mélange

Accessibility for All

August 2024

7 CANADIAN STARTUPS
are set to revolutionize personal mobility: First cohort of the
Mobility Unlimited Hub
a partnership between MaRS Discovery District and the Toyota Mobility Foundation

Madison Tevlin

on breaking stereotypes and inspiring others

ISSN 2563-5697
9 772563 569003 >

VISIT
Myrtle Beach
SOUTH CAROLINA

CONTENTS

62

ON THE COVER

Madison Tevlin, Canadian actor, TV Talk Show host, model, content creator and advocate.
Photo Credit: Mona Miri/ Sustainable Photography

8

LEO SAMARELLI
Boxing champion

20

MARIJETA MOJASEVIC
Disability rights activist

7 Canadian Startups are set to revolutionize mobility with the Mobility Unlimited Hub

36

IAN MCCARTER
MaRS Discovery District

MaRS

40

TRACEY MCGILLIVRAY
Axtion Independence Mobility Inc.

40

LIAM MASSKANT
Axtion Independence Mobility Inc.

44

FRANCOIS BEAUCHAMP-VERDON
AWL Electricity

46

EUGENE CHERNY
Cheelcare

48

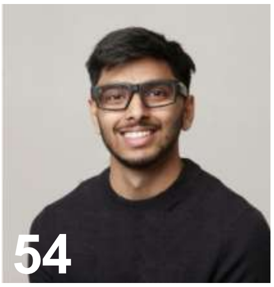
MEHDI MASOUMI
Deaf AI

50

POOJA VISWANATHAN
Braze Mobility

52

MANMEET MAGGU
Trexo Robotics



54

SHUBH MITTAL
Seleste

Ximuwu Lodge: Premier Accessible Safari Experience

Ximuwu Lodge, awarded the highest honor for accessibility by the tourism grading council, offers unparalleled, wheelchair-friendly safari adventures in the Greater Kruger, South Africa. As the only lodge in a vast expanse, we specialize in personalized, private experiences for up to eight guests in our luxurious suites. Embrace the ultimate in privacy and bespoke wilderness journeys, ensuring an unforgettable adventure in one of Africa's most majestic settings. Discover the pinnacle of accessible luxury with us. Visit www.wheelchairsafari.com for details.

Special Offer for Accessible Journey Readers:

Pay 2, stay 3
USD 3999,00
3 days, 1 room, 2 persons

Valid until 1st December 2024.
Terms and Conditions Apply!

XIMUWU
KLASERIE

Ximuwu Lodge: Where Luxury Meets Accessibility.

WHEELCHAIR
SAFARI.COM

CLICK HERE to read the previous issue

Publisher: Mélange Publishing Group
Editor in Chief: Debbie Austin
Designer: Trish Palma

Editorial Staff
Marina Apperley
Lucky Mae Fornoles

We try to present information that is current and accurate, but errors can occur. If you've found an error in the magazine, please email Marina Apperley: marina@readmelange.com

CONTACT US

- Comments
- Share a story
- Contribute an article

email: marina@readmelange.com

Mélange Accessibility for All magazine is published four times per year by:

Mélange Publishing Group
300-3665 Kingsway,
Vancouver, BC,
Canada V5R 5W2.
1.866.384.8257
www.melangeandco.com

Subscribe to:
Accessibility for All magazine
Accessible Journeys magazine
Accessibility Tidbits newsletter
CLICK HERE

Editor's Note

Welcome to the latest issue of *Accessibility for All,* a magazine dedicated to celebrating the diverse experiences, talents and stories of people with disabilities. As we continue to grow and evolve, our mission remains steadfast: to provide a platform that amplifies voices and challenges stereotypes while cultivating a sense of community and empowerment among our readers.

The stories featured in this edition highlight those who are breaking barriers, whether it's through groundbreaking research, artistic expression or relentless activism. Our cover story is Madison Tevlin, a dynamic force in the entertainment industry. A Canadian actor, TV talk show host, model, content creator and advocate, Madison wears many hats, and each one is a bold statement of defiance against the limitations society tries to impose. She's leading conversations on inclusivity with a megaphone and the world is listening.

We delve into the groundbreaking work of the first cohort of startups from the MaRS Discovery District and Toyota Mobility Foundation's Mobility Unlimited Hub. These seven trailblazing companies are at the forefront of revolutionizing personal mobility, driving forward innovations that promise to empower individuals and transform lives.

In addition to these powerful narratives, we've included a piece on mental health and disabilities, a helpful guide to overcoming barriers, finding support and realizing that you are never, ever alone. The compelling story of Leo Samarelli, a boxing champion who turned a personal tragedy into a story of triumph reminds us all that true strength is found in getting back up, no matter how many times life knocks you down.

So, whether you're here for motivation, inspiration, or just a good story to stir your soul, this issue has something for everyone.

Thank you for being part of this journey with us. Your feedback, stories, and support are what make *Accessibility for All* a vibrant and vital publication.

We hope this issue leaves you feeling inspired, informed, and, most importantly, empowered to continue breaking down barriers and advocating for a more inclusive world.

Happy Reading!

Debbie Austin
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
debbie@readmelange.com

To Table of Contents

To Table of Contents

Anila at Jahangirnagar University

Leo Samarelli: The boxing champion who turned tragedy into triumph

Boxing is a tale as old as time but what if I told you the most compelling boxer wasn't found under bright arena lights, but in the heart of a small Italian gym, driven not by glory but by the sheer will to survive and inspire? Meet Leo, a man whose life reads like an epic novel, a saga of tragedy and triumph that extends far beyond the ring.

Born and raised in Vancouver, Canada, Leo's tale begins in the picturesque yet rugged landscapes of Italy, a place rich with cultural history and sporting tradition. It was here, in the country of his father, amidst the cobblestone streets and ancient architecture, that Leo first laced up his boxing gloves, stepping into a ring that would soon become a metaphor for his life. The sweet science of boxing, with its delicate dance of attack and defense, taught Leo much more than just physical prowess.

Boxing in Italy was the first chapter of Leo's story. It was there he met legendary figures like Freddie Roach and Vasily Lomachenko, who showed him the heights one could reach with dedication and skill. These encounters, although starstruck moments, were motivating Leo to push his limits both inside and outside the ring. Coaches recognized his potential and challenged him to excel. The gym, much like life, was a place of constant adaptation and growth. Leo's experiences in Italy laid the groundwork for the extraordinary feats he would accomplish later.

But it wasn't just boxing that

To Table of Contents

defined Leo. His love for various sports—soccer, wrestling, running—painted him as a versatile athlete. Yet, it was boxing's solitary nature, the individual battles fought within the ropes that resonated deeply with him. In the sport's simplicity and complexity, Leo found a profound connection, one that mirrored the highs and lows of life itself.

However, life, much like boxing, is unpredictable. Just as Leo's boxing career was gaining momentum, tragedy struck. A violent encounter in Vancouver left him paralyzed, forever altering the course of his life. The physical blow was severe, but it was the emotional and psychological aftermath that tested Leo's mettle. The loss of mobility was accompanied by profound personal losses— family members who were pillars of support taken too soon— the death of a close cousin, an uncle and his father were heavy blows that would have knocked out anyone else. Yet, Leo found a way to channel his grief and use it as fuel for his fighting spirit.

It was within this crucible of pain and loss that Leo's true spirit emerged. The fighter in him refused to be subdued. Instead of succumbing to despair, he chose to rise, leveraging the very principles boxing had instilled in him—resolve, adaptation and relentless determination. Leo's story post-injury consists of impressively redefining limits and shattering expectations.

He transformed his approach, focusing on adaptive sports, finding new ways to train and redefining what it means to be an athlete. His efforts culminated in remarkable achievements with each feat being inspiration for many—from climbing Vancouver's Grouse Grind on his hands to tackling the volcanic terrains of Costa Rica. His trips to places like Cambodia, where he delivered medical supplies and witnessed the lighthearted banter and joyful mannerism of children in orphanages, brought new perspectives and deeper meaning to his mission. These journeys were eye-openers, making him realize that true strength comes from facing and overcoming unimaginable challenges.

Leo's vision goes beyond achievement of personal goals. He founded the West Coast Wheelchair Boxing organization, pioneering adaptive boxing in Canada. His classes, both in-person and online,

offer physical training but they are also sessions of empowerment. Leo's work showcases the transformative power of sport, not just as physical activity but as a tool for mental and emotional growth. His involvement with the Rick Hansen Foundation and other community projects highlights his commitment to accessibility and inclusion. His initiatives are about creating opportunities for those with disabilities and also fostering a mindset of possibility and breaking down societal barriers.

In his narrative, there's a recurring theme of community. Whether it's his close-knit family, supportive friends, or the broader network of adaptive sports enthusiasts, Leo emphasizes the importance of a strong support system. This community spirit, coupled with his indomitable will, propels him forward, driving his mission to inspire and uplift others facing similar challenges.

Leo's amazing story is still unfolding. His goals for the future are as ambitious as ever. From participating in the Paralympics to establishing a foundation that supports adaptive athletes, Leo is constantly setting new benchmarks. His dream of an accessible gym where individuals of all abilities can train and thrive is on the horizon, promising to leave a lasting legacy.

In essence, Leo Samarelli's story is a powerful reminder that the human spirit is unconquerable. It tells us that adversity can be transformed into a catalyst for change and limitations can be redefined by sheer will and community support. Leo's life, with its trials and triumphs, demonstrates the boundless possibilities that lie within us all when we choose to fight, adapt and inspire. His message: No matter the obstacle, keep punching, for the fight is far from over, and the best rounds are yet to come. ■

"People like me got to know that it is possible, and that they should not give up regardless." ~ Leo

Leo is the recipient of the 2024 Courage to Come Back Award in the Physical Rehabilitation category.

Coast Mental Health's Courage To Come Back Awards presented by Wheaton Precious Metals are now in their 26th year. It was held at the Vancouver Convention Centre on May 23rd.

To date, the event has raised over $25 million in support of Coast's community-based mental health services in the Greater Vancouver area. The evening celebrates the inspiring journeys of five award recipients across the following categories: Addiction, Mental Health, Physical Rehabilitation, Medical and Youth. Each has overcome extraordinary adversity to come back and give back to their community.

To Table of Contents

HERE YOU ARE

33.3373° N, 112.0562° W

Accessible meets unforgettable.

In Arizona, adventure is everywhere and inclusive experiences abound. Make some memories against a spectacular backdrop.

1 **Kartchner Caverns**

Immerse yourself in a literal hidden gem.

2 **Verde Canyon Railroad**

All aboard for a scenic journey filled with rugged landscapes, wildlife, and historic sites.

3 **Sedona Hiking**

Experience the Red Rocks on miles of accessible trails.

4 **Grand Canyon National Park**

By train or plane, a 7th Wonder is calling.

Table of Contents

ARIZONA
THE GRAND CANYON STATE

VISITARIZONA.COM

Table of Contents

Transportation apps can help people with disabilities navigate public transit but accessibility lags behind

By Mahtot Gebresselassie

Smartphone apps have become commonplace tools for travel and navigation. As technology becomes more integrated into transport networks, apps will continue to be indispensable. But many of those apps remain inaccessible to those with various disabilities.

Many people with disabilities rely on public transit as many do not have a driver's license. Planning trips, getting to and from transit stops successfully and navigating transit systems is important.

My research has shown that smartphone app technology can encourage inclusion by helping people with disabilities better navigate transport systems.

In the United States, 13 per cent of the population lives with one or more types of disability. Developing apps and other mobility tools can increase their ability to access employment, education, health care and other services.

Apps and accessibility

My research, conducted in the U.S., found that one of the ways transportation-related general audience apps aim to address the travel needs of people with disabilities is by including accessibility features, such as text-to-voice conversion. These features increase ease of use for non-disabled people as well.

Despite the availability of technology, many apps remain inaccessible, including for cost and lack of mandatory requirements and regulations.

The cost factor

Transportation smartphone apps, which require the use of location-based, real-time information are complex and require more time and cost to develop. The way

To Table of Contents

app development processes are currently set up, the cost of developing apps with accessibility service features is more expensive than those without such features.

The cost of developing an app depends on the quality of the app and the number of features it includes, with additional features resulting in higher costs. It could also take a long time depending on the complexity of the app.

While having additional features such as accessibility services can give apps the opportunity to reach more users, the cost can be a deterrent, especially for entities without the association with big companies such as Uber and Lyft.

There are various types of disabilities and corresponding needs. The inclusion of features that address multiple disabilities in one app might also add to the complexity and cost.

Recognizing the challenge posed by responding to multiple disability needs in advanced communications services and equipment, the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) — that implements and enforces communications law and regulations — states that "every feature and function of every device or service does not need to be accessible for every disability."

Operating system providers

Developers distribute apps on Google's Android and Apple's iOS operating systems via their app stores, Google Play and the App Store, respectively. Android and iOS provide accessibility guidelines, resources and codes for the developers.

Apple and Google also provide built-in accessibility features such as text-to-voice conversion options — an app that offers a voice option for real-time transit information is accessible to a person with visual impairment.

While Apple has more accessible services than Google, Google makes clear that the company's built-in features do not meet all disability needs. Google encourages app developers to use its available technology to create additional accessibility features for their apps.

However, we found that many of the transportation-related smartphone apps that we reviewed in our study were without accessibility features. Part of the problem has to do with the fact these guidelines are suggestions, rather than mandatory requirements to which developers need to comply.

Regulating recent advancements

When the U.S congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, it was meant to prohibit discrimination against people with disabilities in various areas including transportation, services and telecommunication. As it currently stands, the ADA does not specifically apply to recent technological advancements such as smartphone apps.

There is no specific regulation that pertains even to website content other than an application of "general nondiscrimination and effective communication provisions."

The U.S. Department of Justice encourages the use of technical standards such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) to make websites accessible. WCAG also lacks specific standards for smartphone apps, but it provides comprehensive guidance that does not set requirements on how to apply their existing website standards to smartphone apps.

WCAG makes clear three things: (1) Not all guidance applies to smartphones; (2) Informative guidance does not address all disability needs; and (3) Mobile devices have different accessibility

challenges compared to other devices.

When it comes to information and communications technology, the FCC has a mandate to develop and implement regulations. Under its consumer guide, it outlines general accessibility requirements. One of the requirements states that, if achievable, manufacturers must make their hardware and software, including apps, accessible to people with disabilities.

While the FCC guide mentions apps, the conditional nature of the guide and the lack of specificity on what is achievable weakens the requirement.

The future of accessibility

Whether due to the high cost, lack of operating system mandatory requirements, government regulations or specific technical standards, current conditions present a challenge to accessibility of apps.

As a result, the ability of people with disabilities to use apps for transportation is negatively affected. It is inevitable that disability-related regulations will catch up to app technology and the world of apps will move towards more specific accessibility requirements.

In the meantime, developers would benefit from using available resources provided by Apple and Google, and using WCAG guidance to make apps accessible. It may also give them the opportunity to contribute to making a more inclusive digital environment.

This may help developers avoid potential ADA-related lawsuits, fines and expensive accessibility retrofitting, which may end up being more expensive than the initial cost of adding accessibility features. ■

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

> **Despite the availability of technology, many apps remain inaccessible, including for cost and lack of mandatory requirements and regulations.**
>
> ~ Mahtot Gebresselassie

To Table of Contents

Accessiblity
— MEETS —
Adventure

LANCASTER COUNTY, PA welcomes visitors of all abilities. Visit Discover Lancaster's accessible attractions, lodging options, historial sites, sports, recreational activites and more!

PLAN YOUR ADVENTURE NOW

Table of Contents

Photo Credit: Sasha Blair-Goldensohn

Finding voice, paths to understanding, and accessible routes

by Saada Branker

In 2017, the Disability Rights Advocates (DRA) launched two lawsuits against New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) on behalf of a coalition of disability rights groups. The suit accused the authority of systemic exclusion of disabled individuals and elevator maintenance neglect. Sasha Blair-Goldensohn was one of the plaintiffs. Getting to his job at Google, he had no direct route due to inaccessible stations. That inaccessibility meant that Sasha had to transfer and use four elevators. His testimonial back then captured the reality for far too many subway commuters in New York City:

"The lack of elevators doubles my commute time, at best. And if just one elevator is out of service, I'm stuck," said Sasha. "I never know when I'll have to ask strangers to carry me up the stairs in my wheelchair. It's nerve-wracking, dangerous, and degrading."

Sasha also attended rallies, demonstrating with advocacy groups comprised of people with disabilities and abled allies. Together they demanded change and compliance with the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act). Their message: Elevators are for everyone. Six years later, one of the lawsuits came to a settlement binding the MTA to make 95% of its subway stations ADA-accessible with elevators and/or ramps by 2055. In April this year, a Manhattan federal judge officially approved the settlement, marking a significant victory for disability rights. The MTA has meanwhile stepped up its pace, recently installing six ADA-compliant elevators in stations on two subway lines and bringing the number of accessible stations to 151. The New York City subway system has 472 stations.

SASHA: It's certainly not over. There's a second part of the case which is that the elevators not only have to exist, [they have] to

To Table of Contents

Sasha and his Google Maps team enjoying time with the Eyes over Birmingham statue at the entrance of Vulcan Park and Museum Birmingham, Alabama, March 2024

be reliable. And right now, they're not. We're still fighting in court to force them to commit to a reliability standard, beyond sort of a best effort. This is not only a nice thing and a moral thing, but simply a business benefit that when elevators are reliable, more people will take the subway, more young families with strollers are going to settle here; more older people want to retire here, etc. And it seems so obvious. But then on the other side, there's still a thought: Oh, this is a cost. There's those kinds of objections. It makes you want to stay out there and keep having those wins.

A Google eye imagining elite athletes getting around in Paris. The wins are coming. A couple of years ago, Sasha and his Google Maps team turned their attention to the upcoming Paralympic Games in Paris. They talked about a "ton of disabled people, athletes, coming to Paris this late August." The team recognized the great opportunity to help Paralympians, their families, and coaches get around using Google Maps. Within the team they raised awareness of their role to ensure the Map features works well in Paris, generating momentum from that point. It worked.

SASHA: "The good news is that that we succeeded, and I got a lot of helpers, within Maps and volunteers on engineering, but also on the on the advertising and media side, to see this as a worthwhile task. We're working really hard on that."

Sasha and a team – two other wheelchair users and two others that are blind – got to travel together to Birmingham, Alabama in March. They visited the location where The US Paralympic wheelchair rugby team practiced. Stoked by the idea of meeting these elite athletes, Sasha's own team was also eager to learn first-hand the experience of traveling through an unfamiliar setting and using Google Maps as a tool to get around.

SASHA: "Like what works, what could be better, and then also hear from the athletes and what their experience has been. They go to tournaments and competitions all over the world all the time. They're hopefully going to be some of them in Paris this summer. It's a great opportunity to make friends and form community, and I'm looking forward to that."

Using AI to optimize for better accessibility. Looking ahead at the role AI can play in accessible travel is a huge topic, but not an entirely new concept. Sasha referred to the way AI has already been in use for some of the techniques for making statistical estimates.

SASHA: "Practically, we'll meet deciding in Google Maps to put the wheelchair icon on a place to indicate that it has a wheelchair accessible entrance or with a strikethrough to indicate that it does not. We only put those if we have high confidence it does exist or it's true that it does not exist.
"You're dealing with all that information and saying out of that, is it? Are we confident? Yes. Are we confident? No. That estimation uses this same kind of algorithms that AI uses to choose whether to make a right or a left turn, or go straight when it's driving the car, and that those techniques are all related. So, the AI is really deep in these systems."

In talking about the way some corporations or entities don't get the value of inclusion for people with disabilities, Sasha expressed hope that they can come to recognize it's not about a moral or generous thing to do.

SASHA: "Making, say, airline flights accessible is good business and will increase revenue. And you can actually model those things in a statistical way and say, 'Well, there's this many disabled people, there's this many flights, there's, etcetera, ... we should just do this.' And because there are a lot of things that are hidden, because of systemic inequality, a lot of places are not accessible in public transit and in public places. You might not see that many wheelchair users or there might be some disabilities that are invisible. From a pure demographics [point], I think a lot of those systems that are trying to optimize for profit may also optimize for accessibility. That might seem like a pipe dream, but I believe that it's true. So, as a believer in the power of these intelligent systems to do the rational thing, I'm hopeful there's an upside there." ■

Marijeta Mojasevic, a disability rights activist, recognized by the BBC as one of the 100 most influential women in the world

Meet Marijeta Mojasevic

Marijeta lives in Montenegro, a small country in Europe, which has been undergoing various transitions over the past few decades. The area of human rights has developed as a result of democratic processes, particularly concerning the rights of vulnerable groups. After acquiring a disability more than twenty years ago, she became passionate about enhancing human rights, especially for people with disabilities. For over a decade, she has worked in the field of human rights, and her recent involvement in youth work has allowed her to combine this with disability activism. This integration has led to recognition from international organizations.

To Table of Contents

About the BBC recognition

It was a surprise for me, since I did not expect that such a great network will recognize my work as important and inspiring. This is a flattering recognition, because I see my work as inspiring not yet so influential—the reality is not yet so bright for persons with disabilities in my and neighboring countries. But, oh, I see this as "good wind in my back" as we say in my culture, a good way to talk about the topic of disability in public discourse at any time. Because disability comes from reality, it is not supposed to be part of an agenda before elections.

Her disability

It was the hardest period of my life. I remember vividly waking up in a clinic, not knowing where I was. I was 14 years old at that time and many hard and painful things and processes were becoming my reality. I survived two strokes in the same year and by the end of that year (2003) I was living with a hard mental and physical condition, which was leading me to think that death would be the best solution.

After a second surgery abroad, I was sent to a spa. My family and people who stayed with me (a few of them) were very supportive, but it was not enough. However, I met the most important person for my recovery, a great psychologist, who helped me recover over the years, together with some wonderful people from my high school and health system. A challenge—a battle like this—really needs systematic support, and it was done like it should be. But, most of the job waited me only, and it is a long journey that lasts even today.

In your work as a social worker and youth activist, do you share your own experiences? How do you teach others about living with a disability?

I started sharing my disability experience with the high school population in 2016, while covering the position of youth advisor at a local youth office. Since then, I have shared it at elementary schools in my hometown and cooperated with a student parliament of a faculty.

Using a storytelling method, I talk about the most painful period of my life, when I suffered two strokes and acquired several irreversible sensory and physical disabilities and mental health problems. I talk about the process of rehabilitation which was long, and how it was hard to adjust to new circumstances—this was the actual situation when I woke up in same body, but my senses were changed. Also, my social status had rapidly changed. I was no longer desirable company for my former friends, because they were afraid. At that time, I was a high school student and since one of my disabilities was related to my eyesight (I see double-diplopia), it was also very challenging to learn by reading.

All of these challenges have made me stronger, because I chose not to give up on myself. And that is one of the main pillars of my workshops and activism in general: never give up because you owe it to youself! Everything else is secondary. It is possible to live with different kinds of disabilities.

The most important aim of my work is that I am trying to make an impact on young people so they will be accepting of people with disabilities without prejudices and stereotypes. I encourage them to look at people with disabilities first as persons who should have the same rights as them, and also like friends,

To Table of Contents

colleagues and part of our reality. The results of my workshops are really good because young people are ready to accept differences.

What inspired you to take on a disability activist role?

My reality and the constant prejudices that were like a wall around me in many situations for over 20 years of my life—this was my inspiration for activism. But I also wanted young people to see me without that curtain of stereotypes which can be an obstacle in many cases. My advice to persons who want to work on raising awareness and to advocate for people with disabilities is to have the strength to share your story. No matter how hard it may be to talk about your emotions or physical condition at that time, it might be inspiring for others who have the capacity to accept differences, but also to make an impact on those who know nothing of that topic or have prejudices.

Share with us a little about OneNeurology and the work you do together

OneNeurology aims to unite and strengthen neurology-related groups to stimulate collaborative advocacy, action and accountability for the prevention, treatment and management of neurological disorders worldwide. Under the OneNeurology Partnership, international neurological organizations and regional umbrellas are uniting to make neurology a global public health priority.

I am personally interested in activism for the prevention of neurological disorders, but, as you can assume, the level of prevention depends on the development of health system, which is not so good in our country.

Are you working on any new projects?

My most important project this year is my newborn child and my firstborn toddler, who are occupying most of my time. The role of a mother with a disability is more demanding than when you do not have a disability, but with good support and organization everything is feasible.

There are some upcoming projects to spread my workshops in Montenegro and I hope that it will be successful as they were in previous years.

What advice would you give to your younger self and others who have been diagnosed with a neurological disorder or other chronic disability?

Never give up on your life and be patient when it comes to your health. There is a Latin proverb that says: Fortune favors the brave and I really believe it. There has to be courage every day when it comes to health issues.

I always remember the story of Pandora's box. Pandora's box is a metaphor for something that brings about great troubles or misfortune, but also holds hope. And I always stick to that hope. It is extremely important in world of chronic disability. ■

> "All of these challenges made me stronger, because I chose not to give up on myself."
> ~ Marijeta

To Table of Contents

CHANGING THE WORLD
TRAVEL ABILITY
Destination
A11y
ONE DESTINATION AT A TIME

What Does it Mean to Be a Destination A11y?

Being an A11y means:

- Your destination is welcoming to visitors with disabilities
- Your destination cares about being inclusive
- Your destination is working to improve your accessibility
- Your destination sees the future of travel
- Your destination is actively engaging with stakeholders to raise awareness about the needs of the disability community

Thank you to the following destinations who have committed to accelerating accessibility:

THE PALM BEACHES FLORIDA
TRAVEL OREGON
Los Angeles
The Beach
alexandria
Fairfax County, Virginia
DISCOVER Lancaster
VISIT LAUDERDALE
TAMPA BAY FLORIDA
Choose LANSING
EUGENE CASCADES & COAST
THE OREGON COAST
Kissimmee FLORIDA
VISITLEX
VisitFortWayne INDIANA
Oakland
VISIT FLORIDA
DESTINATION BRITISH COLUMBIA
Charlottesville ALBEMARLE, VIRGINIA
VISIT MESA CITY LIMITLESS

THE DESTINATION A11Y CLUB IS A PROJECT OF

TRAVEL ABILITY
FOUNDATION

Some people with disabilities hailed Rep. Jennifer Wexton's use of text-to-speech technology, but say there is work to be done to advance representation for those who communicate differently. (CSPAN)

Her speech using a voice app made history in Congress — and sparked a larger disability conversation

By Sara Luterman

Rep. Jennifer Wexton made disability history by becoming the first member of Congress to deliver a speech using an augmentative and alternative communication device on the House floor. Wexton has a rare degenerative condition called progressive supranuclear palsy, or PSP. However, some in the disability community feel that the news coverage has missed the point, focusing on novelty without acknowledging Wexton's actions in the deeper historical and social context of a world that is not built for people like them.

The speech was in support of a bill Wexton introduced to rename a post office in Purcellville, Virginia, after former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, the first woman to hold the job.

"The choice to use a text-to-speech device on the floor of the House of Representatives was a no-brainer for me. Despite my PSP condition which has impacted my ability to speak loudly and clearly, I want to keep doing my job and that means relying on this device to have my voice heard in Congress," Wexton told The 19th.

The 19th spoke with disabled people who use augmentative and alternative communication similar to Wexton's about how they felt in this historic moment and about the surrounding news coverage. They expressed joy, frustration and hope for a better future.

Augmentative and alternative communication, or AAC, covers a wide range of practices, from temporarily writing out requests while recovering from surgery

To Table of Contents

to long-term use of the type of text-to-speech app Wexton relies on. According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, an estimated 5 million Americans cannot rely on speech alone to communicate and would benefit from AAC.

India Ochs, 48, lives in Annapolis, Maryland. She has a speech disability and is a lifelong AAC user. In 2020, she ran for the Anne Arundel School Board. She didn't win, but she still broke a barrier and is proud of her foray into local politics.

"I felt that was the right time, the best opportunity, to channel years of public testimony on school issues – and decades of experience in legal and legislative settings, leadership, education and human rights advocacy, and juvenile justice reform, back to the community I grew up in, to support not only my son, but ensuring the best education and safe environment for all the thousands of other students, teachers, and families," Ochs said.

Ochs was pleased to hear Wexton using her AAC device on the House floor but has been frustrated with how news outlets have covered it.

"After thinking how great it was, my next thought was, why did they only play the segment where she talks about her illness? I want to hear what she actually was testifying on. Then when I went to find other coverage and hear her actual testimony, it got more frustrating with the number of times broadcasters used the word 'inspiring,'" Ochs said.

The word "inspiring" is complicated or even insulting for many people with disabilities, including Ochs. The late disability activist Stella Young described her frustration with being praised as "inspiring" for doing things as simple as going to the grocery store.

Young coined the term "inspiration porn" to describe how describing disabled people as "inspirational" can be objectifying.

"I use the term porn deliberately, because they objectify one group of people for the benefit of another group of people. So in this case, we're objectifying disabled people for the benefit of nondisabled people. The purpose of these images is to inspire you, to motivate you, so that we can look at them and think, 'Well, however bad my life is, it could be worse. I could be that person.' But what if you are that person?" Young said in a 2014 TEDx Talk.

Ochs also feels that many media outlets failed to understand that methods of communication used by people with disabilities, including text-to-speech software and sign language, should be considered as equal to spoken language.

"Any method a person communicates is their voice. Making the assumption that our natural voice is our only voice is ableist and demoralizing to every person that has spoken by speech app, sign language, pen and paper, etc.," she said.

She added, "In a perfect world, coverage should have been about renaming the post office after Madeleine Albright."

Jordyn Zimmerman, 29, lives in Hudson, Ohio. Zimmerman is the board chair for CommunicationFirst, a nonprofit dedicated to protecting and advancing the rights of nonspeakers like Zimmerman, as well as others who cannot rely on speech alone to be understood.

Zimmerman is autistic and uses an iPad app to communicate.

"Watching Rep. Wexton on the floor of Congress was incredible!

She leaned into the alternative communication tools available to share on the House floor — normalizing tools and supports that people rely on every single day," Zimmerman said.

Zimmerman said that she has been denied access to the House viewing gallery because she relies on her iPad to communicate. Electronics are currently banned, and she would have to give up her ability to speak to be allowed in.

The 19th called the House sergeant-at-arms' office to clarify whether exceptions are made for disabled people like Zimmerman. The office confirmed that normally, electronics are not allowed in the viewing gallery and directed The 19th to the Office of Congressional Accessibility Services about accommodations for people with disabilities. The Office of Congressional Accessibility Services declined to comment.

Zimmerman believes that such rules may discourage people who use AAC from running for office.

"Whether someone has a disability before or acquires one, similar to Rep. Wexton, we must design our spaces and policies to encourage the diverse thoughts that exist in our country," she said.

endever* corbin, 38, lives in Portland, Oregon. The asterisk is part of their name. They are autistic and work part time peer mentoring in a program focused on health care for people with neurodevelopmental disabilities.

corbin was delighted by Wexton's speech, describing it as "a little surreal" but "homey" at the same time.

"Hers is a voice I recognize as kin. It was the setting that was surreal. Because normally we would not be allowed there, or at least would not be expected to be there. So there was a sort of happy flapping feeling — wow, someone like me! On TV at all, let alone on C-SPAN!" corbin said.

They are optimistic about how technology and increased acceptance of at least some disabilities will improve.

"I do think there will be more and more assistive technology users who serve as elected officials. For example I remember Senator Fetterman using captioning to support his auditory processing on the floor recently, too. Disabled people make up a huge portion of the population, and the technology available to us only continues to expand in abilities and decrease in expense as time goes on, so it's entirely reasonable to me that there will be more assistive tech of various kinds in Congress in the future," corbin said.

However, corbin is less optimistic that this increased acceptance will extend to all people with disabilities – particularly those who use AAC like they do.

"AAC specifically – especially when used by people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities who haven't ever spoken with mouthwords enough to gain credence as whole human beings? That feels harder to hope for," they said.

Wexton is aware that the response to her manner of communicating has been somewhat exceptional and hopes that the same grace will be extended to other Americans who use AAC.

"I'm very grateful that I've received nothing but generous accommodations since my diagnosis, but I recognize that is often not the case for too many Americans facing similar challenges in the workplace and in their everyday lives. I hope that seeing AAC being used on the House floor helps more people understand that just because my words may be heard from a device doesn't mean they're any less mine or any less important to hear," she said. ■

This article was originally published in The 19th News. Read the original article here.

> **Hers is a voice I recognize as kin. It was the setting that was surreal. Because normally we would not be allowed there, or at least would not be expected to be there. So there was a sort of happy flapping feeling —wow, someone like me! On TV at all, let alone on C-SPAN!**
>
> ~ endever* corbin

To Table of Contents

The Beach IS MORE SUMMER For Everybody

Extend the season in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

Summer doesn't have to stop just because the calendar says “fall.” In Myrtle Beach, the weather's still warm, the ocean's still pleasant and all your summer faves are still in season. Eat at one of the South's newest foodie havens, take in live music and shows any night of the week, and enjoy hundreds of attractions. There are countless things to do for people of all levels of ability. After all, The Beach is 60 miles for everyBODY.

Start planning your trip at VisitMyrtleBeach.com.

Scan to see accessible attractions at The Beach.

VISIT
Myrtle Beach
SOUTH CAROLINA

Table of Contents

Morgan on Wonder Bikes

The accessible wonder of Morgan's Wonderland

Its beginnings

It all started during a family vacation when Morgan Hartman thought it would be fun to splash and play with other kids in a hotel swimming pool. But much to Morgan's dismay, they took their beach ball and vanished. Observing the painful look on Morgan's face, her parents, Gordon and Maggie Hartman, resolved then and there to create a fun, colorful, barrier-free environment where those with and without special needs could come together to have fun and better understand each other. In 2010, Morgan's Wonderland became the world's first Ultra-Accessible™, fully-inclusive theme park. Morgan's boundless love and ability to soar above her physical and cognitive challenges were the true inspiration for Morgan's Wonderland.

What makes Morgan's Wonderland unique compared to other theme parks?

Every day we work to provide an extraordinary place where smiles and laughter lead to wonderful memories with family members, friends, and caregivers. Although we designed our park with everyone in mind, our efforts to provide necessary accommodations for individuals with special needs and disabilities are what makes us unique. Morgan's Wonderland is the one and only Ultra-Accessible™ theme park where everyone can play, regardless of age and ability.

Is Morgan's Wonderland only for people with disabilities?

Morgan's Wonderland is the first theme park where **everyone** can play, regardless of age or ability. We offer 25 Ultra-Accessible™ attractions, sprawled across a 25-acre oasis of inclusion. From

To Table of Contents

cruising through outer space at the 4D Magic Cinema to soaring across the skies in a 130-foot zipline, there is truly something for everyone to enjoy!

What is the admission fee?

Morgan's Wonderland offers several options to help guests plan the best visit to both of our one-of-a-kind Ultra-Accessible™, fully-inclusive parks. This includes single and dual park admission day tickets, season passes, and special offers—not to mention, free admission for any individual with special needs or disabilities.

What rides and activities can visitors look forward to experiencing during their visit?

Morgan's Wonderland offers something for everyone! Our park is truly one-of-a-kind and has become one of San Antonio's well-known attractions. Morgan's Wonderland has more than 25 Ultra-Accessible™ accessible rides, playscapes, and interactive elements that the whole family will enjoy. In 2024, four new rides were added to our list of attractions which include: Jette's Wonder Bikes, the 4D Magic Cinema Experience - Mars Coaster, Pirate Island Cruises, and Rocket's Sky Flight Adventure zipline!

What resources and support services does Morgan's Wonderland offer to its visitors?

Morgan's Wonderland offers several resources and support services to ensure every visitor feels included. This includes but is not limited to: Free admission for individuals with special needs and disabilities, stroller rentals, Ultra-Accessible™ rides and attractions, Joy's Access Pass, and much more!

Apart from visiting the park, what other ways can readers support Morgan's Wonderland?

Every day, Morgan's Wonderland seeks to improve the quality of life for individuals of all ages and all abilities. We do this through programs, projects, and resources that produce fully-inclusive, Ultra-Accessible™ experiences. With gifts from generous organizations, businesses, and individuals, we can further increase the growth of all Morgan's entities and help expand their shared mission of inclusion. This includes sponsorships, facility rentals, event hosting, attendance at our annual celebrations, or simply buying tickets to our park!

What's next for Morgan's Wonderland?

After a $6.5 million renovation, Morgans Wonderland has just reopened its doors with new branding and new Ultra-Accessible™ rides. In 2025, we look forward to welcoming a new

Zipline

member to our Ultra-Accessible™ attractions called The Happy Swings.

Morgan's Wonderland is just one part of the larger Morgan's organization. Can you share more about Morgan's as a whole and the other experiences or services it provides?

The phenomenal success of Morgan's Wonderland encouraged the innovation of additional works of inclusion. With over 150 million dollars in assets, 150+ acres of land, and over 300 employees, Morgan's serves as the umbrella organization that oversees and supports five Ultra-Accessible™, fully-inclusive entities. This includes our award-winning Morgan's Inspiration Island splash park, Morgan's Sports, Morgan's Camp, and Morgan's MAC (Multi-Assistance Center).

Morgan's stated mission is "to improve the quality of life for individuals of all ages and all abilities through initiatives that produce fully-inclusive, Ultra-Accessible™ experiences." We see ourselves as a hub of inclusion and accessibility whose values are to empower, include, educate, and innovate the world around us to bridge the gap between all abilities. ■

Boat with Joy

Boat and Whirling Wonder

Carousel family

Front Entrance

The First Theme Park Where Everyone Can Play | www.morganswonderland.org

Coast Riverview Amy Romer

Disabilities and Mental Health: Overcoming barriers and finding support

By Melanie Nelson, Amy Bujak and Janelle Peters from Coast Mental Health's Brain Training team.

People with disabilities are disproportionately affected by mental illness. In fact, adults with disabilities report experiencing mental distress almost five times as often as those without.

One of the root causes can be isolation. Whether you're living with a visible or invisible disability, it's easy to become disconnected from people who don't fully understand your experience. Stigma and assumptions about your capabilities can also be invalidating and negatively impact your mental health.

Accessibility also remains a significant barrier, making everyday activities daunting and making you feel excluded. If you've acquired a disability later in life, adjusting to a new identity and loss of mobility can deeply affect your mental health.

Invisible disabilities also pose their own set of challenges. Fear of disclosure due to societal stigma can lead to isolation and a lack of support. You may face disbelief or invalidation from others, making it difficult to get necessary accommodations and reinforcing your isolation.

But it's not doom and gloom! Here at Coast Mental Health, we support people hundreds of people living with mental illnesses across Greater Vancouver, many of whom also live with one or more disabilities. There are a few ways that might help.

To Table of Contents

Connection and community

Connecting with others who have similar experiences can make a big difference. You can find a place where you belong, share your experiences with people who understand and come away feeling validated. If leaving the house is a challenge, there are many online groups and communities that can help too.

Finding purpose and meaning

Setting goals that give you a reason to get out of bed in the morning is an important step in managing your mental health. Whether it's a hobby you enjoy, work or volunteering, there's healing in having a purpose.

Many of our clients enjoy volunteering, or working as part of our employment programs, and benefit from both the income, and the purpose it gives them.

Therapeutic interventions

If you are struggling with negative thoughts and low confidence, Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) can help you change the way you're thinking. We've seen positive outcomes for people who have taken part in Coast's Brain Training program, which includes both of these therapies, many reporting a significant improvement in their quality of life as a result.

Creative outlets

Art, music, writing or gardening can be a great way to express what is inside in a format that suits you. And you can choose to share the results or keep them to yourself.

Advocate for yourself

Knowing and asserting your rights can help in getting the accommodations you need. Resources for advocacy and legal rights can be very helpful and empowering.

Coast Mental Health provides community, connection, employment opportunities and support for people living with mental illness in BC. Many of these programs and activities are funded thanks to the generosity of our community of donors. Visit CoastMentalHealth.com to find out more about how you can get involved. ■

www.coastmentalhealth.com

Mobility Unlimited Hub announcement

To Table of Contents

MaRS

7 CANADIAN STARTUPS ARE SET TO REVOLUTIONIZE PERSONAL MOBILITY:

first cohort of the Mobility Unlimited Hub, a partnership between MaRS Discovery District and the Toyota Mobility Foundation

To Table of Contents

Ian McCarter
Director, Corporate Innovation
MaRS Discovery District

MaRS Discovery District and Toyota Mobility Foundation:

Innovating active mobility for a better future

Let us delve into the remarkable collaboration between the MaRS Discovery District and the Toyota Mobility Foundation (TMF), a partnership that is redefining the landscape of innovation. If you are interested in understanding how the future of technology is being shaped, prepare for an enlightening exploration. We will examine how bold ideas and advanced technologies are revolutionizing lives and setting new benchmarks for progress.

Meet MaRS Discovery District

Located in the heart of Toronto, MaRS Discovery District, often simply referred to as MaRS, is not about chocolate bars or outer space adventures, but something more exciting: transforming early-stage technologies into market-ready solutions. With a focus on health and life sciences, cleantech and transformative tech, MaRS is North America's largest urban innovation hub!

Imagine a place where startups, venture capitalists, government and corporate entities converge to foster technological advancements. That's MaRS. With a network supporting over 1,200 startups across Canada, MaRS provides the essential resources needed to scale groundbreaking ideas from university labs to global markets.

The birth of a partnership—MaRS and Toyota Mobility Foundation

The collaboration between MaRS and the TMF began over a year ago, driven by a shared vision to advance the field of active mobility. TMF, renowned for its contributions to innovation, sought a partner capable of fostering a thriving community around emerging technologies. Their search led them to MaRS, a natural fit with its established ecosystem of support and commercialization.

TMF had previously engaged in various activities to encourage innovation in active mobility. However, they realized that awarding prizes wasn't enough. The technologies needed a supportive community to truly thrive. MaRS, with its holistic approach to innovation, emerged as the ideal partner to bring this vision to life.

Overcoming barriers—The Mobility Unlimited Hub

Together, MaRS and TMF embarked on a research phase to understand the barriers preventing innovation in active mobility. They discovered several key challenges, including the need for a more cohesive community approach to support emerging technologies. This insight led to the creation of the Mobility Unlimited Hub.

Launched in March 2024, the Mobility Unlimited Hub is designed to provide comprehensive support to companies focused on assistive, accessible and rehabilitation technologies. The aim is to help individuals with disabilities and seniors lead more independent lives. By bringing together diverse community members, the hub creates a nurturing environment for these technologies to grow and scale.

To Table of Contents

MaRS Cohort Group

The inaugural cohort—A new era of innovation

The inaugural cohort of the Mobility Unlimited Hub was selected through a national call for applications. Over 50 high-quality startups applied, showcasing innovative solutions in the active mobility space. After a rigorous selection process, seven companies were chosen to join the Hub.

“We looked for innovations in three main areas: assistive, accessible and rehabilitation technology,” Ian McCarter, MaRS’ Director, Corporate Innovation shared. “All with the end goal of helping persons with disabilities, seniors or anyone seeking a more independent lifestyle.”

These startups are not merely ideas on paper. They are established companies ready to tackle the commercialization challenges of their technologies. The Hub provides them with a year-long program of tailored support, including manufacturing scale-up, refining pitches to investors, direct customer and venture capital connections and media training.

Nothing About Us Without Us—Inclusivity at its core

The core ethos of the Mobility Unlimited Hub is "nothing about us without us." This principle ensures that individuals with lived experiences of disabilities are involved in every stage of the process. By incorporating their insights, the Hub ensures that selected technologies address real-world problems faced by people with disabilities.

This inclusive approach is evident in the design of the program, from the initial research phase to the support services offered. It’s about creating solutions that truly make a difference in people’s lives.

The journey ahead—Looking to the future

With the inaugural cohort now in full swing, the future looks bright for the Mobility Unlimited Hub. The program kicked off just weeks ago, starting with a needs assessment to identify how best to support each company. Whether it's product development, market strategy, or capital acquisition, the Hub is dedicated to accelerating their progress.

The success of these startups will validate the community-based

To Table of Contents

model pioneered by MaRS and the TMF. It's about helping individual companies but also creating a sustainable ecosystem that fosters continuous innovation in active mobility.

MaRS Discovery District—A legacy of impact

MaRS is a catalyst for positive change. From healthcare advancements to climate solutions, they support ventures that aim to make a tangible impact on society. The Mobility Unlimited Hub is a prime example of this mission in action.

The collaboration with the TMF is just one of many initiatives MaRS is involved in. For instance, their work with CIBC focused on inclusive design and overcoming employment barriers for individuals with disabilities. They're also engaged in projects to enhance accessibility standards in the built environment, ensuring that physical spaces are inclusive for everyone.

The power of collaboration

What makes MaRS truly special is its ability to bring together diverse stakeholders to address complex challenges. The Mobility Unlimited Hub exemplifies this collaborative spirit, with 13 partners from various sectors contributing their expertise. This collective effort amplifies the impact of each initiative, creating a ripple effect of positive change.

A call to innovators—Join the journey

As the Mobility Unlimited Hub continues to evolve, MaRS and TMF are eager to collaborate with more organizations and individuals passionate about making a difference. Whether you're a startup, a corporate entity, or a community group, there's a place for you along this exciting journey.

Towards a better future

The MaRS Discovery District and Toyota Mobility Foundation partnership is a movement towards a better future. By harnessing the power of innovation and community, they're creating solutions that improve lives and drive progress, making the world a better place, one breakthrough at a time. ■

MaRS West Tower exterior

Photo Credit:Jenna Marie Wakani
MaRS interior crowd

To Table of Contents

The RAYMEX™ Lift is set to revolutionize mobility


Tracey McGillivray, MEDI, MBA, BCSS
Co-founder and CEO,
Axtion Independence Mobility Inc.


Liam Masskant, B.Eng., B.ASc.
Co-founder and Chief Product Officer
Axtion Independence Mobility Inc.


Ian McCarter
Director, Corporate Innovation
MaRS Discovery District

Technology's true purpose is to enrich human lives in profound and meaningful ways. Amid sleek gadgets and complex systems, a groundbreaking product is set to revolutionize mobility aids for the elderly and those with mobility challenges. Founded by Tracey McGillivray and then-mechanical engineering student Liam Maaskant, the RAYMEX™ Lift epitomizes the essence of technology's mission. Designed with love, compassion and a deep understanding of the user's needs, it stands as a poignant reminder of the true potential of technological innovation. The RAYMEX™ Lift is named in honor of Tracey's father, Raymond, highlighting the personal motivation behind the product.

Many people can relate to Tracey's personal experience. She recounts, "This journey began back in 2019 when my dad started to fall at home on a fairly frequent basis. Thankfully, he was never injured, but he was unable to get back up on his own if he went down." Her father's struggles became a source of worry for the family, especially since Tracey's mother, being of the same age, couldn't assist him effectively. The situation often required calling neighbors or emergency services for help.

Determined to find a solution, Tracey scoured the market for a device that could help her parents regain their independence and safety. She found existing devices either too heavy, cumbersome, or impractical for elderly use. "I just can't stand to see a major solvable problem go unsolved," she says, reflecting her resolve to tackle the issue head-on.

To Table of Contents

Enter Liam, a mechanical engineering student and an active leader at their shared alma mater, Acadia University. “I reached out to Liam and explained the problem with Mom and Dad, and the magnitude of the problem across the developed world,” Tracey shares. Liam’s response was immediate and proactive: “Let’s solve this problem.” With Tracey’s determination and Liam’s engineering prowess, they undertook a mission to create a practical, user-friendly solution. The company, Axtion Independence Mobility Inc was born.

Liam dove into the project with thoroughness. Methodical and user-focused, he surveyed care facilities and engaged with community members to understand the nuances of the problem. “I didn’t want to be biased by existing solutions,” he explains. “We needed something that wasn’t just functional but also sleek, elegant, non-intrusive and practical.” The result was the RAYMEX™ Lift, an ingenious device that combines an elevating seat with a Rollator Walker frame. The design allows users to lower themselves to the ground and rise up with minimal effort. It integrates seamlessly into their daily life, enhancing their ability to safely perform everyday tasks.

“One in four adults over the age of 65 will fall at least once a year, with the number doubling for those over 80. While many aren’t injured, almost half need help getting back up. This isn’t just a minor inconvenience—it’s a significant problem that impacts millions.”

Tracey is effusive in her praise for Liam’s design: “He’s very humble and modest, but the concept of putting an elevating seat inside a Rollator Walker was his idea, and it’s just ingenious.”

The device can adjust to various heights—the seat can lower to the ground and rise to 24 inches—making it easier for users to reach low objects such as picking up items from off the floor, reach to a higher surface or stand from a seated position. Tracey said her father considered it his personal utility vehicle. Whether he was adjusting sprinkler heads or tending to his garden, the RAYMEX™ Lift provided the support he needed.

The broader impact of this innovation is that it’s not just for the elderly. Anyone with a fear of falling, whether due to conditions like Parkinson’s or multiple sclerosis, can benefit. It’s about giving people their lives back. Liam shared that the device’s design includes a seat that rotates up and out of the way, allowing users to stand or walk inside the frame, thus offering robust support without hindrance. Tracey recalls, “I would watch my parents struggle with their Rollator Walkers, unable to perform simple tasks because the seat was a barricade.” This small but significant innovation enables users to perform tasks like brushing their teeth or cooking without the cumbersome seat getting in the way.

The RAYMEX™ Lift's functional design includes a load-surge warning system. If something is restricting the seat’s movement, there is a drastic change in load, if something is caught under or on top of the seat while in movement—if any obstruction is detected—this would trigger a warning and the device would automatically lock for 5 seconds, halting movement. The device also includes a low battery warning and an automatic safety lock, preventing any unintended motion. It has a weight capacity of 300 pounds. These thoughtful details underscore the meticulous care that has gone into every aspect of its design.

Currently, the RAYMEX™ Lift is in the final stages of preparation before hitting the market. “It’s been testing very well and has been well-received,” Tracey says with pride. It is expected to retail for around $3,800 in the United States—a price point that is lower than many other comparable powered lifts. This affordability, combined with its multifunctionality, positions the RAYMEX™ Lift as a game-changer in the mobility aids market. Axtion Independence Mobility is offering a solution that could transform lives, and as they prepare the RAYMEX™ Lift for commercialization, Tracey and Liam are very optimistic about the future. Technology often feels impersonal but this product reminds us that the best innovations are those that come from the heart. As Liam aptly puts it, “We wanted to create something that doesn’t just help people, but also brings back their joy and independence.” We’re ready to give people back their peace of mind.” ■

raymexlift.com

The broader impact of this innovation is that it’s not just for the elderly. Anyone with a fear of falling, whether due to conditions like Parkinson’s or multiple sclerosis, can benefit.

To Table of Contents

RAYMEX™ Lift demo

To Table of Contents

Francois Beauchamp-Verdon
Chief Operations Officer

AWL Electricity powers a future without cords

In the bustling metropolis of Montreal, Canada, amid the hum of innovation lies a story that's as electrifying as it is inspiring. Engineer, Emmanuel Glen, whose fascination with Nikola Tesla and the wonders of electricity was ignited at the tender age of sixteen, has conjured up inventions and technology prototypes that most of us could only dream of. AWL Electricity is his brainchild. Passion met purpose. He is blending cutting-edge technology with a profound social mission—a future without cords to restore independence to those who need it.

The Genesis of AWL Electricity

AWL Electricity is the product of a serendipitous meeting of minds driven by a shared vision to make the world a better place. Emmanuel, the brain behind the breakthrough technology, teamed up with his co-founders during an internship at a company developing robotic arms for the paralyzed. Emmanuel's brilliance shone through his invention of wireless electricity—a concept that needed direction and a market to conquer.

Together, they embarked on a journey that led them through Montreal's entrepreneurial accelerator programs, where they fine-tuned their technology and business model. But what truly set their hearts on fire was the realization of their technology's potential to change lives—especially for those with mobility challenges.

The Mission and Vision

AWL Electricity's mission is as clear as a bolt of lightning on a dark night: to use their wireless power technology to create products with high social impact. Their vision is to not only make life easier but to redefine autonomy and dignity for people with disabilities. Their inaugural product, a wireless charger for power wheelchairs and mobility scooters, epitomizes this vision.

Think of a world where mobility devices charge seamlessly without the cumbersome tangle of wires. Where charging stations are as ubiquitous and easy to use as public benches. AWL Electricity is pioneering this future, transforming the mundane act of charging into a dignified, empowering, convenient experience.

Breaking Boundaries with Innovation

What makes AWL Electricity's technology stand out in the crowded field of wireless power solutions? It's the ingenuity of using electric fields instead of magnetic ones. While magnetic fields generate heat and pose various technical challenges, electric fields offer a safer, more efficient alternative. This novel approach not only prevents overheating but also ensures a more reliable and flexible charging experience.

The technology, initially appearing as a farfetched dream, has been meticulously developed into a practical solution. It's now on the cusp of revolutionizing the way we think about power and mobility. With just a simple mat under your power wheelchair or mobility scooter, charging becomes as easy as parking your device.

Overcoming Challenges

The road to innovation is never a smooth one, and AWL Electricity's journey is no exception. From navigating stringent regulations about placing devices on the floor to designing a unique wire

To Table of Contents

to connect the mat to the power source, every step has been a challenge. They even had to simplify their user interface based on feedback from users and healthcare professionals, to ensure that the technology is as user-friendly as it is groundbreaking.

The Future of Mobility

Looking ahead, AWL Electricity envisions a world where wireless power hubs are as common as bus stops. These hubs, powered by solar panels, will serve not just power wheelchairs but also e-bikes and other electric mobility devices. The goal is to create a network of sustainable, accessible charging stations that support a greener, more inclusive urban landscape. They are committed to safety and quality. Rigorous testing and collaboration with ergonomic specialists and manufacturing experts ensures that AWL Electricity's products meet and exceed the highest standards. Their technology is innovative, robust, reliable and ready to transform lives.

Partnerships and Community

AWL Electricity thrives on collaboration. Their success is built on the support of partners and the wider community. From the initial research phases to the current stage of manufacturing and distribution, partnerships have played a crucial role. Suppliers, health professionals and organizations like the Mobility Unlimited Hub have provided invaluable support, helping AWL Electricity navigate the complex landscape of innovation and bring their vision to life.

Impact Stories

This technology is already on its way to making a difference in people's lives. "A senior home in Montreal, Résidence Angus, is eagerly awaiting the new chargers," Francis Beauchamp-Verdon, VP of AWL Electricity says, highlighting the product's impact on independence. Similarly, "a 16-year-old boy with brain paralysis will be able to charge his power wheelchair without his parents' help for the first time." As AWL Electricity prepares to launch their first batch of chargers, these stories are just the beginning of their transformative impact—consider the countless seniors and individuals with disabilities who will no longer be tethered by the limitations of battery life!

Pioneering Change

AWL Electricity's technology is set to make mobility more accessible and sustainable, empowering individuals and enhancing their quality of life through cutting-edge technology.

AWL Electricity is charging devices and charging the future, without cords! ■

www.awl-e.com

Euegne Cherny
CEO
Cheelcare

Allex Laurin
Director of Marketing
Cheelcare

Cheelcare’s Game-Changing Mobility Solutions

Cheelcare represents ideas morphing into life-changing solutions. The company is a revolution in mobility, brought to life by two visionaries, Eugene Cherny and Dima Paltsev. Both had loved ones reliant on wheelchairs and found themselves at a crossroads. The medical device landscape, particularly for wheelchairs, felt archaic and stagnant. While the world evolved, the technology aiding those with physical disabilities lagged behind.

Fueled by personal connections and a shared vision, Eugene and Dima set out to disrupt this inertia. They believed that individuals who rely on wheelchairs deserve better—deserve a life of enhanced mobility and dignity. Cheelcare’s innovative designs and cutting-edge technology aim to provide exactly that.

Their serendipitous meeting at a wheelchair event was the genesis of Cheelcare. With passion and an unwavering commitment, they set out on a mission to create not just a product but a revolution. Thus, Cheelcare was born in 2015, and the world of mobility would never be the same.

Enter Curio, Cheelcare’s flagship product—a power wheelchair reimagined. Unlike traditional wheelchairs with bulky, heavy power bases, Curio is sleek, agile, and revolutionary in its design. Can you imagine a wheelchair that feels like an extension of yourself, one that adapts to your needs and environment seamlessly? That’s Curio.

Its genius lies in its “legs”—independent actuators that move in any direction, providing omnidirectional tilt. This means the user can adjust their seat in any direction, maintaining balance and comfort no matter the terrain. Need

To Table of Contents

to elevate to reach a shelf or lower to get under a table? Curio does it effortlessly with a seat-to-floor height range from 12 inches to an industry-leading 32 inches.

Curio is safe and stable. Its auto-leveling feature ensures that the seat remains level, whether ascending a ramp or navigating uneven surfaces, giving users unparalleled confidence and comfort. It's lightweight, robust, and a true indication of Cheelcare's commitment to engineering excellence.

While Curio was in development, Cheelcare didn't stop there. They identified another gap in the market—manual wheelchair users needing occasional power assistance. Introducing Companion, a power assist device that transforms a manual wheelchair into a power scooter. Don't think of this as merely an add-on. It is liberation!

Companion is user-friendly, easily attachable and detachable by the user themselves. It provides the much-needed boost for those long days, extending the user's range and preserving their shoulder strength. With a top speed of 12 kilometers per hour and a range of 24 kilometers per charge, Companion ensures that users can keep up with life's demands without compromising their independence.

Cheelcare's vision extend beyond creating innovative products. They are keen to break barriers and enable those with physical disabilities to live their lives to the fullest. Their mission is clear: to eliminate as many obstacles as possible and provide solutions that adapt to the user's life, not the other way around.

The success of Companion and the groundbreaking potential of Curio are just the beginning. Cheelcare is committed to continuous innovation, with a suite of products designed to enhance the daily lives of wheelchair users. From advanced accessories like the Aware rearview camera system to USB adapters, Cheelcare ensures that every detail is tailored for convenience, safety and independence.

No journey is walked alone, and Cheelcare's path has been paved with invaluable partnerships. From funding support from the Ontario Centre for Innovation (OCI) to collaborations with Mars and Toyota Mobility through the Mobility Unlimited Hub, Cheelcare has garnered the support and expertise needed to push the boundaries of what's possible.

These partnerships have not only provided financial backing but have also opened doors to a wealth of knowledge and resources. The Mobility Unlimited Hub, for instance, has connected Cheelcare with advisors, coaches and potential investors, amplifying their ability to innovate and bring their products to market efficiently.

As Cheelcare stands on the cusp of its 10th anniversary, the future looks boundless. Curio is set to make waves, challenging the status quo and setting new standards in the industry. But this is merely a glimpse of what's to come. Cheelcare's pipeline is brimming with cutting-edge technologies and concepts that promise to redefine mobility.

To the public, Cheelcare's message is simple yet profound: Be aware. Understand the options available, advocate for better solutions and support innovation in the mobility industry. This company's products remind us that with the right tools, those with physical disabilities can definitely live independently with dignity.

So, keep an eye on Cheelcare. They are transforming mobility and lives, one invention at a time. And in doing so, they remind us of the incredible power of human ingenuity and compassion. ■

cheelcare.ca

Mehdi Masoumi
Co-founder
Deaf AI

Deaf AI ushers in a new era of communication accessibility

Artificial intelligence (AI) is shaking up our daily lives in ways we never imagined and a visionary, Mehdi Masoumi is on a mission to use it for something truly transformative—making life better for millions who are Deaf and hard of hearing. Welcome to the story of Deaf AI, a tale of innovation and the pursuit of inclusivity.

Our story kicks off in Iran, where Mehdi found himself deeply moved by conversations with Deaf friends and family. “We had a lot of conversations around using technology to help Deaf students,” Mehdi recalls, a spark of an idea flickering in his mind. This idea packed its bags and travelled with him to Canada, landing in Toronto. Here, Mehdi met a fellow student with a shared passion for tech and accessibility. Together, they started brainstorming: What if AI could bridge the communication gap for the Deaf community, not just in emergencies, but every single day?

Then came COVID-19, a stark reminder of the importance of accessible communication tools. And so, in 2021, Deaf AI was born. Their mission? To develop AI-driven tools for sign language interpretation and captioning. Imagine digital avatars translating spoken words into sign language in real time, or advanced captioning systems in public places where information often slips through the cracks.

The magic of Deaf AI lies in its unique approach to sign language. Unlike spoken languages, sign languages are a rich tapestry of facial expressions and body movements. This complexity poses a challenge for AI, but Mehdi is tackling it with gusto. They're crafting sophisticated algorithms and building extensive datasets to ensure their digital avatars can translate spoken words into sign language accurately and expressively.

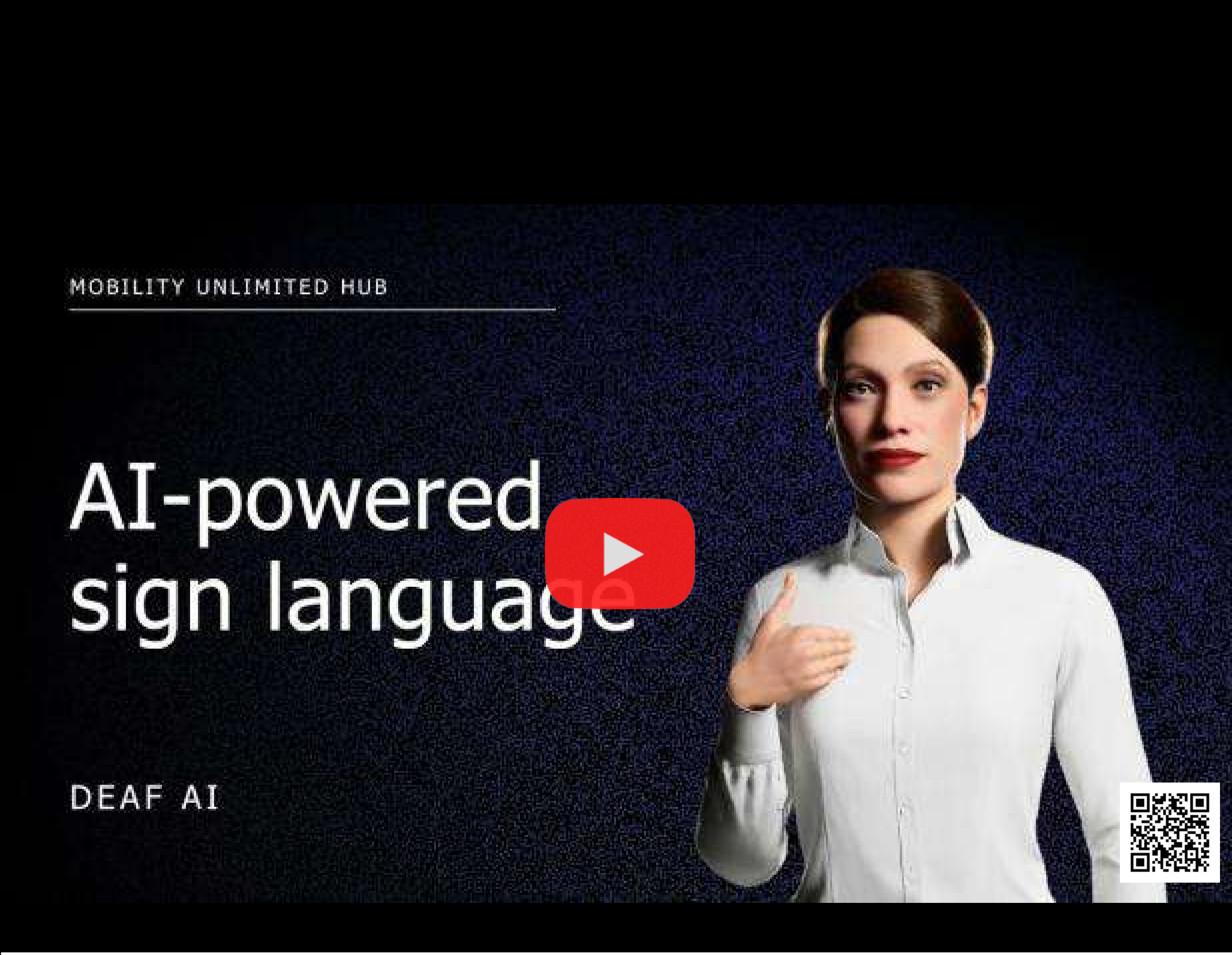
One of the most exciting applications of Deaf AI’s technology is in transportation. You may be at a bustling airport and can’t hear the boarding announcements. For a Deaf person, this scenario is a minefield of stress. Enter Deaf AI's solution—digital avatars on screens at airport gates and on mobile phones, translating announcements into sign language. This innovation not only bridges the communication gap but also integrates seamlessly into existing setups.

But let's not sugarcoat it—the journey is fraught with challenges. Perfecting AI technology, ensuring cultural accuracy in sign language and building crucial partnerships are no small feats. Yet, the team's unwavering dedication, bolstered by support from organizations like MaRS and the Mobile Foundation, keeps them moving forward.

Looking ahead, Deaf AI’s immediate goal is to roll out their technology across Canada’s transportation hubs, from airports to train stations, making public announcements accessible through their digital avatars. But the horizon holds even more possibilities: educational tools for Deaf children, expanding into other public sectors and elsewhere.

Deaf AI aims to leverage technology to create positive change. Mehdi aims to inspire

To Table of Contents



other innovators and entrepreneurs to harness their skills for the greater good. Their motto? Make technology work for everyone.

As Deaf AI gears up to launch their product in the next six months, the feedback and support from the Deaf community are their guiding stars. Mehdi is convinced that with the right blend of technology and compassion, a world can be built where everyone's voice is heard, understood and valued. Here's to a future where Deaf AI not only transforms lives but also inspires a wave of tech-driven inclusivity. ■

www.deaf-ai.com

Video

To Table of Contents

Pooja Viswanathan
Co-Founder, CEO
Braze Mobility

Braze Mobility's smart wheelchair technology enhances independence and safety

In 2006, a visit to a long-term care facility in Ontario, Canada, ignited a vision that would revolutionize mobility for wheelchair users. The staff's apprehensions about accidents, property damage and collisions led to residents being denied access to motorized wheelchairs. Dr. Pooja Viswanathan observed residents confined to manual wheelchairs without the strength to self-propel. This realization marked the beginning of an innovative journey for her that has since transformed countless lives.

Motivated by this, Dr. Pooja initiated an investigation into how sensor technology could improve wheelchair safety. This led to collaboration with a research lab in Toronto, focusing on developing smart wheelchairs equipped with sensor technology to enhance safety and accessibility. The goal was to enable safe power mobility for individuals previously considered ineligible for it. This research culminated in her PhD thesis on smart wheelchair technology, involving the creation and testing of smart wheelchairs with numerous users. However, the frustration of a lack of commercial solutions persisted until the founding of Braze Mobility in 2016.

Innovative solution - The technology

Braze Mobility introduced the first and only blind spot sensor system for wheelchairs. These sensors can be added to any wheelchair, whether manual or motorized and offer three types of alerts: visual (lights), auditory (sounds), and tactile (vibrations). These alerts inform users of the proximity and location of obstacles, enhancing their ability to navigate safely.

VISUAL ALERTS: The system features two rows of lights indicating obstacles in front and behind the wheelchair. The top row signifies front obstacles, while the bottom row highlights those behind. The lights change color based on the distance: yellow for obstacles within two feet and red for those within one foot. Users can customize the alert distances and even set up two different profiles through an accompanying app.

AUDITORY ALERTS: Beeps accompany the red lights, serving as a crucial warning system for both the wheelchair user and others in the environment. These beeps

To Table of Contents

ensure that users are alerted to close obstacles, prompting them to stop or adjust their path.

TACTILE ALERTS: Vibration pads can be placed in the backrest, seat cushion or armrests, providing tactile feedback. For instance, if an obstacle is on the right, the right side of the chair will vibrate, guiding the user away from potential collisions.

Success Stories and Impact

The impact of Braze Mobility's technology is profound and far-reaching. Here are three diverse success stories:

1. Restoring independence in long-term care:

- A Canadian long-term care resident faced the prospect of losing her power wheelchair due to safety concerns. The staff restricted her mobility and also prohibited her from visiting the mall on her own. After trialing Braze Mobility's sensors, she was able to navigate safely and the staff allowed her to retain her power wheelchair. Another issue was that she would damage the area beneath the sink in her bathroom with her wheelchair when attempting to use it. When equipped with the sensors, further damage was prevented because it would alert her when she was getting too close. Safe navigation around the facility and during mealtimes significantly improved her quality of life. She was also able to drive to the mall on her own.

2. A veteran with vision loss was empowered:

- A veteran and long-term power wheelchair user started losing his vision, leading to a confidence-shaking incident where he crashed into an empty baby stroller. The Veterans Affairs purchased Braze Mobility's system for him and despite becoming legally blind, he maintained his independence. He even travelled out of state alone, using the sensors and a white cane. This story demonstrates how the right tools and training can empower individuals with disabilities.

3. Assisting a young girl with unique needs:

- A six-year-old girl using a head array to drive her chair faced challenges in navigating doorways. Braze Mobility's system allowed her to center herself before backing up, eliminating damage to door frames. The system also taught her peers to respect her personal space, enhancing her independence and social interactions at school.

Customization and Support

One of Braze Mobility's standout features is its adaptability. The system can be customized to fit any wheelchair model and tailored to meet the specific needs of the user. The app allows for adjustments in alert distances, feedback modalities and even the brightness and color of the lights to accommodate users with different sensory needs and preferences.

The company provides continuous support to clients, ensuring that any new requirements are met promptly.

Partnerships and Market Reach

Strategic partnerships have been instrumental in Braze Mobility's success. Collaborations with organizations like AARP, Veterans Health Administration Innovation Ecosystem, Toyota Mobility Foundation, AGE-WELL NCE, Ontario Brain Institute, Centre for Aging and Brain Health Innovation, Access to Success, Ontario Bioscience Innovation Organization have expanded the reach and impact of their technology. These partnerships, along with participation in incubators and accelerators like Google for Startups, Techstars, Founder Institute, University of Toronto Entrepreneurship, have propelled the company forward.

Braze Mobility is revolutionizing wheelchair safety and independence. Their vision extends beyond power wheelchairs to include all personal mobility devices with sensor technology being a standard feature.

For inquiries or further details, visit Braze Mobility's website and explore their range of transformative products. ■

To Table of Contents

Trexo Robotics is pioneering mobility solutions for children with disabilities

Manmeet Maggu
Co-founder & CEO
Trexo Robotics

Rahul Udas
Co-founder & CTO
Trexo Robotics

Every child deserves the chance to walk, run, and explore freely, without physical limitations holding them back. Trexo Robotics is making this dream a reality, step by joyful step. Co-founded by visionary engineers Manmeet Maggu and Rahul Udasi, this groundbreaking company is revolutionizing the future for children with mobility challenges through their innovative exoskeletons.

Trexo Robotics' journey began with a deeply personal mission. Manmeet Maggu's nephew, Praneit, was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, a condition that severely restricted his ability to walk. Faced with the inadequacy of existing solutions, Manmeet and Rahul harnessed their robotics expertise to create something truly transformative. “We decided to use our robotics background to build something for Praneit,” Manmeet shared.

In 2016, they crafted their first exoskeleton prototype in their living room. Packed into a suitcase and flown to India, this rudimentary model enabled Praneit to take his first steps—a moment Manmeet still considers the proudest of his life. This breakthrough fueled their determination to refine their design, making it more advanced and user-friendly.

As interest from families, hospitals, and clinics grew, the duo realized their invention was not just for their family, but for families around the world. In 2017, Trexo Robotics was officially incorporated and Manmeet and Rahul then devoted themselves full-time to perfecting their exoskeleton.

Trexo Robotics' mission is to make walking accessible to everyone who desires it. While their primary focus is on children due to the significant unmet need, their technology can also benefit adults in the future. They believe walking is a fundamental human right, and everyone should have the opportunity to experience it.

The benefits of walking extend beyond the physical. Children using the Trexo exoskeleton gain not just mobility, but independence, self-confidence and a sense of inclusion. Imagine the joy of playing in the park, joining a gym class, or simply strolling through a mall—experiences many take for granted but are life-changing for these children.

The exoskeletons are designed to be both comfortable and functional. A standout feature is the initiation engine, which detects how much a child is assisting or resisting movement. "While the child is walking unengaged, the initiation score will be close to 0. If they're really pushing

and trying to help the walking process, the number will be higher," explained Manmeet. This real-time data allows caregivers to adjust support levels, tailoring the walking experience to the child's capabilities and maximizing therapeutic benefits. Additionally, the device's modular design allows for easy adjustments and repairs, ensuring long-term usability.

The true impact of Trexo Robotics is best captured through the stories of the children it has helped. For instance, a young girl confidently walking through a bustling mall with the aid of her Trexo device, experiencing independence and autonomy for the first time. Or a child, adorned in her exoskeleton, proudly walking down the aisle as a flower girl at a family wedding.

Then there’s Marc, an employee at Trexo, who purchased an exoskeleton for his son, who has a rare genetic condition. Since using the Trexo, his son has seen remarkable improvements in core strength, head control and even dietary intake, transitioning from a liquid diet to eating solid foods like steak. These experiences, once out of reach, are now possible, thanks to Trexo Robotics.

The journey has not been without its challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic compelled the company to rethink its deployment and training strategies. Initially, Trexo’s team would visit homes to set up the device and provide training. However, travel restrictions necessitated a shift to Zoom-based training. However, what initially seemed like a setback turned out to be a blessing in disguise, resulting in a more flexible and efficient training program.

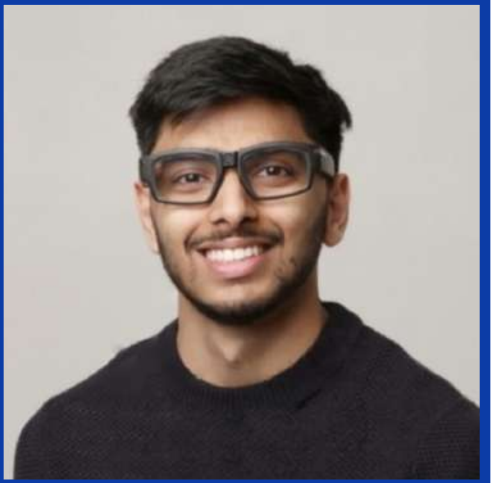
In Canada, the exoskeleton is available at a cost of around $40,000, with leasing options and private insurance coverage in some cases. With a $500 deposit, one can reserve an exoskeleton, after which the assessment process begins. Within six weeks, measurements, doctor’s information and other details are gathered. The exoskeleton is then shipped to the user’s home, with setup assistance and training provided via Zoom. Follow-up check-ins are conducted regularly to ensure optimal use and support.

As Trexo Robotics advances, their vision becomes more profound: to transform mobility assistance and provide every child with the tools to walk and explore their world. Through relentless innovation and a commitment to improving lives, Trexo Robotics is expanding the limits of what is possible. They continue to roll out new features and updates to enhance functionality and user experience, with plans to expand into new markets, bringing their life-changing technology to children across the United States and Europe.

Trexo Robotics is empowering children with disabilities to walk, explore and live fuller lives, turning dreams of mobility into reality for children everywhere. Follow them on this incredible journey and witness the power of possibility, one step at a time. ■

www.trexorobotics.com

To Table of Contents



Shubh Mittal
Founder & CEO
Seleste

Smart Glasses by Seleste:
The next big thing in assistive technology for the blind

Smart glasses being as common as smartphones? This would revolutionize how we interact with our surroundings!

This vision isn't from a sci-fi movie, but from Shubh Mittal, the innovative mind behind Seleste Innovations Inc. Shubh's story begins during his university years, where he was captivated by the potential of smart glasses. "I always thought smart glasses were the future," he recalls. But the path to innovation is rarely straightforward. It was a personal connection that truly ignited his passion. "I had a friend in university who was blind. He was incredibly smart, but he struggled with everyday tasks like grocery shopping or reading notes in class. It hit me that smart glasses could really make a difference in his life," Shubh shares.

Determined to turn his vision into reality, Shubh started experimenting with smart glasses. His commitment deepened when he began volunteering with the Vancouver Paralympic team, specifically with goalball players. These athletes, who are visually impaired, became the first users of his prototypes. "Seeing the impact on their lives was a game-changer for me. It wasn't just about technology anymore, it was about making a real difference," says Shubh.

Seleste's core mission is clear and ambitious: to make people more efficient and focus on what truly matters. "Our goal is to eliminate inefficiencies, especially for blind professionals who spend too much time navigating inaccessible documents or websites. We want them to focus on their actual work," explains Shubh.

One of the primary challenges for visually impaired individuals is what Shubh calls the "last ten feet" problem. While tools like Google Maps can guide users close to their destination, the final steps—finding the exact door, navigating a lobby, or locating an elevator—can be daunting. "I remember a user telling me she was stuck in a doctor's office lobby for hours because she couldn't find the elevator. Another waited at a closed bus stop for 45 minutes because she couldn't read the sign. These are the everyday challenges we aim to solve," Shubh recounts.

Developing Seleste's smart glasses was no walk in the park. Shubh initially thought his company would be the only one creating such technology, but he discovered competitors were offering similar expensive and bulky products. "It was a surprise, but it pushed us to innovate further," he says. A major breakthrough came when they decided to offload processing to the user's phone. "This allowed us to make the glasses thinner, more powerful, and affordable. It was a game-changer," Shubh reveals. However, this also meant navigating restrictions imposed by phone manufacturers, which sometimes slowed down development.

What sets Seleste apart from its competitors is its commitment to affordability and style, along with a broad range of functionalities. "Our glasses look normal. It's a myth that people don't care about aesthetics. They don't want to stand out," Shubh notes. The AI assistant integrated into the glasses offers additional value by helping users recall previously read documents or business cards, a feature invaluable for professionals.

Beyond canes and guide dogs, in the mobility assistance market, many innovations for the blind haven't become widespread. Seleste's approach is to complement, not replace, these essential tools. "We're not trying

To Table of Contents

to replace canes or guide dogs. Instead, we're adding another tool to the arsenal, something that can help with tasks like reading a menu at a café or finding the right door," Shubh explains. His goal is to reach millions, making a significant impact on the visually impaired community.

Looking ahead, Shubh sees rapid advancements in AI as a game-changer. Seleste is exploring how AI can assist with tasks like grocery shopping or web browsing, making these processes faster and more efficient. "We're working on creating a conversational assistant that can handle these tasks seamlessly, saving users time and effort," he shares excitedly.

Partnerships have been crucial in Seleste's journey. Organizations like the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) have provided funding and user feedback, while startup incubators like Next Canada have connected Seleste with the wider market and venture capitalists. "The support from CNIB has been amazing. They've helped us with funding and real user feedback. Next Canada has been instrumental in getting us out into the wider market," Shubh acknowledges. More recently, the Toyota Mobility Hub has offered invaluable expertise in hardware commercialization, helping Seleste navigate the challenges of developing and scaling their smart glasses.

Safety is a top priority for Seleste. The smart glasses are designed to complement existing tools, not replace them. For example, they won't assist users in crossing roads due to the lack of necessary sensory data. "We focus on tasks like reading signs or navigating buildings, where we can make a real impact. It's all about enhancing safety and accessibility," Shubh emphasizes. Clear guidelines and user education ensure the glasses are used safely and effectively.

Looking to the future, Shubh is excited about improving the hardware—enhancing the mic, speakers, and camera to create a better user experience. "It's challenging, especially for a team with a software background, but it's essential for scaling our impact," he says. Collaborations and resources from partners like the Toyota Mobility Hub will be crucial in overcoming these challenges.

With a clear mission to enhance accessibility and independence, Seleste is poised to make a significant impact on the lives of the visually impaired. The future holds exciting possibilities, and Shubh is ready to lead Seleste toward a world where technology truly serves everyone.

As Shubh concludes, "We're just getting started. The journey ahead is challenging, but the potential to make a real difference keeps us motivated. We want to create a world where everyone, regardless of their abilities, can navigate life with ease and independence." And with that, Seleste Innovations Inc. continues to forge a path toward a more inclusive future. ■

www.seleste.co

Insights with Bart Vulliamy

www.BartVulliamy.com
@PhotographieBlack

Neuroaffirming care:
The future of autism awareness

"Acceptance requires facing that which makes you uncomfortable about us, thinking about why it makes you uncomfortable, and confronting any prejudice at the root of that discomfort."
- Kassiane S., Autistic Self Advocacy Network

Autism Acceptance Month (otherwise known as Autism Awareness Month) is celebrated in April every year, and while the month heads towards becoming an actually autistic led movement (or moves away from being corporate led), much more needs to be done in terms of awareness.

Neuroaffirming (neurodiversity-affirming) care is when scientific research and health care values the strengths and differences of autistic people. It does this by promoting the idea of neurodiversity – like the way biodiversity is a natural variation in humans and is vital to our survival as a species.

There is a difference between acceptance and awareness. According to Autistic Self Advocacy Network – "Acceptance requires facing that which makes you uncomfortable about us, thinking about why it makes you uncomfortable, and confronting any prejudice at the root of that discomfort. To accept us is to make a conscious effort to overcome that prejudice, to recognize that your discomfort with our differences is far more your problem to overcome than ours."

There still exists harmful myths and stigma against autistic people that awareness won't help to stop. Awareness is knowing that the autistic demographic has struggles, while acceptance seeks to understand the struggles, the root causes, and the systemic issues at hand.

Autism acceptance is meant to lead to positive change, inclusivity, and simultaneously lead to better mental health of autistic and disabled people, but in recent years it's become something else. What started as a movement for betterment has become a hollow, performative act for non-autistic people and companies to talk how much they care about autism, but as soon as the month ends, so does their act.

Autistic people are still the most unemployed of all the disabilities at a staggering 80% being unemployed or underemployed. Most autistic women will never get a diagnosis or be misdiagnosed, and autistic people are susceptible to abuse and trauma due to behaviour therapies training them to people please.

Neuroaffirming care challenges the traditional model of disability (the medical model), which aims to cure disability and reframes it as being a different but equally valuable divergence. Under neuroaffirming care, there is no normal or better, nor is there a bad or a good—only a different variation of how our brains work. Think about how many kinds of

To Table of Contents

plants there are, and how each one requires a different amount of sunlight, water or soil in order to thrive in its environment. It goes the same way for autistic and all other disabled people. We all require a different variation of needs, services and accommodations.

If you buy a plant, put it in the corner of your office with no sunlight and you only water it twice a week, it's not going to thrive. The environment it's in does not work for the plant. This doesn't mean the plant is defective, it means the environment needs changing. This is exactly how neuroaffirming care works. It's about changing the environment instead of changing the person and administering behaviour therapy. ■

RESOURCES

Acceptance vs Awareness

Neuroaffirming care values the strengths and differences of autistic people, those with ADHD or other profiles. Here's how . . .

Advocates for Spectrum Knowledge

Masking to Get a Job (And Choosing When Not To)

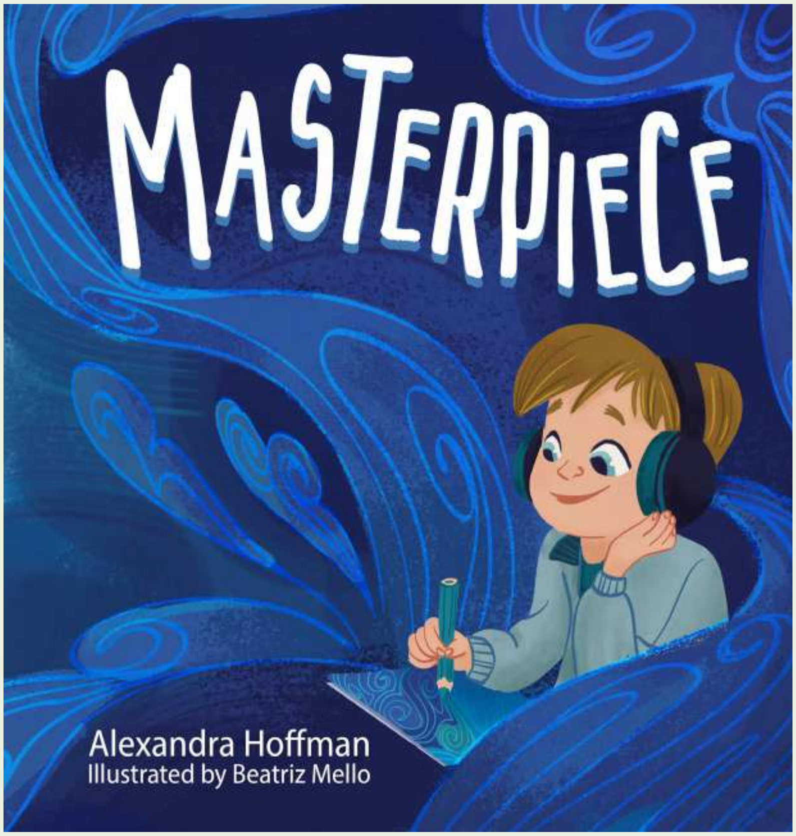
> **Autistic people are still the most unemployed of all the disabilities at a staggering 80% being unemployed or underemployed.** ~ ***Bart Vulliamy***

To Table of Contents

Recommended Book

Throughout my career as an educator, I have been fortunate to teach and work with incredible autistic and neurodiverse children.

Masterpiece was inspired by an autistic child who didn't see the world like his peers. His outside-the-box thinking was incredibly inspiring and taught me profound lessons about humanity. At the time when I wrote the book (a few years back), there was very little representation of autism or neurodiversity in kid's books. So, I wrote a book to increase representation. I wrote a book that focused on the strength of autism; a book that celebrates an autistic mind - that shows the world that an autistic child is a masterpiece.



An inclusive kids book celebrating a child on the autism spectrum

I have always been a writer, but a variety of experiences have led me to write books for kids. Not only am I an author, but I'm also an elementary teacher with over 14 years under my belt. During my time as a teacher, I have read thousands of picture books to kids. I realized that there was a big need for inclusive literature for children. This became a driving force behind the stories I now write.

The books I put out for kids are published with this mission in mind:

- inclusivity
- diversity, and
- increasing representation

~ Alexandra Hoffman, Canadian author.

> Inclusion benefits us all! The more we prioritize inclusion, the better the world will become.
> ~Alexandra Hoffman

Alexandra Hoffman and Wishing Star Publishing

Literature for All

Share details of other picture books you have published

The Self-Love Book is a simple, yet pointed book to inspire wellness in children. I think that many kids face a lot these days that can impact their self-esteem, confidence and mental health. This book exists to inspire self-love in children. My most recent release is *Big Dreams,* an inclusive story that challenges gender norms and celebrates girls who play football. Football is one of the last male-dominated sports out there. The inclusion of girls and women is growing, but there is still a long way to go. The representation of girls playing football in books and film is next to none. There are currently NO other picture books I can find that represent a girl playing football. It is my hope that *Big Dreams* helps to move the needle (even a little) in regards to representation in the media of girls playing the sport. What is most amazing about the book is that various women who are coaching professionally in the CFL have offered words of inspiration in the book, including Tanya Henderson, the first woman to coach full-time in CFL history.

Tell us about the origins of Wishing Star Publishing and what motivated you to embark on this journey

When I finished writing *Masterpiece,* I started to pitch the book to agents to have it published traditionally. Unfortunately, no one picked it up. I understand there are a variety of reasons an agent may pass on a book; however, I knew the strength of the story. So, I decided to self-publish the book and go the indie route. With this decision, I also decided to establish a publishing company to publish that book and future books. That's when Wishing Star Publishing was born!

What is at the core of Wishing Star Publishing and how has your mission evolved over time?

I started the house with one mission in mind: publish books that inspire kindness, inclusion, social awareness, understanding, empathy and discovery. This remains the mission to this day.

How does Wishing Star Publishing give back to the community?

When *The Self-Love Book* was released, I decided that I wanted part of the proceeds of the book to be donated to a local organization that provides mental health supports and services to youth. CASA Mental Health is a fabulous Alberta organization and I knew that I wanted to support them. 10% of the proceeds of every copy sold of *The Self-Love Book* are donated to this wonderful organization.

To Table of Contents

As an author, publisher, and advocate, are there any notable moments or achievements that stand out to you?

I have been fortunate to earn a few awards for my books, along with other literary accolades, including a Kirkus Star. Those are always neat to receive. But more than that, I think that the most significant moments have been connecting with people who have read my books, and who have appreciated the message of my stories. That means the world to me.

Tell us a bit about Masterpiece Day. What inspired its creation and how does it help people living with disabilities? Who benefits and how can others participate?

Masterpiece Day is inspired by the story, *Masterpiece.* After writing the story and receiving heart-warming messages from families in the autistic and neurodiverse community, I knew there was room for more work to be done to not only increase inclusion but to more so, celebrate neurodiverse and autistic thinkers. That's when Masterpiece Day was born. On Masterpiece Day, students in classrooms around the world are encouraged to celebrate neurodiverse and autistic thinkers. It is a special day for all kids (young and old) to embrace themselves exactly as they are, honour their differences as special, and create their very own masterpieces! Global Masterpiece Day happens every year on April 26th (or a day around that time that works best). Since its inception in 2023, thousands of students in Canada, USA, Australia and the UK have participated. If you'd like to participate, head to www.globalmasterpieceday.com and sign up! Anyone who signs up receives an educator guidebook with ideas for how you can celebrate the day.

Do you have any new projects in the works?

I am always writing and currently have another book in production that will be published under Wishing Star. That should be released in the spring of 2025. I also just signed with an agent and some of my manuscripts could potentially be published traditionally in the future. But more importantly, I had my second child this past April. Caring for my newborn is my main priority at the moment.

What message would you like to share with the world about the importance of inclusivity and the power of literature to unite people?

Inclusion benefits us all! The more we prioritize inclusion, the better the world will become. The beauty of humanity is that we are all vastly different and it's important to not only celebrate these differences, but to ensure we are actively including all members of society into all avenues. I believe that literature has incredible powers to unify people and I plan to continue to put out books with this mission in mind. ■

Check out Alexandra Hoffman's books on Amazon.

To Table of Contents

To Table of Contents

Photo Credit: Charlotte McBride

To Table of Contents

> I always like to remind everyone that they are not defined by what other people think they are. So I say, be who YOU know you are.
>
> ~ Madison Tevlin

Madison Tevlin

on breaking stereotypes and inspiring others

Madison is a 22 year old Canadian actor, TV Talk Show host, model, content creator and advocate for her community and the things she believes in.

What does a day in the life of Madison look like?

Lately, it seems like I've been experiencing new and exciting things every day! Since the *Assume That I Can* video went viral, I've been spending my days talking to different media outlets all around the world. It's been incredible! A regular day for me isn't so regular anymore! I try to stick to my routine if I can. I always get my 10,000 steps in. I love to spend time with my friends and family and I love to go out to parties and dinners! Since I started content creating, I also get to spend time making videos for social! Just like anyone else, I get tired when I work long days. I always use music to hype me up! I think my biggest challenge is when people assume I can't do things. I sometimes get treated like I can't do things or like I'm a little kid. It's one more reason why the *Assume That I Can* campaign was so important.

Congratulations on your successful career. How did your professional journey begin?

When I was around 12 years old, I started taking singing and acting lessons. I love music and I love singing and I wanted to practice and get better at something I love. My singing teacher recorded a video of me performing "All of Me" by John Legend and she decided to put it online. It went viral! After that,

Photo Credit: Mona Miri/Sustainable Photography

Photo Credit: Louise Baker Lee

Photo Credit: Credit Lauren

I got so many opportunities! It really opened doors up for me and everything just kept coming after that.

When I was born, the doctor told Mom and Dad that life would be hard for me. He told them that I may never talk, I may never walk, and I may never be able to hold a job. He imagined a very different life than the one I am living right now.

If that's something a doctor can say, then imagine . . .

How did you get involved with the ASSUME I CAN campaign? What does this kind of work mean to you?

The National Down Syndrome Society (NDSS) reached out and told me that CoorDown and the Small Agency were shooting a new campaign for World Down Syndrome Day and that I should send in a self-tape, so I did! When I found out I got it, I was so excited but had no idea what to expect. We shot in Barcelona and that was amazing. The crew and everyone on set were so encouraging and so nice. I had no idea that I was going to be the main star for the whole ad! The response has been overwhelming in the best way and seeing the impact it's made on so many people, has been incredible. We still have a lot of work to do for people with disabilities, but this was a big step in the right direction!

Every great individual has a great support system. Who has been there for you throughout your journey?

So many people! First off, my Mom,

To Table of Contents

Dad and sister. I wouldn't have come this far without them. My friends, my extended family, all of the people at NDSS, Best Buddies and Dear Mom. I've met so many amazing people along my journey and everyone has had a part in helping me! Most importantly, everyone in my family has always treated me just like everyone else.

What advice would you give to other aspiring actors and models living with down syndrome or other disabilities?

When some people look at me, all they see is Down syndrome. But I want people to know that I am so much more than that. Down syndrome is the least interesting thing about me.

I don't think that any person is just ONE thing. We are all made up of so many different things and that's what makes us uniquely special. I always like to remind everyone that they are not defined by what other people think they are. So I say, be who YOU know you are. Go after the things you love and don't let anyone tell you that you can't!

What is one word that best describes you?

Just one? There's so many! If I have to choose, I'd say: Passionate. I love the work I do, I love my family and friends. I love listening to music and travelling and everything I do, I put my whole heart into it.

> **When I was born, the doctor . . . imagined a very different life than the one I am living right now!**
>
> ~ Madison Tevlin

Madison on the Canadian Screen Awards Red Carpet
Photo Credit George Pimentel

> When some people look at me, all they see is Down syndrome. But I want people to know that I am so much more than that.
>
> ~ Madison Tevlin

To Table of Contents

@madisontevlin

@madisontevlin

madisontevlin.com

Photo Credit: Sam Jackson

To Table of Contents

Hearing the voices of Indigenous people with neurodevelopmental disabilities

By Kendra Thomson and Louis Busch

Indigenous Peoples with neurodevelopmental disabilities (NDDs) and mental health challenges are among the most marginalized groups in the country. NDDs include things like autism and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Research points to persistent health inequities, and mental health research has tended to overemphasize suicide and substance use in Indigenous populations.

Although their stories also tell of strengths, struggles and important community contributions, the voices of Indigenous Peoples with NDDs often go unheard.

A report that includes immediate and long-term calls to action was developed to shed light on the experiences of this under-represented group and create meaningful change in their lives.

"Forming the Circle: 2023 Gathering on Indigeneity, Neurodevelopmental Disabilities and Mental Health" was informed by a community event held last spring that brought together Indigenous community members, Knowledge Keepers and Elders, service providers, researchers and non-Indigenous allies from across Canada.

The report was authored by researchers from Brock University (Kendra Thomson) and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health - CAMH (Louis Busch) and reflects the findings from the event and recommendations for future actions. Attendees provided feedback on the report in focus groups after the event and before the report was released.

The gathering

The gathering explored how colonization, systemic discrimination and determinants of health such as food insecurity, housing and access to cultural safe services impact individuals, families and communities.

Gathering attendees concluded that the path forward should begin with establishing a national network on Indigeneity, neurodevelopmental disabilities and mental health to take action that will enhance the health and well-being of Indigenous Peoples with NDDs and mental health challenges.

To Table of Contents

At the 2023 Gathering on Indigeneity, Neurodevelopmental Disabilities and Mental Health at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto, people with lived experience, traditional Knowledge Keepers, clinicians and researchers from across Canada shared knowledge and expertise.

Some of the long-term recommendations within the report call for:

- The creation of programs to promote and preserve culture;
- Partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations, with training provided to enhance the cultural safety of programs;
- The development of culturally appropriate assessment tools and supportive programs for Indigenous Peoples with NDDs;
- Examination of the experience of Indigenous Peoples with NDDs within the criminal justice system, youth populations, child welfare system and those impacted by environmental issues; and
- Evaluation of the impact of incorporating traditional teachings and medicines within educational, social and health-related programs.

JJ's story

Among those in attendance was JJ Thunder Bear Man, an Anishinaabe man who travelled almost 2,000 kilometres from Dryden to Toronto to share his story at the gathering.

Born in the early 1980s in a community in northern Ontario, JJ was put into the foster-care system at age five as his parents faced the realities of their experiences at residential schools.

Adolescence came with its own challenges, with JJ getting involved in a gang and struggling with addiction. His journey toward healing and recovery began when he joined Community Living in Dryden at the age of 18. His support team helped him to connect to his culture and to community.

The revelation of his spirit helper, the bear, and his spirit name, Thunder Bear Man, offered a powerful lens into JJ's path to healing and connection to culture.

His heartfelt desire to reconnect with his family's language, lost over time, also added a poignant layer to his story. He recalls having to ask his sister what his mother was saying when they finally got to visit years later, as she didn't speak English, and he couldn't speak Ojibwe.

JJ's story, not unlike other young Indigenous Peoples living with NDDs and mental health challenges, highlights the dire need for preserving language and tradition.

Beautiful differences

JJ's story is one that contains experiences familiar to many Indigenous Peoples with neurodevelopmental differences and mental health challenges.

During the event, JJ issued a plea for kindness, understanding and companionship for neurodiverse individuals within Indigenous communities, reflecting on the impact acknowledgement and support can have.

The importance of a supportive "strength-based" approach was a theme that emerged again and again at the gathering, stressing the need to recognize individuals' unique contributions, accomplishments and abilities. Many participants used the term "neurodevelopmental difference" rather than disability or disorder.

This report is intended to mark only the start of a broader discussion, new and strengthened relationships and a collective commitment across the country to take action to improve the lives of Indigenous Peoples with beautiful differences.

We would like to acknowledge JJ Thunder Bear Man for bravely sharing his moving story with us, and his helper, Lesley Barreira of Surrey Place, for supporting him in doing so. ■

First published in The Conversation.
Read the original article here.

To Table of Contents

Deaf Insights

with Angela Lynn

A Universal Symbol of Love: The ILY Handshape

Expressing love transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries. The ILY (I Love You) handshape, used in American Sign Language (ASL), is a widely recognized symbol of affection and unity. While the words "I love you" can have different translations and may not always be understood universally, the ILY handshape remains a powerful and universal symbol of love.

Although it might not be understood in every sign language or culture, its message of warmth and goodwill resonates far and wide. The ILY handshape brings smiles and spreads love wherever it's seen, showcasing the beauty of expressing love in a way that transcends language barriers.

The ILY Handshape: What is the ILY Handshape?

The ILY handshape is a sweet and simple way to say "I Love You" in American Sign Language (ASL). To make this gesture, raise your thumb, index finger, and pinky while keeping your middle and ring fingers down. Originating from ASL, primarily used by the Deaf community in the United States and Canada, the ILY handshape combines the letters I, L, and Y to symbolize "I Love You." Its simplicity and positive message have made it a popular symbol of love and affection, used to express sentiments like good-bye, good-night, and apologies. Variations like "good-bye-ILY" and "good-night-ILY" are common among close friends and family. This gesture, with its deep roots in ASL, continues to be a cherished symbol within the Deaf community and beyond, spreading warmth and affection with just one hand.

The linguistic complexity of ASL and English

Both American Sign Language (ASL) and English are recognized as formal linguistic systems with complex structures. Contrary to outdated misconceptions that viewed ASL as "monkey language," it is, in fact, a complete and natural language with its own unique grammar and syntax. ASL, like English, is a fully developed linguistic system capable of

To Table of Contents

conveying complex ideas and emotions.

William Stokoe, often referred to as the Father of ASL, was a hearing professor at Gallaudet University who played a crucial role in establishing ASL as a legitimate language. He discovered that ASL possesses all the properties of a true linguistic system, similar to spoken languages. This recognition has been pivotal in elevating the status of ASL within the academic and Deaf communities.

ASL is expressed through movements of the hands and face; and serves as the primary language for many North Americans who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. It has a rich grammatical structure that, while different from English, is equally complex and capable of nuanced expression.

English, known for its intricate grammar and syntax, shares this linguistic richness with ASL. Both languages demonstrate that true language can be expressed in multiple modalities, whether spoken or signed, each with its own set of rules and expressive capabilities. This highlights the importance of recognizing and respecting the diversity of human language and communication.

Interesting facts and cultural importance

Using the ILY handshape with respect and understanding is important. For the Deaf community, it holds deep cultural and emotional value. Thoughtful use can promote understanding, while misuse can reduce its impact. There have been several instances when hearing people have misunderstood the ILY handshape and innocent people have been hurt and, in several cases, lost their lives. Such is the case of a 25-year old Deaf man in Chicago who was fatally shot by a teenager because he mistook the man's hand signals as a gang sign.

Positives in the deaf community

The ILY (I Love You) handshape is a powerful symbol within the Deaf community, representing unity and mutual support. This simple gesture effectively conveys positive emotions, fostering goodwill and affection. Globally recognized, the ILY handshape bridges communication gaps between Deaf and hearing people, raising awareness about Deaf culture and sign language. Its frequent use in media and public events highlights its importance as a symbol of Deaf Pride and cultural identity.

Positives in the hearing community

The ILY (I Love You) handshape offers several benefits for the hearing community. Its simplicity makes it easy for hearing individuals to learn and use, fostering inclusive communication. This gesture can function as a bridge to Deaf culture, serving as an entry point for hearing people to engage with and learn more about Deaf culture and American Sign Language (ASL). Moreover, the ILY handshape conveys a universally understood message of love and goodwill, transcending language barriers. By encouraging the use of non-verbal communication, it promotes inclusivity and positive interactions within diverse communities.

The confusion of similar handshapes

The ILY (I Love You) handshape is a cherished symbol of love and unity within the Deaf community. However, it can sometimes be confused by hearing people who might attribute different meanings to similar finger configurations.

- For example, the Hard Rock sign—made by extending the index and pinky fingers while the thumb holds down the middle and ring fingers—symbolizes rock and roll.

- Similarly, the Hang Loose sign, or "shaka," involves extending the thumb and pinky while curling the other fingers, originating from Hawaiian surf culture to convey a relaxed sentiment.

- Some gang signs can also resemble the ILY handshape when oriented differently, leading to potential misunderstandings.

Recognizing these similarities is crucial to ensure clear communication and avoid misinterpretations due to the varied cultural and contextual meanings of these gestures.

There is also a risk of TOKENISM, where hearing people might use the ILY gesture superficially without engaging deeply with Deaf culture and language, thereby undermining its intended significance.

Understanding the proper contexts of these handshapes helps maintain the ILY gesture's true meaning and fosters genuine connections across different communities.

Not a Universal Language, but a True Universal Symbol of ILY

The ILY (I Love You) handshape is like a little hug from American Sign Language (ASL) to the world! While it's not a universal language, it carries a heartwarming message of love and connection that many people recognize. This special gesture is deeply rooted in ASL and holds unique cultural and linguistic significance within the Deaf community. Even though it may not be understood across all sign languages and cultures, the ILY handshape beautifully symbolizes a universal feeling of affection and positivity. So, while it might not speak every language, many feel its warm embrace!

International true facts: the ILY Handshape

When I spoke to my friend Sariyah Ibrahim in Kuala Lumpur, she explained that the ILY handshape isn't a universal sign because each mother tongue lacks an exact translation that matches the ASL gesture. For example, in Malay, "Saya cinta padamu" and "Aku cinta padamu" convey "I Love You" but don't visually match the ILY handshape.

I also learned from my friend Nancy Goduto in Toronto about Brazil's unique version of the ILY handshape. Her friend, who used to live in Brazil, uses a "3" (frontward) handshape to say, "I Love You." Though not universal, both the ILY and the "3" handshapes uniquely convey the sentiment of love.

True and fun facts about the ILY Handshape:

Presidential Endorsement:

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter used the ILY handshape during his 1977 inauguration parade, becoming the first president to use sign language at a public event, which was a significant gesture of inclusion.

Marvel Superheroes:

In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, characters like Spider-Man use the ILY handshape in their poses, helping spread awareness of its meaning to a global audience.

Social Media Influencers:

Deaf influencers, including Nyle DiMarco and Angela Lynn, host of The Angela Lynn Show, use the ILY handshape in their posts to advocate for Deaf culture and sign language, increasing visibility and awareness.

Emoji Inclusion:

The ILY handshape was added as an emoji in 2017, allowing widespread use on platforms like WhatsApp, X , Instagram, and

To Table of Contents

Facebook, and increasing its global visibility and adoption.

Prominent use of the ILY Handshape

The ILY (I Love You) handshape is widely used by both Deaf and hearing people to show support and promote inclusion. It is often seen in various contexts:

Public Events:

The ILY handshape is frequently used at public events to demonstrate solidarity with the Deaf community. For instance, former U.S. President Barack Obama has used it to show his support for inclusivity.

Media and Entertainment:

TV hosts, such as Richard Dawson during his tenure on *Family Feud* from 1976 to 1985, incorporated the ILY handshape into their shows, making it a familiar and beloved gesture for many viewers.

Social Media:

Influencers and advocates use the ILY handshape in their posts to raise awareness about Deaf culture and encourage inclusive communication.

These uses highlight the ILY handshape's significance as a symbol of love and unity. Its widespread adoption helps raise awareness about Deaf culture and the importance of inclusive communication. The ILY handshape is appreciated by both Deaf and hearing communities for its simplicity and positive message. For Deaf people, it represents a cherished part of their cultural identity, while for hearing people, it can be a meaningful gesture of inclusion and goodwill. Recognizing and respecting the nuances of this handshape can enhance communication and foster greater understanding.

By appreciating the different perspectives and contexts of the ILY handshape, we can promote a more inclusive and respectful environment for everyone. Whether used by political leaders, athletes, artists, or everyday people from all walks of life, the ILY handshape remains a timeless symbol of love and connection. Embracing its significance helps bridge cultural divides, fostering unity and mutual respect across communities from all levels of society.

If you have any questions or ideas, please feel free to contact me at angelalynn@theangelalynnshow.com ■

Angela Lynn

Read more Deaf Insights by Angela Lynn

Breaking Barriers: Advocating for Inclusion and addressing audism

Inclusion and Awareness

Celebrating diversity & inclusion: Reflections on World Inclusion Day

Deaf and hard-of-hearing travellers

Deaf etiquette

To Table of Contents

Take a Lesson from Nathan:

Making meaningful connections in everyday life

By Christine E Staple Ebanks

When we think of role models, we often picture people who've achieved great things and are good at making wealth. We aspire to be successful business leaders, celebrities, innovators, artists, athletes, scientists, philanthropists, public figures, and even social media influencers who are well-known and celebrated for their accomplishments. But how often do we recognize the value of diversity in role models, including people with disabilities?

Take my son Nathan, for example. He's the most courteous and courageous person I know. From the moment he was conceived, he's been fighting for his right to live. Diagnosed with a congenital birth defect at five months gestation, he came into the world ready to battle. Immediately after birth, he was separated from me and underwent major corrective surgery at just three days old. He spent the first 28 days of his life in the hospital, with 20 of those days in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). Even after coming home, he faced numerous challenges, including failure to thrive and global developmental delays. By the time he was nine months old, he was diagnosed with cerebral palsy.

Today, Nathan is a twenty-year-old young man who exudes unparalleled joy in life despite the challenges he has faced and continues to face. He greets every day with boundless energy and excitement. He gifts everyone he passes with a big, warm smile that makes them feel like long-lost friends. Many people respond, blissfully

To Table of Contents

surprised, thinking they must have known him before.

I remember taking Nathan to a dentist's appointment once, where he saw another big kid in a wheelchair. He got so excited, waving and voicing his unique brand of "hello," which to those who know him sounds like "el-oo." The other young man's accompanying adults waved back and engaged Nathan, exciting him even more. Afterward, the young man's mom asked me how they knew each other. She was visibly shocked when I explained that they didn't know each other and that Nathan was simply that friendly and warm.

While I consider myself warm towards people, Nathan's brand of warmth takes engaging with others to a new level. For example, when I'm out and about, if I go on public transport and sit beside someone, my upbringing dictates that I say good morning or afternoon. If I perceive the person as approachable, I will likely say hello. But if I see them as unapproachable, shyness and insecurity kick in, and I will not do so.

Take, for example, a recent morning walk in my community. I saw a younger man walking in the opposite direction, doing his morning walk. I had never seen him before, and thus, my mind started arguing with my heart about whether to bid him good morning. It didn't help that he was staring right past me with what I perceived as an unapproachable countenance. So, I chickened out and walked right by him. But this didn't sit well with my heart. I kicked myself for not showing courtesy and letting my perception color my actions.

That was when I thought, "What would Nathan do?" In my mind's eyes, I see his response: Grinning from ear to ear, waving his hand, bouncing in excitement in his wheelchair, looking squarely at the person, and voicing his "el-oo." For Nathan, it doesn't matter how unapproachable the individual seems (to me); that doesn't stop him from showing love and bringing joy to the world. I thought about how much more pleasant the world would be if we took a page from Nathan's book and took the time to greet each other. This simple connection could help us see that we have more in common than what divides us. It's incredible how a small gesture like a smile or a greeting can bridge gaps, break down barriers, and remind us of our shared humanity. If we all embraced this mindset, we could foster community and belonging wherever we go.

Then, I got my second chance. I spotted the young man again, and as we walked by each other, I smiled, waved, and said, "Good morning." To my delight, he smiled and returned the greeting. This simple exchange lifted my spirits and reaffirmed the power of human connection. The 'feel good' feeling stayed with me all day, and I went about my day with a smile. The ripple effect was that other people smiled back at me as I passed by them. I realized then that I was spreading positivity to those around me.

This caused me to reflect on how Nathan's ability to connect with people, regardless of their disposition, teaches us valuable lessons about humanity and the simple acts that can make a profound difference in our daily lives. We live in a world where people often see the outward appearance first, which can make us defensive if we perceive someone looking at us differently. I love that Nathan doesn't judge people based on appearance or demeanor or even how they may look at him. He looks beyond the surface and sees the person within. This is a powerful reminder to look past our preconceived notions and judgments, recognizing that everyone we meet is fighting their battles and carrying their burdens. We open ourselves to understanding, compassion, and genuine connection by seeing the person, not the perception.

Here are three lessons we can all learn from Nathan:

Embrace everyone with a smile.

Nathan's smile is his superpower. It's his way of saying, "I see you, and you matter." A smile can break down barriers and create instant connections. It transcends ability, race, ethnicity, language, culture, and circumstance. When we smile at someone, we acknowledge their presence and affirm their worth. This simple gesture can turn a stranger into a friend and a moment of silence into a shared experience of joy.

See the person, not the perception.
Nathan doesn't judge people based on appearance, demeanor, or how they may look at him. He looks beyond the surface and sees the person within. This is a powerful reminder to look past our preconceived notions and judgments, recognizing that everyone we meet is fighting their battles and carrying their burdens. We open ourselves to understanding, compassion, and genuine connection by seeing the person, not the perception.

Spread joy and love unconditionally.
Nathan's interactions are characterized by unconditional joy and love. He doesn't wait for someone to smile at him first; he takes the initiative. This proactive approach to spreading positivity can have a ripple effect, transforming our mood and atmosphere. When we choose to spread joy and love unconditionally, we create a world where kindness and warmth become the norm rather than the exception.

We're into summer and the best travel months of the year, if you are like me, where you gauge others' countenance and demeanor before deciding to engage, draw your inspiration from Nathan's approach to life. His way of being offers hope and inspiration in a world that often feels divided and disconnected. Imagine if each of us approached every day and every person with genuine joy and enthusiasm. Picture taking the time to truly connect with others and see them for who they are beyond our initial perceptions. Just think about the kind of world we could help create by embracing these meaningful actions. Think of Nathan the next time you're hesitant to greet a stranger or reach out to someone. A warm smile and the ability to see beyond first impressions can spread joy and make the world a better place, benefiting all of us.

Do you have someone in your life who inspires you, especially someone with special needs? I'd love to hear from you. Until next time, take care! ■

> **While I consider myself warm towards people, Nathan's brand of warmth takes engaging with others to a new level.** ~ Christine

Christine E. Staple Ebanks is a contributing writer and the author of the award-winning book *Raising Nathan Against All Odds.* Her book shares her inspiring and transformative journey of raising a child with disabilities in two distinct worlds: Jamaica, where resources are scarce, and the United States, with its intricate systems of education and healthcare. Christine writes about the everyday practicalities of navigating life with a loved one with disabilities. She offers insight, hope, and encouragement, empowering readers to see the world through a new lens.

To Table of Contents

Read Accessible Journeys magazine HERE.

Sign up to have new issues delivered to your inbox.
CLICK HERE.

Ximuwu Lodge:
An accessible destination for your bucket list

"Five years ago, I spent three months in a wheelchair after a failed back surgery. This experience made me acutely aware of what is convenient and what isn't for those with mobility challenges. When the idea to build our own lodge arose during COVID-19, my wife, Elly and I agreed to create a completely wheelchair-accessible place. We envisioned a lodge where guests could fully enjoy the bush without the compromises of unsightly grab bars or hospital beds. Instead, we aimed for tasteful, natural aesthetics.

We wanted our guests to experience the thrill of an open game viewer, feeling the wind through their hair and the scents of the bush all around. Believing we could achieve our vision without an architect, we partnered with a builder who shared our mindset. From the outset, Elly took charge of the interior, while I focused on the exterior design. We choose a terrain that is even with no obstacles which made the design a lot easier." ~ Patrick Suverein

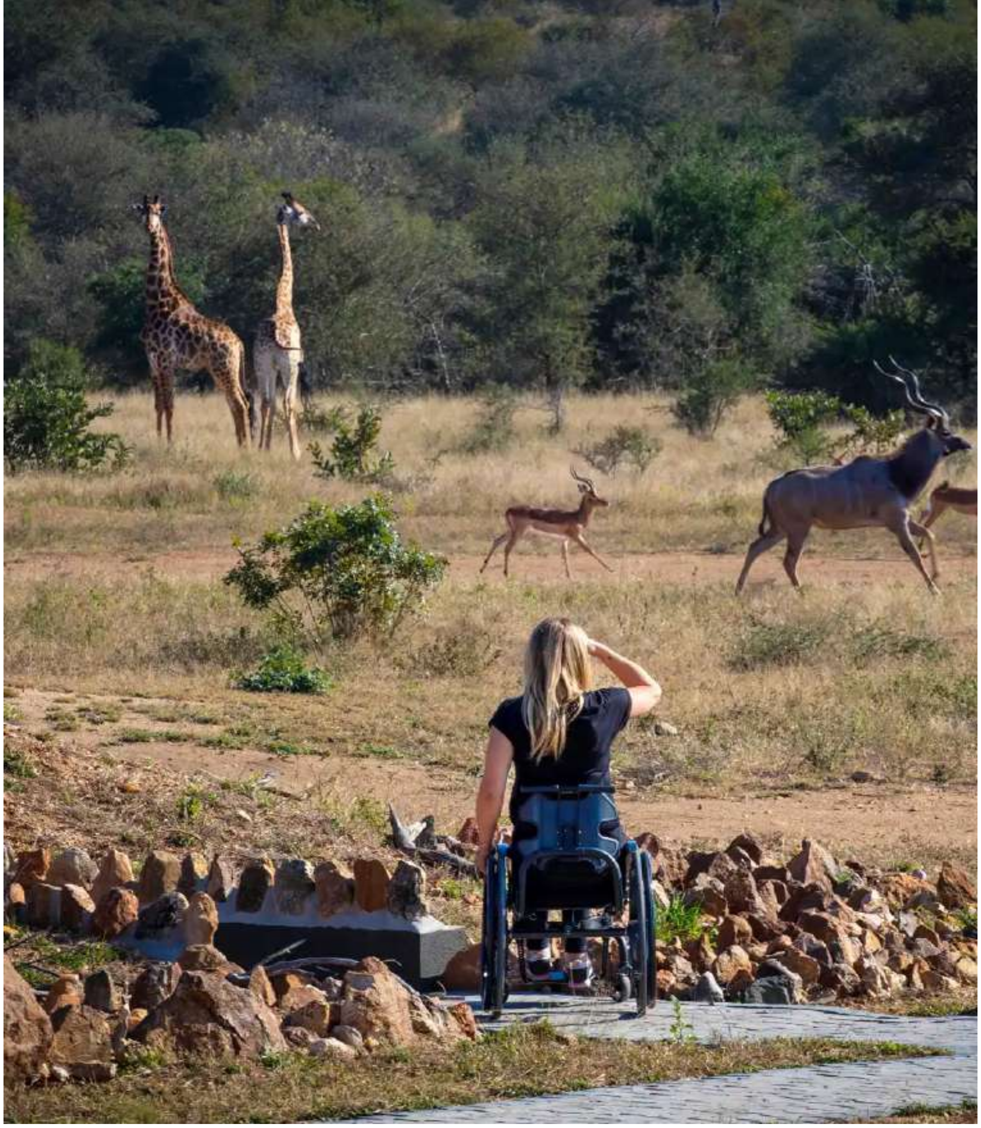
Wheelchair access

We paved all paths connecting the suites to the main building and designed the gutters for water disposal after heavy rainfall to be wheelchair-friendly. Wheelchair users can easily move from their rooms to the main building and back. In front of the main building, we built a large ramp for wheelchair access and parking for the Gameviewer. It features specially designed doors and unique sliding seats, allowing guests to slide from their wheelchair onto the seat, which can then be slid back into the Gameviewer. If needed, we can strap them in securely before closing the door for the game drive.

Ramps, no elevators

Everything is on one level, eliminating the need for elevators. We have ramps leading from our main deck to the campfire at the boma

To Table of Contents



and extending to one of our accessible photographic hides. While we provide assistance here as the angle is a bit steep, the ramps ensure easy access throughout the lodge.

Accessible rooms

All four rooms are built equally, with the two closest to the main building offering extra facilities. These include a paraplegic toilet in the bathroom and easily accessible showers with grab bars, both inside and outside. All doors inside the rooms are very wide sliding doors, over 100 cm. In one room, we have mounted grab bars in the toilet, while the other room is free of them, catering to different needs. We also provide a removable rack that fits over the toilet for those who prefer handle bars. The countertops are completely open underneath to allow wheelchairs to fit comfortably, and the taps have easy-to-use handles.

Parking

There is no special parking as we do not get any self driving guests here.

Accessible restrooms

There is an accessible toilet in the main building with an electric door opener, equipped with handrails and sufficient space for a wheelchair.

Accessible dining facilities

Our whole dining area is spacious and the tables provide easy access to drive under with a wheelchair.

Swimming pool

We imported a state of the art pool lift from Europe and we can heat the pool for our guests upon request.

Assistive devices on site

Here is a list of equipment for use at the lodge, free of charge:

- emergency buttons our guests can carry with them which works through the entire lodge's wifi
- two different shower chairs
- one shower wheelchair

To Table of Contents

- a bath lift
- two special adjustable beds higher/lower, up down, and vibration setting
- one electric wheelchair
- one manual wheelchair
- cooling vests
- seat heating equipment, and
- our accessible airport shuttle van that is also free to use should people want to do day trips.

Staff

Our staff is not professionally trained to deal with disabilities but they are trained to deal with our guests.

The Lodge and its set up is very small and emergency routes and procedures are in place. We have emergency buttons should people experience danger or discomfort and we are member of Africa SafeT, a medical response team that works 24/7.

Other special touches

- We have a custom-built access ramp that we can locate anywhere
- We provide easy access to and from the game vehicle
- As a special for every guest while staying at Ximuwu, we organize a bush dinner and a drink stop ■

Angela Lynn

www.theangelalynnshow.com

Be The Change You Want To See!

- Angela Lynn

Step into the Spotlight with The Angela Lynn Show! Share Your Voice, Passions, and Expertise - Join Us at www.theangelalynnshow.com

http:// Snippets from the www

Newsbreak ‘A sense of belonging’: Mattel adds two more dolls to disability-inclusive Barbie line

Mattel has introduced two new dolls to its inclusive Fashionistas line: a Black Barbie with Down syndrome, and a blind Barbie, advancing the company’s campaign to offer “endless possibilities for storytelling and fashion exploration” through the Barbie Fashionistas line. Read the full article.

1 in 8 pregnant people have a disability, but significant gaps exist in the provision of accessible care

People with disabilities account for 13 per cent of all pregnancies in Ontario, but a new report shows that this population was more likely to experience pregnancy complications such as emergency department visits, hospitalizations, and preterm birth. Read the full article.

Vision impaired young people call for change in narrative to avoid stereotypes, stigmas’

Advocates are calling for greater awareness of what it is like to live with vision impairments and for the avoidance of stereotyping. Read the full article.

This Berkeley arts organization is providing a guide to arts accessibility — with rules it hopes will soon be obsolete

Axis Dance Company has been a leader in working with disabled and non-disabled dancers for almost forty years. The Berkeley organization frequently engages in conversations about accessibility and aims to compile best practices and expertise in its Access Guide for Presenting and Touring the Performing Arts. Read the full article.

To Table of Contents

Google Maps rolls out alerts for issues impacting accessibility

Google Maps now has an accessibility alert feature to notify users of outages at public transit stations. The update is available on iOS, Android, and desktop devices and is currently rolling out in several cities. Read the full article.

The Best Adaptive Kitchen Tools To Improve Accessibility For All Cooks

Cooking at home can be difficult for people with limited mobility or vision, fatigue, or reduced limb strength. However, there are adaptive products that make cooking more accessible for everyone, reducing stress and simplifying tasks. Read the full article.

Paris 2024 Games: ensuring total accessibility for an ideal spectator experience

The philosophy of Paris 2024 is "Games wide open," with plans to accommodate nearly 280,000 people with disabilities. Various accessibility solutions will ensure everyone can fully enjoy the Olympic and Paralympic experience. Read the full article.

Robotic pods to enhance visitor accessibility at Vancouver International Airport through B.C.'s Integrated Marketplace

New self-driving robotic pods are being tested at Vancouver International Airport (YVR) as part of B.C.'s Integrated Marketplace, delivered by Innovate BC, to provide an additional option for passengers with diverse mobility and guidance needs. Read the full article.

Beyond accessibility: how the Jooay App helps families find inclusive play opportunities for children with disabilities and connects families to their communities

Children with disabilities are often excluded from play, putting them at risk for health and social difficulties. The Jooay app aims to change that and currently reaches over 4,000 users in all provinces and territories. Read the full article.

Accessibility, Integration and the World of Martial Arts

The diverse disabled community's inclusivity is gaining attention in Canadian news. Disability resources are expected to be included in the new Canadian federal budget dropping on April 16, a move supported by the community, according to the Angus Reid Institute. Read the full article.

To Table of Contents

FashionAbility

MAGAZINE

LAUNCHING SOON!

Inclusive Beauty
makeup tips

WARDROBE
Essentials

Fashion Industry
Voices

Adaptive
Fashion Editorials

Shopping
GUIDE

Adaptive
Clothing Hacks

Adaptive Fashion trends

Meet the Models | Designer Spotlight | AND MORE . . .