

Post-Production FILE

AccessAbilityWorks003LoriSamuelsFinal.mp3
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>> Welcome to the AccessAbility Works podcast, a podcast about the possibilities of accessibility for people with disabilities. I'm Albert [INDISCERNIBLE].

>> And I'm Jonathan [INDISCERNIBLE].

>> And this is the AccessAbility Works podcast. And as a reminder, please tell all your friends and family about our podcast and where to find it.

>> Just random people on the street. Yeah, everybody. Go to our website at MyBlindSpot.org/AccessAbilityWorks.

>> Or on any of the places you get your podcasts regular, like Apple or Spotify.

>> Today, we have an interview with Lori Samuels. She's in charge of accessibility programs for the NBC Enterprise, including NBC Entertainment, NBC Sports, Olympics, cable networks, and digital business.

>> See, I don't even think about her being accessibility director. She's just a fantastic friend, colleague, and mentor of mine. So I just call her Lori.

But yeah, Lori went to NBC Universal. She was with Intuit before, and then Microsoft, and she has been a driving force behind everything we do at MyBlindSpot. She does a lot of different things at NBC Universal, which is a parent company of Comcast, and she gets to work alongside Tom Bulkowski and a few others. Wow, she's got a lot more important things to do than talk to us, so let's get this going.

>> But first, the news.

>> Oh, yes. Current events.

>> So Biden won the election, I guess.

>> Are we sure?

>> I don't know.

>> I haven't seen anybody concede. We've only now -- it is -- today's December first that we're recording, and we still have not had a smooth transition. I'm not sure what that means for the country, but right now, some of the indicators that I've noticed with regard to the transition team and/or Cabinet that Biden's putting together, it looks hopeful for people with disabilities. We'll be blogging about that in a couple of days. It may already be out. Again, we're pre-recording. So please read my blog on what the new Administration means for people with

disabilities, authentic inclusion, and digital equity.

What else did we have to touch on, Jon? There was something new in your circle that you wanted to share.

>> The -- concerning accessibility, the only thing that, really, I've found is a thing called Open Dyslexic, which is a specific type of font that is easier for people with dyslexia to read. It looks funny to other people, though, I hear.

>> I can't speak to that --

>> [Laughing]

>> -- obviously.

[BOTH LAUGHING]

>> But if it's warranted, we need to do more research into the right fonts to use, because that's another contingent of people with a print disability that we serve. Other than that, we're gonna be looking deeper into this new font that Jonathan was introduced to, and following the ebbs and tides of the transition of the Biden campaign into the White House, and the ending of the past four years under the Trump Administration.

Unless you've got something else to say, let's get to talking with Lori. I can't wait to hear what she has to say.

>> Indeedy do.

>> Indeedy do. Let's do a do.

[MUSIC]

>> Hey, Lori. How are you today?

>> I'm great, Albert. Thank you.

>> And you know you have Jon "Hermis" [phonetic] here, my co-host extraordinaire, and --

>> Hello.

>> Hi, Jon.

>> [INDISCERNIBLE - cross talk]

>> [Laughing]

>> So Lori, would you like to give a rundown of how we've come to meet and a little bit of background about who you are, where you are, why you are, and how you got here?

>> I met Albert when I was the Accessibility Program Manager at Intuit back around 2011. I was, at the time, working to start up the Intuit's global enterprise accessibility program, and that involved a lot of training, and working with developers, and raising awareness at advocacy for accessibility at Intuit at the time across their products, like TurboTax, and QuickBooks, and Quicken.

So I was building that program, and one of the things that happened was that I would tend to get the phone calls or contacts from customers who had questions or concerns about accessibility. And one of those calls was from Albert. [Laughing]

>> [Laughing]

>> And we just went on from there. And Albert ended up being just a fantastic partner, and collaborator, and advocate. We just did amazing things.

>> We really did. I'll never forget, you and I had joined forces, and people who had been in the industry much longer than I, namely Eric "Dannery" [phonetic] from Freedom Scientific, and then you had the guys from GW Micro, who are no longer in business anymore. Even individuals on the front line, members of the disability community, arguing with Intuit about the very important need to create an accessible platform. And for some reason, nobody listened to them.

And when Lori and I got together and started putting our heads together and coming up with reasons that not only justified the restructuring of a 30-year-old legacy -- at that time, I think it was 30-ish, and it was pre-MSA, pre-ADA, pre-Intuit, pre-Internet. I mean, pre-everything. It was custom designed, and we were able to use Intuit's pillars and commitments to their consumer base, which at the time was about four and a half million strong. Specifically, we don't want you to go back to doing accounting the old way.

We did a presentation. What was the theme, Lori? Karan Patel.

>> Karan Patel, yeah. So, I mean, right. To fill in the story a little bit -- so one of the things we started to do together -- Albert had originally contacted me. You had contacted me about QuickBooks --

>> Yes.

>> -- specifically, so it was a small business accounting software. You know, hugely popular. Also used not only for people who own their own business to manage their finances but also by

bookkeepers and accountants --

>> Accountants, yes.

>> -- who are doing, you know, doing that service for small businesses. So you contact me about it, and then we started talking more. We started to dive into the customers and the people who had been frustrated with QuickBooks over the years. And Albert, one of the things you did was just to gather the stories from those customers, and --

>> Yeah.

>> -- once we learned more about the demands that had been there from customers that had been yet an unmet need, that, I felt, gave us, gave me, the ability to go into the business leaders and say, "You know what? We've got customers that we're not -- we're not meeting their needs."

And I think one of the things we did that was so compelling was we actually, you know, through your contacts, we created a short film --

>> Yeah.

>> -- five minutes long, but you know, really impactful film with Dixie Sanderson, who had been a QuickBooks consultant and had her own business, and then lost her vision very suddenly --

>> Forty-eight hours. In 48 hours.

>> Yep. And she's been --

>> That --

>> -- learned that she could just go back to work --

>> Yep.

>> -- using QuickBooks. And then, it became apparent that the -- what disabled her was the lack of accessibility of QuickBooks. I think that's an important lesson because we talk about the social model of disability being that people are not disabled by their particular condition, but they are disabled by virtue of the lack of accessibility in the physical world and in the digital world. And in her case --

>> Yeah.

>> -- quite clearly, it tied to that.

>> Yeah. I'm getting chills because I do remember how we were sitting in the parking lot, not sure what to say, how we were going to be received when we got there.

>> Right.

>> And then we sat down -- at that time, we had Ted Drake, who is still with Intuit, by our side, and we did the presentation. We went back with testimonials from people who could not use the program for one reason or another. And then we ended the presentation with the mini-documentary-feeling story about Dixie Sanderson and her access, or lack thereof, and her being disabled from using the QuickBooks platform. And you could have heard a pin drop.

And I remember like it was yesterday, Lori, when Kieran got up, and he goes, "You had me basically at 'Hello'. You had us at the start. That was just the cherry on the sundae. How did we miss this?" And then executive sponsorship was offered, and we've been working with Intuit now some eight or nine years later and we've introduced usability and functionality in areas that even the engineers in India did not even know existed, thanks to Richard Kelly's deep diving into areas that people use periodically. It was just a remarkable experience, and it's where we got our start. And you know, I've said this before, and I'll say it again -- if it wasn't for you and I partnering together, if it wasn't for your guidance and your belief in accessibility, I don't think MyBlindSpot would be here today.

>> [Chuckling] So yeah, that meeting that you're referring to was with the executive vice president and leader of the Intuit small business division --

>> Mm-hmm.

>> -- [INDISCERNIBLE] --

>> Yeah.

>> -- wonderful man, who, as you say, you know, you came in with me. We got some time with his senior leadership team, and again, we just basically went through the business case, the cust -- the voice of the customer. That was a term that Intuit used to talk about this need for QuickBooks to make an investment in making the product more accessible to people with disabilities. And again, as you said, it was an incredibly impactful meeting. It was one of those moments when you have to just get your courage up and realize that what -- our message was so important --

>> Yep.

>> -- that we just had to have the courage to go in there and say it. And we didn't know what the response --

>> No.

>> -- was gonna be. We were just thrilled. I mean, I really give credit to the leadership team. They were -- they got completely behind the effort. They gave us resources, money --

>> Mm-hmm.

>> -- consultants, contractors to help out. And we had an amazingly enthusiastic team. I can't say enough about the team in India of engineers who worked on QuickBooks, led by [INDISCERNIBLE], who was --

>> Yeah.

>> -- just an amazing advocate for accessibility and has grown in that role. So, you know, so many good things just came together. Albert, you collected people who were able to help with beta testing and give us feedback on how the screen reader experience was going. We pulled in experts like Steve Clark, who knew --

>> Yes.

>> -- how to do some JAWS script to help smooth the process out in places, and it was just an amazing project. And probably, to this day, kind of one of those -- at least one, if not THE one that I'm kind of proudest of in my career.

>> [Chuckling] Oh, exactly. The other day, Jonathan and I were talking to some friends of ours and specifically around the election, and when was the last time you felt anything you did made a difference in the world? And I can actually say with confidence it was this.

>> [INDISCERNIBLE]

>> Knowing that we've -- since we've done this, Lori, thousands of people have been able to manage their own businesses more independently, and people have been able to maintain their careers, rather than being relinquished to public assistance programs and not being able to stay employed. It's been remarkable the things we know have happened, and it's only now, nine years later, it's only now starting to catch on because the community is able to confidently have faith in Intuit's commitment to staying the course. And it has gotten better, and it is something that I think you can have in that colorful headdress with feathers that show you're a warrior.

[LAUGHTER]

>> And I think you're touching on something, Albert, with the commitment, and that long-term commitment is so important. And yes, I definitely give Intuit credit for having that and having established that in their culture. They've got some wonderful accessibility leaders in the space now. Ted has grown a team that's just really lovely folks. "Punam" [phonetic], "Saw-ger"

[phonetic], you know, some other great folks.

>> Sawger is really great. Yep.

>> That's a theme that I see recurring in other large companies. Certainly at Microsoft as well.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> I had the privilege of being able to be part of Microsoft's accessibility journey prior to joining NBC Universal, for about four years, and --

>> [Singing] N-B-C.

>> [Laughing] And so that was just amazing. I mean, here's a company that's clearly got CEO-led commitment to accessibility --

>> Yes.

>> -- to full inclusion. And they are making huge strides, both on disability inclusion in hiring people with disabilities to come into the company in all roles, as well as the accessibility of their products. It doesn't happen overnight. It's not a quick fix. There is no such thing. That sustained commitment to accessibility and disability inclusion is so important. And you know, I'm thrilled to be part of --

>> Yeah.

>> -- Comcast, NBC Universal now, driving that --

>> Yeah.

>> -- same agenda.

>> And that -- and one of the things, just to harp on it again, you and I, early on, had come to appreciate that accessibility and inclusion are a marathon. It's not a sprint.

>> Absolutely.

>> You know? It is a relay race in instances. If you wanna do the sprint, do little sprints, stop, pass the baton to somebody else. And as you touched on, Microsoft's doing a great job. Intuit is continuing to do a great job. Google is getting into the arena in a meaningful way. AT&T has always been there, thanks to Mark "Bell-san-uh" [phonetic] having driven that whole thing. And I think the pandemic, in a way, has had a huge "civil-onia" [phonetic]. I always look for a way to take, you know, lemons and make lemonade, preferably with a side of Tito's, and I've seen how the concept of digital access and remote access has become paramount and critically important

--

>> Mm-hmm.

>> -- for the economy and for the well-being of our country. And again, by accident, oh, what happens? Oh, the poor person with the disability is gonna benefit from this. In the past, we only had three percent of our workforce working remotely, when at least 50% of the jobs in America could be done from home.

>> Absolutely.

>> And that's -- yeah.

>> Yeah. [Chuckling] Yes, and definitely have heard from the disability community, the slight irony in the fact that many people with disabilities over the years have been asking for the accommodation of being able to work from home, at least occasionally, and been told that, no, that wasn't possible. And of course, as soon as all the able-bodied people needed that, it was miraculously appeared as -- [Laughing] -- a possibility. But you know, kidding aside, our irony noted. But I agree with you. There are both opportunities and challenges in the COVID era --

>> Yes.

>> -- with regard to accessibility. One, of course, major challenge for the deaf community is video calls and conference meetings, and that kind of thing. Fortunately, that challenge is being met, and many people are not aware of the technology capabilities of platforms like Zoom --

>> Oh, my God, yeah.

>> -- Microsoft Teams, ScubaMeet. The popular platforms are building in or already have, you know, live captioning services --

>> Yes.

>> -- so that we can have inclusive meetings. An inclusive meeting is one where everyone can participate, understand --

>> Mm-hmm.

>> -- what's going on, and captions are, of course, a critical part of that. We did see -- [Chuckling] -- you know, just again, outside of sort of the digital accessibility space, but we saw that the National Association for the Deaf had to bring lawsuits against both Gov. Cuomo and the White House for not having ASL interpreters during their --

>> Mm-hmm.

>> -- press briefings, which is unfortunate. You know, it's unfortunate that it had to take that. We really need to get to a better state where inclusion is thought of up front, and it's just a given. It's table stakes. So yes.

>> It shouldn't be an afterthought, and that's one of the things too --

>> Of course.

>> -- that when this whole pandemic thing started, we found out that none of the states had a completely usable, compliant platform. They decided to go onto the candidates' websites and, you know, neither of them were accessible. We wrote to their campaigns, and understanding, you know, there's a lot of going on, and you know, they're busy trying to edge the other one out and win, but 62 million people -- even if we go half of that, 30 million people, plus their friends and family, are disenfranchised. They're not considered viable. And when I looked at Trump's website, it had no accessibility statement, had no response for us, and not that Joe Biden was that much better, but at least his website spoke about people with disabilities and had the accessibility statement. But still, no response.

>> And Biden had an opening. I'm not honestly sure whether someone stepped into that role. I believe they did -- for an accessibility director.

>> And I remember when Clinton was trying to do that too. There is reasons for the disability community to step up and say, "Don't diss my ability. Don't just label us. We are a contingent of people to be reckoned with."

>> Mm-hmm.

>> We have means. We have to make decisions how to spend our money, where to spend our money. We're done doing it because it's the warm, socially-conscious, fuzzy thing to do for poor, downtrodden, disabled people. It's good business. We are a commodity.

>> Absolutely.

>> We are irate.

[CROSS TALK]

>> And I think one other positive trend that I see now is that I think we're beginning to bring two different worlds together in what I think will be a more impactful way within corporate America. And by that, I mean we've always had diversity, and equity, and inclusion professionals and practitioners, and then we've also, for quite some time now, had digital accessibility or web accessibility professionals. But those two worlds haven't collaborated as closely as I believe that there is an opportunity to do now.

So with Black Lives Matter and with the, you know, social justice concerns in this country, and an increased emphasis on what are companies doing about diversity, equity, and inclusion, I think we have an amazing opportunity to ensure that disability inclusion is part of the DEI agenda, because disability intersects with all races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, etc., and, in fact, is the largest diversity strand.

So what's interesting to me and I'm hopeful about is collaboration and an understanding that you can't achieve inclusion in a company without disability inclusion as being part of your strategy. And you can't achieve disability inclusion without a commitment to accessibility. Those things are essential. And I think, if we continue to kind of message that and action on it in the right way in corporate America, we will begin to see better progress.

>> What's DEI?

>> Diversity, equity, and inclusion.

>> [INDISCERNIBLE - cross talk]

>> Sometimes it's called D and I --

>> Yeah.

>> -- but it's increasingly kind of -- they're throwing "equity" in there.

>> Yeah. The acronym is diversity and inclusion, or diversity, equity, and inclusion.

>> Right.

>> So it's a matter of who uses what.

>> Some people have talked about diversity as being "invited to the dance", but inclusion means you're "out on the dance floor", or something to that effect. I'm probably quoting that badly. But the idea is that, you know, diversity is just kind of getting the different people in the door, but inclusion is more of a state of welcoming, and full participation, and appreciation for diverse points of view, which, of course, disability brings a lot of that to the table.

So, in any case, I think there is this opportunity to pull these threads together --

>> Yeah.

>> -- and I've always been really passionate about getting more people with disabilities into the workforce because I think that side-by-side collaboration, working together, getting those diverse points of view, getting the strength that disability brings to the table, the creativity, the

innovation, the problem-solving skills -- I mean, those are hugely valuable, and companies are missing out if they're not hiring people with disabilities. They really, truly are.

>> And there's that concept, "nothing about us without us." You know, that's where MyBlindSpot really takes a firm stand in involving the stakeholders in the outcomes as part of the solution to the problems. You can't expect people with disabilities to be understood or appreciated when they're being dictated by others who have no concept or lived experience with a disability.

>> Absolutely. In fact, the misperceptions and -- about disability are so deeply ingrained, which, you know, people aren't familiar with the term "able-ism". It's a real thing.

>> Yes.

>> And that representation and understanding needs to change quite a bit.

>> Quite a bit. You know, and then, that's something that, when people always say to me, "Wow, it takes you a long time to get these things going," because we have to deconstruct social constructs that have pigeonholed people with a disability into a role of less than. And we take a look -- as I've said so many times -- you take a look at the Bible, the Torah, or the Koran, and people with disabilities are not worthy of God's presence. And even the story of the Good Samaritan, whereby everybody was running by the prophet, Jesus, in the gully, and nobody stopped to help him. None of the rich people, none of the rabbis, none of the priests, nobody. It has been pervasive.

And one of the things that you get, Jon gets, is people in the world are temporarily able. At some point in time, they're going to join this community. And disability community is at the intersectionality of all other groups of people, minority or otherwise. That's why, when we talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion, you rarely see disability councils within corporations. I mean, Morgan Stanley, when we were trying to impose the importance of authentic inclusion there, made it clear, "All we have are women's rights groups, Latinos, African Americans," and the list went on and on, but nobody had anybody with a disability voice in their --

>> I think that's been true. And again, I mean, I think there's an organization that's doing some amazing work internationally, called The Valuable 500. And they have definitely made the point exactly that you're making, Albert, which is --

>> Did --

>> -- something like 94% of all companies profess commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, but only 4% had anything that showed --

>> Yeah.

>> -- any commitment or action on disability inclusion.

>> I've been tracking what Caroline's been doing.

>> Yes.

>> Fan-frickin-tastic. Jonathan and I had dinner with her, what? Two years ago? I forget. We went into the city, had dinner with her. Jon, you remember. It was Caroline Casey. We had dinner with her, and what she's done -- and she is a woman who is blind. Her entire life, her parents never told her she was blind, and when she was 17, if I remember the story correctly, she was all excited about getting her license, and the doctor turned to her mother and said, "You never told her?"

This young woman had -- at the time, was a young woman -- had enough vision to convince herself that she was seeing normally, and her parent never wanted her to feel different or segregated out, and she's taken what would have crippled most people and turned it into a global movement.

Lori, why don't you pick up and talk about The 500, because I don't wanna do a disservice to her, because she's a force to be reckoned with.

>> Right. They've gone on now. I think they have something along the lines of 340 --

>> Yes.

>> -- number of organizations. And essentially, what they do is they ask for a pledge from the CEO of an enterprise, and that pledge is a commitment to disability inclusion, to accessibility, in whatever form makes sense for that particular business. It's along the lines of something they're already doing, but they're getting those leadership pledges.

And I think what I like about them also is that they're focusing on the end-to-end experience of disability inclusion. So hiring is certainly an aspect of that, but also, all the way through to how do you practice inclusive design for --

>> Yeah.

>> -- whatever particular products or services your business may have. And I think that's hugely important.

Another person I'm a huge fan of is Christina "Mallon" [phonetic] from "Wondermon" [phonetic] Thompson, who is truly amazing as a leader in this space. And she has done some wonderful work in integrating inclusive design all the way through the process, whether it's advertising, or fashion design, or whatever. Whatever business you happen to be in, the "nothing about us without us" is something that --

>> Yeah.

>> -- she lives every day. She, herself, lost the use of her arms. She's, you know, a young woman, probably, I think, maybe in her 30s, around --

>> Thirties, yes.

>> -- and what a force on the scene. I mean, there's so many. And we need to keep pushing it, and I think, again, back to changing perceptions. I recently went on a little bit of a rant on LinkedIn because I saw a post of a video celebrating a young man who had been in a wheelchair, and had been very determined, and was able to walk. And I'm really happy for the young man. That's great. He had a goal. You know, doctors were not encouraging about this prospect, and yet he was very determined. And that's great, but the commentary in it and the framing around it was that automatic assumption that disability is a terrible thing, and everybody must be suffering --

>> Yeah.

>> -- and anyone with a disability must automatically wish that they didn't have that disability.

>> No. Yeah.

>> And it just permeated everything in the comments. I just had to kind of speak up, and of course, I got a huge amount of backlash for speaking up and saying, "You know, this framing of, you know, saying that this young man was quote/unquote stuck in a wheelchair, many people view their wheelchair as -- they're grateful for it."

>> Yeah.

>> They -- it's their mobility. It's their access to the world. And so --

>> It's their normal.

>> --they don't resent their wheelchair.

>> Yeah, I know. Hey, Lori?

>> Yeah?

>> So I'm gonna grab that and put it in the show notes.

>> Yeah.

>> [Laughing] Oh, wow.

>> Anyone wants to go check it out, they can.

>> Yeah, and you know, one of the things that that reminds me of, Lori, is you and I -- and I know that people have heard me ad nauseum -- we want to infuse authentic inclusion and digital equity, in this instance, into the DNA of our corporate and social cultures. We want to see authentic inclusion from the board room to the mail room and everywhere in between. And that is something that I believe that you and I have always aspired to and spoke to clearly and non-negotiably. And that's what made me fall in love with Caroline Casey and her message. It's just a no brainer.

And she went right to the top. She's doing everything to infuse the authentic inclusion into the DNA of the corporations' cultures. And I think we need to get her on next to include here, because I know Caroline would have a fantastic wealth of information to share with the audience and to bring us all up to date on all the work she's doing globally.

>> Yeah.

>> But it's remarkable.

>> So Lori, we talked a lot about what you do, but not about why you do it. Could you expand on why you do what you do?

>> Sure. Probably, the roots of it are that my sister has cerebral palsy, and we grew up a long time ago --

>> [Laughing]

>> -- in the 1960s and 70s in Boston. And my sister didn't go to Boston public schools. The ADA had not been passed into law. She went to a school called The Industrial School for Crippled Children.

>> Ooph.

>> Must have --

>> I --

>> -- been hard living in Boston.

[LAUGHTER]

>> And you know, it had a horrible name, obviously. It did ultimately change its name over the

years. And I do wanna say that the people at the school were wonderful teachers and staff, and I loved going there to hang out with her friends or go to school dances. It was awesome.

Nevertheless, I mean, she was segregated from me and my brothers. And I think that awareness of the challenges that she faced in just, you know, not -- the opposite of inclusion is exclusion. And she was excluded from the childhood experiences in the schools that we went to, and on so many levels. I carried that awareness with me. It's kind of baked into my DNA.

And then, in the 1990s, I had moved out to the Bay Area, and I was working for a company called Broderbund Software, which -- and I was doing product development and engineering there for products like the Print Shop. And Broderbund had a lot of fun, multimedia CD-ROM products, like 'Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?' --

>> [Laughing]

[CROSS TALK]

>> Jon played that.

>> I did.

>> A fabulous --

>> I know.

>> It was a fabulous place to work. I loved it very much. We had so much fun. But I started to get involved in doing some volunteer work at a school in Berkeley, working with kids with disabilities in a computer lab at their school, who were, you know, trying out different kinds of adaptive technology. So there were these big trackballs instead of a mouse. There were different types of keyboards that were easier to work with for kids with physical disabilities. And you know, I was learning at the same time everybody else was about what we could do to meet the needs of kids with disabilities, in this case. And there was a great bunch of innovation happening in the 1990s in that space. And Kurzweil invented the first screen reader and tele-tools, had the intelli-keys keyboard, and many, many others that I can't forget -- can't remember their names at this point.

But that was my introduction into what I would call understanding that if mainstream software were developed to meet certain standards, then it would be compatible with these adaptive technologies and devices. So it was pre-internet. [Chuckling] We didn't have WCHE or the W3C, but we did have this notion that technology could be something that would actually enable kids and adults to participate in learning experiences, in play and work, if only the developers of that software would just pay attention to the fact that their software might be used with these different kinds of peripheral devices. That was the world in the 1990s.

>> I gotta stop and say I just -- thank you so much for Carmen -- 'Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?'

>> [Laughing]

[CROSS TALK]

>> He loved that game.

>> Yes. Well, actually, that was one of, obviously, one of Broderbund's, you know, huge hits. They also had 'Myst', which was on the gaming side, so it was a -- it was a really, really fun place to work. And the nice thing about Broderbund was that they were very supportive of the work that I was bringing to them and that -- and the learning that I was bringing to them around accessibility. And they definitely were supportive of that. I did some training with the developers, even back then, around what we could do, and just kind of to bring that awareness, and actually connected with Microsoft as well.

Microsoft was just, at that time, building accessibility APIs into the Windows platform. It was actually pre-Windows 95. So anyway, it was a pretty fascinating time in the industry, and that was my start in accessibility.

>> Last podcast, we talked about my life and how I, in school, went through a whole bunch of [INDISCERNIBLE] programs. One of the best parts about it was they would let me play games like [INDISCERNIBLE] and Sandiego. [Laughing]

[LAUGHTER]

[CROSS TALK]

>> We may be -- we'll be on this for a while.

>> I don't know if it was a game that I played recently, or if I found an animated series that was either based on or --

>> Tied to a game.

>> -- was -- no, it was. It was absolutely 'Where is Carmen Sandiego?'. But some recently, they just -- they rebooted it or something.

>> [Laughing]

>> In the gaming, it's one of the things too, now that we've "sed-ju-ated" [phonetic] into that, that I never gamed. I played my brother. He cheated, even in 'Pong'. And that's how far back I go to video games. But I've come to appreciate, thanks to Jonathan and some of our other

friends, I never realized how people with disabilities -- now, kids can play games with other people all around the world --

>> Absolutely.

>> Remember when we were kids? We had to go downstairs and have our friends come to our house.

>> Absolutely. No, gaming has become such --

>> Now --

>> -- an interesting world. I mean, especially in the pandemic, too. You know, the first couple months of the pandemic, I think my son, who's 16 now, you know, he spent a lot of time, you know, on [INDISCERNIBLE - cross talk] with his friends, you know. And it is all an immersive online experience where you're talking in real time with your friends, playing the game together. And so, again, an opportunity for inclusion or --

>> Yes.

>> -- the risk of exclusion.

>> And -- or the opportunity to escape your mundane, everyday lives and step into a role or an imagination place where you don't have people judging you for who you are, how you roll through life, or stuff like that.

>> Exactly. And just having some fun --

>> Yeah.

>> -- and hanging out with your friends, your buddies. And so I think that there have been some great strides in gaming. Obviously, Microsoft produced the adaptive Xbox controller, so that's just a huge --

>> Love that commercial with --

>> Yes.

>> -- that little kid in the neighborhood coming together.

>> So much. There's so much going on in --

>> So much in that space. Yes. Yeah.

>> the gaming, when it comes to accessibility for everyone.

>> Inclusion.

>> But --

>> And, you know, we're definitely --

>> -- I believe --

>> -- seeing that. You know, I think we're starting to see more accessibility settings and features built into games.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> Stephen Sailor, I don't know him personally, but he's a blind gamer, and he had shared a video of one experience, and of course, I'm gonna forget the name of the game, but it was at the end of the game, and he had -- it was so accessible that he was actually overcome with emotion --

>> Yeah.

>> -- about how, you know, he had been able to complete this game. And he was so thankful to, you know, the company, of course, in this case, that had produced this game with a thought to inclusion. And again, you know, whether it's play, or work, or learning, we just have to be inclusive. We have to think of people's needs, and we think of how to meet those best. And of course, when we do, you know, when that's done right, it ends up being great for everyone. So it's so important and so impactful when it's done right.

>> So Lori, I know we don't have much more time, so could you tell us what you have planned for the future, if you have anything planned?

>> For me, personally, I think I'm just getting started at NBC Universal. So there's just a great opportunity here to pull together some threads, I think, from both digital accessibility as well as diversity, equity, and inclusion, disability inclusion, and the platform of being able to influence public perception through representation, authentic representation in media, and entertainment, and news.

So while I don't expect to be the person, necessarily, driving all of that, there's great work going on within NBC Universal and also other companies that are beginning to recognize that it's really important to hire people with disabilities in the entertainment industry and in the news business, as journalists, as writers, as creators, producers, directors, and actors and actresses, of course. So it's an exciting space that I find myself in now after coming out of the tech world. This is a new adventure for me personally. So I'm really enjoying that.

And you know, I tend to be an optimist about the future, insofar as the opportunities, but we have to be vigilant. We have to continue to work hard. We've seen, from the last four years of the Administration that didn't support disability rights and inclusion, that the work really has to amp up now. We've lost some ground, I think, in terms of inclusion and equity. And we have a long way to go.

So I just hope to be part of that. I just hope to be part of driving for real equity and real accessibility.

>> Oh, my God, you say so much that I just don't even know where to begin, because it's like preaching to the choir here. But for our listeners, what can they do? I mean, right now, we know that platforms are designed less than exceptionally at times. We have academic institutions that need access for people with disabilities. We have work environments. But we're still so far off, and that's one of the things that the ADA has seriously failed at, is opening up avenues to employment. I mean, we still have a 75% under-employment and unemployment rate amongst the disability community.

What do you see as a future goal that we should be more focused on that will shift that perspective, both with equitability or making things equitable and usable, as well as opening up avenues of opportunity for people with disabilities to move away from being taxing dependents and --

>> Yeah.

>> -- and then become independent taxpayers?

>> That's a great question. So I think education is key. Yeah, I think it's absolutely critical that we -- really, even from a young age, we start teaching about disability, about inclusion, and about accessibility and what that means. There's too many stories that people don't even know. There's too many people that grow up without a personal connection or experience with disability and have absolutely no idea. And so to kind of continue to live their lives with this lack of awareness and probably, unfortunately, carrying around a lot of unconscious bias. Again, kind of back to the representation side of things, but I think it's really key to get kids all the way through school understanding disability as part of human diversity, not as some terrible thing that people suffer from but just simply as an aspect of diversity.

Access is key. You know, people should be in -- whether it's in computer science, or web design -- anybody who's building digital experiences needs to understand accessibility. And there's some good work going on in that space, but --

>> Yep. It sounds to me like you still believe strongly about compassionate empathy as opposed to sympathy, doing things for good business practices versus because the poor person with disability deserves this. There seems to be much more value in approaching this from an

empathetic perspective. Would you agree?

>> Absolutely. In fact, sympathy and pity are really antithetical to taking responsibility for providing access. You know, if you can live your life just feeling like you're righteous because you pity people with disabilities or that perhaps, you're even kind or charitable, you're not really solving any problems, and you may, in fact, be, you know, just kind of perpetuating cycles of discrimination based on that.

You know, there's some great articles written on this topic. And people like Alice Wong, who's going out there and created this disability visibility project, which I highly recommend learning more about, she's really driving that perspective too, along with many others. Wendy Lu, who's a fantastic, brilliant writer for the Huffington Post, really talking about, again, the social model of disability, looking at it differently and looking at the barriers that exist within society. Again, whether that's the digital world or the physical world, or both.

>> Yeah.

>> Those are the problems that need to be solved. We have so much technology that can be used for good, be used to provide equal access. So technology should never be the barrier. It should be a solution, not a barrier.

And of course, in the physical world, we're still 30 years after the ADA --

>> Please.

>> -- being physical, you know, access problems.

>> And New York City is suffering through that right now, and I've seen recent tweets and texts, what have you, social media blurbs, about how inaccessible New York City is, but I know Vic "De-kee-see" [phonetic] and the Mayor's office have done fantastic things that I have personally experienced over the few years I've been blind. Taxicabs that have an audio output on their screens. We have audible cross walk signs happening, even though back in the day, there wasn't enough room in the infrastructure to support that. There's a whole undertaking, even in -- oh, my God -- down in downtown financial district, you've got curbs without curb cuts, and the curbs drop 10, 15 inches, which is not good.

We're being conscious of that, and I think that the dialogue's happening. Historically, we've got a wealth of reference to draw from with the Civil Rights movement, and now it's time for the disability community to take its rightful place as valued members --

>> Yeah.

>> -- of society.

>> Absolutely. I think there's definitely a lot of analogy between the two. I mean, basically, disability rights are human rights. They are civil rights. As we work to be anti-racist, we also have to work to be anti-able-ist, and --

>> Yes.

>> -- understand that able-ism is a real thing, and it's very systemically baked in, and even people who truly believe that they have good intentions may be speaking about disability and making assumptions about it automatically, again, being a negative thing that everybody with a disability must wish they didn't have a disability. That's a very common assumption.

>> Yeah.

>> And it's just not true. [Chuckling]

>> No, no. And you know what else too, Lori? There is this -- [Chuckling] -- I talk about everybody, you included, being temporarily able. You had that one experience where you had your operation on your foot. You were --

>> Mm-hmm.

>> -- using that little scooter all over the place --

>> [Chuckling]

>> -- and the fun we had getting you up and down stairs and into buildings. But we're all temporarily able. And disabilities is at the intersectionality of all other ages, all other races, all genders, all orientations, all religions. And you know, we might not pay attention to it now, but one day, you're gonna regret it when you become a person with a disability, whether it's because of a hearing impairment, or a limited vision. All these things come into play as we age into the community. And it's important for us to make sure -- as corporations, we might not want to engage -- and Lori, you and I have been down this path so many times -- in the heavy lifting of marketing to a new community of people. But if we take the time to convince organizations and corporations about rewarding their loyal consumer base we're aging into this community --

>> Mm-hmm.

>> -- by accident, they open themselves up to nearly 3.6 billion people around the world who either have a disability or are friends of people who have them.

>> Yeah. And there's so much innovation that happens when inclusive design is really practiced, and people with disabilities are engaged as employees, as consultants, you know, throughout that process. There's so much innovation. I mean, I think we talked about --

>> Yeah.

>> -- history of innovation that's happened when people have leaned in to try to solve a problem in the disability space. So whether it's text messaging for people who are -- you know, it was originally designed for people who were deaf. The touch screen that's on an iPhone was designed originally for people who had physical disabilities and couldn't apply pressure to a keyboard. So there's all kinds of things we see in history. The typewriter was invented for someone who was blind. If we just look at all that and realize what's to come, if we design products and experiences with inclusion in mind and practice that, it is a practice. Nobody has to get it perfect right out of the starting gate, but it's something that the more you do it, the better you get and the better products end up resulting, and the more they're inclusive and accessible.

>> New things there. But one of the things I wanna highlight too is, you know, our careers. My career in this is sort of following yours. Having had contacts with NBC Universal before and having spoken with, presented with, and learned from Tom Bulkowski --

>> Mm-hmm.

>> -- and what Comcast is doing is fantastic. And I mean, having worked with Intuit that was, you know, crawling toward inclusion, kicking and screaming, in my opinion. Microsoft also has made great strides under Jenny Lay's efforts, and now you're with Comcast, NBC Universal under Tom's oversight and guidance. What have you seen as improved environmental? What have you seen, since you started in this industry, have been some of the most significant advancements, and how do you feel your position at NBC Universal working with such large organization, with Tom --

>> Mm-hmm.

>> -- is going to impact how you continue to do what you do, and how has it changed to give you access to the things you know need to be done?

>> I would say, first of all, again, this is why I'm optimistic. In the --

>> Mm-hmm.

>> -- in the ten, full-time years that I've been focused on accessibility work, I've seen huge improvements, huge trends in a positive direction in large enterprises. And of course, I feel like I've been really fortunate to worked in companies that really try to live their values, and you know, it's not just talk. When Microsoft talks about their mission statement to empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more, it's really not cliché. They do really try to embrace that and live that, and be every person and every organization speaks to inclusion of people with disabilities. And they're very conscious of that.

I've seen -- you know, Comcast has a accessibility as a core value that they report on. We're seeing companies really try to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion, and I guess I'm not cynical about that. [Chuckles] And yes, there's definitely more to be done in the disability space around that, for sure.

>> Yeah.

>> There's huge opportunity, but I think the time is perfect right now to really get disability inclusion into the diversity, equity, and inclusion --

>> Yeah. [Chuckling]

>> -- and to make sure that it's solidly there, and then make sure that the digital accessibility practitioners are engaged with the diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners, having that tie-in between the two to understand.

So I'm very optimistic about the way that I think things are trending in corporate America. Again, a lot of work to be done. Definitely --

>> Yeah.

>> -- obstacles in the way. It's still a challenge to get accessibility to the point that it is simply part of the process, and it's a --

>> [INDISCERNIBLE - cross talk]

>> -- table stakes. It's not negotiable. It doesn't get dropped off the priority, you know, list, and --

>> Yeah.

>> -- into the background. So --

>> It becomes a line item that gets scratched off the list of things to do.

>> Yeah. It's definitely still challenging, but I feel like the receptivity is there. I used to have to fight the battles around why we had to focus on accessibility. I'm not having those conversations, or rarely, I would say I have those --

>> Yeah.

>> -- conversations now. Now, it's a given that we wanna do this. Now, it's a question of how. How do we do it well?

>> [INDISCERNIBLE - cross talk]

>> How do we execute more effectively? How do we get businesses to really own the problem and take ownership of it? Those are still questions that we're working on, but I don't feel like I have to make the case so much anymore, which is a lovely place to be.

>> Isn't that refreshing?

>> It is refreshing.

>> It really is.

>> And it's hopeful. So we really have to all keep working on this, but I'm excited about the future.

>> I'm pretty optimistic myself. I've always said to you -- and you've heard me say this before -- I picked the right time to go blind, because the technologies are definitely what allows me to do more and be more. And as long as we just include those programmatic codes into the platform, we'll all be better off for it.

And I keep thinking, too, Lori, and I'll leave you with this thought -- education. We need to ensure that all of the academic institutions in this country incorporate accessibility 101 --

>> Absolutely.

>> -- [INDISCERNIBLE] standards 101, whatever you wanna call that --

>> Absolutely.

>> -- into their course offerings --

>> It --

>> -- because that's going to ensure we have an educated, informed contingent of individuals coming out of these universities, and we'll never have to run into a Karan Patel again, who admittedly said, "I didn't know about this," and was --

>> Exactly.

>> -- the head of a technology firm in Silicon Valley.

>> I think it's so important to start young, start early. Make sure that kids as young as in elementary school --

>> Yeah.

>> -- are learning about disability inclusion, are learning about racial inclusion and equity. I mean, all of these things. How are we ever going to really change social justice problems if we don't educate our children about them?

>> Yeah, and --

>> So I think it's critical to get kids at a young age --

>> Yep.

>> -- get them understanding, get them building empathy, get them understanding how to practice inclusion in their daily lives. We can solve this generationally, but we have to put an effort into it.

>> This is where I think we're at this interesting intersectionality. For the first time, I mean, Jonathan has opened my eyes to the concepts of, you know, millennials. We have friends of ours who are millennials. And how inclusive --

>> [INDISCERNIBLE - cross talk]

>> You are a millennial. [Laughing] You're at the cusp. You're at the beginning head.
[INDISCERNIBLE - cross talk]

>> Corey and his friends are Gen Z.

>> Gen X.

>> Gen Z.

>> Gen Z. All right. Well, I'm sorry. I can't keep track of all these titles. But, I find that Jonathan's generation and younger tend to be more inclusive, more embracing, more demanding of diversity than ever before. And then we have the aging population of people.

So I think, as it relates to people with disabilities, some of my peers -- [Chuckling] -- don't want to have to do without. And then we have the Gen X and the millennials who are absolutely keyed into this, and I think we have the makings of a perfect storm to move past the fears, and the guilts, and the lack of budget planning for digital equity and inclusion for the first time. And I think it's gonna be a dramatic change over the next five to ten years like we've never seen before.

>> I agree, and I hope so. I think we're see a generation that's also coming up very

technologically savvy. They're used to working with technology. They expect to be able to work with technology. So again, I think that pressure is gonna also come from people who've grown up with technology and are comfortable with it, and will just simply expect it to work for them, and aren't really willing to just accept discrimination in the technology space, hopefully. So I'm hoping that that will also be a driving force.

>> Well, I'm so happy to hear that you have moved to NBC Universal. I'm so happy to hear you're working with Tom and Ken. I have nothing but high hopes and fantastic belief in your abilities. I always have. You've been a beacon of hope for me in all that I do. And I wish you continued success.

>> Thank you, Albert.

>> [Laughing]

>> I appreciate that, and it's been such a pleasure and joy to have you in my life from the moment we met.

[MUSIC]

>> That was Lori Samuels, the accessibility director at NBC Universal Media.

>> That was a fantastic, fantastic interview. I just -- I love the wealth of information she has. She's so authentically committed.

>> Yeah, you two seem to build off each other a lot.

>> Oh, my God. When we used to do panel presentations pre-COVID, it was seamless, and it's not easy doing a presentation, or a panel, or a podcast with somebody when you can't read their body language. But it was so natural, and you saw how we just interact with each other.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> And she's more than just a colleague and a mentor. She's one of my nearest and dearest friends.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> We're going to be wrapping it up here.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> So please remember to look for AccessAbility Works on your favorite podcast outlets -- Spotify, Apple -- or visit MyBlindSpot.org, and you can download and listen there.

[MUSIC]

>> We're also open to suggestions for potential people to interview or topics to discuss. So please reach out to us at Podcast@MyBlindSpot.org and give us your ideas, feedback. We're looking forward to continuing the dialogue. We'll be going back with another podcast shortly with other movers and shakers and evangelists looking to promote authentic inclusion and digital equity for people of all abilities.

Thanks for listening. I'm Albert Rizzi.

>> And I'm Jonathan Hermis.

>> And if we don't get our next episode out in time for the holidays, please have a joyous, healthy, and prosperous holiday season. Stay safe and healthy during these unprecedented times. And remember, wash your hands or --

>> Wash your damn hands.

>> Or what?

>> "Crampis" [phonetic] will come for you.

>> Crampis, the bad Santa, is going to put you on the naughty list. Wash your hands. Stay safe. Wear a mask. It's the right thing to do.

Thanks for listening. Peace out, people.

[MUSIC ENDS]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]