

MBS

Episode 001 Final

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Post-Production FILE

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>> Welcome to Accessibility Works.

>> A podcast where access to ability creates possibility for people with disabilities.

>> I'm Albert Rizzi.

>> And I'm John Hermus.

>> And this is Accessibility Works.

>> And today we're going to talk about Albert's story and why we're here and what we're doing and the creation of My Blind Spot.

>> Yeah, my story.

>> -- which you can catch on Albert's TED Talk on --

>> myblindsport.org and take a listen. We've also done some pieces and films and interviews about my calling, if you will, to champion the disability community in ways that only I can bring to the table.

[Speaking in deeper voice]

>> So who are you and what do you do?

>> Who am I?

>> Who are you?

>> Who am I?

[SINGING]

[🎵]

>> Well, I'm Albert Rizzi, and I'm the founder of My Blind Spot, a non-profit that was born out of my journey into this new way of seeing. A few years ago -- 14 to be exact-ish -- I lost my eyesight, and when I ran into some of the virtual barriers present in the world as well as the physical barriers, I decided to do something about it, and we started My Blind Spot which is an organization dedicated to inspiring accessibility for people of all abilities.

>> So you would say your journey began with My Blind Spot at least by losing your eyesight?

>> No. I would absolutely say that I had not had much else going on with regard to evangelizing and advocating for people with disabilities. I had people in my family who had a disability, friends who had disabilities, but it never crystallized itself in a way that it did once I became a member of the community.

You've seen it, for the past ten years, how it's changed the way I do things and how I've had to adapt, and I am not the only one out there who is resilient and who is capable of doing great things provided we have access to the tools that allow us to promote and create our own abilities, our innate abilities, and thereby create infinite possibilities in our lives for all things.

Yeah, My Blind Spot was definitely something that was born out of my own personal frustration and my own, "I don't quit" -- the word "can't" doesn't exist in my vocabulary mindset, and I created avenues to empowerment for myself and a lot of people from what I've understood.

>> So you're CEO of My Blind Spot. What does My Blind Spot do, and who are some of their notable clients?

>> I prefer to call myself a founder, and I use the term CEO loosely. It's not one of my favorite terms, but we have people working for us all over the country and I can say all over the world now. We have a few people working for us in other countries. Through the efforts of building this organization with the T.E.A.M. we have in place, and T.E.A.M. is an acronym that stands for Together Everyone Achieves More, and everyone at My Blind Spot is the reason we've achieved more.

In the short time we've been incorporated and a non-profit, which is going on our eleventh year now, we've had the privilege and honor of working with giants like: Toyota Lexus (the fifth largest corporation in the world), American Airlines, Peapod fresh direct food delivery companies, 98point6 (a healthcare company), Intuit, Canon USA, American Express, and recently we've been approved as a preferred source vendor in the entire state of New York and New York City delivering digital accessibility and usability testing services and remediation support for agencies, hospitals, universities, and non-governmental organizations.

>> What we're getting at is that we're on the cutting edge of what the laws and the news and everything that's going on with accessibility and getting people back into the workforce, that's our goal.

>> What differentiates us, John, from other organizations is we're an organization that is managed, run, operated by people who are stakeholders in the outcomes, people who are blind, deaf and blind, deaf, people with mobility issues, any degree of paralysis. We have people with traumatic brain injuries, cognitive delays, people with dyslexia, organic dysfunction --

>> All over the place.

>> They're all over the place. We've got people of all abilities.

>> I, myself, happen to be dyslexic.

>> We also work with the aging population because people who are aging join this community with no choice of their own, and one of the things we believe at My Blind Spot is that the disability community is at the intersectionality of all other minority groups, age groups, genders, orientations, races. There isn't a person in this world who will not age into this community so we all have a vested interest in the work that we do at My Blind Spot to make sure we can live full and enriching lives well into our 90's.

>> Let's talk a little bit about what's going on in the world of accessibility today.

>> Well, the most important advancement that's happened is the adoption of the WCAG standards back in 2018. The United States now uses the international standards to gauge the usability and functionality of our digital platforms: namely websites, mobile applications, electronic communications, and we are working very dedicatedly to stay on top of those trends as they change. Technology, as everyone knows, changes within seconds of things being launched and introduced.

We are working diligently with our clients to introduce the concept of infusing authentic inclusion and digital equity into the DNA of their corporate cultures. We are definitely advocating for and championing the positioning of ability alongside race, gender, orientation, and religion in both our social and corporate cultures, trying to ride the wave of the Civil Rights Act and taking the lead of our African-American brothers and sisters, Women's rights in the '70s, LGBT advancements in the 80's and 90's, and now it's our turn.

>> Other than what's going on now, the next thing is what's going on for the future, but before we get to that, I wanted to point out some of the crazy stuff that's going on today that I've been researching into and finding out for the past year about audio games that I didn't know existed for the last 10 -- 20 years. Those are games like videogames, but with no video -- just audio. You navigate a whole game just by sound, and they exist, and they're out there.

>> As a notable gamer, I'm surprised to know that you didn't know about this, but it just goes to show you, John, how much of the accessible knowledge to accessibility in digital equity are still some of the best secrets kept out there. You've been talking about the idea of an audiodgame for me, when we get into gaming --

>> Apparently they already existed.

>> Yeah, thanks to the AFB, we read an article that was put out in their newsletter recently, and it was really eye-opening, no pun intended.

>> That and some of the more cutting-edge technology that I've heard about is some implants. They have implants to improve -- the two things that they can improve with eyesight is your cornea, in your eyeball, and the visual cortex in the back of your brain.

>> -- and the retina, too.

>> The retina is part of your eyeball.

>> Okay, sorry.

>> I said cornea, didn't I? It's the retina that I meant.

>> That's okay. You're dyslexic. You mixed it up.

>> Shut up.

[LAUGHING]

>> No, but when you found those articles -- it was really fantastic -- those studies that are going on to create these bionic eyes or these microchips that go into the eyeball and then send messages relaying it to the visual cortex --

>> I forget the name of the company, though.

>> You'd have to look -- I know the studies they are doing are in L.A., China, and then there was that one that you found, John, that was really promising for me personally, the one about the research they're doing to repair damaged optic nerves. My visual impairment was caused by my optic nerve being destroyed after the meningitis, but there are a lot of cutting-edge opportunities out there to restore vision for people who lost it with retinized pigmentosa, and a few others that we've blogged about so make a point of looking at some of the posts we share on our social media outlets as well as the blogs that are speaking to these new cutting-edge advancements in science.

>> There is two companies. One is based in California, and the other one is based in Australia making leaps and bounds in this field, and I believe they have a 6 centimeter by 6 centimeter square piece of technology that they put directly into your brain, and it presses on your brain. It links magnetically through a piece that is right behind your ear so when you put a pair of glasses on, it links to those glasses, and there is a camera in those glasses and whatever image it says in front of you, that little implant in the back of your head presses on your visual cortex and people have been -- I believe they've been doing studies on it, and people have these implants. They can see points of light to the

point where they can see where the curb stops and the grass begins or where the couch starts and the floor begins --

>> Yep.

>> It's not like they have perfect vision again, but there is something from nothing.

>> And they're perfecting it as they go --

>> It works -- I believe it only works in people who had vision and lost vision, though.

>> That's where I think some of the challenges lie. People who have been blind most of their lives or all of their lives were born blind, there are still studies trying to figure out how to initiate/introduce the concept of visual information to the cortex because it has never been used before, but people like myself who lost their eyesight later in life, there tends to be that residual memory that the brain has that actually allows it to jumpstart and pick up where it left off, so to speak. I'm not looking forward to getting my eyesight back if it means looking at the mirror and seeing the wrinkles and the grey hairs that have popped up since I turned 42.

[LAUGHING]

>> My mother always says she's happy to see that I'm blind because she'll always look 59 the rest of her life.

>> I believe the company or at least the implant is called the Orion.

>> Orion. We put something out about it on social media and got some nice hits.

>> I think there are already some clinical trials -- I think there are at least 30 clinical trials already out there.

>> If I remember correctly when you shared the article with me, there were actually some dramatic stories about people who had regained usable vision back from the technology. I really picked the right time to go blind with all the things that are out there: self-driving cars, I mean, GPS canes, GPS programs for iPhones, so many things. It looks like one day, it's going to happen, I will get my eyesight back just in time to see myself in a pair of Depends undergarments and a wheelchair at 92.

[LAUGHING]

>> And then there was the one about the bionic eye you were talking about as well.

>> It's an article from November 14, 2019 so it's fairly recent.

>> -- fairly recent.

>> The title of the article is " Bionical eyes with thermal infrared vision in development."

>> It sounds very military, like I can see in the dark.

[LAUGHING]

>> Well, working with just the visual spectrum of light is narrowing your field. If you expand it to infrared and ultraviolet, you have more to work with so you can find things that work.

>> Like I said, it's just a remarkable time, and those will be things that we'll be discussing at length throughout the podcast. We'll be talking about new technologies, new things happening in the accessibility and inclusion arena. AI is the next great frontier out there so I'd love to see corporate America buy into infusing, baking in, creating, developing everything from the design process that allows people of all abilities, especially people with a disability, to execute in life. I still think there's going to be one day when I get that barette on my forehead like Geordi from Star Trek: The Next Generation.

>> The website is called intelligentliving.co

>> That's for the bionic eye?

>> Yeah, there is a five minute video along with it, Baylor College of Medicine.

>> John, are you able to quickly share the types of conditions that the bionic eye works best with? Is it for people with corneal issues, retinal issues --

>> It's only for people who have lost their vision. They had to have had vision beforehand and then lost it.

There is two different types of implants: one that goes on the cornea and that fixes problems with the cornea and one that goes directly into the visual cortex in the back of your head.

>> If I'm hearing you correctly, there are two options: one that uses the eyeball connected to a healthy optic nerve --

>> Well it depends on what kind of problem you have. If you have a cornea problem, the implant will go in the cornea. If there is optic nerve damage which is something they haven't been able to figure out how to rebuild --

>> They're still figuring out how to bypass --

>> -- short of stem cell research which is questionable at this point in time.

>> Yeah, but they're doing studies, too. I think the reason they've stepped into the optic nerve is there were studies being done on spinal cord regeneration --

>> Well it's much more difficult to work with nerves than it is to poke the brain. You can just poke the optic center in the back of the brain and give yourself an image.

>> Right, that's the bypass.

>> That's what they're doing. They're bypassing the eyes, and they're bypassing the optic nerve and just poking the brain.

>> Well one of those studies that you shared, also, that we shared out was discussing how the work being done to regenerate damaged spinal cords, which are a tremendous ganglia of nerves, allowed scientists and researchers to consider looking at the optic nerve because it's just one cell, if I'm not mistaken about what I read, so there is promise --

>> Yeah, the optic nerve is one string -- I don't know if it's one cell -- one string of cells. It's one nerve line.

>> One nerve line, there you go.

>> The spinal cord is a group of nerve lines.

>> Correct. That's what I meant to say.

>> Like 10, 20, 30 of those optic nerves is what makes up your spinal cord.

>> Right. All these studies are coming down and as best we can, we're going to want to discuss them at length. If anybody out there has experience with them, please write to us: info@myblindspot.org. We'd love to be able to maybe speak with you and find out what your experiences are.

And if you're a clinician out there, a doctor, a scientist who can speak intelligently on the subject moreso than us, we'd love to welcome you to join us on the podcast.

>> Speaking about the future, what does My Blind Spot have planned for the future? Anything interesting?

>> Yeah, we have --

>> Trying to work with these people trying to stick devices into people's brains?

[LAUGHING]

>> No. I'm still trying to get a scotch ordered. The dog just isn't cooperating.

Right now we're looking to really solidify ourselves as a subject matter expert or continue that momentum, riding the wave of the TED Talk that we've done and all the presentations that we've given, advocating for authentic inclusion, looking for new clients, new corporations of any size.

We work with non-profits as well. We've worked with Reader's Digest Partners for Sight for a couple of years now bringing their site into compliance. What lies ahead is probably more speaking engagements. Anybody who would like to have us come and speak, feel free to write to us at albert@myblindspot.org or jonathan@myblindspot.org.

We're going to be looking at ways to discuss the value that having people with disabilities bring to your work environment, your brand, your image.

We're trying to get people to move away from looking at the disability community as a group of people we want to sympathetically help out and do the warm, socially fuzzy sorts of things that make us feel good about ourselves, and acknowledge and draw attention to the fact that we are a minority group, a global group with a huge financial integrity. We are 1.4 billion strong, 2.3 billion friends and family with \$8 trillion of global discretionary spending power. We have \$4.9 trillion of that power in North America. We have \$300 billion of disposable income rests in the hands of people with disabilities so every corporation would be well-served, and it just makes good business sense to look at the disability community the same way we looked at LGBT marketing opportunities back in the '90s and Latino communities back in the '80s and '90s. It's our time so we want you to tap into our strength and allow us to spend our money where you live.

If you are out there, and you are a colleague or friend or if you're somebody who just wants to become a friend or colleague, write to us and give us an idea of what you'd like to discuss as it relates to Accessibility Works, creating opportunities for people with disabilities in the workforce and in our social communities, and we'd love to speak with you.

>> Be sure to go check out all our social media. You can find links to all those on the My Blind Spot website.

>> Myblindspot.org is our website. Anyway, that's our story and we're sticking to it. Until next time --

>> This is John.

>> And this is Albert.

>> And this has been Accessibility Works, a podcast about the possibility of accessibility for people with disabilities.

[END OF VIDEO]