipper openings on the legs, or anything similar to accommodate Stella’s casts.” She continued, saying, “zipOns pants can improve lives for caregivers, people with disabilities or medical conditions, and people recovering after surgery and accidents. The market is large. It is very inspiring to see something so simple make such a huge difference. And makes you want to share it with the world."

Who benefits from your product, and how?

zipOns make dressing easier, safer and more comfortable for those living with disabilities or short-term mobility challenges due to injuries, surgery or other medical conditions. The patented design includes zippers spanning waist to hem, allowing them to open and unzip completely on both sides of the legs. They can be put on and taken off easily while standing, lying down or from a sitting position, without pulling up through the legs like traditional pants. zipOns also open from the bottom as needed to accommodate casts, braces and other medical equipment, making them ideal for post-surgery and injury recovery.

Though zipOns were created with limited mobility in mind, they are so stylish and versatile that they are also great everyday pants and great for sports and recreation. We have customers who use them for horseback riding, gymnastics, ice skating and fishing to name a few!

What sets you apart from your competitors?

There are other companies that make adaptive pants and some with full length zippers but befree holds both design and utility patents on our pants, for our unique design. We have an interior flange that covers the zipper entirely on the inside of the pants and folds over at the waist as well to prevent contact with skin and provide maximum comfort. This can be critical for customers with paralysis or limited sensation to ensure there isn’t anything irritating that could cause friction and lead to infection.

Our pants also come in a variety of color options which we haven’t seen as much of with our competition.

befree is an official sponsor of Swim Up Hill Foundation. Tell us about this.

We are all about inclusion and when we heard about founder and CEO, Paralympian Jamal Hill's mission, we wanted to support him and get involved. He is focusing on schools with large populations of underprivileged and children with disabilities to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to learn to swim. He is promoting inclusion as well as saving lives and we're proud to be a part of this amazing program! Learn more at swimuphill.org/

What advice do you have for others hoping to become champions for people with disabilities, whether as a person with a disability or as an ally?

Champions for people with disabilities are great problem solvers. Whether you are an ally or a person with a disability, if you have a solution to a problem for yourself or someone you are caring for, go for it! If it will help you then it can make a huge impact on others as well.

What can we expect from befree in the next year?

We will continue to promote adaptive and inclusive fashion with our messaging and will have some new product offerings as well. We currently have shorts and leggings in production, both with the same design and functionality as our long pants. These should be available in the upcoming months. Later this year we are going to work on joggers, cargo pants and jeans.

What message would you like to share about the importance of inclusivity and the power of the fashion industry to unite people?

befree is dedicated to improving lives by addressing the real, everyday challenges of people living with limited mobility, and we're committed to making adaptive and inclusive fashion that really works. While zipOns were initially created with Stella in mind, they have evolved to be a stylish and functional solution for millions who struggle to get dressed due to temporary or permanent disabilities. The market for inclusive fashion is substantial and growing. Millions of Americans live with a permanent physical disability and struggle every day to dress themselves. Temporary disabilities too—including lower limb fractures and hip and knee surgeries—leave millions more without good options for simple, attractive and wearable clothing. While designers are slowly becoming more aware of the need for inclusive fashion choices, to date those options are still extremely limited.

Everyone, regardless of ability or disability, should have a wide range of fashion options to express themselves and feel good in the clothes they are wearing. It is important for the fashion industry and consumers to recognize that the desire for fashion applies to everyone. We should all aim for a future where adaptive clothing is mainstream.

Because inclusion is so important to us, we want to make sure that financial hardship is never an obstacle to access our adaptive clothing. We have partnered with a local non-profit, the Jauron Family Foundation, to provide financial assistance when needed to purchase our pants. Learn more at **www.jauronfamilyfoundation.org**.

We invite readers to visit us at **www.befreeco.com**, join our email list and spread the word about befree!

To Table of Contents

Dateability

Q&A with Jacqueline Child (with input from Alexa Child)

About the Founders, Jacqueline and Alexa Child

I am a 29 year old woman who is disabled due to chronic illness. I became sick at 14 and it was quite an adjustment! Some of my diagnoses include gastroparesis, RA, lupus, and trigeminal neuralgia and I have endured over 40 surgeries. Through my experience with disability, I became interested in psychology, graduating with a BS and then receiving my Master's in Family and Human Development.


Alexa Child


Jacqueline Child

Alexa is 33 and is a public interest attorney. She has always been a tenacious advocate and is a true ally to the disability community. Her passion for social justice and equity is remarkable.

We grew up in Telluride, CO and now we live together in Denver. We both love watching TV, spending time outside and exploring new places.

Tell us about the inspiration behind creating this dating app for people with disabilities? What drove you to start this project? How long has it been in existence?

For years I had searched for a legitimate dating app for disabled and chronically ill people. My

To Table of Contents

experiences on the mainstream apps were so negative and filled with ableism. I would repeatedly get rejected and even worse, face discrimination. I have been told it would be selfish of me to have biological children, that I was a burden, and that people were surprised that their friend would date someone like me. These horrific experiences eventually led me to believe I was unworthy of love and broken. No one seemed to understand all that I had to offer.

Then, in 2021, I had to make the tough decision to get a J-tube for my severe case of gastroparesis. While this was a live preserving surgery, my biggest hesitation about doing it was how this would change my dating life. Living in Colorado, people are always looking to participate in physical activities, which meant my first dates mostly involved eating out. But with this feeding tube, I wouldn't be able to eat 3 meals a day as eating brings me lots of pain and vomiting. When Alexa and I discussed how I was going to handle this adjustment, I reiterated my desire to find someone who could understand me— even if the person didn't have identical circumstances, having a broader understanding of chronic illness would help foster a deep romantic bond.

Right then and there, we decided we would create our own app. We began sketching our ideas from my hospital room during my week-long stay and a year later, on October 21, 2022, Dateability was released.

What specific challenges or barriers do you believe people with disabilities face when it comes to dating, and how does your app address these challenges?

A big challenge with disabled dating is disclosure. It can cause a lot of anxiety and it absolutely did for me. I wanted to wait to share until it was relevant because I felt like people needed to earn that information, but sometimes the timing wasn't perfect. I never felt comfortable with when and how I disclosed and it seemed like I was either hiding a big part of myself or revealing too much too soon.

To combat this, we created the Dateability Deets section which is an extensive list of broad terms to describe oneself. People can choose terms like, "neurodivergent," "permanent medical device," and "chronic pain." We also include a type in option! This section really eases users' anxiety as they can present the information neutrally. Of course, this section is optional, but we have received great feedback from our users. We don't want our users to be ashamed of their disability or chronic illness and Dateability Deets is our way of combating that stigma.

To Table of Contents

STAND UP TO ABLEISM

Dateability

What sets your dating app apart from mainstream ones? What features or functionalities make yours stand out from other dating platforms?

Our mission is to be a fully inclusive app. We intend to break stigmas and stereotypes about disabled people and change the conversation surrounding disability and intimacy. We want to change the way non-disabled people view disabled people and in turn, change the way disabled people view themselves. After years of isolation and rejection, so many people, like myself, have been made to feel less than. We at Dateability are saying "no more" to these feelings!

In addition to our Dateability Deets section, we have a text box for image descriptions which is great for blind/low vision users and those with sensory processing disorders. Further, we launched Dateability to be compatible on smartphones and desktop computers.

Dateability is an extremely personal business venture and we are committed to making it successful. It is so vital that a company like this is run by someone among our community. I know first-hand the struggles we can face when dating. Of course, I cannot speak for everyone, but I do have an understanding of the situation and the devotion to changing it. For so long, we would see disability-focused companies being owned by non-disabled founders and in the end, their product doesn't live out to its full potential because there will always be a disconnect between disabled and non-disabled people. It has been really special to create someone for my community.

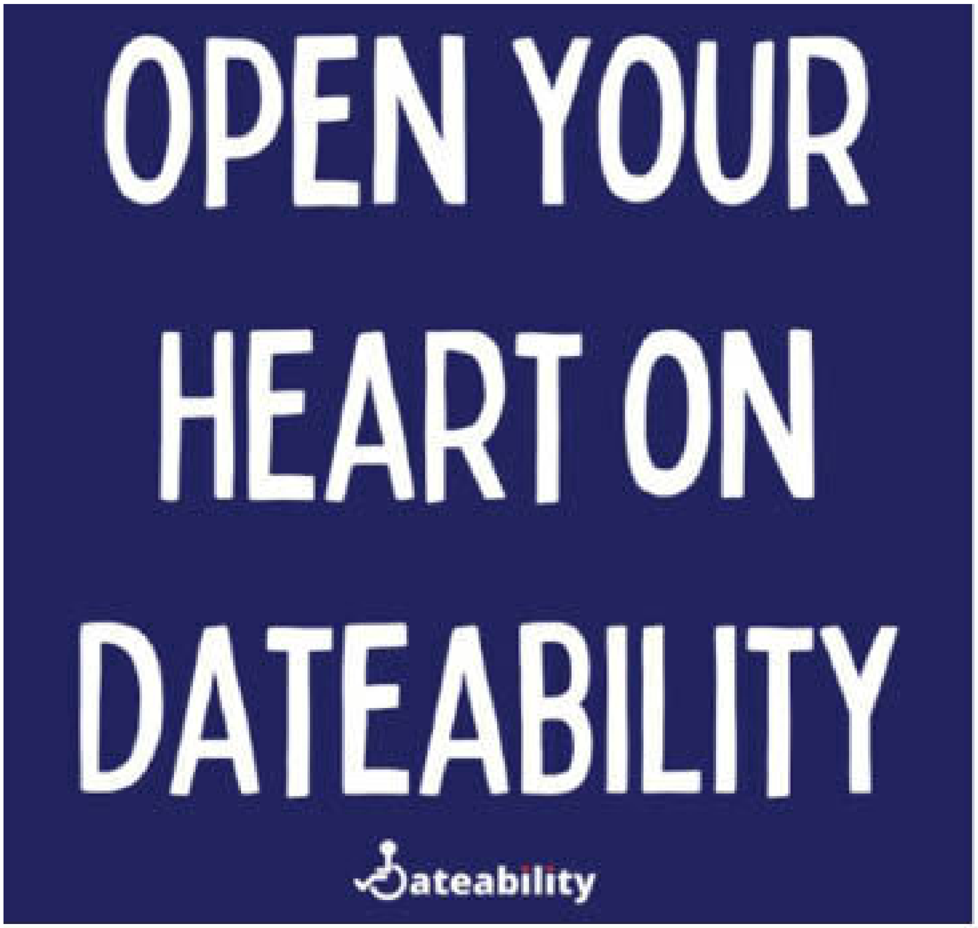
How does the app cater to the unique needs and preferences of individuals with disabilities?

When building Dateability, we took into consideration what our community values the most. We want a diverse user base, so we welcome people with physical, intellectual, and psychiatric disabilities as well as non-disabled people.

Another feature that our users love is the optional location function. There's nothing worse than getting on an app and not seeing anyone to swipe on. As a new app, we know it takes time to grow a significant user base, which is why we gave users the option to search within their 100 miles radius AND across the entire app. Long distance relationships are fairly common and we are excited to be able to facilitate these types of connections. Additionally, with

To Table of Contents

the ongoing pandemic, virtual dating is popular among the community, many of whom are high risk.



We are always very receptive to feedback because we want people to want to use Dateability. Although I am disabled, I do not represent everyone in my community and there are so many things I've learned along the way. We appreciate suggestions for ways we can enhance our users' experiences.

Accessibility is crucial for people with disabilities. What steps have you taken to ensure that your app is accessible to all users, including those with visual, hearing, or mobility impairments?

Accessibility is at the foundation of Dateability. While there is always room for improvement, we continuously make accessibility a top priority. For example, launching with a web app version in addition to mobile apps was important for those who only use desktops or laptops. Desktops are often more screen reader compliant and can be helpful for those with mobility impairments.

When developing our profile verification process, we worked hard on making the poses accessible, so we included ones with only facial expressions and single hand movements. We also provide an alternative verification method in the event none of the options given are accessible.

Inclusivity is key in a dating app for this demographic. Will you say that your app is a diverse and welcoming community for users of all backgrounds and disabilities?

Our user base is so diverse! While the majority of our users are millennials, we really do have people of all ages. We have heard from a fair number of our older users that this is the first dating app they've ever signed up for, which is such an honor. We also have a fairly even split between male and female, which is atypical of dating apps. Through the Dateability Deets data, the most common selections are physical disability and chronic illness. Furthermore, to be completely inclusive, we allow non-disabled people to join Dateability. There are many people who don't stigmatize disability and/or have experience with it and we welcome those people on our platform. Of course, we welcome people of all sexualities, races, gender identities and ethnicities!

Read the rest of Jacqueline's interview here.

Patty is a diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) professional in Wisconsin, U.S. She's also a three-time Paralympian, and a two-time Paralympic gold medalist in wheelchair basketball. The former teacher determined to fill a gap in children's literature by writing the book, *Tenacious: Fifteen Adventures Alongside Disabled Athletes,* which highlights 15 disabled athletes and their major accomplishments. **Follow her @patty_cisneros_prevo_ply_**

Patty Cisneros Prevo

remains *Tenacious*

Tell us about yourself

In the fall of 1996, I was a freshman at Indiana University, when I was in a car accident and acquired a spinal cord injury.

Before that I had been an avid athlete. I ran cross-country and track, played volleyball and tennis and basketball. Making that connection back to sport was something my physical and occupational therapists homed in on during my rehabilitation after my spinal cord injury. I know it sounds cheesy, but I really mean it that when I was introduced to wheelchair basketball, that really changed my life. I needed it therapeutically, mentally, physically, emotionally, all the ways that therapy can really benefit us.

I was competitive before my injury and that certainly didn't go away. I found this new sport and was really excited to jump into the world of wheelchair basketball. I played on team U.S.A., went to the Paralympic Games, got gold medals in 2008—that team was great—and I went on to play professional wheelchair basketball. It's always shocking to people when they hear there is a professional wheelchair basketball league. I played for a team in Germany, and we went undefeated, won three cups and it was the pinnacle of my career. I returned to the U.S., played here for a couple of years, off and on. I finally retired to pursue the next chapter of my life—settling down, getting married and having kids.

I had been an elementary school teacher, off and on, but when I had my kids, I realized that there was this huge gap in children's literature. Naively, I told people that I decided to write a book about all these incredible disabled athletes that I had met and who were not being shown in children's literature. That's how my book got started. Of course, I made many mistakes because I didn't have any creative writing experience. I'm so happy that Tenacious did get published after a six-and-a-half-year journey. I'm super thankful to be able to share these stories of 15 incredible individuals.

Tell us about training for the Paralympics; how difficult was that?

It was difficult in the sense that Paralympics and Paralympians don't get the same sort of resources and support as our Olympians. And so that's what really made it tricky.

We had to fund most of our own training. Oftentimes, many of us had to work full-time and train full-time. It lent itself well to being a student athlete, which I was since that part of my career was when I went to the University of Illinois. I got my graduate degree and I was also training for the Paralympic Games as a student athlete.

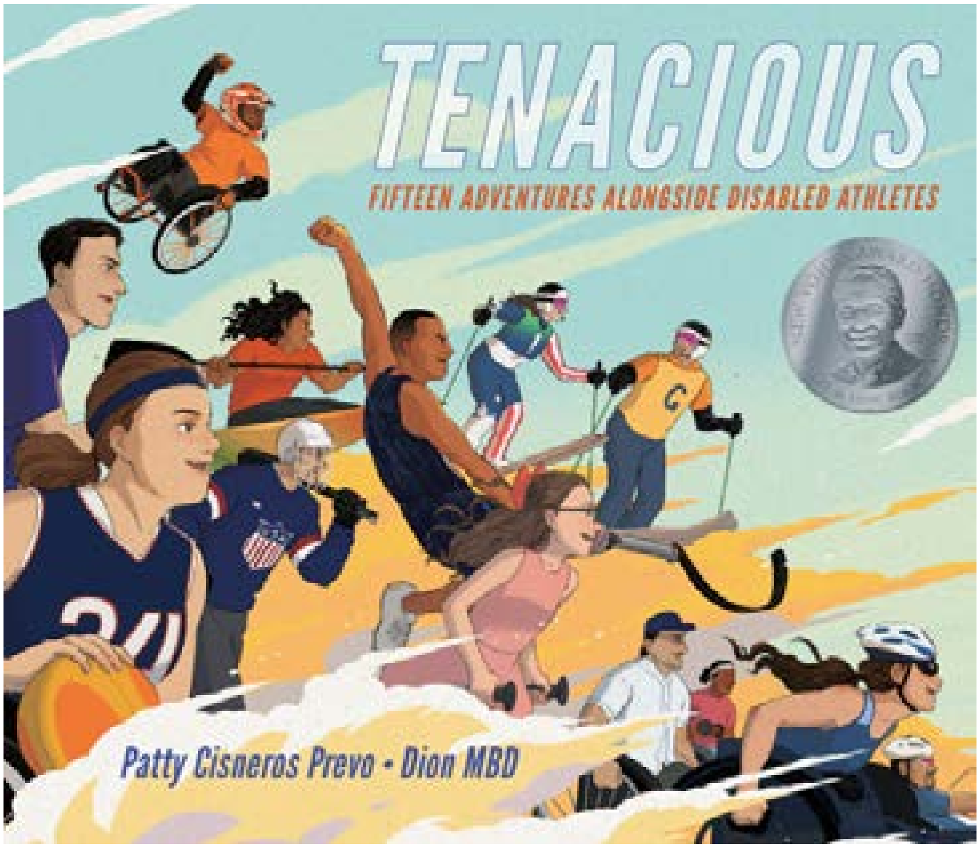
It was tricky because, with little funding or finances, we couldn't just focus on the training. So there were always other barriers that were presented while we trained. Certainly there are some Olympic sports that have the same issues—the smaller ones that are not televised or advertised as much as swimming or basketball. I think those athletes understand the sort of obstacles that we have to go through as Paralympians.

As for the training, you love the sport so you want to put in the work. I loved being in the gym with my teammates and I loved scrimmaging and practicing. All that wasn't hard; that was the fun part. It was the politics part. Always the politics.

How have your children dealt with the success of your book?

It's really interesting. My kids see the level of ableism in our world that I didn't even see as a disabled person. My husband is not disabled, and the way that people interact with me compared to the way they interact with him is different. Our kids see that and they're always asking, "Why do they do this with you and not to him?" or "Why did they ask you this and not him?" So I think my kids have already been really immersed in the disabled community, whether they wanted to or not. You are born into advocacy just being kids of a wheelchair user.

My kids are very proud of me, super proud. They always brag about me and I think, because of proximity, their friends also have this awareness of disability because of us. My hope with *Tenacious* is that we can have this representation, this awareness, this education of disabled individuals at such an early age that it mitigates those harmful stereotypes and micro-aggressions that disabled people face on a daily basis. I hope it can target the youths, so they can be the change makers. They could really change the narrative around disability.



In your work as an author, a disabled advocate and a DEI professional, what achievements stand out for you?

I'm really proud of my time at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which is where I started my career change. I was as elementary teacher then I transitioned to higher education and into the field of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). I learned so much about myself and my students, and about the work that it takes to be anti-racist and be a true advocate for social justice and learning. I was able to learn and share that with my students, which was very meaningful. These students weren't kids but they could still have a huge influence as newer voters. We can make such an impact on our society just by learning and sharing. We can put that into practice at the ballot box or in classes or with community events, public service, etc. It was really great to be able to transition into this career and learn and share all things DEI with students.

To Table of Contents

Do you envision writing another book?

Yes, I just signed my second contract with Abrams Books for a book loosely based on my life with my intersecting identities of disability and my Mexican culture heritage. That will be fiction but then I am also writing Tenacious 2.0 and I really want to highlight disabled musicians. I am really excited about this, but I understand that I'll have to do a bit more research because sports is my background. I already knew all of the athletes in Tenacious so that was easy. I could just call or text them for information. Music is not my scene and so it'll take a little more work.

I'm constantly working on a lot of manuscripts. I write a lot about me, my experiences and my identities. Not me per se, but the identities that I hold and so, lots of my books or my manuscripts right now focus on disability.

What advice do you have for others wanting to advocate for those with disabilities?

Very simply, I think people need to do their own work around learning about disabilities. It is such an emotional tax and emotional labor for disabled people to educate non-disabled people about their experiences. So, if you really want to be a true ally or if you're disabled and want to learn more about ableism (we certainly have a lot of internalized ableism as disabled people) I think the work starts with you. Google is at your fingertips, literally. Google ableism, for a working definition and how can you be a better ally to disabled people. Learn what language is harmful, what language is outdated and that we're moving away from.

I think the work really starts with you. Once you start learning more about the movement, you can plug into disabled organizations or books. Books are a fantastic way to learn more, Tenacious is one of the many vessels to do that. I think that people can find that second step once they've done the work within themselves.

What advice would you give your younger self?

Oh, my goodness! I think, be curious and inclusive of differences. I don't know if I was or wasn't. I remember there was a girl who was a wheelchair user in my high school. And I didn't really try to be friends with her or want to know about her. I was just like, okay, there she is and I helped her in a couple of classes. But it wasn't like I went out of my way to learn more about her experiences. I think I would tell myself to be a little bit more curious and a little bit more inclusive of those with differences in general because it could be race, it could be sexual orientation, it could be disability, it could be gender identity, it could be anything. But not to be comfortable within just your own space.

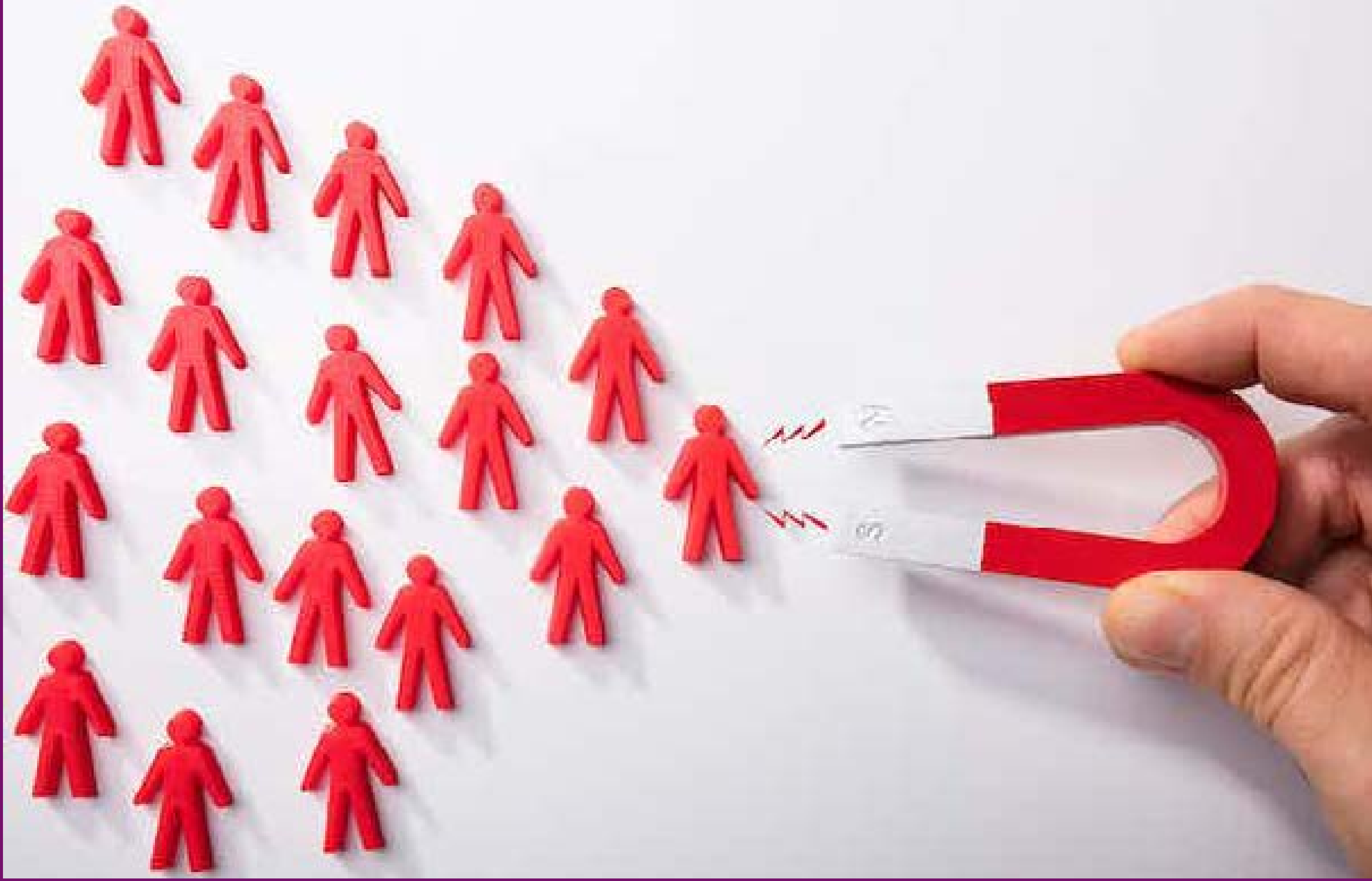
What message would you share about the importance of inclusivity and sports to unite people, educate them or help them grow?

I think that we really need to be intentional about inclusion. I think it's one of those buzzwords right now but in order to truly be inclusive, we have to be intentional about those we are welcoming into spaces.

We want that inclusion, but we also want people to feel like they belong. We don't want to hear, "Hey wheelchair user come in this space that's not very accessible." Inclusion takes that second step of thinking I want to invite this person into the space, but I also want to make sure they feel like they belong, and we've made any necessary changes so they feel included, valued.

I think we can do that with non-disabled sports and disabled adaptive sports just like with other areas—music, art, non-traditional sports or outdoor sports like hunting. I think there is great opportunity to provide that inclusion and belonging in those spaces if we're intentional about it.

To Table of Contents



The job market is experiencing an influx of job-seekers at the moment, putting the responsibility on employers to attract employees to their organizations. (Shutterstock)

Employers need to prioritize employee mental health if they want to attract new talent

By Stephen Friedman

Canadian employers are currently facing significant challenges in attracting and retaining talent in the workplace, putting the responsibility on employers to attract employees to their organizations.

One key way for employers to achieve this is by prioritizing the mental health of their employees. Workplaces are increasingly recognizing that productive employees actively seek out workplaces that prioritize mental well-being and offer flexible working conditions.

This recognition is well-founded, as employees tend to be more productive when they are not burdened by mental health challenges.

As a teacher of current and future leaders, my experience confirms that employees want workplaces that facilitate well-being. Many of my students have indicated that mental health support at work is a must-have.

To Table of Contents

Mental health stigma

Mental health is a pressing issue for many. In 2021, a quarter of Canadians reported having symptoms of a mental health disorder. Five million reported needing professional help, and over one-third said they were burned out. Forty per cent of workers aged 18 to 24 indicated they were at a "breaking point."

Although many employers are starting to recognize the importance of mental health support in the workplace, stigma still persists, resulting in negative attitudes and discriminatory behaviours.

Leaders play a crucial role in addressing mental health stigma by modelling risk and vulnerability. By using informal communication, like sharing stories about their personal struggles, leaders can support the mental health of their employees.

There is growing evidence that shows stigma decreases when leaders disclose their own mental health and substance use problems. This reduction in stigma, in turn, encourages employees to share their own stories and seek out treatment.

Being mindful of language

Leaders need to be careful about how they go about addressing stigma. Even those with good intentions can unintentionally cause harm. For example, using the word resilience to discuss mental health can be problematic.

Framing resilience as a necessary skill for battling mental illness overlooks the fact that some mental health conditions are disabilities that cannot be toughed out. Assuming that mental toughness is an inextricable part of addressing disability is a form of ableism.

Any employee who is suffering from mental health issues that cannot be fixed by resilience may avoid telling their story or

One way to fight mental health stigma at work is by encouraging workplace leaders to share stories about their personal struggles. (Shutterstock)

Allowing employees to choose when and where they work can help mitigate mental health challenges. (Windows/Unsplash)

seeking support for fear of being seen as weak.

It's important for leaders to be mindful of the language they use to foster mentally safe and supportive working environments.

Workplace flexibility

Evidence-based research about the outcomes of mental health awareness and wellness programs is currently lacking. These programs are well-intended, and experts are optimistic that we will have a better idea of what really works once we have more data.
In the meantime, there is something employers can do immediately to prioritize the mental health of their employees: allowing them to choose when and where they work.

Flexibility has been proven to work well in many jobs over the past few years, including in larger organizations like 3M Canada and Desjardins Group, as well as small and medium employers like Auvik Networks and GSoft.

Unfortunately, flexibility can sometimes lead to boardroom debates about how many days in the office employees should work. As a result, what was initially intended as flexibility can inadvertently lead to rigid remote work policies. Workplaces need to be aware of this.

True flexibility, without the need for employees to justify themselves, can help mitigate mental health challenges. By allowing for downtime and encouraging employees to do activities unrelated to their work,

To Table of Contents

stress and burnout can be minimized.

Challenges can also be minimized by recognizing when employees are most energized and productive and adjusting work schedules accordingly. The success of a flexible workplace hinges on the ability of leaders to trust their employees and refrain from micromanaging them.

A new way of thinking

According to a recent job insight survey, when employees are forced to choose between flexibility and stability, most will choose stability.

But do we need to choose one over the other? Why can't we have both? As many know from the last few years, employees can be productive at different times and in different places when leaders provide the necessary resources and support to make flexibility possible

Leaders have the valuable opportunity to challenge the typical "either/or" way of thinking and instead using "both/and" thinking. A personal experience of mine exemplifies this.

Once, during a teaching session, a sales executive recounted a story about an employee of hers who asked to work remotely due to mental health challenges. This leader turned down the request, insisting the sales team could not successfully sell remotely.

A debate ensued among the other executives and a suggestion was put forth: Why not have the sales team try selling remotely and see how it goes?

Either/or thinking stops new solutions from emerging. It misses how creative tension — the gap between where a group is and where it wants to go — can help us challenge conventional assumptions about work, like the belief that flexibility and stability are mutually exclusive.

In light of the prevalence of mental health issues, and the importance of fostering inclusive workplaces, leaders who act as agents of change can help reshape conventional notions of leadership and build better workplaces.

This article was originally published in The Conversation. Read the original article here.

Houston Vandergriff with his camera in Phoenix, AZ

- Houston Vandergriff -

A journey in photography captures dreams and breaks barriers

Art + Adventure + Advocacy

By Mel Padmore

In a world that often fixates on differences, one remarkable individual is proving that uniqueness can be a powerful asset. Meet Houston, a 25-year-old with Down syndrome, whose journey into the world of photography has not only enriched his life but has also been a motivational force for countless others and an effective advocacy tool. Houston's story is a reflection of the boundless potential that exists within each of us, regardless of our abilities. In a household that refused to define him by his condition, Houston was always cherished and celebrated for the vibrant soul he is. His mom Katie said, "Houston was just Houston and we treated him like the other children—he's got two sisters, 27 and 28 years old. In our family we never made a big deal about him having Down syndrome."

Your first encounter with Houston may be through his website, www.downsandtowns.com which dazzles with a captivating mix of vibrant colors and sleek, modern design. Its intuitive layout effortlessly directs visitors through its engaging content. From his fine art print collections available for global shipping, to a diverse Merch section offering reusable bags, phone cases, calendars, sweaters, mugs, baseball caps, gift cards, and more – there's something for everyone. What makes this website even more special is that it was designed by his sister. She is the visionary behind his logo and branding.

The website, however, provides merely a glimpse of Houston, the photographer. His journey began long before, as he had always been drawn to photography. Even as a preschooler, he clutched disposable film cameras during family trips, capturing memories with the zeal of a budding artist. Upon graduating from high school, his family recognized the synergy between their love for travel and Houston's passion for photography. He enrolled in a professional photography certificate program at University of Tennessee, where he honed his technical skills and immersed himself in the art he adores.

His fascination with photography took a pivotal turn while attending the photography program. During the class, his instructor noted that there appeared to be few travel photographers with Down syndrome and suggested, "That could very well become your unique niche." With the encouragement and unwavering support of his family, Houston subsequently set out on a remarkable journey that would see him blossom into a travel photographer with a unique perspective. Photography became his voice, an advocacy tool and a canvas reflecting his adventurous spirit.

Houston's family loves to travel and their experiences, which spanned 49 US states and beyond provided a rich canvas for his creativity. As Houston's skills developed, so did his connection to the local photography community and an international audience through social media. Mentors and collaborators emerged, guiding him in the intricacies of color, composition and editing, and nurtured his growth as a photographer.

But Houston's journey was not confined to personal development. It was about breaking down barriers and advocating for inclusion. Over the past year, the family has shared their story at conferences, inspiring others to pursue their passions, regardless of perceived limitations. They have also taught photography classes for individuals with Down syndrome, reinforcing the universal value of photography as a means of expression.

As we delved deeper into Houston's story, we learned about the daily life of a passionate photographer. With his trusty iPhone always at hand, he captures moments that might otherwise slip away unnoticed—but his

The Vandergriff family in Iceland – Maranda, Elisa, Houston, Katie, and David

To Table of Contents

professional photography is entrusted to his Nikon DSLR-D850! Houston's journey has been a continuous evolution and remarkably, his story took an exciting twist when Nikon recognized Houston's talent and commitment. They reached out, sending him a mirrorless camera and lenses. He's also visited Nikon USA Headquarters to speak during their career day.

Through it all, Houston remains humble and excited about the possibilities that lie ahead. His sources of inspiration are many, including the friends he's made within the photography community among whom are National Geographic-featured photographers. As technology constantly evolves, Houston remains committed to the ever-learning journey of photography but his life is not solely defined by photography. He also actively participates in baseball, basketball, and even claimed a unique victory at the Mr US STAR Amerifest competition this year, channeling his inner Elvis Presley. Yet, perhaps the most significant achievement in Houston's journey is the impact he's having on people worldwide, and for the places where awareness and acceptance of individuals with disabilities are still emerging, it is profoundly significant. He has garnered a dedicated following on social media platforms, particularly TikTok, keeping his audience engaged, motivated and inspired, extending his advocacy far beyond the realm of photography, touching hearts and minds across cultures.

Hot air balloons at sunrise in Cappadocia, Turkey

Streetcar in Lisbon, Portugal

Fallen tree in Yellowstone National Park

Icebergs floating in the Jokulsarlon Glacier Lagoon in Iceland


Visiting the market in Cairo, Egypt


Dirt road in Idaho

Houston's adventures and travels continue and with it are invitations to share his journey. His award-winning photography has graced galleries around the world. Earlier this year, he was among the accredited photographers at the Indianapolis 500. One of his favourite projects is working on non-fungible tokens (NFTs) photography with photographers all over the world and this May, in New York City, he was honoured as one of the top 100 NFT creators making a difference in the world!

Houston's story resonates with love, determination and the belief that every life holds value, irrespective of ability or disability. His journey reminds us all that our dreams are within reach, and our differences can be our greatest strengths. With his unwavering spirit and camera in hand, he is a shining example of what can be achieved when we choose to see the beauty in every moment and every person.


Geysers overflow in Yellowstone National Park


Houston at work at sunrise in Cappadocia, Turkey

To Table of Contents

Houston with his first image sold as a digital collectible (NFT)

Award: “Take Flight” won second place and was exhibited in the Nashville International Airport

Gallery shows: Houston’s work has been exhibited in galleries and shows in NYC, Scotland, Venice, Rome, Lisbon, LA, and Barcelona

To Table of Contents

Take Flight

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To Table of Contents

Houston's journey reminds us all that our dreams are within reach, and our differences can be our greatest strenghts.

To Table of Contents

All Wheels Up

Advocates for accessible air travel

By Pauline McKenzie

Michele Erwin and family

Alan Chaulet

Their genesis

All Wheels Up was born out of personal experiences. Founder Michele Erwin's son has spinal muscular atrophy and during a flight when he was very young, she realized there was a severe lack of wheelchair accessibility on airplanes. This experience ignited her passion to improve accessible air travel for individuals with disabilities, paving the way for All Wheels Up. Alan Chaulet, a technology enthusiast and entrepreneur, shared a similar vision, inspired by a 2014 petition requesting airlines to make planes accessible for individuals with disabilities. Their shared passion led to the merger of their organizations, strengthening their advocacy efforts.

Their unique approach

This organization operates differently from many other advocacy groups in the field of accessible air travel. While some organizations focus primarily on advocacy, All Wheels Up takes a multifaceted approach. They collaborate directly with airlines, airplane manufacturers, regulators, universities, engineers and more, to conduct research, develop solutions and ensure safe seating for wheelchair users on airplanes. One key differentiator is their commitment to promoting diverse ideas. All Wheels Up hosts annual working group meetings where

To Table of Contents

The All Wheels Up Flight Coin presented to Senator Tammy Duckworth. These coins are given to their presenters and heroes who want to make history happen.

various universities and original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) present their ideas related to accessible air travel. This open approach fosters innovation and encourages a broad spectrum of solutions. The organization also supports the efforts of other advocacy groups, sharing information and resources to drive the cause forward.

Their impact and benefits

All Wheels Up's primary beneficiaries are individuals with disabilities, especially those who rely on wheelchairs for mobility. They aim to empower these individuals to travel safely and comfortably, opening doors to new experiences and opportunities. Beyond the disabled community, the travel industry as a whole stands to benefit from their efforts. The economic impact of accessible air travel cannot be underestimated. By making air travel more inclusive, billions of potential passengers with disabilities can contribute to the industry's growth. The organization's research and advocacy are not just about improving accessibility, they also have the potential to drive significant economic gains in the travel sector.

Upcoming initiatives

- They recently hosted their fourth annual Global Forum on Wheelchair Accessible Air Travel. This event brings together major stakeholders to discuss innovations, research findings and advocacy efforts.

- They are expanding into the realm of medical research, focusing on the human factors involved in accessible air travel. This research will address issues such as head strikes, lumbar injuries and the psychological aspects of travel for individuals with disabilities.

- Their advocacy efforts are also set to continue, with a strong focus on improving training for wheelchair agents and airline personnel. They aim to establish proper credentials and certifications for individuals handling passengers with disabilities, ensuring their safety and comfort during travel.

A message of inclusivity and unity

In the spirit of inclusivity and unity, All Wheels Up sends a powerful message to both the disabled community and the travel industry. They highlight and emphasize that the travel industry should not be viewed as an adversary but as a potential partner in making air travel more accessible. Airlines and manufacturers are increasingly open to learning and improving accessibility and this should be embraced. For individuals with disabilities, the organization encourages active advocacy and support for one another. Disabled people have unique perspectives and valuable contributions to make, and their active participation

To Table of Contents

can drive meaningful change. All Wheels Up believes that everyone has the right to explore the world, and accessible air travel can make this dream a reality.

As All Wheels Up continues its groundbreaking work, we optimistically look forward to a future where air travel is truly accessible to all, and the travel industry becomes a beacon of inclusivity and diversity. This organization's dedication and innovative approach serve as an inspiration to advocates worldwide, reminding us that progress is possible when we unite behind a common goal.

Learn more at **www.allwheelsup.org**

Wheelchair test

All Wheels Up highlight and emphasize that the travel industry should not be viewed as an adversary but as a potential partner in making air travel more accessible.

To Table of Contents

I suffer from the world's most beautiful disease – and also the most expensive to treat

By Antonio J. Pérez Pulido

My name is Antonio and I suffer from spinal muscular atrophy (SMA, for friends). My life expectancy was only a few years when I was born, almost half a century ago. And all because I "got" a rare, neurodegenerative disease, which is among the genetic diseases with the highest associated mortality.

What happens, simply put, is that my motor neurons (the "cables" that link the spinal cord to the muscles) gradually degenerate and end up dying. This has kept me in a wheelchair for most of my life. And over time, the involvement of the respiratory muscles can lead to the fatal outcome.

But since I am also a scientist, I must add that I have discovered that SMA is the most beautiful disease in the world… at a molecular level.

How does spinal muscular atrophy occur?

SMA is a genetic disease caused by the mutation or loss of a gene called SMN1. If our mother and father have a mutated copy (one of two copies each), and we are unlucky enough to inherit these two defective copies, we are likely to get SMA.

This gene contains the information to guide the

To Table of Contents

construction of a protein called SMN. Its name comes from the suggestive acronym survival of motor neuron, and it plays very important roles in our body. In fact, without SMNs, there is no survival of motor neurons, and no possibility of life itself. This is because these cells are essential for carrying out muscle movements, including those of the diaphragm or pharynx, which allow us to breathe and eat.

So how do SMA patients survive? Because it turns out that there is a second gene in the human genome, called SMN2, which also allows us to build the same SMN protein. SMN1 and SMN2 are almost identical, but SMN2 differs in five of the more than 40 000 letters or nucleotides of which these genes are composed.

The existence of virtually identical genes is very rare in the human genome. In fact, SMN2 does not even exist in other animals: it is unique to our species.

A lifesaver

These minimal differences between the two genes mean that the SMN protein from SMN2 is only produced in its entirety in 10% of cases. In principle, this would be insufficient for long-term survival, but it happens that humans can have from zero to more than ten copies of the SMN2 gene.

Doing a quick calculation, if we have ten copies, and each copy produces 10% of SMN, we will generate 100% of the SMN protein we need. But what happens if we have fewer copies of SMN2, say five? Well, only 50% of the required SMN is made up.

So, in general, those who lack the SMN1 gene and have only one copy of SMN2 have a severe case of the disease, with more rapid progression (type I). Those with two copies have a milder case (type II). Finally, with three or more copies we have an even milder case (type III) and the chances of living longer are increased.

Given this reality, we can conclude that evolution “invented” the copy of SMN1 in humans to have a lifesaver in the case of losing the main gene. Beautiful, isn’t it?

Extortionately expensive treatments

Knowing all we know, how can we cure SMA? If SMN1 is missing or the gene is mutated, as with other genetic diseases, there is no choice but to replace the missing gene. In fact, although it sounds like science fiction, this substitution is already underway. In 2019, the drug Zolgensma was approved, which allows the SMN1 gene to be introduced via a virus that carries it directly to the motor neurons.

But the real beauty of SMA is that, because SMN2 exists, we can use other, more original approaches. Let’s think about it for a moment: if we can figure out what makes SMN2 produce only 10% of the full SMN protein and fix the problem so that the percentage is higher, we can compensate for the lack of SMN1.

And that’s what the first treatment approved in 2016 for SMA, Nusinersen, does, as well as another one greenlit in 2020, Risdiplam.

What these treatments achieve seems really easy to do if we rely on a bit of basic biology. In the case of Zolgensma, it’s all about getting the SMN1 gene intact into the motor neurons, which is now called gene therapy. And in the case of the other two treatments, the challenge is to get something to stick to the region that differentiates SMN1 and SMN2, to turn the latter into the former.

But the difficulty of making this work, and also bringing it to the rare disease market, means that both treatments are among the most expensive in the world. Zolgensma costs no less than…. two million euros per dose! That makes it the

most expensive disease in the world. Fortunately, only one dose is needed. In the case of Nusinersen and Risdiplam, it would cost between 400,000 and 800,000 euros per year (and, of course, per patient).

Why these sky-high prices? We will never know. Pharmaceutical companies usually negotiate the price of the drug independently in each country and with zero transparency. This leads them to consider the drug as a commodity, the price of which is not necessarily linked to its development and production cost. Rather, it is the price one is willing to pay for the life and well-being of patients in every part of the world.

By the way, none of the three drugs cures. They only slow down the progression of the disease – which is no small thing.

Future for SMA and other rare diseases

What will happen in the future with these rare disease treatments? Well, obviously, the market will eventually drive prices down. Treatments such as gene therapy have already been used for other diseases, and will undoubtedly continue to appear and, more importantly, to be perfected. Ultimately, the universality of their use will favour lower prices.

On the other hand, we can pin our hopes on drug repurposing, i.e. the use of existing drugs for other diseases. This has the enormous advantage of greatly reducing costs and shortening research times.

In conclusion, it is indisputable that SMA is a devastating disease, and that SMA patients will always have the right to complain about the bad luck we were born with. But at least I hope I have shown that this disease has a special charm at the molecular level which, for those of us who suffer from it, also gives us a certain right to call it "the most beautiful disease in the world".

This article was originally published in The Conversation. Read the original article here.

To Table of Contents

- Lansing recognized by Accessible Journeys and Travel Ability as one of the top three destinations in the country for those traveling on the autism spectrum.
- Lansing recognized as the first Able Eyes Certified Destination in the country.
- Virtual tours allow people of all abilities to explore public places prior to visiting.
- Sensory Friendly Activities & Calendar of Events.

Plan your getaway at *Lansing.org*

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ACCESSIBLE VENTURES

St. Maarten

- Passionate about ensuring the transportation needs of people with disabilities are met
- 26 vehicles include ADA cars, vans and tour buses
- Helps with Medivac and non-emergency medical transportation
- Their non-emergency medical transportation services cover St. Maarten and neighboring Saba, St. Eustatius and Anguilla

www.accessible-ventures.com

@accessibleventures

Planning a trip? Give them a call: +1 721-542-0411
or email: accessibleventures@outlook.com

http:// Snippets from the www

Rutgers launches disability studies minor to explore world of oft-ignored community

A university is shedding light on the challenges people with disabilities face by offering a new minor in disability studies. Read the full article.

Disability Advocate Alyssa Higgins Expecting Baby No. 2 with Husband Jimmy: 'So Excited' (Exclusive)

A disability activist, who suffered a spinal cord injury at birth, has announced exciting news that she is expecting her second child. Read the full article.

These women say dating with a disability is tough, but they're hoping to change stereotypes

Dating, in general, can be challenging and stressful. One woman with cerebral palsy explains why people with disabilities face increased barriers when searching for love. Read the full article.

Checking off a childhood dream: Riding a wave, despite my disability

He thought he was just clumsy. 50 years later, a man who was unable to surf as a kid learned why. Now, he's making that childhood dream come true. Learn more.

"We're Not Invisible": Disabled SAG-AFTRA and WGA Members on Accessibility Challenges — and Solutions — at the Picket Lines

Striking WGA and SAG-AFTRA members with disabilities explain the challenges of the picket line and what they say is needed to make it more accessible for everyone. Read the full article.

To Table of Contents

Charities fear disabled could be forced to work from home under benefits changes

Activists fear that changes to the United Kingdom's disability benefits program will force people with disabilities and illnesses to find work when they're not well enough to do so. Read the full article.

Autism may be identified early with eye-tracking device, studies show

A new device has been found to speed up an autism diagnosis in toddlers by simply following a child's eye movements. Read the full article.

A psychologist didn't know she has autism and ADHD until she was 37. Now, she educates others on spotting subtle symptoms.

Her autism and ADHD diagnosis didn't come until she was 37 years old. Now, the psychologist is educating others about the subtle symptoms in adulthood. Read the full article.

How to teach kids to befriend a child with a disability

Making new friends can be a challenge for children with disabilities. But there are some ways parents can encourage their kids to befriend someone who seems a little different. Read the full article.

Toronto man wins disability accommodation fight against Air Canada

Canada's largest airline has been ordered to do more to accommodate passengers with mobility devices after a man was denied access to a plane because of the size of his power wheelchair. Read the full article.

Personal experience informs Google executive's work in accessibility and disability inclusion

A Google executive is on a mission to make workplaces more accessible by improving the usability of Google products. Read the full article.

Denmark apologizes for abuse of people with disabilities

Denmark is apologizing for the abuse of thousands of children with disabilities while committed to state institutions. Read the full article.

To Table of Contents

A Conversation with
Spencer van Vloten

Spencer van Vloten is a nationally published writer, community advocate, and editor of BCDisability.com. He is a recipient of the BC Medal of Good Citizenship, BC Achievement Foundation Community Award, Vancouver Excellence Award, and was named the Rick Hansen Foundation Difference Maker of the Year. You can find more of his work at SpencerV.ca or follow him on X at @SpencerVanCity

Can you tell us about your personal journey and what inspired you to become an advocate for people with disabilities?

My older cousin has cerebral palsy, which impacts his speech and significantly limits his mobility in all but one arm.

Growing up I looked up to him like he was Superman, because we would arm wrestle and he was so much stronger than me, but then I also started seeing the barriers he faced and the frustration it caused him. When I was younger, I struggled to understand why he had to go through this, and I promised myself that I would help make society more equitable for him one day.

As I got older and developed a stronger grasp on the system factors behind inequality, I became more active in community organizations and campaigns advocating for people with disabilities. Through this work I noticed some especially prominent barriers faced by people with disabilities, with poverty and inaccessibility – of physical spaces, information, attitudes – being two of them.

Spencer van Vloten

"Be kind to each other – we can accomplish more together than if we are divided and bickering."

My work since has focused significantly on these areas, and I am happy to see my cousin doing well and living independently – he even does adapted skydiving!

Share with us some of your accomplishments, awards and recognitions you've received over the years

For community advocacy and my writing on inclusion I have been awarded the City

To Table of Contents

of Vancouver Excellence Award, the BC Medal of Good Citizenship, the BC Achievement Foundation Community Award, and I was named Difference Maker of the Year by the Rick Hansen Foundation.

I have also had nearly 100 articles published across Canada and this year wrote the Vancouver Community Pocketbook, a free printed resource book for community organizations working with marginalized populations.

A lack of access to information is one of the barriers that has repeatedly appeared in the community work I have done, and that motivated me to create the book – so far almost 5,000 have been distributed.

In what ways do you collaborate with other disability advocacy organizations and individuals to amplify the voices of people with disabilities in BC?

BC Disability shares stories of persons with disabilities in BC and across Canada, through articles on the website and social media. Our social media channels also function as a discussion hub for disability issues and for people to express their perspectives. We accept articles from anyone who has something they want to say, and aim to be as low barrier as possible.

One of my deepest connections has been with my friend Paul Caune. Paul has muscular dystrophy and formerly lived in an oppressive long-term care setting. He advocated strongly for himself and eventually won his freedom, and now advocates for others living in

Receiving the BC Achievement Foundation Community Award from Lieutenant Govenor Janet Austin

With my friend Paul Caune

institutional settings. Paul has written several articles for BC Disability and opened many eyes about the darker sides of long-term care.

When it comes to groups doing similar work, supporting one another is so important, and to that end BC Disability helps promote events, campaigns, and programs of other disability organizations. The more we support each other, the more people who will benefit.

BC Disability covers a wide range of topics related to disability. Can you highlight some of what you think are the most pressing issues facing the disability community in BC today?

The one that stands out most is, quite simply, survival. Six million disabled Canadians live in poverty, as disability assistance rates are below the poverty line in every province and employment opportunities for people with disabilities are limited.

The average cost of a one-bedroom apartment in Vancouver is nearly $3000, which is about double the rate of provincial disability assistance, only one percent of rental housing is available in the city, and not all of it is accessible. It is a similar story across Canada.

If you do not have stable housing, and cannot afford nutritious food, tuition, or all the meds you need, it makes it so much tougher to achieve your goals and live a happy, healthy life.

Despite this, government continues to be aggressive in clawing back supports for disabled and low-income persons, meaning they are being legislated to stay in poverty.

With self-advocates, city councillors, and school board trustees at a Community Inclusion Month event I organized

To Table of Contents

With the Community Living BC Vancouver Council, which advocates for the inclusion of people with developmental disabilities

Accessibility and inclusion go beyond physical spaces. How does BC Disability promote awareness and action in areas like employment, education, and social inclusion for people with disabilities?

One way was through helping advise the City of Vancouver on the organization of its accessibility consultations. That included connecting self-advocates and other people with disabilities to city staff to provide input on accessibility barriers, which are still present in virtually every aspect of life. Through these consultations attention was brought to the many ways Vancouver needs to become more accessible, and how the city's accessibility strategy, in concert with provincial accessibility legislation, can facilitate this.

Recently I was also a contributor to a town hall on HandyDART and the need to create more accessible transit systems in the province's Lower Mainland. HandyDART is meant for people who cannot access public transit, but it has increasingly become unreliable as service is limited and they are outsourcing more rides to inaccessible taxis.

BC Disability's role is to highlight issues like this, and also to promote opportunities for the public to get involved in solving them.

Overall, there is still far to go to make our communities accessible, but there has been progress in recognizing that accessibility is about more than ramps, curb cuts, and lifts, and that it extends to equally important but less visible areas like attitudes, education, and information.

To Table of Contents

Handing out copies of the Vancouver Community Pocketbook to seniors

The media plays a significant role in shaping public perception. How do you strive to challenge stereotypes and promote more accurate representations of people with disabilities through BC Disability?

One of the main ways is to share the stories and perspectives of people with disabilities. The more these are highlighted, the easier it is to counter inaccurate narratives, and to create more positive ones.

It is also important to call out poor representations, and to applaud good ones. The more critical people are, the more pressure the media will feel to accurately portray communities that are stigmatized - the disability community and people living in poverty among them.

In your role, you likely interact with various stakeholders, including policymakers and advocacy groups. How do you collaborate with these entities to bring about positive change for the disability community?

Unfortunately, people with disabilities are still small fish on the agenda of policymakers.

There are a few reasons for this, and one of them is a lack of awareness about the issues people with disabilities face.

For example, I had numerous meetings with MLAs about the province's clawbacks to disability assistance based on spousal income, and many of them were unaware this situation even existed. Without knowing a problem exists, elected representatives are highly unlikely to pursue reform in these areas, so it is crucial to

To Table of Contents

educate them about these issues.

But education is not enough. Our political reps have to manage so many different issues and interests that it often takes significant pressure to push one near the top of the pile. That is why it is essential to raise our voices and build the momentum to force the hand of those with power to make better laws and policies.

It is also why I think it is so important that people come together and are supportive of one another, consolidating our power as advocates rather than competing within a movement.

How can individuals, businesses, and the community at large get involved and support the work of BC Disability and the disability community in British Columbia?

When it comes to BC Disability, please spread the word. Share the website and if you have the means you can also donate to the funding of the Vancouver Community Pocketbook – the book is given out for free and one hundred percent of every donation goes to printing costs. You can visit my personal website SpencerV.ca to get your own free copy.

But in general, there are many ways to make an impact: volunteer with a disability-related organization, speak to your elected representatives or at public consultations, share the stories of people with disabilities, write letters to the editor, educate your friends and family, attend rallies and events supporting more inclusive communities, call out injustice or accessibility when you see it, sign and share petitions.

Even a little gesture can go a long way.

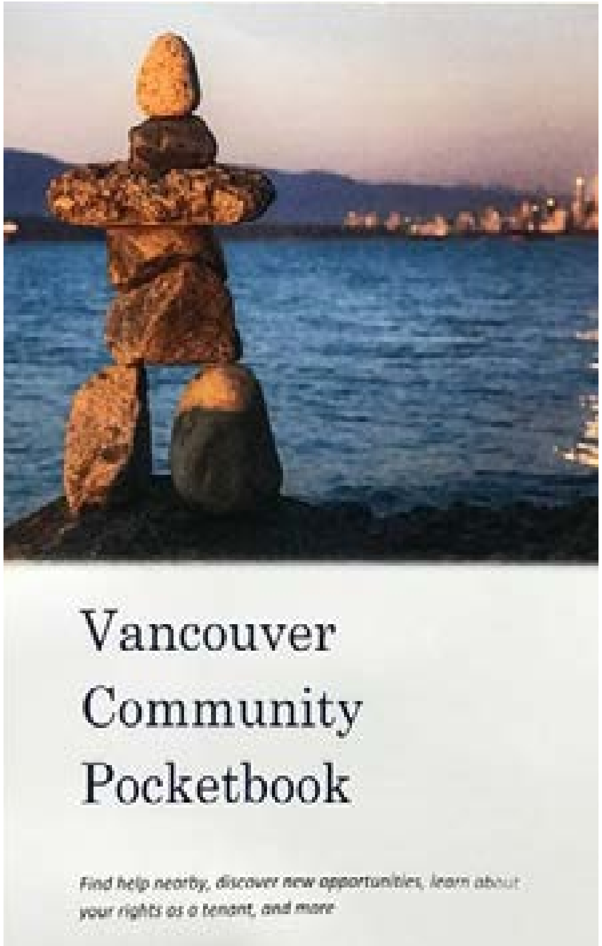
Share with us your other interests and advocacy efforts outside of disabilities.

Certainly! I don't consider myself a disability advocate so much as I do a community advocate, with disability justice being a critical aspect of that.

I also do a lot of writing and advocacy on issues like poverty reduction, housing, mental health, and even some local and national history. It is tough to isolate these topics because of all the interconnection among them – you move one and it changes the position of all the others.

In closing, I'll like to add: be kind to each other – we can accomplish more together than if we are divided and bickering.

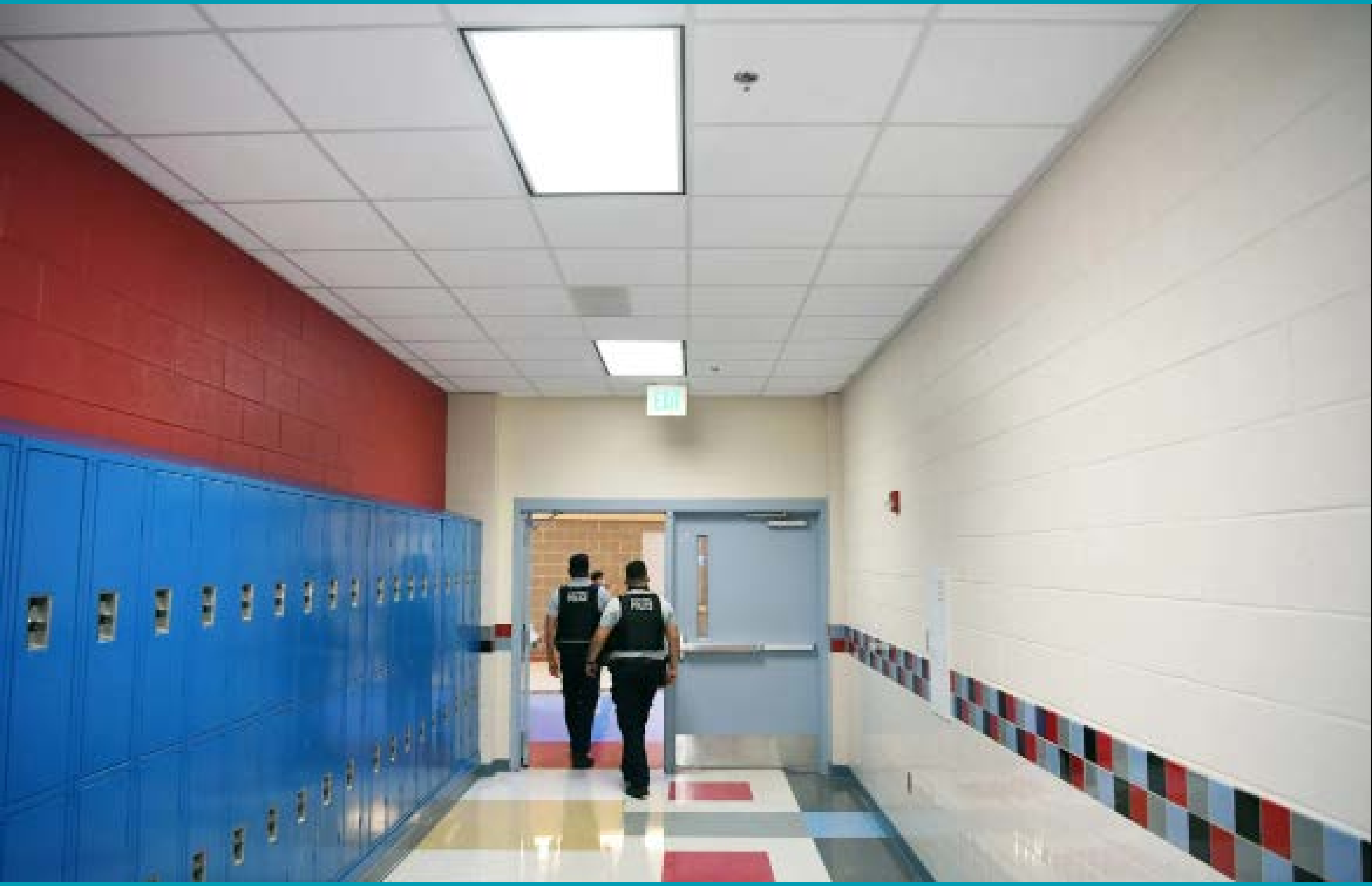
Read about BC Disability's Vancouver Community Pocketbook **here.**



Vancouver
Community
Pocketbook

Find help nearby, discover new opportunities, learn about your rights as a tenant, and more

To Table of Contents



Alexandria Police Department school resource officers walk through T.C. Williams High School in June 2021. The City Council voted in 2021 to pull funding for school resource officers and then reversed itself five months later. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post via Getty Images)

Schools target students with disabilities for discipline 'too often'

New federal guidelines remind schools that special educators and mental health professionals are better equipped to deal with student struggles than police.

By Corey Mitchell

New federal guidelines aimed at reducing high rates of discipline for students with disabilities affirm that schools are responsible for the discriminatory behavior of police and school resource officers on campus.

That includes incidents when schools refer students to law enforcement, an action that can lead to school-related arrests, criminal charges, fines or citations that require them to appear in court.

The Center for Public Integrity's

2021 analysis of U.S. Department of Education data found that school policing can have severe consequences for students with disabilities. Our investigation, When Schools Call Police on Kids, revealed that schools referred students with disabilities to law enforcement at nearly twice their share of the overall population.

The U.S. Department of Education guidance, released in July, comes after the Trump administration rescinded something similar in 2019.

"Too often, students with disabilities face harsh and exclusionary disciplinary action at school," U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona said in a statement.

The agency warned that many students with disabilities are disciplined "because they are not receiving the support, services, interventions, strategies, and modifications to school or district policies that they need to manage their disability-based behavior."

The number of students with disabilities referred to law enforcement is likely higher than federal data shows because some schools fail to report referrals as required and undercount the number of children eligible for disability rights protections. Four of the nation's ten largest school districts, including New York and Chicago, reported that law enforcement officers arrested zero students during the 2017-18 school year despite evidence to the contrary.

Such errors undermine the purpose of federal data collection: to ensure the civil rights of all children in the United States are protected in schools.

"The idea that when you do something so strong as to kick a kid out of school … or to call the police about their conduct, and yet some districts say, 'Oh, we don't have the data. The police have the data,' to me, that's just not a legitimate excuse because that's such a huge intervention," said Daniel Losen, director of the Center for Civil Rights Remedies, an initiative of the Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Law enforcement referrals can also have a domino effect, causing students to lose time in school if they're suspended or expelled because of interactions with officers.

The National Association of School Resource Officers has provided training for more than two decades on supporting students with disabilities, said executive director Mo Canady.

"Most things we deal with in a school environment are not criminal. We have to learn to be better advocates," Canady said. "When students have special needs and disabilities, that requires a different level of care."

Despite years of pressure on schools to limit policing of students or halt it altogether, not much has changed.

In the past year, mass shootings at Oxford High School in Michigan and Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, had districts across the country pledging to increase law enforcement presence on school grounds.

Research shows that police stationed on campus do little to prevent school shootings.

A sheriff's deputy assigned to Oxford High rushed to the school and helped stop the shooter, but not before the 15-year-old killed four students and wounded seven others. In Uvalde, 376 law enforcement officers responded to Robb Elementary but took more than an hour to end a standoff with the gunman, who killed

To Table of Contents

19 students and two teachers and wounded 17 others.

Nevertheless, a gun safety law that President Joe Biden signed into law this summer more than doubles funding for school police and other school security upgrades, adding $300 million to the federal program that fueled the growth of law enforcement on campuses. The legislation also made more than $2 billion in grants available to districts looking to bolster or develop student mental health programs and efforts to improve their experiences in school.

School police are "not adding the safety that people think they are," Losen said. "It's just not a solution to legitimate concerns about school shootings. Nobody is saying we shouldn't be thinking about how kids should be safer. But the research shows that adding police isn't that solution."

The federal guidance suggests that schools re-examine their policies and procedures to avoid disability discrimination in interactions between students and law enforcement. Losen said he wished it would have more closely examined the way race and disability together impact discipline.

The Public Integrity analysis of federal data found that Black children in every state, and Latino and Native American children in some states, are disproportionately referred to law enforcement.

"Usually kids of color, especially Black kids with disabilities, have [discipline] rates that are just shocking, shockingly high," Losen said. "We have a major problem with racial discrimination among police in this country, and those same officers are in our schools in increasing numbers."

This article was originally published in The Center for Public Integrity. Read the original article.

Most things we deal with in a school environment are not criminal. We have to learn to be better advocates . . . when students have special needs and disabilities, that requires a different level of care. ~ Mo Canady

To Table of Contents

Health & Wellness

with Julia McNally

Rheumatoid Arthritis

People with arthritis often find that their ability to engage in specific activities varies from time to time. Julia McNally, founder of The RA Yogi shares some of the benefits of deep breathing.

In yoga, the breath is called prana and considered one's life force and vital energy. Yogis look at prana as something that is infinite and can be controlled through breathing exercises (pranayama). These breathing exercises may include full yogic breath (breathing into the belly, diaphragm and chest and exhaling, noticing the belly fall as you exhale), kapalabhati breath of fire, which is good for increasing energy, anuloma viloma /alternate nostril breathing to help bring focus and grounding energy if you're feeling scattered or anxious and intercostal breathing to help aid depression/ low mood because of its expansive nature. Placing the hands on sides of the ribcage, breathe in through the nostrils, notice your body expanding into your hands, try to create equal breath of each side, notice the lungs filling with air slowly and expansion of the breath as you inhale and as you exhale relax and let go of any stale energy, moving the stuck energy out of the joints and the body.

Deep breathing brings you into the present moment, so even taking 3-4 simple conscious deep breaths is such a great practice. Julia said, "I actually have an alert on my phone and my computer to remind me to take 3 conscious breaths every day, just in case I forget."

Read more about Julia's advice on yoga for rheumatoid arthritis here.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In the know

with Angela Lynn

Celebrating diversity and inclusion

Reflections on World Inclusion Day

I am honoured and humbled to have participated in the 2023 World Inclusion Day celebrations hosted by the Garden Foundation, located in the vibrant city of Las Vegas, Nevada on October 10th. As an American Sign Language interpreter passionate about inclusion, I was brought on board to work alongside with Jodi Fontana and Jada Willis, ensuring full accessibility and participation for all attendees at this momentous event.

World Inclusion Day holds deep meaning on a global scale, uniting diverse communities worldwide to advocate for the rights and well-being of individuals with disabilities and diverse abilities. Through my experiences teaching American Sign Language over the years, I have witnessed firsthand the immensely positive impact sign language can have on empowering individuals with Down Syndrome, autism and a wide variety of disabilities.

In this article, I aim to share my personal reflections and takeaways from World Inclusion Day, while also exploring my lifelong passion for furthering diversity, equity and inclusion - especially within the realm of travel.

The significance of World Inclusion Day: a celebration of progress

The Garden Foundation, founded in 2017 and opened in 2018, and World Inclusion

To Table of Contents

Day, established in 2020, are instrumental in our mission. World Inclusion Day serves as an international day of awareness, celebrating significant achievements in recognizing sign languages and safeguarding the fundamental rights of disabled individuals globally. It commemorates the ongoing journey toward equity, accessibility and inclusion that marginalized communities continue to courageously fight for.

While rightfully acknowledging the remarkable progress that has been made, World Inclusion Day also serves as a call-to-action, urging us not to become complacent, but to continually push forward in supporting and empowering members of our society who are all too often overlooked or discriminated against.

The travel and tourism industry stands out as a particular area still needing substantial improvements when it comes to enhancing accessibility and inclusion. While many strides have certainly been made, systemic barriers and challenges very much remain for disabled travellers and individuals with diverse physical and cognitive abilities. Advocates and allies around the world stress the fundamental importance of maximizing accessibility within travel to allow all people, regardless of their abilities, to enjoy safe, meaningful, enriching and barrier-free journeys.

At its core, World Inclusion Day is a reminder that the quest for inclusion and equity across all of society is an ongoing journey - one requiring the tireless, collective action of advocates, governments, businesses, organizations and ordinary citizens.

Top inclusive destinations around the world: insights into global tourism

In honour of World Inclusion Day and its core message, I wanted to highlight some of the most inspirational examples I've come across of inclusive practices being implemented within

Photo Credit: WikiPedia

Photo Credit: Nations Online Project

Photo Credit: Conde Nast Traveller

Photo Credit: Lonely Planet

major travel destinations around the world.

New York City, U.S.: With widespread accessibility measures like accessible subways, Deaf-friendly Broadway shows, museums tailored to diverse needs and rigorous enforcement of ADA laws, New York City sets an exceptional standard for welcoming and accommodating disabled visitors from around the globe.

Amsterdam, Netherlands: The city provides visual aids and announcements across public transportation services, as well as museum tours and informational videos tailored specially for Deaf visitors, ensuring an inclusive experience.

Tokyo, Japan: Signage, aids like Braille, visual pictures and services at popular sites like the Tokyo National Museum and Tokyo Disneyland enable Deaf travellers and those with diverse abilities to explore the city fully and without barriers.

London, United Kingdom: Accessible transit, museum tours and exhibits tailored for the Deaf community allow disabled visitors to immerse themselves in London's rich cultural history without obstacles.

Singapore: With modern amenities like tactile ground surfaces assisting blind travellers, and sign language services readily available at major attractions, Singapore excels at ensuring disabled individuals feel welcomed.

Dubai, United Arab Emirates: Staff providing sign language assistance and services are stationed throughout the city's most famous landmarks like

To Table of Contents

the Burj Khalifa, enabling full exploration and engagement for Deaf visitors.

Barcelona, Spain: From the Sagrada Familia to Park Guell, informative tours and easy-to-navigate transport cater seamlessly to Deaf visitors and those with disabilities, facilitating inclusive cultural immersion.

These inspiring examples from across the globe exemplify the growing commitment within the travel industry to providing inclusive environments where individuals of all abilities can fully and confidently experience all a destination has to offer. While ongoing work remains, the meaningful progress reflected through these cities' efforts is encouraging and motivational.

The journey toward inclusion continues

This World Inclusion Day, even as we celebrate the progress made, we must also renew our commitment to pursuing equity, dignity and accessibility for all members of the global community. Let us continue collaborating, innovating and advocating to shape a more inclusive world.

Through persisting compassion, understanding and a shared vision of positivity, we can enable all people, regardless of their abilities, to explore the diverse beauty of our world safely and meaningfully. My experiences over the years have affirmed my belief in the profound positivity that increasing accessibility and inclusive practices can generate.

Thank you for accompanying me on this journey to reflect on the triumphs and opportunities surrounding inclusion. Stay inspired, and keep up the good fight, friends.

Moving forward, I pledge to do my part to practice, "Be the change you want to see," and I warmly invite you to join me on this crucial ongoing journey toward empowerment for all. Please feel free to reach out with any questions, comments or ideas through my website or at **angelalynn@theangelalynnshow.com**.

Angela Lynn

www.theangelalynnshow.com

> **World Inclusion Day serves as an international day of awareness, celebrating significant achievements in recognizing sign languages and safeguarding the fundamental rights of disabled individuals globally. It commemorates the ongoing journey toward equity, accessibility and inclusion that marginalized communities continue to courageously fight for.** ~ Angela Lynn

To Table of Contents

People with dyslexia can bring unique strengths and advantages to the workplace

By Sarah Rahimi

Dyslexia is the most common learning disability in the world, and up to 15 to 20 percent of the population has a language-based learning disability. If you don't have dyslexia yourself, you likely know someone who does.

Dyslexia is characterized by difficulties with reading, writing and spelling. Like other learning disabilities, people with dyslexia process information and learn differently.

Though learning disabilities are often characterized as a childhood issue, they are lifelong conditions that follow

To Table of Contents

people into the workplace. People with dyslexia find it harder to find jobs and they often experience challenges once they are hired because of their learning disability.

Dyslexia can result in challenges with organization, time management, reading and writing, effective communication and comprehending complicated instructions. These challenges can be compounded if companies don't have accommodations in place for people with disabilities.

But people with dyslexia often bring unique strengths to the workplace as well. Employers miss out on untapped potential when they overlook or discount their abilities in the workplace.

Misconceptions and stigma

Under the Canadian Human Rights Act, individuals are protected from discrimination based on disabilities, including learning disabilities such as dyslexia. However, misconceptions and stigma can often make it difficult for people to disclose that they have dyslexia.

While there can be positive impacts from self-disclosure, such as receiving accommodations like text-to-speech software or dyslexia-friendly fonts at work, there can also be negative impacts.

Self-disclosure can result in workers feeling isolated and discriminated against. (Shutterstock)

Self-disclosure can result in workers feeling isolated, discriminated against and receiving lowered expectations from managers and co-workers.

Some of this can be attributed to the stigma surrounding dyslexia. Even though dyslexia is the most common type of learning disability, it is widely misunderstood. There is more discussion about mental disorders and physical disabilities than learning disabilities, so people tend to know less about them.

One of the most common misconceptions about learning disabilities is that having one makes you less intelligent. But this isn't true; many people with learning disabilities have average or above-average intelligence.

This harmful stigma can lead to lower self-esteem, stress, shame or isolation. It can also result in people with dyslexia being seen as liabilities at work.

Because of this, many people with dyslexia choose not to disclose their condition. This can discourage people from seeking accommodations or help in the workplace, and prevent them from reaching their full potential.

Those that don't self-disclose must instead find ways to manage their learning disability

To Table of Contents

without the company's help. For most people with dyslexia, knowing their learning style can help them adapt and compensate for their learning disability.

It's crucial for people without dyslexia to learn more about it so they can better understand and support individuals who have it. This knowledge can empower people to advocate for those with dyslexia, reduce the stigma associated with it and create better, more inclusive workplaces.

Advantages of dyslexic workers

Because people with dyslexia process information and think differently than others, they can bring distinctive advantages to the workplace.

People with dyslexia tend to be visual thinkers and can often see the big picture. This can help them visualize complicated scenarios and come up with new, original solutions to problems.

People with dyslexia also have above-average problem-solving skills, and are skilled at thinking creatively and coming up with abstract and unique ideas — all of which results in a more innovative work environment.

In addition, people with dyslexia are often resilient and persevering because of their experience overcoming challenges and barriers. This can lead to a strong work ethic, determination and motivation towards accomplishing their goals.

Building inclusive workplaces

Canadian employers have a duty to provide reasonable accommodations for employees with learning disabilities to ensure they have the supports needed to perform their jobs well.

Workplaces can be more accommodating by providing employees with assistive technologies like spellchecking tools, allowing flexible work schedules, modifying job tasks and training methods, and providing instructional materials in a variety of formats.

Support is an ongoing commitment, not a one-time effort. Employers should be ready to provide continuous assistance to their employees and be understanding and supportive towards their needs and preferences.

People with dyslexia can bring a great deal to the workplace. Establishing an inclusive and accommodating work environment for people with learning disabilities like dyslexia can foster a diverse workforce and improve productivity, innovation and performance. Doing this ultimately creates a more supportive and productive work environment for all.

This article was originally published in The Conversation. Read the original article.

But people with dyslexia often bring unique strengths to the workplace as well. Employers miss out on untapped potential when they overlook or discount their abilities in the workplace.

Is AI taking jobs from disabled workers?

By Bart Vulliamy

Artificial intelligence has captured my imagination in movies and books for 30 years. AI is not a new concept; it was first mentioned in 1956 and first implemented that same year. The definition used by Merriam-Webster puts it simply as, "the capability of a machine to imitate intelligent behaviour." This differs from the concept of automation which requires humans to set up a machine to perform specific tasks in a certain order.

The concept of artificial intelligence involves getting computers to perform tasks usually performed by intelligent beings, i.e., humans. Machines are being taught to research and make decisions and are now able to complete tasks. Predictive writing and autocorrect, currently used by the program I'm using to type this, are examples of technologies powered by AI. But what happens when the person typing is replaced by a computer to provide this content?

Two questions I've been asking myself while I've been job hunting: what jobs can I do right now as a person with an intellectual disability, neurodivergency plus the skills and training I already have; and where are those jobs?

Creative writing, data entry, bookkeeping, coding/programming, photo editing, web design, data analysis, technical writing, and the arts have been replaced by artificial intelligence in the last few years. These are also, coincidentally, the top jobs sought after by disabled people.

One example of AI taking over jobs is happening right now in Hollywood. Alongside the traditional disputes over pay and job protections, AI technology has become the wild card in the contract breakdowns that have led actors' and writers' unions to go on strike in 2023. Business leaders want to use AI to write scripts, taking away jobs and stealing from artists and writers to save money. Money is the entire reason that businesses

To Table of Contents

are using AI, to cut costs by not hiring people, which then makes the businesses more money.

Where does this leave disabled workers? Well, due to the complexity of disability, and how each person is affected differently (no person with the same disability has the same experience), they're often unemployed or underemployed. Autism is one of the most unemployed disabilities, and those who are autistic and employed, they're often underemployed. It's estimated that 7 in 10 autistic adults are unemployed. To get a job that is meaningful, a person with a disability would need to gain further education, which is not accessible for many, or take low-skill level roles that don't leverage their talents.

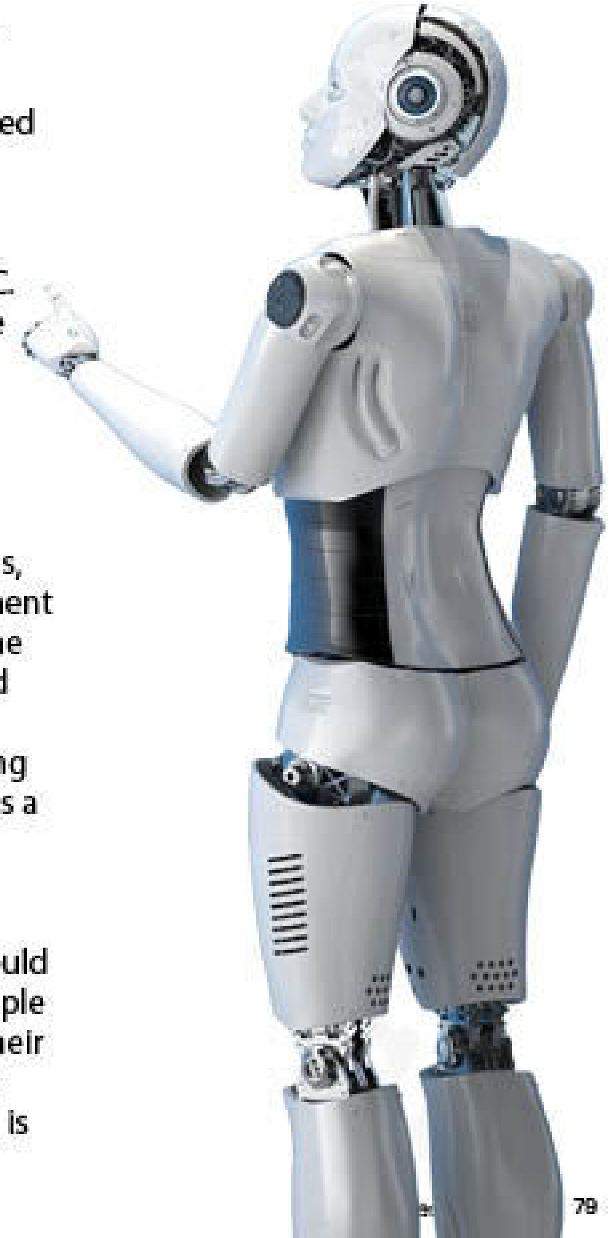
There is a program, once touted as the future of hiring and still being used today by Fortune 500 companies as a part of the hiring process. The program compares gestures, facial expressions and mannerisms of people doing video interviews for a position with those who were the most successful employees in that position. The program then recommends which applicants to hire. This is a problematic way of hiring because it immediately filters out disabled applicants like me. People with disabilities can have different mannerisms and expressions than abled people. We can stim, shake or be uncomfortable with eye contact. When taking business courses in college, I was taught that these kinds of things were unprofessional and would go against hiring practices.

What's even more problematic with this program, is that it automatically seeks out signs that an applicant may be disabled by comparing their mannerisms with those of people with known disabilities. What this program and other companies do, is ask if the applicant identifies as disabled or not, or has any accommodation needs. This is often done in the name of inclusivity but is most often used by AI to filter out disabled candidates.

A year's income for a single person with a disability in B.C. is roughly $16,300., while the poverty line is at $25,200., according to StatsCan. The cost of living for disabled people is also much higher than that of abled people. Medical treatments, therapies, medication, assistive equipment are already expensive, and the costs are increasing. Disabled people are often paid less because we work less, keeping in mind that being disabled is a full-time job in itself.

In theory, having artificial intelligence take our jobs would be a good thing, leaving people to take care of themselves, their family and be able to pursue anything other than work. AI is not the problem, as it's only a tool. The problem comes down to ethics, who is using it and why they use it.

Employers, whether inclusive or not, should strive for equity in their business rather than trying to take the easy route and use AI. Accessible recruitment processes, accommodations, acceptance and workplace training on autism, LGBTQ and racism are all the minimum that an employer or business owner should be doing for their staff.



AbilityNet
TECHSHARE
PRO 2023

AbilityNet is bridging the digital divide for accessibility

By Pauline McKenzie

Mark Walker

Technology has become an integral part of our daily lives and AbilityNet, a UK-based charity specializing in digital accessibility, shows us what it means to put people with disabilities first. During an insightful exploration of AbilityNet with its Head of Marketing and Communications, Mark Walker, we learned that this charity has been at the forefront of promoting digital accessibility and inclusivity for the past quarter-century and, their approach is unique!

One striking feature that sets AbilityNet apart from its peers is its hands-on approach. While many charitable organizations advocate for accessibility in a broader sense, AbilityNet rolls up its sleeves to ensure that individuals with disabilities can truly harness the power of technology. Whether it's aiding stroke survivors in selecting the right computer mouse or addressing specific needs of those navigating the digital realm with a disability, such as dyslexia, AbilityNet's commitment to practical assistance is unmatched. Mark shared, “We have a network of 300 volunteers. You can call our help line, which is free, and get advice about a problem. You can also ask somebody to come and help you with that problem in your home. That's our primary face-to-face free service as a charity.” An example of this would be: imagine you are of working age and know how to use a computer, but you had a stroke. You now have some issues with speech, memory or may have some difficulties using a mouse. You may be sitting in front of the laptop that you've used all of your working life, but you're now unfamiliar with how you’ll be able to use it after your stroke. Here, AbilityNet enters the picture. Its volunteers will sit with you and help you to navigate in that new space.

This charity occupies a unique niche in the accessibility landscape, one that many organizations have not yet addressed as comprehensively. While others may focus on specific disability types or engage in broader advocacy, AbilityNet serves as a lifeline for individuals seeking personalized digital support. But what truly distinguishes AbilityNet is its global reach and expertise in seamlessly merging disability support with technology

To Table of Contents

solutions. They also provide free, valuable factsheets on their website.

Their journey began at a time when accessibility services were relatively niche, but today, there is a growing global awareness of its importance. Over the years, AbilityNet has witnessed significant growth in the accessibility field. The proliferation of digital accessibility consulting, plugins, and related services has been driven by corporate recognition and legal obligations, particularly in the United States. As more companies realize the need to cater to a diverse range of customers, the competition in this space continues to expand.

Despite the mounting competition, AbilityNet has not only persevered but achieved remarkable milestones. One such milestone is the TechSharePro conference, which has transformed from a niche event into a platform that attracts major industry players like Apple and Google. This shift underscores the recognition of AbilityNet's growing influence in the realm of digital accessibility.

Another noteworthy accomplishment is the establishment of the International Association of Accessibility Professionals (IAAP), where AbilityNet holds the honor of being a founding member. IAAP has elevated accessibility to a recognized status, pushing for a more professional approach to this crucial field. This has resulted in increased awareness and the integration of accessibility features in mainstream products.

This perfectly aligns with AbilityNet's mission which at its core lies a profound belief in inclusivity. They emphasize that the digital world is as essential as the physical one. In an era where technology plays a pivotal role in every aspect of life, digital inclusion becomes a matter of equality. It ensures that everyone, regardless of their abilities, has access to the same opportunities, services, and information.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of digital accessibility even further. The rapid transition to digital communication and services during the pandemic made accessible video calls, captions, and other features imperative. Major tech companies have recognized that digital inclusion is no longer an afterthought but an absolute necessity.

AbilityNet stands as a vital advocate for this digital inclusivity thrust, bridging the divide to ensure that technology is accessible to all. Their strategy now incorporates ESG principles to align with their values of inclusion and sustainability. As part of their ESG strategy, the charity continues to build disability awareness in organisations in all sectors, fostering a generation that is more attuned to the needs of disabled individuals from an early age. This proactive approach aims to create a more inclusive society by nurturing empathy and understanding.

The key takeaway from AbilityNet's work is that, in a world driven by technology, digital accessibility is not a luxury; it's a necessity. Organizations, policymakers and individuals must work collectively to ensure that no one is left behind in the digital age. AbilityNet's tireless dedication illustrates the power of technology to unite people and the importance of inclusivity in our digital future.

> **Our core mission is about disability, not technology. What are people with disabilities trying to do? What are the barriers they face? Some of them are social, some are technical. We help them with the technical barriers. We enable them to address whatever it is they're trying to do in that space.**
>
> ~ Mark Walker

Resources:
www.abilitynet.org.uk
www.techsharepro.com
www.abilitynet.org.uk/factsheets
www.mycomputermyway.com
www.abilitynet.org.uk/training

RESOURCES

FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

ACCESSIBILITY CONSULTANTS

Maahs Travels, USA

Massiraa, Dubai

Marco Pasqua, Canada

BUSINESSES OWNED BY PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Colletey's Cookies, USA

www.retrophiliac.etsy.com, USA

CERTIFICATION COURSES

Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification, Canada

CLOTHING

Intimately, USA

IZ Adaptive, Canada

DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY

specialising in digital content (PDFs, ePUBs, eJournals, etc.)

www.jwdigitalinclusion.com, Dubai

DISABILITY-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS

Access Israel, Israel

Easter Seals, Canada

Easterseals, USA

FONHARE, Haiti

Friends of Access Israel, USA

The American Association of People with Disabilities, USA

The Arc, USA

EMPLOYMENT

Bender Consulting, USA

HOSPITALITY TRAINING

The Slatin Group, USA

INCLUSIVE EMPLOYERS

Gabi & Jules, Canada

Lil E Coffee Cafe, Canada

Project Dignity, Singapore

GLOBAL PWD COMMUNITY

www.yoocanfind.com, Israel

LEARNING CENTRES

Achievement Learning Centre, Dominica

MEDIA

Accessible Media Inc., Canada

The Angela Lynn Show, USA

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Paratrek, Israel

PRODUCTS & ACCESSORIES

Izzy Wheels, Ireland

The Alinker, Canada

TRAVEL

360Access, USA

AccessNow, Canada

Accessible Indonesia, Indonesia

Japan Accessible Tourism Center, Japan

European Network for Accessible Tourism (ENAT), Belgium

Four Season Travel & Tours, Nepal

Travel-for-All, Canada

WEB ACCESSIBILITY

EqualWeb, Israel

To Table of Contents

Embrace Differences

Let's build a more inclusive society

To Table of Contents

To Table of Contents

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