

Post-Production FILE

**AccessAbility Works Episode 004-Kirk Adams-Final
January 29, 2021**

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SPEAKER:

(LIGHT ROCK MUSIC PLAYS) Welcome to the AccessAbility Works podcast, a podcast about the possibilities that accessibility means for people with disabilities. I'm Albert Rizzi.

SPEAKER:

And I'm Jonathan Hermus.

SPEAKER:

And this is AccessAbility Works podcast.

SPEAKER:

Today, we're going to be talking with Kirk Adams.

SPEAKER:

Dr. Kirk Adams, the CEO of the American Foundation for the Blind, the AFB, originally founded over 100 years ago this September, which we'll talk about with Kirk. And our last episode was with who?

SPEAKER:

Lori Samuels.

SPEAKER:

Lori Samuels is the Accessibility Director at NBCUniversal. Long-time friend, colleague and everything else in between of My Blind Spot and of ours. If you haven't had a chance to download and listen to that, go to wherever you find your favorite podcast and download it or visit us at myblindspot.org, and you can stream it live there.

SPEAKER:

We've also got a blog coming out about the recent Biden administration taking the reins of control in DC, looking forward to the next four years and seeing what our country can do with us.

SPEAKER:

It's certainly interesting.

SPEAKER:

And you can find the blog at myblindspot.org and let us have your feedback and thoughts about my feelings on what the Biden administration could be doing to be more inclusive about digital equity and including ability alongside race, gender, orientation and religion in both our social and corporate cultures.

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And then to some exciting news that Jonathan's going to talk about was a webinar held at the G3ict about Neuralink and some brain stuff.

SPEAKER:

G3ict, for those who don't know, is the Global Initiative for Inclusive ICTs. And that was, what was that one?

SPEAKER:

I think it's information and computer technologies. That's what I'm sticking with.

SPEAKER:

Sounds right.

SPEAKER:

Ickt, ickt.

SPEAKER:

But they held a meeting -

SPEAKER:

A webinar.

SPEAKER:

A webinar about brain computer interface -

SPEAKER:

Oh, that's what it was.

SPEAKER:

- which I find endlessly fascinating.

SPEAKER:

Well, I think that's going to be the one of the stepping stones into how I get some usable vision back again. It's some sort of brain chip or some chip in my brain or some other neurological bypass system. And it's kind of exciting.

SPEAKER:

They have a program called NeuroAbilities.

SPEAKER:

NeuroAbilities. Well, we're going to look into that more and maybe speak about it on the next podcast.

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Alright. Well, let's get on to our next interview. We want you to meet Dr. Kirk Adams, friend and colleague and trusted confidante and CEO of the AFB. Hello, Kirk. How are you today?

SPEAKER:

I'm doing great. It is January 4th, World Braille Day today. I read Braille all day long. So, it's a holiday for me worth commemorating.

SPEAKER:

You know, the funny thing about me and Braille is when I went to college at Manhattanville College in Westchester, New York, I was taking other languages, Latin, and then they had sign language. So, I took American Sign Language. And the professor, Charlotte Goldblatt, insisted that I take Braille, too. And to this day, I hear her telling me, "Albert, you're never going to read Braille if you read it with your eyes." To wit, I said, "I'm never going to be blind. What does it matter?" Ba-rum-pam!

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So, Braille is a very important consideration as an educator and as somebody who is now blind, having the ability to read Braille allows us to gather information independently. And I think it's a very important thing to celebrate. So, happy World Braille Day, people.

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So, Jonathan, you've never met Kirk before. So, Kirk, this is Jonathan.

SPEAKER:

Hello. Well, just tell us a little bit about yourself, Kirk.

SPEAKER:

Sure, sure.

SPEAKER:

What was it like growing up blind? (LAUGHTER) What was it like?

SPEAKER:

Well, it was a whole new adventure for everyone in my family. I was born a sighted child and my retinas both detached when I was in kindergarten. So, I became a blind child very quickly and suddenly.

SPEAKER:

Why did that happen?

SPEAKER:

Oh, it was some blood vessels in my eyes that hemorrhaged. And the pressure from the hemorrhage detached the retinas.

SPEAKER:

No particular reason?

SPEAKER:

No discernable reason. So, my folks were young. I was actually born when they were in college studying to become teachers. My dad was a basketball coach - high school basketball coach - for his career and taught so he could coach. My mom taught fourth grade.

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But when my retinas detached, I had my first emergency retinal surgery in the Cabrini Hospital in Seattle. Family lived just north of Seattle, and it was before laser surgery. So, I had a series of unsuccessful, painful, traumatic surgeries, spent a lot of time at Doernbecher Children's Wing at the University of Oregon Medical School in Portland.

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At that time, my parents did not know another blind person, didn't know about advocacy, didn't know what to do, and were told - which was the mode of the day, I was a kindergartener at the local public school here - he's got to go to the state school.

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So, they visited the Washington State School for the Blind in Vancouver, Washington, and were not happy with what they saw there, as far as the level of academic activity. My retinal specialist was in Portland. Someone there said the Oregon State School is great. They visited there in Salem. They liked it and they quit their jobs and moved.

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I had a younger brother. A sister came along later, but moved the family to the state of Oregon so I could attend the Oregon State School for the Blind. I did that for first, second and third grade.

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Had a wonderful teacher, Mrs. Summers. Whenever I'm in a conference and someone says, shout out the name of the person who's been most influential in your life, Mrs. Summers for me, because she taught me how to read Braille. I can remember she made me use these big sweep-back books to get the motion of the hands down before she would teach me the Braille code.

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And I can remember asking her, "Will you teach me to read now?" (LAUGHTER) "No. You're not ready." You have to get the technique using both hands, reading the first part of the line with your your left while you're finding the beginning of the next line down with your right.

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So, the model was you went to a school for the blind until you had the skills to be thrown into the deep end and go to public school. Learn to read and write Braille, type on a typewriter, use a white cane.

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Third grade, I would go in the mornings to the School for the Blind. Then I would walk independently about eight blocks through Salem to Bush Elementary, and I would go to the regular elementary in the afternoon. And then, starting fourth grade I started public school, Silverton, Oregon. Sink or swim, and I learned to swim fast.

SPEAKER:

Olympic-style.

SPEAKER:

I was the only blind student in school from fourth grade on through my doctorate. Not a lot of supports back then. I would get my textbooks in Braille sometimes on time. I remember being in high school Spanish. The other kids had the fifth edition. I had the second edition because that's what had already been Brailled, things like that.

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As far as life goes, everything was pretty cool until about age 16, because I lived in small country towns. And when you turn 16 in a small country town, you get a driver's license -

SPEAKER:

Boring. (LAUGHTER)

SPEAKER:

- and you get a job. Yeah, you get a driver's license and you get a job and I got neither. Very isolated, a lot of psychosocial, emotional challenges around that time in my life.

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And then I went off to Whitman College in Walla Walla and things were good again, because there's a whole bunch of students there trapped in Walla Walla. Everyone was on campus. I met a young lady there, beautiful African-American woman, the first week of school. Her name was Ros. We've been married 35 years. We have two grown, amazing children who are contributing citizens.

SPEAKER:

Nice. And that's one of the things that really annoys me - for lack of a better term - is in the '70s, there were still issues about institutionalizing students who happened to be blind. And it's interesting to hear how you had parents who didn't see the disability. They just saw the ability and who you were and refused to put you in these homogeneous institutions that allowed you to - would have forced you to sort of lose the opportunity to integrate and assimilate into mainstream society and rise to the top as you have.

SPEAKER:

Yeah. Let's talk about expectations just for a minute. So, there are lots of kids with additional disabilities who are blind. So, leading cause of blindness in babies is cortical visual impairment, which is brain function, not eye function. So, a lot of blind kids, a larger and larger percentage of blind kids have additional developmental disabilities.

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So, I didn't have any additional disability. Blindness was my only impairment. So, kids need whatever level of support they need to reach the fullest potential that they can. And one of the greatest barriers to thriving is expectations. So, my parents could have thrown up their hands and said we got this blind kid, let's wrap him in cotton. Or they could say you do what all the other kids do.

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I sometimes tell parents of blind kids, you can measure your success in your parenting as how many times you go to the emergency room with your kid, (LAUGHTER) because they need to be out there. If the four-year-old sighted kids are fighting over a toy in the sandbox, your blind kid needs to be out there fighting over a toy in the sandbox. When the eight, nine-year-old kids are climbing trees and falling down and riding their bikes and getting scrapes, their blind kids need to do that. If your middle school kid is going downtown to meet their friends at the mall to go to the movie in non-COVID times, you got to figure out how your blind kid can figure out how to do that.

SPEAKER:

Kudos to your parents for doing the right thing.

SPEAKER:

No, but, you know, it goes back to when I went to St. John's University to get my master's degrees in education, I was blessed to have had professors who really reinforced the concept. And knowing that your parents were teachers and Miss Summers, too, they taught to your ability and they strengthened your ability. They didn't coddle you. They didn't say, oh, you're blind, you're never going to learn. They just said, OK, this is your normal and we're going to adapt and we're going to support everything and anything to get Kirk where he needs to be.

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And again, a lot of people will say he took lemons and made lemonade, but no. You just took the Adams family values - ooh, that's a movie - and ran with it. And I don't know that, how many parents do that. I think a lot of parents - out of fear and guilt and concern about their child being bullied, being hurt, because of some difference in ability - and they become helicopter parents who complicate growth and maturation. And it sounds like you got that all handled.

SPEAKER:

Well, I was fortunate in circumstance and a lot of ways. I became blind suddenly, totally before first grade. So, I had to learn Braille. I had to learn how to use a cane. I had to learn how to type on a typewriter, which is keyboarding now. There was no question about that.

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Kids with usable vision, the parents have to decide. Should they read Braille? Gosh, they can really kind of - can't they just listen to stuff? They can kind of keep You know, I'm not putting any parent down for having difficulties in being clear on what they should do. Note to parents, if your child cannot read print at the same rate as a sighted kid, they need to learn Braille.

SPEAKER:

They're going to be functionally illiterate. You were going to say something, Jon?

SPEAKER:

Yeah, I'd say there's a whole world of difference between when you grew up, Kirk, and today.

SPEAKER:

Well, yeah, and I say it - network, network, network. My parents, like I said, they didn't know anyone who was blind. They never met a successful blind adult in their life until I became an adult. (LAUGHTER)

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So, if you're a parent of a blind kid - National Federation of the Blind, American Council of the Blind, AFB, American Printing House for the Blind. Google it up. Find people who've had the same experiences as you. There's so many resources.

SPEAKER:

Well, Jon has a print disability, too. He's pretty dyslexic. He has like seven or eight different variations on the theme. And his mom really was like your parents and said we're going to find a way to give him what he needs so he can compete.

SPEAKER:

Books on tape, mostly.

SPEAKER:

Books on tape was - she was a librarian. So, there was all that. I hate to tell you this, Jonathan, but we still have people who work for us and volunteer at My Blind Spot who can't get textbooks in Braille or can't even get versions that the professors are using for one reason or another.

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So, as advanced as things have become - and I want you to touch on this, Kirk, because you're much more versed in the advancements we've made as well as the steps we still have to take, and we'll get to that down the road. But it's kind of scary for me, having lost my eyesight unexpectedly, almost overnight, to see how far we still have to go, but how far we've come.

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So, Kirk had a whole different experience than most. Now, how was it - and because 'cause is this is a fairly recent experience for you, having the ability to advocate for yourself and having thrived in a variety of careers that you've had - what was it like going for your PhD. PhD, to going for your undergrad

or even elementary, high school?

SPEAKER:

I didn't spring fully formed as an advocate. I will tell you, when I was a senior in high school - Snohomish High, home of the Panthers here up in Snohomish County north of Seattle - there were like 30, 40 kids who were kind of the college-bound kids.

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So, first period, we were all in physics. Second period, we're all in math analysis. Third period, first day of senior year. I went to chemistry and the chemistry teacher said, you can't take chemistry.

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And I didn't take chemistry. I went home and told my parents and they said, well, if Mr. So-and-so says you can't do it. And they put me in a study hall. I sat in the library and read trashy novels for third period for my senior year, and I didn't have the advocacy skills. I wasn't connected with one of the consumer groups who could help guide me. I didn't know any blind adults. So again, back to those networks. But now, I've met blind chemists -

SPEAKER:

Blind physicists.

SPEAKER:

- who are blind and yeah. So, you know, now I know.

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So, undergraduate, I graduate from high school in '79. I had all my stuff in Braille, pretty much. Braille, Braille, Braille. Went to college and the laws are different - K-12 and higher ed - at that time. And I had to listen to my books, which was really different for me. And I got all my textbooks on tape, recorded by volunteers from Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic, bless your hearts. But I was an economics major and I had a lot of textbooks read by people who were not economists. (LAUGHTER) So, the description of graphical representations was pretty challenging.

SPEAKER:

Less than stellar.

SPEAKER:

And, you know, the technology. I had a four-track cassette player from National Library Service. I had these books on tape. I had an IBM Selectric with erase tape. That was the cutting edge.

SPEAKER:

Pre-computer days.

SPEAKER:

And I used a slate and stylus and took notes in class every day. And then I copied them on a Perkins

Braille every night. My parents were teachers. They instilled the good study habits. So, I was a good student - Phi Beta Kappa, cum laude, all that stuff - and graduated and couldn't get a job. That's a different story.

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But 15 years later, late 90s, I went to Seattle University, which was a Jesuit university and got a Masters in not-for-profit leadership. And I told them I can only enter into this program if I can get all my materials in Braille.

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So, they hired two work-study students. They bought a scanner, an Arkenstone scanner and a Braille embosser and Brailled every - sometimes a teacher, at the last minute, would hand out something, hand out and say. "Oh, I didn't have time to get this in Braille." Not often. Of course, it happened. And I will tell you, when I did my capstone project, I handed Braille out to all the students and I said, "Well, I didn't have time to get this in print for you all."

SPEAKER:

I love you for that! (LAUGHTER)

SPEAKER:

There's so many times that I've always wanted to start any speaking engagement I've been on in total darkness, and see what people would get from that and then

MAN 1:

That way.

KIRK ADAMS:

Yeah, so I finished the master's in '99, and then I started the PhD program in 2010, and 11 years, the world that changed. Everything was available electronically.

MAN 1:

Yeah.

KIRK ADAMS:

You know, we had the A to Z Journal Gateway, so all the journal articles were available. Some of the textbooks weren't. A very few. And again, I was fortunate to have great support from the Lighthouse for the Blind in Seattle and my executive assistant cut those books apart and scanned those books and embossed them. So, leaps and bounds every 10 to 12 years as far as my academic experience goes.

MAN 1:

Well, it's kind of interesting. Now, I kind of because of our never ending ongoing discussions about inclusion and access to academia specifically. We have been working with Sunni and their CIO Brian Dickman, and the deputy CIO Karen Jellinek, and have now just partnered with Proctorio. Proctorio is a testing platform environment. And all of this has become much more significant to be concerned about

as it relates to digital access and usability for the general public. And by accident, our community has catapulted to center stage in my opinion, and we are now working very intentionally with Sunni and Proctorio to make sure that the learning management systems that universities use, and that interface with testing platforms is compliant and above reproach. And I think you're right, every 12 years, every couple of decades or so, things do change. And our community, I believe, needs to be on top of those changes so we can shift our perspectives on accessibility versus usability and how our community is actually being elevated to inclusion in the 21st century because of technological advancements. Do you feel that anything has changed through the AFB?

KIRK ADAMS:

Well, what's going to be next, I mean, the smartphones were the last thing, right?

MAN 1:

Yeah, right.

MAN:

So, everyone's got a smartphone, everyone's got apps, but now it's, I've learned it's called XR. So, the virtual reality augmented reality where is that going to go?

MAN 2:

As far as what I know about virtual reality, it's all visual.

KIRK ADAMS:

Well, there are haptics which is the sense of feel, there are some obviously auditory and right now most stuff for blind people is all auditory. If you get too many things talking to you at once, it loses its effectiveness. So, where are those things going to go, and how do we have our voices heard so that we don't create this new digital divide? You know, we're always kind of a few steps behind when it went from some of you may remember MS-DOS.

MAN 1:

Yes.

KIRK ADAMS:

You know, things are pretty cool when it was MS-DOS. That's why a Braille display is 80 characters across because it was 80 characters across the line. Then Windows were a little bit behind and versions come out were a little bit behind. I guess my watchword is we need to be really present as these new technologies are developed so that they can create opportunities rather than a new set of barriers. There's a lot of stuff about implicit bias and artificial intelligence.

MAN 1:

Oh, yeah.

MAN 2:

So, we just were just talking about BCIs, brain computer interfaces. Basically, Elon Musk has, what was it

called, Neuralink?

MAN 1:
Neuralink.

MAN 2:
And this thing called G3ict.

MAN 1:
G3ict, yep.

KIRK ADAMS:
Yep, you're on it.

MAN 2:
They're having a panel.

MAN 1:
A symposium. Yep, panel.

MAN 2:
About BCIs, brain interfaces for computer. So, that would that would basically just allow you to interact with a computer just by thought alone.

KIRK ADAMS:
The singularity is coming.

MAN 2:
Yeah.

MAN 1:
Oh, yeah.

MAN 1:
(CHUCKLES)

MAN 2:
I'm excited about that. I want it to happen.

MAN 1:
Me too. But you know, it just it's interesting, again, Kirk, I agree with you, we need to be in front of these artificial intelligences and these virtual realities.

MAN 2:

I don't think in front of, but like side by side.

MAN 1:

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, I disagree. We have to be right in front of it. Because what happens, otherwise, there's going to be a 10 year lag and we're going to be playing catch up 15 years from now when it's mainstream and normal.

MAN 2:

You know, when you say...

KIRK ADAMS:

I think the good news is that inclusion, accessibility, usability are becoming more common in the space, in the environment.

MAN 2:

Yes, that's for sure.

KIRK ADAMS:

And it's reminiscent of when people started talking about making the green choice and carbon footprint.

MAN 1:

Correct.

KIRK ADAMS:

And waste streams and zero waste. I mean, 25, 30 years ago, that was foreign language.

MAN 1:

Yeah.

KIRK ADAMS:

And now it's common. So, I've seen a lot of progress in the last, Gosh, seven years.

MAN 1:

Yeah, we were talking with Lori Samuels from NBC Universal about the advancements and the things she's seen changing since she was in Silicon Valley. And they are happening and fantastic. Like I said, I think I picked the right time to go blind. I didn't have to struggle as much as others. There is still such a great opportunity for us to have dialogue with Microsoft with Proctorio, with Sunni, with all these different organizations and corporations that prior to the pandemic, and prior to DNI diversity and inclusion offices actually stopping and realizing we didn't have a disability representation. We had Latinos, African-Americans, Jews, you know, Christians, whatever it is, LGBT, women. But you know, we are at the intersectionality of all other age groups, all other abilities, being a member of the disability community, everybody is temporarily able, but they all will get here at some point in time, at least 99% of them, as they age.

KIRK ADAMS:

I think that's our opportunity At the American Foundation for the Blind. This is our centennial year.

MAN 1:

Yeah.

KIRK ADAMS:

We're 100 years old. So, we have a chance to shine a spotlight on a few things and get some attention that we wouldn't have in a non-centennial year. So, the conversation about diversity and inclusion and institutional barriers, institutional racism in particular...

MAN 1:

Systemic.

KIRK ADAMS:

..and things like Black Lives Matter has shone a light from a particular lens on inclusion and barriers to inclusion.

MAN 1:

Yep.

KIRK ADAMS:

So, at AFP, we're shining focus through the lens of blindness because that's what we know. We know there are institutional barriers to inclusion for people who are blind, institutional barriers for people who are, you know, how many women are on Fortune 500 boards?

MAN 2:

Oh, yeah.

KIRK ADAMS:

Most NFL players are African-American. How many African American head coaches are there? How many blind people are leading blindness organizations?

MAN 2:

Yep.

KIRK ADAMS:

So, the answer to all those questions is very few.

MAN 1:

Very few.

KIRK ADAMS:

So why? Because there are institutional barriers built into these systems. And if we have the growth

mindset as a society, and we say, let's bring all of these people into the circle, let's bring everyone in around the campfire, let's hear everyone's story, let's let everyone contribute. If you read the Carol Dweck stuff, you know, is that growth mindset or is it a zero sum game mindset?

MAN 1:

Yep.

KIRK ADAMS:

And in my opinion, it's not if someone wins, someone has to lose. It's let's grow this pie as big as we can, and the way to do that is to bring everyone's talents to the table.

MAN 1:

This is why I value your input on so many different things. There's a lot to unpack in there. I just want to touch on a couple of things and then keep on. I want to definitely talk about how the AFB was founded and formed. A lot of people know who Helen Keller was. I've always known who she was. My professor at college who taught me sign language and Braille had met her so many times and had an opinion about her being a difficult personality but...

KIRK ADAMS:

Good for her.

MAN 1:

No, yeah, no, exactly. She didn't take no, you know? And that's the thing. And I think that's where we need to let blind people know that there are no barriers in front of you. If you can point out what they are, we can fix them. We need to make sure that nothing about us without us is at the core of what we do. We need to ride the civil rights movement and understand from a historical perspective how difficult it was to eventually have an African-American president and now a vice president who happens to be a woman of color, and all the different advancements we've realized for gender equality and LGBT equality. And it's time for us take our rightful place and nurture the talent in our youth to advocate for authentic inclusion.

MAN 1:

And I was arguing with this woman, I don't want to get too deep into it, but she was arguing that a platform wasn't working. And I don't know about you, Kirk, but I find that a lot of members of our community don't have the skill set sufficient enough to know the difference between accessibility and usability outside of the frustrations they have using antiquated platforms. And we really need to educate ourselves on what's out there and how to tap into the most current up to date platforms that are now being built with accessibility baked into the process. And usability is the next thing we have to really focus on, and that's just critically important for us to take our place in society.

MAN 1:

How did you get to be the CEO of the Seattle Lighthouse for the Blind? And one of the things that most people don't realize is lighthouse is a umbrella term, but they all run independently and your organization, your stewardship of the lighthouse in Seattle, that organization was one of the top four

employment opportunities and creating gainful employment for people who just happen to be blind. Talk to us about that, please, and how that enriched your life and how...

KIRK ADAMS:

Rewinding back to graduating from college with a degree in economics from a well regarded regional liberal arts college, Whitman College in Walla Walla, and with a four point, and my major and Phi Beta Kappa and Akun Laude, and wanted to go to work. Applied to some graduate schools got in to a couple, decided I wanted to work and get, earn a salary and buy a house and get married and have kids. Yeah.

KIRK ADAMS:

(CHUCKLES)

MAN 2:

Two kids.

KIRK ADAMS:

So, I start applying for jobs. And using my IBM Selectric I put the resume together and a cover letter. And I knew I wanted to live in Seattle because there was public transportation there and jobs there. And I'd grown up in small towns so, you know, I needed to live in a city. So, I started to apply. Number one, my parents were teachers, all their friends were teachers. I had no network in business, back to networking. If you're interested in a field, young blind person, reach out to some people in that field and get to know them. I had nothing. I had an academic bachelor's degree, and I thought I wanted to be a financial analyst.

KIRK ADAMS:

So, I start applying for those jobs. And there were entry level jobs available for people such as myself. And I would get a phone interview and they would say, "Come on in." And I'd walk in with my white cane, and my slate and stylus, the confusion would set in over the room, and I would not get hired. Which leads us to a really interesting question on what when do you disclose your disability in a job application process? So, at that point, I wasn't disclosing. I was just sending out the cover letter, resume.

MAN 1:

And so many people do today still. Go.

KIRK ADAMS:

Yeah, getting the phone interview, getting the in-person interview, not getting the job. So, then I decided I should disclose. So, in my cover letter, I changed it. I've been blind since I was five. This is how I have accomplished what I accomplish. These are the methods I use. This is how I'll do the job. And then I wasn't even getting the phone interview. So, I cast my net wider and wider. By this time I graduated, I was living at my back in my room at my parents in Snohomish, Washington without a job. I need to get out of there. No public transportation at that time.

KIRK ADAMS:

So, I sent a letter to a little brokerage firm that specialized in tax free bonds. And the sales manager had

also gone to Whitman College was also an economics major. He called some of the professors that we both had in common. He was maybe 12, 14 years before me. And they said, "Sure, he can sell tax free bonds." So, I got a job offer to sell municipal bonds, straight commission, no benefits. Here's the phone, here's a list of bonds. And I did that for 10 years, and I made 50 cold calls a day every day. Unbeknownst to me, I made quite a lot of money in my 20s. I didn't really realize till later.

KIRK ADAMS:
(CHUCKLES)

KIRK ADAMS:
But, well, I was doing bought a house, got married, had kids. I turned 30, you know, didn't enjoy that work. It wasn't my career of choice. It was the job I could get. I kind of got to that realization point like, "I do not want to do this for the rest of my life." So, I made an arrangement with another broker to take over my clients. I had enough money to live on for a year. I got the 'What Color Is Your Parachute' book out of the library?

MAN 2:
Yeah, yeah, yeah.

KIRK ADAMS:
Yeah, I went through it religiously like it was a job, did all the exercises followed the path. Conclusion was I should be in the nonprofit sector, I should be in leadership, I should be in, you know, working for an organization, creating opportunities for people who are blind, and that should be in Seattle. Those were the parameters.

KIRK ADAMS:
(LAUGHTER)

KIRK ADAMS:
So...

MAN 1:
Kind of specific, don't you think?

KIRK ADAMS:
Oh, that's the point of the book.

MAN 2:
Yep.

KIRK ADAMS:
And then, you know, I did what the book says. I had informational interviews. I called up some CEOs of nonprofits I respected and said, kind of gave them a short version of what I just told you and "Can I come in and talk to you for half an hour?" And they all said yes. And I was talking to a woman who was

the CEO of Planned Parenthood of Western Washington. She was a former securities broker. She says, "Well, you should enter the nonprofit sector through becoming a fundraiser, because you have spent the last 10 years talking to rich people about money, and there's just a crying need for professional resource development people. So, that's what you should do." So, I started applying for fundraising jobs and not getting hired because I didn't have any experience.

KIRK ADAMS:

And this all sounds much more linear than it actually was. But then I got a newsletter from the Talking Book and Braille library, which I used a lot, and it said we need to raise \$200,000 or cancel our Evergreen radio reading service. So, I called the librarian whom I knew, gave her the story and said, "I will come down and volunteer to raise the money 20 hours a week and I will so I can put something on my resume and I'll job hunt the rest of the week." So, I got a book on tape from recording for the blind and dyslexic on how to write a grant proposal at a library volunteer, read me, the Washington State trust directory, identified the foundations that fit with our goals, wrote letters of inquiry, got invited to write some grant proposals, wrote some grant proposals, got a few big checks. And then they said, "We'll create a job for you."

KIRK ADAMS:

So, the library was run by Seattle Public Library. So, my first nonprofit job was Development Officer for the Seattle Public Library Foundation, raising money for the statewide Talking Book and Braille program. I did that for three, three and a half years, got clear that that's the space I wanted to be in. Like I said earlier, I went back to school, got a master's in not-for-profit leadership, moved on to a couple different fundraising jobs. My wife was an early childhood educator so I wound up doing fundraising for a nonprofit childcare association. And then I got a call from someone from the Lighthouse for the Blind saying, "We want to start a fundraising program and we want to start a foundation and we heard there's a blind guy in town who does fundraising."

KIRK ADAMS:

(LAUGHTER)

KIRK ADAMS:

(CROSSTALK)

MAN 2:

And the rest is history.

MAN 1:

It's all falling into place.

MAN 2:

Yeah.

KIRK ADAMS:

So, my wife and I went in and took a tour and amazing I had no idea. I knew they did something with

employment. You know, what stood out is the lighthouse had been making parts for the Boeing Company since the '50s. So, I walked into a huge machine shop with 80, 90 blind and deaf blind people with sign language interpreters, making precision aircraft parts, operating computer numerically controlled milling machines, precision machining and then big deaf blind program 40, 45 deaf blind people. So, accessibility was the watchword. You know, we walked out the front door and my wife said, "You have to come work here."

KIRK ADAMS:
(LAUGHTER)

MAN 2:
I'm sorry, what kind of precision machining?

KIRK ADAMS:
Computer numerically controlled.

MAN 2:
Yeah, it's kind of my wheelhouse. I used...

KIRK ADAMS:
CNC Machines.

MAN 1:
CNC, yeah, exactly, I was waiting for him to pick up on that.

MAN 1:
Yeah, yeah, so...

KIRK ADAMS:
And I did not disclose that I was dyslexic, but I managed to work it out.

MAN 1:
Yeah, good, still have all your fingers, yeah?

KIRK ADAMS:
Oh, yeah.

MAN 1:
A couple scars here and there.

KIRK ADAMS:
There was a few close calls in the cabinet shop, but I never it's called, they call it graduating from the woodshop. I never graduated.

MAN 1:

Yeah, gotcha.

KIRK ADAMS:

(CHUCKLES)

MAN 1:

Gotcha. So, then that was in 2000, I started the fundraising program, started the foundation around 2005. I was asked if I would take on more responsibility. They created a position called General Manager of Administration. So, I had HR reporting to me marketing, sales, basically all the non-manufacturing staff. And then the CEO came to me and said, "I'm going to retire in a couple of years. Would you like to do what it would take to be qualified to apply for my job?" I said, "Yes."

KIRK ADAMS:

(CHUCKLES)

MAN 1:

They hired a consultant. They did an analysis. This was awesome. That took all the responsibilities of the CEO, I rated myself against each one, and wherever there was a gap of two or more, we put a development plan together. I followed it religiously. And then they went through a process, they interviewed internal candidates first, they offered me the opportunity. I was called President-elect. There was a 15-month transition period between the time they hired me and the time my predecessor retired. He'd been there for 25 years. It was called quarterly and orderly. So, every quarter part of the organization that was reporting to him would report to me the last three months he was there to consult. And then I became CEO in January of 2008. As we remember, that was tough times economically for the country.

MAN:

Yeah.

MAN 1:

But we did a strategic plan right off the bat, got really clear on creating a livable wage jobs for people who are blind, got our criteria together, bought a grocery store that gone out of business in Spokane, Washington, put a manufacturing line in there, hired people there expanded onto various military bases, and right before I left, purchased the manufacturing facility near Charleston, South Carolina, to hire blind people to support the Boeing Company there. So, had good success, really amazing organization. I did not start the contract with the Boeing Company. That started in the 1950s.

MAN:

But you expanded built on that.

MAN 1:

I certainly.

MAN:
Yeah.

MAN 1:
I certainly enjoyed building upon what had been done before, and really getting focused, and kind of flipping the model.

KIRK ADAMS:
Yeah, some of my best work is building on other people's stuff.

MAN:
Yeah.

MAN 1:
Yeah, like flipping the model from let's get as many blind people hired at minimum wage as we can, let's put as many hands on these jobs as possible to let's drive as much revenue per employee as we can so we can drive wages up.

KIRK ADAMS:
Yeah.

MAN 1:
Which means automation, bought a robot to do some things for the first time, automated, had great people to work with, you know, great skilled manufacturing people. And once the mindset was established, you know, we drove wages up 40% or so during the time I was there.

MAN:
That's one of the things that I think is lacking in our community, in general the disability community and the blind community, is that there are a lack of positions, careers that aren't barred to us. And it's all again, goes back to social influences for millennia about our ability and how blindness scares people to death. But that's where in New York, we went after becoming a preferred source provider of digital services of the automated testing and remediation supports, because the hourly rate for that kind of work is impressive, if you're looking at a minimum hourly job on a manufacturing line. I think it's time for us to step forward in that arena. And I might want to tap into creating a strategic plan around that for my blind spot to accelerate what we want to...

MAN 1:
Oh, yeah, if you read the research, which is out there, and we're a research based organization, if you want to subscribe to our journal, 'Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness', there are peer reviewed research articles. And it's very clear that blind people are in a much narrower band of types of jobs and occupations than the general population.

MAN:
Yeah.

MAN 1:

Lower paying and lower on the org chart. That's very, very clear. So, our theme for our centennial year is inclusion knows no limits. And we'll know that we can shut our doors and go out of business when those numbers are the same across the board, when, you know, the outcomes for blind people are the same as outcomes for the general population.

MAN:

Isn't that interesting that our business model is to be out of work and not have to deliver these services? How many companies, how many organizations start with that as their goal? We don't want to be doing this. We want it to be obvious.

MAN 1:

Right, exactly. So, that's back around to inclusion, and how asset-based thinking, building on strengths, so there's a model out there of challenge leading to success, right? So, people are challenged, they learn how to problem solve, they improve, they get better. So, in the general population, you hear Thomas Edison the light bulb was his 10,000th attempt, Colonel Sanders went bankrupt eight times, you know, that's held up as a strength, right?

MAN:

Yeah.

MAN 1:

So, with blind people, we get challenged every day. So, we actually, again, research we develop cognitive skills that are unique, because of the unique set of challenges we have. So, you know, as a 17, 18-year-old college kid, I was hiring and firing people because I had to have readers. Now small example, so, you know, I could pay the Commission for the Blind gave me a certain amount of money to spend on readers, I could pay people \$4.25 an hour. I needed to get my work done. So, I interviewed people, I hired readers, I fired a few readers, I managed the budget, I had to invoice. My classmates weren't doing that.

MAN:

Like we all say being blind is not for the faint of heart.

MAN:

(LAUGHTER)

MAN 1:

Right, right, I'm just saying that there is a school of research and business, the challenge models are people who face challenges and overcome them leads to business success.

MAN:

OK, that's a great segue into the next part of our interview and conversation with you about the AFB. So, tell us more about what's going on with the AFB.

MAN 1:

Yeah, yeah, I love to talk about that. So, American Foundation for the Blind was founded in 1921, hence the centennial.

MAN 1:

(LAUGHTER)

MAN:

Learned that in math class, it is.

MAN 1:

September 23th, which is also Bruce Springsteen's birthday, if anyone out there knows him, we'd love to talk. I'd known about AFB forever. Let me back up. So, founded in 1921, and founded by the blindness field. So, there were working to professional organizations, American Association of Teachers of the Blind, who are mostly teachers of blind kids in residential schools, and mostly sighted people, and American Association of Workers for the Blind, who ran things like workshops and asylums for the blind and homes for the blind. We have come a little bit of a ways forward in the last 100 years, but they both organizations met in their annual conventions and decided that they should put leadership and resources forward to create a new central nonprofit that would use data and research and convene the field to identify the greatest barriers faced by people who are blind and the biggest opportunities.

MAN 1:

And that was the American Foundation for the Blind, founded and bankrolled in large part by a gentleman named M.C. Migel who has his own interesting history, in 1921 in Manhattan. They hired Helen Keller in 1924 to be the brand ambassador and she worked for AFB until she passed away in 1968. We're really unique in the blindness field because, first of all, we're a private nonprofit. We're not a membership organization. I'm big proponents and fans of strong, successful membership organizations for the blind. So, federation and the council, hats off, keep up the good work.

MAN:

Yep.

MAN 1:

But we're not. We're a private nonprofit. We have a national board. We can do our best to recruit the best and brightest to our board. We have a super broad charter, which is something like, make the lives of blind people in America better. (LAUGHTER) And we get to decide what that mean...

MAN:

What it better means.

MAN 1:

..at a given time. So, in the 1930s, worked with the recording industry, developed the 33 and a third long playing phonograph record to create talking books for...

MAN 1:
(CROSSTALK)

KIRK ADAMS:
Wow!

MAN 1:
Our friend Helen Keller and her friend Eleanor Roosevelt did a lot to get the National Library Service funded and stood up. AFB made the talking book machines in a factory in Manhattan and employed significant numbers of blind people making the talking book machines. From there got involved in engineering, so some of the first talking bathroom scale, first talking blood pressure monitor.

MAN:
Yep.

MAN 1:
And I became aware of AFB as a first second grader in the mid '60s because they made teaching aids for playing kids that were in the classroom I was in.

MAN:
It's interesting that most people don't realize how involved the First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was in advancing inclusion of people who were deaf blind and blind. And going back to Charlotte Goldbart, who we affectionately called Chippy, her husband was a lawyer and he knew the Roosevelts and Eleanor had asked her to help champion schools and trainings and supports for the blind and deaf in Connecticut. She used to live in Greenwich, right? Beautiful. But Eleanor...

MAN 1:
Oh, Charlotte lived in Connecticut?

MAN:
Yeah.

MAN 1:
Coincidence? I don't think so.

MAN 1:
(CHUCKLES)

MAN:
And it's funny she Ms. Goldbart would always complain about what an uppity, spoiled brat Helen Keller was. And I'm like, "Well, no, you'd be if you couldn't hear, speak or see." Just, you know she went out of her way. (LAUGHTER) She was this little frail old woman who, oh, my god, I was like, "That's mean Mrs. Goldbart, but it's true." But you know, and she got...

MAN 1:

But she got a lot done.

MAN:

Yeah, no, she did. And that's one of the things too, we look to today for people who are the next Helen Kellers and, you know, I still don't know that that's important as much as it is just being front and center and letting people know that people of ability are now running organizations and being responsible for the direction that inclusion goes rather than having it be given to us and told to us by people who don't understand what it's like to be us.

MAN 1:

God love her, and she was the most well-known, most famous person with a disability for a while.

MAN:

Oh, yeah.

MAN 1:

And people with disabilities are stereotyped so easily by the general population. So, there's the superhero, then on the other end of the spectrum is the helpless that needs to be taken care of. But really, we're just people, just regular people.

MAN:

Oh, yeah. There was a study done by Harvard, he's Professor James Roz, and he termed the coin supercrip, you know, a super-crippled person. I think sometimes I always am conscious of not wanting to look like I can do everything because then it all sudden, it makes everybody slotted into one group or, I don't know, but there are those broad spectrums of...

MAN 1:

Yeah, I just flashed on a Michelle Obama quote where she said, "Well, there's the Barack Obama who makes the speech, and then there's the Barack Obama who won't pick up his socks."

MAN:

Yeah, yeah.

MAN 1:

Just a person.

MAN:

And that's exactly who we are. And that's one of the things it's interesting I remember being in the church choir here in Sayville, and they were saying, "Okay, we're going to sing up on the altar. How are we going to get Albert up there?" And I'm listening to them whisper in front of me, and I'm like, "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm blind, not deaf. That's what the guide dog is for. He knows how to walk up steps." But even our closest, nearest and dearest people don't understand and challenge us, or at least

challenge themselves. John and I have this thing where I tell him, don't limit my challenge, challenge my limits.

MAN 1:

I like it.

MAN:

Yeah, no, and his family's the same way. You know, ever since I've met them some 10, 11 years ago, they would always say, "You're not that blind. It's almost like you can see what you're doing." But we use our other senses to call in all the information we need.

MAN 1:

That tells us about our focus on building our strength and using what you have. I mean, you get my hearing tested, no, it's not super hearing. But if I am walking into my house, and I drop my keys, I'm going to listen for where they fell. And if a sighted person drops their keys are going to look down and look for where they fell.

MAN:

That happened this morning with a cap to the milk container, I'm like, "Oh, heard it." And I went down for it. They're like, "How did you see that?" You just listen to the sound like a dolphin or a bat. We use echolocation.

MAN 1:

OK.

MAN 1:

(LAUGHTER)

MAN:

But so now, so Helen Keller was integral in positioning the organization.

MAN 1:

Yeah, yeah. So, then from the phonograph record to the early engineering and AFB Tech, and then when Silicon Valley companies started to think about accessibility, they wanted to find out who knows what, so many of them found AFB Tech. So, you know, we one of our, again, Darren Burton, who was our employee, and went to work for Yahoo, then Verizon Media, and is working with us again, when he was with AFB Tech, he's the first blind person to use voiceover to try voiceover on an iPhone. So, AFB has some wonderful long relationships with Microsoft and Apple and Facebook and Google and all of our friends are doing such great things for inclusion and accessibility for everybody.

MAN:

Again, networking, all comes back to the network.

MAN 1:

And then I've gone to work for the Lighthouse in 2000. I'd been in the securities business, then I was in nonprofit fundraising for a childcare organization. And the person who hired me said, "You know, if you want to get to know the blindness community, you have to go to the AFB conference." So February, March 2001, I went to my first AFB Leadership Conference in DC. The theme was telling our story with statistics. So, there were a lot of academic people there reporting out on their papers, different research on people who are blind and various outcomes. And I met really cool university researchers, and I met really cool blind people who worked for AFB. And I never missed leadership conference. I went every single year. I went to 15 of them before I became part of the staff.

MAN:

Became the CEO. (CHUCKLES)

MAN 1:

Yeah. We cosponsored one in Seattle about Lighthouse and Pacific Northwest AR, we cosponsored a leadership conference in Seattle eight, nine years ago, maybe 10 years ago now. And then I was asked to join a committee. Always great thing to do, which we look to do today, is bring non trustees onto committees. And then I was asked to join the board and served on the board for several years. And Carl Augusto, who was my predecessor took me aside at one of these conferences and said, "I'm going to be retiring in May of 2016. That's a couple years from now. I want you, I think you're the right person to lead AFB into the next century. Will you give that some thought?" And I said, "I will give that some thought." I talked it over with my wife, had the Lighthouse on a really good track, growing nicely, well organized, our kids were out in a way and earning their upkeep.

MAN 1:

So, when AFB hired a search firm, I resigned from the board, I put my name forward. It was a very exhaustive and exhausting application process that required me to fly from coast to coast a couple times, and interviews with three subgroups, and a big group interview. On January 1st, 2016, my son and I were down at Arizona to go to the Seahawks game and I got a call offering me the opportunity. I said, "I need to check one more time with Ros." And she said, "Go for it."

MAN:

Yeah.

MAN 1:

So, we packed, I moved to the East Coast.

MAN:

Yep, Brooklyn.

MAN 1:

She emptied the house and got renters in and we moved into a teeny...

MAN 2:

An apartment in Park Slope. And I learned how to take the F train to the A train into Penn Station, how

to go to the AFB offices.

MAN 2:

In Penn Station. Yeah, right above Penn Station.

MAN 2:

Was that One Penn or Two Penn?

MAN 2:

Two Penn. Two Penn Plaza.

>:

You know, my first order of business was to lead a strategic planning process for AFB, which took us a year. And we got really clear on - we wanted to focus on systems change. We wanted to look for those systemic barriers that we talked about earlier. We wanted to look for ways we could really move the needle.

>:

That involved making some pretty big changes in the organization because we developed quite a few programs that were designed to support individual blind people and families and professionals in the field. And we couldn't do both. Limited resources and we're you know, after 90 - how many years was it then - 95 years, we'd gotten a little diffused, trying to do a few too many things, kind of getting a mile wider and an inch deep.

MAN 2:

Spreading yourselves too thin.

MAN 2:

Yeah. So, we did the plan. We got focused on systems change. We've gotten very clear that the lens we're going to look at everything is through employment, because when you do your root cause analysis, like a good, well-paying, interesting career solves a lot of other problems.

MAN 2:

Well, that's one of the things that I feel very strongly about is the more we talk about digital equity and authentic inclusion, the better off our society will be for moving people away from being taxing dependents, stuck on public assistance programs and become independent taxpayers. It's a win-win for the economy. It's a win-win for our mental health and wellbeing and allows people who just happen to be blind to live the American dream.

MAN 2:

And it gives employers a competitive advantage because they bring in a talent pool that's unique. So, you know, you talk to an employer and you say, what are you looking for in an employee? And they say, someone who can work independently, who's a creative problem solver, who knows how to analyze and manage risk, who knows how to work in a team, who can work with lots of different kinds of people -

MAN 2:

Who could be disruptive by walking into a room and knocking stuff over by accident. (LAUGHTER)

MAN 2:

Right, right, right. So you say, well, you just described a lot of people who live with blindness. So, we did a year planning. We took a year transitioning programs that didn't fit the new model to other homes, so they would continue to be good resources for people. Intentionally went very virtual, put together a virtual workplace committee, closed our big physical space in Manhattan and took those jobs virtual, downsized our other spaces, sold our building in Dallas.

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So, before last March, probably 90% of our work hours were performed virtually. From an operational standpoint, we've been in really good shape with the pandemic.

>:

And then, we launched into research right away. We did a big survey called 'Flattening the InAccessibility Curve'. We had 19, 20 blindness organizations push it out. We had over 1,900 respondents to a pretty exhaustive survey and those results are on our website, AFB.org.

>:

We are in the second round of an access and engagement survey which focuses specifically on K-12 education for blind students who are not faring well. As all these school districts scramble to figure out how to provide virtual learning, accessibility for their blind students is often not at the top of the list.

>:

So, we're going to use that data. We're pushing it out to the largest school districts in the country, to the Offices of Public Instruction in the various states. We'll use that data when Congress - the new Congress, as they look to put funding mechanisms together, we want to make sure that there's real data to show what our blind kiddos need, as far as K-12 education goes.

MAN 2:

You've basically righted the ship of a huge galleon that was driving through opportunity and possibility for people who happen to be blind. And I've listened to it. I've watched it. We've discussed it at length. And I take my hats off - my hats. Hat? I don't know how many I'm wearing at the same time. (CROSSTALK) I wear a few. (LAUGHTER)

MAN 2:

I don't know that I righted the ship, but I think we have redesigned the ship while we continue to sail the ship. So, it's sleeker. It's more maneuverable. (CHUCKLES)

MAN 2:

Yes. You did a lot in the short five or six years that you have been at the helm. And it is impressive and I don't believe any of the integrity and value in the organization has at all been compromised, but instead

galvanized and reinforced for the next century. And I think that Carl was very right in asking you to help get us through the next hundred years.

MAN 2:

Well, thank you. I appreciate that.

MAN 2:

Alright. So, now what do you see as your future objectives and future goals for yourself?

MAN 2:

Before we get to that, I wanted to touch on - I hear there's an AFB podcast. What do you know about the AFB podcast, Kirk?

MAN 2:

I know I listen to it (LAUGHTER) every Wednesday at 4pm Eastern time. It's called 'Inform & Connect'. The hostess with the mostest is Melody Goodspeed, who works on our community engagement area, and she talks to a wide variety of really interesting, cool people. Some are blind, some are not. Most have a commitment to working with us to create that world of no limits for people who are blind.

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And that's the fastest half hour in podcast land. It flies by. You can find them, 'Inform & Connect', on AFB.org. They're archived. You can listen to it, livestreaming, 4pm Eastern Time on Wednesdays.

MAN 2:

Let's check some of that out.

MAN 2:

Yeah, I know. She's great.

MAN 2:

And she is a Major Gifts Officer. So, we are a philanthropy-driven organization. We have businesses that help fulfill our mission and generate revenue. We have a consulting practice. We do paid research. We just entered into a two-year research engagement with Guide Dogs for the Blind from San Rafael, California.

MAN 2:

San Rafael, yeah, West Coast.

MAN 2:

They want to know why only 2% of blind people use dogs and why do lots of people who get a first dog not get a second? And they have some research questions that we're going to help them answer.

>:

Back to philanthropy and Melody. She's a Major Gifts Officer. We were founded through philanthropy.

Helen Keller was a fabulous fundraiser, I must say. I just want to thank everyone out there who's made a gift to AFB. We have tens of thousands of people across the country who join us in creating a world of no limits by making donations. And we would invite those of you who have not done so. As you plan your charitable giving for the year, think about AFB and our centennial. Greatly appreciate the support. (CHUCKLES)

MAN 2:

Alright, for the last few minutes here, Kirk, can you tell us about your plans for the future?

MAN 2:

Well, I've relocated for the time being to Seattle, back to our home. We're working virtually. Who knows what the future holds, as far as being able to get together with people in person? But when time and circumstances allow, I'm looking forward to resuming that part of my life and of AFB's life. And part of what we were created to do is convene conversations and bring in different thoughts and voices and understand. It's easier to do in person, I must say.

MAN 2:

Yeah. Face to face makes a big difference.

MAN 2:

From a virtual perspective, prior to the pandemic the research that I was looking at showed that only 3% of the American workforce worked from home, when in essence, 50% of our jobs in the country could be done remotely. And for years they told me, since I lost my eyesight in January 2006, that there were no work-from-home opportunities.

>:

This is going to be a dramatic impact on our community, like nothing's ever impacted them before, to give corporate America insights into how productive and rewarding a remote-access team of professionals would bring to the company. And I don't know about you, but I see a future that's bright for opportunities like that for our community.

MAN 2:

I fully agree with you. The pandemic has been horrible, horrifying, terrible for so many individuals and so many families and so many businesses.

MAN 2:

Eye-opening. It's eye opening.

MAN 2:

It's eye-opening. It really is, though, you're right to say that.

MAN 2:

It's been terribly disruptive of so many lives. But with disruption does come opportunity. So, virtual work is becoming normalized. I doubt corporate America will ever look the same way.

>:

There is language in the rehabilitation statutes that say setting up a person with a disability to work from home is the accommodation of last resort. And that language was written when everyone went into the office. So, everyone's not going into the office, and everyone's not ever going to go into the office.

MAN 2:

Dolly Parton's got to come out with a new song that's not 'Nine to Five'. They have to do that for us, please, will you?

MAN 2:

(INAUDIBLE) on mute. (LAUGHTER)

MAN 2:

I do see a lot of silver linings in the pandemic. Yes, we've had a lot of disruption, but we have to go through that whole disorganization, reorganization and organization. We have to cyclically take a look at where we are, evaluate how effective it's been, and then set our sights on new and improved ways to execute. And I believe the pandemic - and I'm glad you see it the same way, Kirk - I really looked at, painfully, to look for the positives in all of this, as we were being inundated with all the negative press every day. And I do see a brighter future for people with disabilities and virtual options and remote options for -

MAN 2:

Absolutely. And as far as future, I think, as we talked earlier, let's not have blindness over here on the side as a side conversation. Let's have it part of the conversation about inclusion and equity and dignity and respect and systemic barriers, and creating opportunities for everyone to thrive, and for everyone to bring their fullest and best selves into their lives.

>:

And how does intersectionality play into this? Where do these various dynamics meet and how do we have blindness as part of the conversation, as we all work to create that world with no limits? As I said, our centennial theme is, "Inclusion knows no limits." And we just want to make sure that when these conversations are happening, that blindness and visual impairment is part of the conversation, as it should be. It's part of life. That's the characteristics that some people have.

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So, if we're thinking about including everyone, let's make sure that the particular perspectives brought forward by people living with blindness are at the table. So, (INAUDIBLE) If you're not at the table, you just might be on the menu.

MAN 2:

Yeah. Oh my god, that's so funny you say that. Nothing about us without us, you know, and that's one of the things I have really embraced. And I do believe that, you know, my blindness is more of a characteristic than it is a defining attribute or whatever.

MAN 2:

Yeah. Yeah. When I give a talk, sometimes I'll say, who in the room is under five-two? Clap. And, you know, there's usually a few people. Yeah. And I say, so if you have something on a shelf that's eight feet high, does that mean you're disabled? No, it means you're in a disabling situation because whoever built the shelf made it taller than you can reach.

>:

So, what are you going to do? You're going to get a tool. You're going to get a step ladder or a step stool. You're going to use an accommodation. You're going to solve the problem. You're going to team up with someone. You're going to say, hey, tall friends, can you reach up there? (CROSSTALK, LAUGHTER)

MAN 2:

No, I know whenever we go grocery shopping, they'll always be asking you. And I don't have my cane and I look at them like, you don't want me to grab for that, lady. (LAUGHTER)

MAN 2:

So, if I'm in a meeting and it's a budget meeting and I have the budget in Braille in front of me, I'm not in a disabling condition. I have no impairment. My eyes don't see, but I have the material in the format that I need to access it. If you hand me a print stack of paper, then I am -

MAN 2:

That's disabling.

MAN 2:

- then my impairment is a disabling condition, because I don't have the - and I think about it as buildings. I talk about that, so, you know, in the ADA -

MAN 2:

All areas of life.

MAN 2:

Well, in the ADA, they said - and society now embraces - if you're in a wheelchair, it's not your personal responsibility to figure out how to get into this building. It's the people who build the building's responsibility to make sure you can get in.

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So, just like the digital environment that you're working on, it's not the blind person's personal responsibility to figure out how to use your website. It's your responsibility to create your website so that people can use it. No one would build a building now that didn't have a ramp. No one would tell someone, oh, there's this beautiful stairs going up to the front, but you can go back through the back alley and come in through the kitchen in your wheelchair. No one's going to say that.

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But when we get to the point where no one is expecting a blind person to digitally go down the alley and through the kitchen, when the access is the same for everybody, then we've arrived.

MAN 2:

And that's the thing, too, is all of these changes have impacted, quote unquote, normalizing ability. And that's why I like to say don't dis my ability. You know, we can disable a bomb, we can disable a car, we can disable an engine. And by the definition of the word disabled, it's to cut off its life force or energy. You can't disable a person, but we can be put in very disabling situations.

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I also find that there's a lot more to do in the way of leveling the playing field for access to employment. And it does start with understanding how technologies are that level playing field for us. I remember going to meet you at Two Penn Plaza and was impressed how - that building's been around for decades and how we always hear how infrastructure doesn't support technologies. But you had an elevator that I knew I was getting off on the floor, that it said what floor do you want to go to, and stuff like that.

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I have to take my hat off to New York City in general, because there's been a significant bunch of advancements, you know. Taxi cars, I can hear how much I owe now on the rides there and the subway systems. There's been a lot of concentration on inclusion that I think the next ten years are really going to refine that.

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But one of the things I think we've suffered through is in the corporate arena. And I know that when the ADA was signed in 1990, there were expectations that this was going to be all-important for employment. And it's missed the boat. It's missed the mark.

MAN 2:

Yes, and I'll tell you where can we get traction, where can we start eating this employment elephant? And we're really excited about internship and apprenticeship programs. There are so many successful apprenticeship and internship programs that were created to address inequities in race and gender. And now, again, the opportunity is to expand that conversation. Let's think about other populations who are underrepresented in your workforce and let's use what you've learned. Let's use these great programs and make them inclusive.

MAN 2:

Wow, what powerful words to end on. Thank you for being on the show with us, Kirk.

MAN 2:

It's an honor and a privilege to be asked. This is the first conversation I've had to kick off our centennial year, 2021. American Foundation for the Blind turns 100. We know that inclusion knows no limits. And My Blind Spot and Albert Rizzi are a huge part of that.

MAN 2:

Thank you, Kirk.

MAN 2:

And Happy World Braille Day!

MAN 2:

Happy World Braille Day! And a hundred never looked so good, brother.

MAN 2:

Well, thank you for listening to today's episode. If you want to learn more about us, visit us at MyBlindSpot.org or if you have any comments or suggestions or wanna (INAUDIBLE) talk to us, you're lonely - I don't know - you can email us at podcast@myblindspot.org.

MAN 2:

Please don't forget to follow us on all of our social media outlets. We are there on LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and please feel free to visit our website for all of our blogs and updates and current events and visit us at MyBlindSpot.org.

MAN 2:

Being our first podcast of 2021, we wish you a prosperous new year. Stay healthy, stay sane, stay informed.

MAN 2:

And above all else, remember to wash your hands, wear your mask and practice social distancing. Keep an eye out for a vaccine center opening near you. Well, that's it for this episode of AccessAbility Works Podcast.

MAN 2:

A podcast about the possibility of accessibility for people with disabilities. I'm Jonathan Hermus.

MAN 2:

And I'm Albert Rizzi. Thanks for listening and see you next time.