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Accessibility for All

November 2024

JEN BRICKER-BAUER
rewrote the rules of success

Q&A with KEELY CAT-WELLS
Founder & CEO of Making Space

BERNADINE FOX
Emerging from the shadows of trauma and breaking the silence

HOW VET TIX
supports Veterans mental health

INTRODUCING PORT PROTECT
the heartfelt invention that's changing lives

RACE FOR A REASON
with The Axis Project, Access Initiatives

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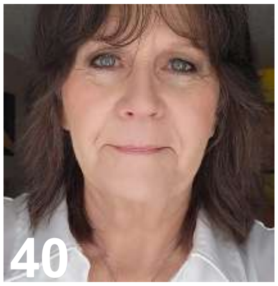

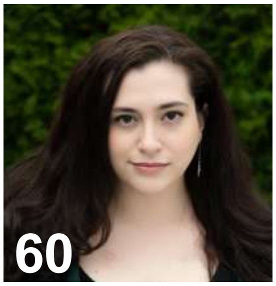

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Editor's Note

As the crisp air and vibrant colors of fall settle in, we're excited to bring you our November issue, perfect for cozy reading as the charm of this season unfolds.

On our cover is the remarkable Jen Bricker-Bauer, who shows us how to embrace our strengths and dream big, defying every limit life throws our way. Inside, you'll find stories, each one proof of the power and beauty of difference. We introduce Armando Perez, a man with a developmental disability who has achieved gainful employment with American Express, breaking down barriers and thriving in his role. His success not only inspires but highlights the richness that inclusive employment brings to our communities.

Bernadine Fox shares her harrowing yet redemptive journey through trauma and mental health advocacy after enduring abuse by a trusted therapist. Her fortitude, honed through profound vulnerability, has turned her pain into purpose, illuminating a path for others in similar darkness. We're also honored to spotlight Keely Cat-Wells and her visionary work with *Making Space*, an innovative, accessible talent acquisition and learning platform.

But that's not all—this issue is packed with inspiring stories and insights. From accessible lifestyle tips to Jamie Schultz's Port Protect, born from compassion and experience, each page offers ideas to motivate. Discover *The Girl Who Walked Differently,* a children's book about disability; explore Vet Tix, which supports veterans' mental health through meaningful connections; and dive into Illana Jacqueline's book on medical gaslighting, calling for a more compassionate healthcare system. *Race for a Reason,* a feature on athletes with disabilities, shows the power of sport as a platform for inclusion, awareness and positive change.

This issue is filled with bold lives, fierce advocacy and remarkable achievements. Through these stories, we hope you'll see that disabilities are not limitations but pathways to innovation, sparking a fresh vision of what can be achieved.

Happy Reading!

Debbie Austin
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Inclusive employment transforms lives

Meet Armando—his smile alone could light up the entire building. He's the kind of person whose presence feels like a warm embrace on a chilly day, radiating joy and positivity that ripple through the office. His presence reminds you that, sometimes, the simple act of showing up with a good attitude is enough to make the world spin just a little more smoothly.


Armando Perez

Armando is a person with a Intellectual and Developmental Disability (IDD), but his job at American Express Dining Department infuses purpose into his days which he approaches with passion and enthusiasm. You'll find him tidying up food stations, making sure the microwaves are spotless and overall, keeping the office clean. He is contributing and making a difference. Every task he performs is done with care, attention and a pride that comes from knowing he's an essential part of the larger whole.

"Hi!" He greets you with a grin so genuine, it feels like the sun breaking through the clouds. Ask him about his job and his response is always simple yet filled with meaning: "I like everything." And you know he means it. Armando's work is centered around the tasks he completes but it's also about the connections he builds. His coworkers are more than colleagues; they're his friends, his second family. He talks about Curtis, his supervisor, with affection. Curtis, to Armando, is a big brother—someone who looks out for him, helps him out and makes sure he's always supported. And Armando, in return, is always ready to help his teammates, his warmth and willingness to pitch in making him the kind of person every office needs.

Armando started his journey at American Express in 2019, and since then, he's grown in every possible way. His role might seem humble on the surface—cleaning, setting up food stations, maintaining a spotless environment, but there's nothing ordinary about the way he approaches his work. It's the care he puts into every detail that elevates his role and makes him indispensable. Every microwave he cleans, every food station he sets up, is done with the quiet dignity of someone who knows they're part of something bigger. And it's clear that Armando's contributions are deeply valued by his team.

But more than the tasks themselves, Armando's job is a place where his enthusiasm and zest for life are given room to flourish. He loves coming to work, so much, in fact, that although he's only required to work three days a week, he insists on showing up five days a week. That's Armando's dedication in a nutshell. He cherishes the sense of belonging, the sense of purpose, that comes with being part of a work community. He gets a paycheck but to him, his job means more than that. He enjoys the independence it gives him and the knowledge that his job allows him to contribute towards society. He is pleased to receive the respect of his colleagues and gives them his respect in return. Armando is gainfully employed and proud!

Then there's Rozanne, the Senior Employment Specialist at CP Unlimited, who plays a crucial role in making sure Armando and others like him can shine in their roles. If Armando is the heart of this story, Rozanne is the backbone. She's

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the one quietly working behind the scenes, ensuring that people like Armando have the support, advocacy and resources they need to thrive. Her job extends beyond employment—it's about empowerment. Rozanne helps bridge the gap between employers and individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, ensuring that both sides are equipped for success.

For her, every day is a balancing act of responsibilities—overseeing her caseload, supporting other employment specialists, and advocating for her clients in the workplace. She's been with CP Unlimited for over seven years, and in her role as Senior Employment Specialist, she brings a wealth of experience, empathy and commitment to the table. Once the individual has been matched with a job or a role that allows them to perform their tasks with a level of comfort; she is able to provide the supports that will enable the individual to build the type of skills that are necessary for the work environment. Rozanne invests in their long-term success and happiness. It's clear that for her, inclusive employment is about transforming lives not just filling positions.

Rozanne's work with Armando has been instrumental. She's the one making sure his workplace is a welcoming, inclusive environment. She's there to advocate on his behalf when needed—whether that's coordinating time off for a doctor's appointment or ensuring his paychecks are accurate. But her support doesn't stop at logistics. Rozanne helps Armando navigate the social and emotional aspects of work, too. She guides him in handling relationships with coworkers, encourages him to take his time and focus on quality over speed and teaches him the self-advocacy skills that will serve him for a lifetime. "He likes to move fast," she laughs, "but I always remind him that it's about quality, not speed."

A rare blend of patience, empathy and expertise are needed for this role and Rozanne's got it! She's passionate about helping her clients not just succeed at work but feel empowered to stand on their own. One of her main focus is teaching self-advocacy—equipping individuals like Armando with the skills to speak up for themselves, express their needs and set boundaries. "We host group conversations about self-advocacy," Rozanne explains, "so they can learn to take turns speaking, listening and responding. It's crucial they learn to express their needs and set boundaries."

Rozanne's dedication shines brightest in moments like watching Armando's success unfold. "It's amazing to see Armando come to work so happy, so proud to be contributing," she says with a smile. "He loves his job and knowing that I've helped him find that sense of purpose—that's what keeps me going."

Her work doesn't stop with Armando. Rozanne manages a caseload filled with individuals, each with their own unique abilities and challenges. Some need more hands-on guidance, while others, like Armando, benefit from a lighter touch. She provides everything from collaborating with Care Managers family advocates, and medical personnel during Life Plan meetings, preparing action plans with goals and safeguards to guide the individual in executing their tasks while garnering their safety. She also provides job coaching services to advocating for workplace accommodations, ensuring that her clients are treated with the respect and dignity they deserve. In many cases, Rozanne also works to educate employers, advocating for an inclusive environment and sometimes stepping in to resolve misunderstandings or address biases when they arise.

When she's not working directly with her clients, Rozanne is mentoring other employment specialists, helping to build a cohesive, supportive team at CP Unlimited. Her leadership extends beyond her own caseload, allowing her to impact the lives of countless individuals across the organization.

At CP Unlimited, there's a larger mission of inclusivity: employment transcends just earning a paycheck. It is a source of dignity, independence, and belonging! This is a powerful reminder that every person, regardless of ability, has something valuable to offer. CP Unlimited is helping individuals uncover that value and in doing so, are changing lives, one job placement at a time.

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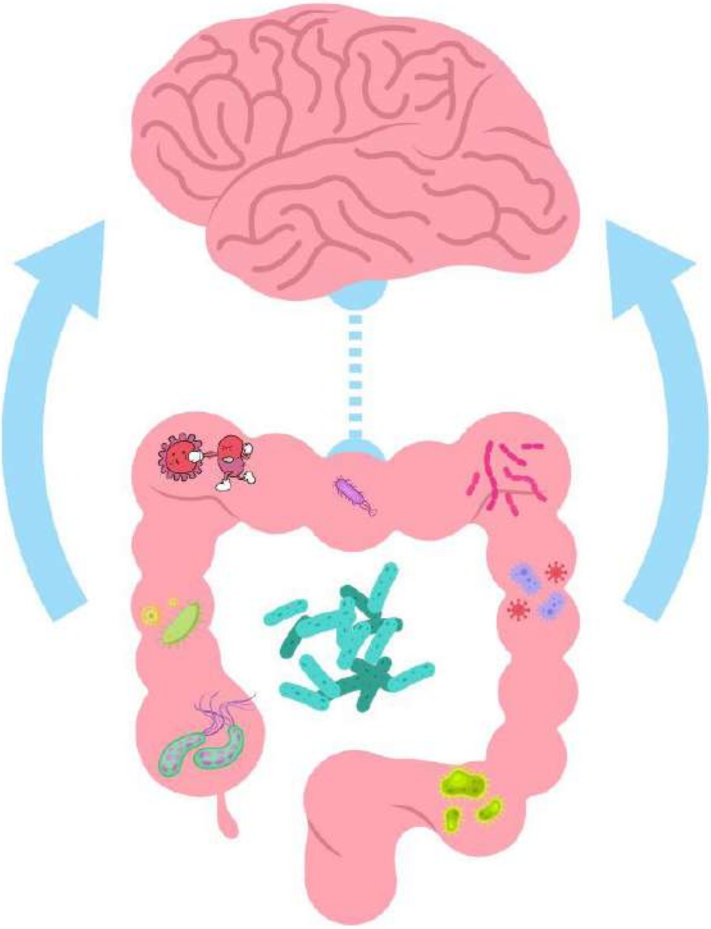

Microbes can influence the connection between the gut and the brain.

Gut microbe imbalances could predict a child’s risk for autism, ADHD and speech disorders years before symptoms appear

By Angelica P. Ahrens | Eric W. Triplett | Johnny Ludvigsson

Early screening for neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism is important to ensure children have the support they need to gain the essential skills for daily life. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that all children be screened for developmental delays, with additional screening for those who are preterm or have a low birth weight.

However, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force has called for more research into the effectiveness of current autism screening practices. Primarily based on milestone checklists and symptoms, autism diagnoses also currently rely on observations of behavior that often manifests after crucial developmental stages have passed.

Researchers and clinicians are working to develop simple, reliable tools that could identify early signs or risk factors of a condition before symptoms are obvious. While early screening can lead to the risk of overdiagnosis, understanding a child’s developmental needs can help guide families toward resources that address those needs sooner.

We are researchers who study the role the microbiome plays in a variety of conditions, such as mental illness, autoimmunity, obesity, preterm birth and others. In our recently published research on Swedish children, we found that microbes and the metabolites they produce in the guts of infants – both found in poop and cord blood – could help screen for a child’s risk of neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism. And these differences can be detected as early as birth or within the first year of life. These markers were evident, on average, over a decade before the children were diagnosed.

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The sooner a child's needs are identified, the sooner they can be met.

Microbes as biomarkers

Biomarkers are biological indicators – such as genes, proteins or metabolites in blood, stool or other types of samples – that signal the presence of a condition at a certain point in time. There are no known biomarkers for autism. Efforts to find biomarkers have been largely hindered by the fact that autism has many potential pathways that lead to it, and researchers tend to ignore how these causes may work together as a whole.

One potential biomarker for neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism are gut microbes. The connection between the gut and brain, or the gut-brain axis, is an area of considerable interest among scientists. Gut microbes play significant roles in health, including in immunity, neurotransmitter balance, digestive health and much more.

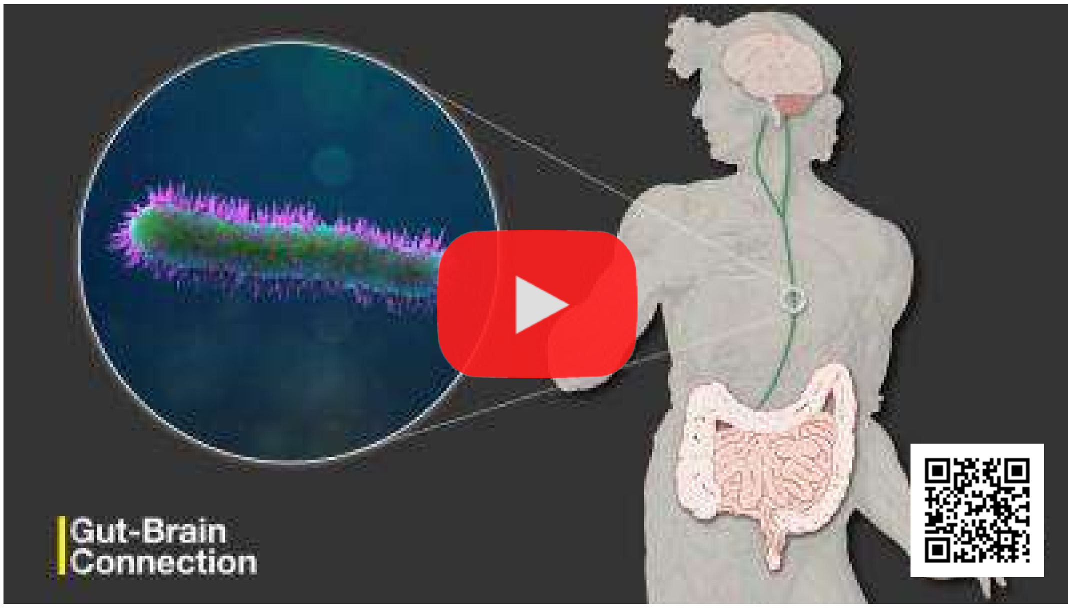
A lot of work has been done around mapping what a "typical" microbiome looks like based on age and organ system.

Researchers have shown that the microbiome is personalized enough that it can distinguish two people or two households even better than genetics, with differences in colonization starting very early in life.

The microbiome undergoes immense changes during childhood. It shapes and is shaped by the immune system and influenced by life changes and events. It is also influenced by factors like genetics, environment, lifestyle, infection and medications.

Gastrointestinal symptoms such as diarrhea, pain and constipation are common in children with autism and ADHD, with as many as 30% to 70% of autism patients also diagnosed with functional gastrointestinal disorders. Untreated GI issues can also lead to additional sleep and behavioral disorders among these children. A small pilot study found that children with autism showed improvements in gastrointestinal and autism-related symptoms after having healthy microbes transferred into their guts, with some benefits lasting up to two years.

Most studies on the microbiome and neurodevelopmental conditions, however, are restricted to people who are already diagnosed with ADHD, autism or other conditions, and these studies often show mixed



Your gut and your brain are intricately connected.

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results. These limitations raise an important question: Does the microbiome play a direct role in the development of autism and other neurodevelopmental conditions, or are changes in microbiome composition a consequence of the conditions themselves?

Some investigations have proposed that the microbiome has little or no association with future autism. However, these studies have a notable limitation: They don't examine microbial imbalances prior to diagnosis or symptom onset. Instead, these studies focus on children already diagnosed with autism, comparing them to their siblings and unrelated neurotypical children. In most cases, dietary data and samples are collected several years after diagnosis, meaning the study cannot test for whether microbial imbalances cause autism.

Microbes matter

We wondered whether studying the bacteria residing in small children before they are diagnosed or show symptoms of autism or other conditions could give us a clue into their neurodevelopment. So, we examined the cord blood and stool collected at approximately 1 year of age from participants of an ongoing study called All Babies in Southeast Sweden, which follows the health of approximately 17,000 children born between 1997 and 1999 and their parents. We have followed these children since birth, nearly 1,200 of whom were later diagnosed with a neurodevelopmental disorder by age 23.

We found significant differences in bacterial composition and metabolite levels that developed before symptoms of neurodevelopmental conditions – such as gastrointestinal upset, crankiness and sleep problems – as well as formal medical diagnoses. These differences spanned many conditions, including autism, ADHD and speech disorders.

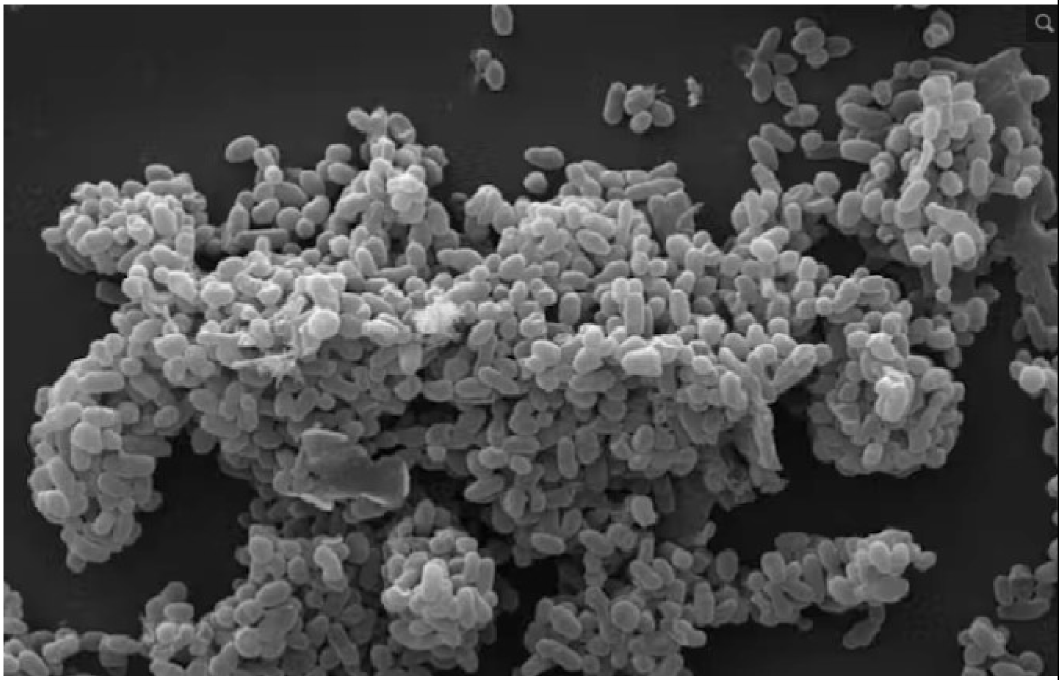
Next, we linked bacteria to neurotransmitters – chemical signals that help brain cells communicate – and vitamins such as riboflavin and vitamin B in the child's stool. Given previous research on children and adults already diagnosed with a neurodevelopmental disorder, we expected to find differences in the microbiome composition and health between those with and without neurodevelopmental conditions.

But we were surprised to discover just how early these differences emerge. We saw variability in the microbes and metabolites that affect immune and brain health, among others, in the stool collected from the diapers of children around 1 year of age and in umbilical cord blood collected at birth.

The imbalance in microbial composition – what microbiologists call dysbiosis – we observed suggests that incomplete recovery from repeated antibiotic use may greatly affect children during this vulnerable period. Similarly, we saw that repeated ear infections were linked to a twofold increased likelihood of developing autism.

Children who both repeatedly used antibiotics and had microbial imbalances were significantly more likely to develop autism. More specifically, children with an absence of *Coprococcus comes*, a bacterium linked to mental health and quality of life, and increased prevalence of *Citrobacter*, a bacterium known for antimicrobial resistance, along with repeated antibiotic use were two to four times more likely to develop a neurodevelopmental disorder.

Antibiotics are necessary for treating certain bacterial infections in children, and we emphasize that our findings do not suggest avoiding their use altogether.



The researchers identified a link between imbalance of Akkermansia muciniphila and later development of neurodevelopmental disorders. Zhang et al. 2019/Microbial Biotechnology, CC BY-SA

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Parents should use antibiotics if they are prescribed and deemed necessary by their pediatrician. Rather, our study suggests that repeated antibiotic use during early childhood may signal underlying immune dysfunction or disrupted brain development, which can be influenced by the gut microbiome. In any case, it is important to consider whether children could benefit from treatments to restore their gut microbes after taking antibiotics, an area we are actively studying.

Another microbial imbalance in children who later were diagnosed with neurodevelopmental disorders was a decrease in *Akkermansia muciniphila*, a bacterium that reinforces the lining of the gut and is linked to neurotransmitters important to neurological health.

Even after we accounted for factors that could influence gut microbe composition, such as how the baby was delivered and breastfeeding, the relationship between imbalanced bacteria and future diagnosis persisted. And these imbalances preceded diagnosis of autism, ADHD or intellectual disability by 13 to 14 years on average, refuting the assumption that gut microbe imbalances arise from diet.

We found that lipids and bile acids were depleted in the cord blood of newborns with future autism. These compounds provide nutrients for beneficial bacteria, help maintain immune balance and influence neurotransmitter systems and signaling pathways in the brain.

Microbiome screening at well-child visits

Microbiome screening is not a common practice in well-child visits. But our findings suggest that detecting imbalances in beneficial and harmful bacteria, especially during critical periods of early childhood development, can provide essential insights for clinicians and families.

There is a long way to go before such screening becomes a standard part of pediatric care. Researchers still need validated methods to analyze and interpret microbiome data in the clinic. It's also unclear how bacterial differences change across time in children around the world – not just which bacteria are present or absent, but also how they may be shaping immune responses and metabolism. But our findings reaffirm the growing body of evidence that the early gut microbiome plays a key role in shaping neurodevelopment. ■

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

KRISTEN DEANDRADE
Photo Credit:
Monica Lokitus

AUTHOR OF
Little Legs, Big Heart. One Girl's Journey of Acceptance, Perseverance, and Growth

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Kristen DeAndrade is championing inclusion

Kristen DeAndrade is the walking and dancing proof that perseverance can break barriers and rewrite stories, especially when it comes to dwarfism and disability. Born with achondroplasia, the most common form of dwarfism, Kristen's life is her canvas, and she's painting a whole new picture of what it means to live with differences.

As the author of Little Legs, Big Heart: One Girl's Journey of Acceptance, Perseverance, and Growth, she invites readers on a heartfelt adventure through the universal battles we all face—fear, insecurity, and embracing the parts of ourselves we usually hide. Then, in 2024, Kristen did some-thing huge. She founded The Little Legs Big Heart Foundation, a nonprofit that's all about creating a space of inclusion, community, and support for those with skeletal dysplasia. Through efforts like the Little Legs Lifeline Fund—offering financial aid for medical treatments—she's crafting real solutions for those navigating life with skeletal dysplasia, all while spreading love and light.

Now calling West Palm Beach, FL, home, Kristen thrives on creativity—whether she's twirling on the dance floor, whipping up magic in the kitchen, or basking by the sea. She's also deeply involved in her local community, working closely with The Paley Orthopedic & Spine Institute and The Quantum House, where she's a pillar of support for families facing medical challenges. Kristen's inspiring presence has also graced the TEDx stage and appeared in a kaleidoscope of media outlets like The Learning Channel, NY Post, Refinery29, Women's Health, The Female Lead and more. Kristen's mission is simple but powerful: to shine a light on adversity, celebrate the power of connection, and inspire others to embrace their scars as stories worth sharing.

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Q&A with Kristen DeAndrade

> “It’s not about pleasing others or fitting into a mold society expects from you. It’s about embracing who you are, flaws and all, and living authentically. ~ Kristen DeAndrade

Can you share a pivotal moment that shaped your journey as an advocate for people with dwarfism?

A pivotal moment in my journey as an advocate came in third grade, when our class read Thinking Big, a story about a little girl named Jamie who also had achondroplasia. My teachers saw this as an opportunity to empower me, encouraging me to share my own experiences with the class. I compared my life with Jamie’s, highlighting both the similarities and differences between us. That was the first time I realized the impact of using my voice to educate others, and it sparked my passion for advocacy and breaking down barriers, set by society, for people with dwarfism, disabilities and differences.

What challenges have you faced in raising awareness about dwarfism especially as limb-lengthening procedures are frowned upon in the dwarfism community. What keeps you motivated to continue the fight?

Advocacy is definitely not without its challenges, especially within the dwarfism community, where procedures like limb-lengthening are often frowned upon. I learned early on that I wasn't going to be everyone's cup of tea. But as the saying goes, if everyone agrees with you, you're probably not pushing the right buttons. Since day one, I've been going against the grain, and people always have something to say. I still remember being told at 12 years old, "Shame on you for trying to undo diversity." It was shocking then, and it's still happening now.

With the recent FDA approval of VOXZOGO and ongoing drug trials for achondroplasia, I realized how many people are still receiving inaccurate information. I couldn't sit back knowing that someone like me, or new parents, were being shut down when asking questions about medical options that could improve quality of life. That just isn't right. Life with dwarfism is hard enough—we're constantly navigating a world that wasn't built for us, and dealing with media-driven ignorance. The last place we should feel excluded from is our own community.

For me, this fight isn't personal anymore. I've already made my choices, I stand by them and I have won. It's about the future generations, and those in the community who feel like they don’t have a voice; kids, adults, parents and caretakers all wanting to know how to achieve the best quality of life possible when living with dwarfism. Me being loud and relentless, its for them. They keep me motivated. Because there is no “right” way to live – it looks different for everyone. And, everyone has a right to accurate information, community, etc.

You've empowered many people to embrace their differences. What advice would you give to someone who is

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struggling to accept or love themselves?

The biggest piece of advice I can offer is to remember that, at the end of the day, you are your own biggest motivator and confidant. When I finally stopped caring about everyone else's opinions and chose to live my life according to my plan, that's when true empowerment found me. It's not about pleasing others or fitting into a mold society expects from you. It's about embracing who you are, flaws and all, and living authentically. You have the power to define your own worth—no one else can do that for you.

Living with achondroplasia presents unique challenges. How has this influenced your approach to every-day life, travel, and relationships?

Living with achondroplasia has definitely shaped my approach to life, travel, and relationships in ways I never anticipated. Honestly, I wouldn't be where I am today if I hadn't faced adversity head-on, seeing the world through a lens that only 1 in 40,000 people truly know. Pain has always been my greatest teacher, and it's taught me that while we have control over a lot of things, there's also so much we don't control.

Over the past eight years, I've undergone 19 surgeries (soon to be 20!) because of the mistreatment and misdiagnosis of spinal stenosis, which is the leading cause of disability for those living with achondroplasia. That experience has made me really intentional about controlling what little I can—my attitude, the opportunities I go after, the relationships I nurture. I always say, "If not now, then when?" None of us know what tomorrow will bring, so I make the most of today, in every way possible. When presented with an opportunity to travel, meet new people and make connections – it is incredibly rare that my answer is "no." Those closest to me will tell you, I do not stop. Ever.

You've been a role model for so many. Can you share a story where your work or words made a significant impact on someone else's life?

Yesterday we had a 9 year old patient come into our clinic for a followup appointment after she had corrective surgery on both of her legs to get her out of pain. Even though she lives with a completely different form of skeletal dysplasia than me, I have been able to relate to her, her struggles and her triumphs on a level that most people cannot. After her appointment she gave me a card with a note that read, "We love you so, so, so much. You have done so much for me and I know how thankful I am and I know how much other people you have done things for are thankful for you too."

It's those little moments that really make me pause and reflect on how much more confident and less anxious little Kristen might have been when facing tough situations if she had the same sense of community I have now. Community is everything, and while I may have an impact on other people's lives, the truth is, the way they've touched my heart and shaped my life is just as profound. That's something I'm truly grateful for. ■

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Jamie with Port Protect

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A hug for your Port.

Introducing Port Protect— the heartfelt invention that's changing lives

Jamie Shultz's inspiration for her innovation starts where many others do: with frustration. But she did not tinker away in a garage, dreaming up the next shiny gadget. Her pain and discomfort, the kind that makes the simplest tasks seem monumental, was raw, real and human—stealing comfort from an already difficult life. An urgent solution was necessary.

Diagnosed with multiple autoimmune diseases, Jamie's world changed in ways that most of us can barely comprehend. The former attorney found herself navigating a new life defined by chronic illness, frequent treatments and something called a chest port—a device that allows direct access to a vein for delivering medications, especially for patients like Jamie who need infusions regularly. But even that, a seemingly practical solution, came with its own set of challenges. One big, painful challenge: the needle.

If you've ever had a chest port, you know that each access comes with a painful poke. The numbing cream, typically lidocaine, helps. But here's where the frustration sets in. The numbing process itself? A chaotic dance of lidocaine, plastic wrap and hope. Hope that the cream stays in place, hope that it actually numbs the right spot, hope that by the time you get to the infusion center, you won't be dealing with smudged cream and an uncovered port. But often, that hope is misplaced and patients like Jamie are left to endure a process that's messy and inefficient.

In the world of chronic illness, where every bit of energy matters, spending time wrestling with plastic wrap and runny cream isn't just annoying—it's exhausting. And so, Jamie thought, "There has to be a better way."

The birth of Port Protect: A simple solution with big impact

And there was! Port Protect, Jamie's brainchild is an elegantly simple product that solves a problem no one else seemed to be addressing. Instead of messing with plastic wrap, patients can now use this neat little invention that sticks in place over the chest port, holding the numbing cream exactly where it's needed. No mess, no stress, just a seamless process that makes life a little bit easier for people who need it most.

Think about it—a product that saves patients from unnecessary pain and frustration, that offers something as simple yet profound as comfort. For anyone living with chronic illness, comfort is a precious commodity and Jamie's invention is delivering it in spades.

The process is easy: peel off the backing, stick it over the port, open

Saran wrap misery

the lid, apply the cream, close the lid, and go about your day. Whether it's a seatbelt pressing against it during the drive to the infusion center or a bra strap brushing against it, Port Protect stays put. It keeps the numbing cream where it belongs and prevents that inevitable mess. Then, when it's time for the infusion, just peel it off. Simple. Practical. Game-changing.

A hug for your Port

But the true magic of Port Protect goes beyond its function. It's in the lives it's touching. Take, for instance, the little boy who uses Port Protect and lovingly refers to it as 'a hug for my port.' Imagine that—a device that makes a child feel safe, that turns what was once a source of anxiety into something comforting. For a kid fighting cancer using Port Protect, that kind of comfort is beyond valuable. It's life-changing. Children, with their innocent wisdom, often reveal truths that adults miss. That boy's simple statement—a hug for his port—speaks volumes. It captures the heart of Jamie's creation. This medical device is an emotional balm for patients who have to deal with more than most people will ever face in a lifetime. In the infusion centers, Jamie has seen it all—adults struggling, children crying as they're held down for port access and the all-too-familiar sight of plastic wrap sloppily covering ports, doing little to ease the pain. And that's why she created Port Protect—to offer a much-needed solution to ease suffering.

Beyond the product

Jamie didn't stop at just creating the product. Her mission is to help as many people as possible, particularly children. Port Protect, now patented, is making its way into hospitals, infusion centers and the lives of patients around the world. Doctors and nurses are noticing. Families are sharing their stories and slowly but surely, what started as the solution to personal frustration is becoming a movement for change.

But Jamie's vision goes beyond just selling a product. She's passionate about giving back. When a child needs Port Protect, Jamie often refunds the order. She believes no child should ever have to pay for something that can bring them comfort during such a difficult time. Port Protect is a business, but to Jamie, it's also about kindness and making a difference in people's lives when they need it most.

A future full of hope

Even as she battles with her own chronic illnesses, Jamie is determined to keep growing Port Protect. She dreams of working with nonprofit organizations, partnering with hospitals like St. Jude's and making sure that this small, simple solution reaches every patient who needs it—whether they can afford it or not.

Jamie's journey from attorney to inventor wasn't one she ever anticipated, but it's one that's making waves in the medical world. Port Protect proves that even in the face of adversity, one person can make a world of difference.

So, here's to Jamie and her brave, brilliant creation. Here's to the small inventions that have a massive impact and here's to the hugs—both literal and metaphorical—that we all need every once in a while, especially when life gets hard, especially when we're sick and especially when something as simple as a peel-and-stick product can make all the difference in the world.

Website: www.port-protect.com

Instagram: @portprotect

Here's an Instagram reel of a little girl, happy with her Port Protect. Her mom shared with Jamie that this is the first time her little girl did not have a lidocane-meltdown. ■

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"I decided to create my own product to resolve this issue. ~ Jamie Shultz

How to embrace disability with humour and flair

Living with a disability does not mean that you have to fit into society's idea of what's 'normal.' You're free to create your own normal, rhythm and doing things in a way that feels right for you. If that happens to involve some good-natured humor along the way—then all the better. So, let's dive into some creative ways to manage disabilities.

Write your own rules

Break stereotypes, and do things your way. You get to rewrite the rules. Want to wear a flashy outfit with pockets specifically designed for your assistive device? Do it. Got a quirky wheelchair attachment or a custom brace that's practically a work of art? Rock it. Who said you can't have a glow-in-the-dark prosthetic leg or a cane that doubles as a lightsaber? Your unique style can shatter expectations and turn heads—not because of the disability, but because of how fabulous you are.

Become a master of Zen navigation

Find peace in unpredictability. In the vast world of disabilities, unpredictability is part of the game. But instead of getting frustrated, turn this into a practice of Zen. It's like being on a surfboard, catching the waves of the day—high tide or low tide, you ride it with grace. Breathing techniques are your magical spells, able to calm you instantly when something doesn't go to plan. Ever tried an adaptive yoga class? Imagine yourself as a wise, meditating wizard whose power lies in patience and flexibility (physical and mental).

Laugh in the face of frustration

Master the art of self-deprecating humor. When life throws hurdles your way, laugh at them! There's something incredibly powerful about humor—especially when it's directed at your own obstacles. Wheelchair stuck on a weird curb? Announce dramatically, "Ah, the villain strikes again!" Got stared at because of your hearing aids? Wink and say, "I'm just from the future." You become the narrator of your life, and laughter becomes your sword, slashing through awkwardness and discomfort like a knight on a noble steed (or a power chair with really cool rims).

Invent a new language of accessibility

Communicate your needs with creativity. Not everyone speaks the language of accessibility—so teach them. Invent fun, quirky ways to communicate your needs to others. Make requests sound like you're ordering off a secret menu: "I'll have the smooth ramp, extra space, and hold the small talk, please." Write notes on cards in stylish fonts, or make apps do the talking for you if verbal communication isn't always an option. Language is your tool, and your personality shapes how you use it.

Turn boredom into a creative laboratory

Keep your mind engaged with passion projects. Got downtime due to medical appointments? Turn that into prime creative time. Learn a new skill, binge-watch documentaries, become an expert in a random topic—whatever fuels your curiosity. Use adaptive tools to dive into art, writing, gaming, or music. Who knows, maybe you'll invent something revolutionary, like a wheelchair that folds into a backpack (patent pending, right?).

Build your own legends

Share your journey. Your story is epic. Whether it's navigating daily life with flair or overcoming a huge challenge, it's worthy of being told. Share your experience, whether through social media, blogs or just over coffee with a friend. Let your journey inspire others—not as some cliché triumph, but as a real, raw, and fabulous adventure. You're the hero of this story, after all. ■

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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

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DONATE

Race for a reason

By Danniel Swatosh, *CMO of The Axis Project, Access Initiatives*

At The Axis Project, we empower people with disabilities and seniors to lead active lives through adaptive programming and innovative equipment at our Access Initiatives gym. Our inclusive community helps members overcome limitations, achieve fitness goals, and engage fully in life, fostering a space where fitness has no boundaries.

Sports have long been a powerful tool for promoting health, wellness, and inclusion for people with disabilities. Despite centuries of progress in disability inclusion, there's still a tremendous amount of work to ensure that sports and society are truly accessible to all. While sports for athletes with disabilities can be traced back to 1888, with the first Sports Club for the Deaf in Berlin, the fight for inclusion has continued to evolve.

The Paralympic movement owes much to Dr. Ludwig Guttman, who, in the 1940s, began organizing athletic competitions for veterans with spinal cord injuries in Great Britain. His belief in the transformative power of sports—that people with disabilities can achieve athletic excellence while nurturing their mental health and well-being—eventually led to the creation of the Paralympic Games. These events have been pivotal in raising awareness and advancing social inclusion, proving that athletes with disabilities are capable of extraordinary endurance and skill.

However, systemic change is often slow. The New York City Marathon, first organized by the New York Road Runners (NYRR) in 1970, took 30 years to introduce an official professional wheelchair division. This landmark decision in 2000, allowing wheelchair athletes to officially compete, followed decades of advocacy, lawsuits, and legal battles for inclusion, starting 1978 with Bob Hall, who sued for the right to compete in the race. Hall was the first wheelchair athlete to compete in the 1975 Boston Marathon, making history as the first major marathon to permit wheelchair athletes to participate.

While the Paralympics, the New York City Marathon, and adaptive sports have raised visibility and accelerated progress, much work remains to ensure that sports—and society—are truly inclusive for everyone.

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Racing for inclusion: A personal journey

For **George Gallego**, participating in the NYC Marathon has become much more than just a race. “It’s a powerful platform to raise awareness about inclusion, especially for athletes with disabilities.” Having completed the NYC Marathon many times, initially in a racing chair, he eventually shifted to doing it in his everyday wheelchair. “Why? Because I wanted to highlight the challenges and obstacles that people with disabilities face on a daily basis and use that platform to advocate for greater inclusion and accessibility in all aspects of life, not just in sports,” says Gallego.

Brian Corcoran, another participant, echoes the sentiment that the NYC Marathon fosters inclusivity for athletes of all abilities. "Thousands of people complete the NYC Marathon despite various limitations. This event is a community gathering to show support for each participant. Each person has their own story and their own issues they’ve dealt with. Whether you are an athlete with a disability or not, it shows a large number of people coming together for a common goal. The NYC Marathon demonstrates that even if you face a disability, you can still achieve greatness. At the finish line, everyone crosses, people support one another and prove that it is possible to achieve this goal, even with boundaries."

Yannick Benjamin reflected on the personal and transformative nature of the NYC Marathon. “I’ve always believed that the NYC Marathon is more than just a race; it’s a reflection of life’s circumstances. Every year, as I take on the course, I gain a deeper understanding of not only the route but also myself. For those five hours, it becomes a moment of meditation where I reflect on the life I’ve been given and express gratitude for the opportunity to keep pushing forward."


George Gallego


Brian Corcoran


Yannick Benjamin

Having completed the marathon more than ten times, Benjamin shared how challenging it remains. "At the 59th Street Bridge, there’s always a part of me that wants to give up, but I remind myself there’s gratification waiting on the other side. It’s a lesson that sticks with me in everything I do. One of my favorite mantras is: 'The magic we’re looking for is in the work we’re avoiding,' and that principle guides me both in my personal and professional life."

The fight for full inclusion

Athletes with disabilities have long encountered significant barriers in competitive sports, ranging from lack of accessibility to outright exclusion. Progress is being made, particularly with events like the NYC Marathon introducing categories for Athletes With A Disabilities, but full inclusion remains a work in progress, and exclusion is ultimately a civil rights issue.

"Personally, I have encountered challenges related to ensuring equal recognition and support for athletes with disabilities. In many sports,athletes with disabilities were either placed in separate categories or had limited access to the same playing field as their non-disabled counterparts. However, my experience competing with Team USA in triathlons from 2007 to 2012, where both athletes with and without disabilities compete equally and crossed the same finish line, was a powerful example of how inclusive sports can be. " says George Gallego.

Yannick Benjamin shared his thoughts on the broader significance of inclusion, stating, "These events show us that with the right support, accessibility measures, and mindset, inclusion is not only possible but enriching for everyone. They remind us that society thrives when we actively break down barriers and design environments where everyone, regardless of ability, can succeed. This same approach should be applied across all areas of life—from education and employment to entertainment and beyond. Inclusion isn't just an accommodation; it's a powerful way to elevate our collective potential."

Racing for a cause: The Axis Project

In the 1980s, the New York Road Runners (NYRR) introduced charity slots, allowing participants to run while raising funds for important causes, including disability advocacy. This transformed the marathon into more than just a race—it became a platform for social change, amplifying the message that sports and society should be inclusive for all. This year, George Gallego, Yannick Benjamin, Catriona Duncan, Brian Corcoran, and Phillip Palacios are racing for a reason in the 2024 TCS New York City Marathon on November 3rd: to raise funds and awareness for The Axis Project, a vital community for people with disabilities that fosters inclusion, empowerment, and the belief that everyone deserves the opportunity to push their limits.

The Axis Project was founded by George Gallego, who, like Ludwig Guttman, believes in the transformative power of physical fitness to enhance a person's independence and improve both their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

Yannick Benjamin emphasizes his mission of raising awareness and creating opportunities. While he aims to make the most of his resources for his loved ones, his commitment to inclusion remains strong: “George Gallego and The Axis Project have provided so much to me and the disability community, and it's my mission to ensure the door remains open for others to have the same opportunities I was given. We all need a purpose in life, and setting goals is the first step. A place like The Axis Project is vital in making that possible.”

Phillip Palacios shares how the marathon expanded his advocacy efforts. "I connected with Ines Vanboom, co-chair of Northwell Health's N-Able group, which promotes disability inclusion for patients and staff. After learning about The Axis Project, she invited me to share my message with hospital staff, and we raised money for the cause." Palacios also hosted a charity ride at Garden City Cyclebar, "We promoted it on social media, and my friend, Jamie Pangallo, led the ride. It was a great way to support The Axis Project and raise awareness."

Catriona Duncan adds, “Raising funds for The Axis Project has heightened my awareness of my own privilege and the inequities that still exist. To me, marathoning represents the triumph of the human spirit, where the community and fellowship of diverse individuals striving for the same goal enriches the experience for everyone. I’m proud to be an ally and represent an organization that advances equality.”

Phillip Palacios

Catriona Duncan

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George Gallego reflects on the impact of The Axis Project: "It means everything to me because it's not just an organization—it's a community born out of the need to create a space for people with disabilities to connect and grow together. I founded The Axis Project in 2014 to offer the empowerment I found in sports as a paraplegic athlete. It's about building confidence, fostering community, and breaking down barriers."

The power of community and advocacy

George responded thoughtfully when asked what event he would design to further push the boundaries of inclusion: "If I were to design a new event or aspect of the NYC Marathon to push the boundaries of inclusion further, I would create an 'Inclusive Relay Marathon' that highlights and celebrates athletes of all abilities and backgrounds working together. This event would emphasize teamwork, cooperation, and shared experiences, reinforcing the idea that inclusion in sports is not just about accommodation but true integration."

Together, Gallego, Benjamin, Corcoran, Duncan and Palacios exemplify how the marathon and organizations like The Axis Project can serve as platforms not just for athletic achievement, but for advocacy, awareness, and meaningful change in the ongoing fight for inclusion and accessibility in all areas of life.

As athletes and advocates race toward inclusivity, they inspire future generations to believe in their potential. Their journeys remind us that sports are about community, resilience, and the unwavering spirit to break down barriers. Each challenge faced and goal achieved demonstrates that when we support one another, we create a world where everyone has the opportunity to shine. In this shared pursuit of equality, we are not just spectators; we are all participants in a powerful movement toward a more inclusive society.

For George Gallego, participating in the NYC Marathon has become much more than just a race. "It's a powerful platform to raise awareness about inclusion, especially for athletes with disabilities."

Donate to George's fundraiser

Accessible Lifestyle Tips

These tips promote an active and accessible lifestyle while empowering individuals with disabilities to integrate adaptive sports into their routine.

Start small, build gradually

When transitioning into adaptive sports, begin with low-impact activities like swimming or handcycling. These allow for gentle movements and help build strength and confidence before advancing to more challenging sports like adaptive skiing or mountain biking.

Invest in the right adaptive gear

Ensure that you have the correct adaptive equipment tailored to your specific needs. Research options and talk to professionals or peers who have used certain devices to understand what works best for your abilities and goals. Many organizations, including can provide resources and funding for adaptive gear.

Utilize local resources and communities

Connect with adaptive sports programs in your area. Many places offer accessible fitness and adventure opportunities such as wheelchair basketball leagues, adaptive yoga, or outdoor clubs that cater to different mobility needs. Being part of a community can help you stay motivated and expand your support network.

Accessibility-friendly fitness plans

Create a fitness plan tailored to your abilities, whether that involves upper-body strength training or balance exercises that complement your chosen sport. Working with a physical therapist or adaptive sports trainer can help you design a program that enhances both fitness and functionality.

Plan outdoor adventures carefully

Research accessible trails, parks and recreational facilities before planning outdoor activities. Many public spaces now have trails and areas designed for adaptive sports, with smooth terrain and accessibility features such as ramps or railings.

Prioritize mental health

Adaptive sports can be a powerful tool for emotional well-being. Regular physical activity, especially in nature, has proven mental health benefits. Make it a point to practice mindfulness or relaxation techniques, and remember that progress in adaptive sports comes at your own pace.

Hydration and nutrition

Like any athlete, adaptive athletes should prioritize hydration and nutrition. Maintaining a balanced diet that supports your energy levels is crucial, especially when engaging in physically demanding adaptive sports.

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New devices could change the way we measure blood pressure

By Matías A. Loewy

Embedded in a cell phone or in accessories such as rings, bracelets or watches, the novel tools aim to make it easier to manage hypertension. But they must still pass several tests before hitting the clinic.

If just by looking at our watch or cell phone we can know, in real time, our heart rate, the number of steps we take, the calories we burn and the hours of sleep we got the night before, why can't we also know our blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the force that the blood exerts against the arterial walls. It is defined by two values: systolic, or maximum pressure, which is the thrust of the blood pumped through the body by the contraction of the heart; and diastolic, or minimum pressure, which occurs when the heart relaxes. The American Heart Association considers blood pressure to be normal when it does not exceed pressures of 120 mmHg systolic and 80 mmHg diastolic — which we see presented as 120/80 mmHg.

When values are below 90/60 mmHg, the person is exhibiting hypotension. In athletes, this may be asymptomatic and without risk. But in other circumstances, it causes symptoms such as dizziness, nausea, pallor, blurred vision, confusion and fainting, because the brain isn't receiving enough blood. Very low blood pressure can be life-threatening because of shock, a state where organs suffer damage due to lack of blood flow. This is more common in the elderly and can be precipitated by sudden changes in position, dehydration, infections, bleeding, certain medications and diseases such as Parkinson's and diabetes.

Above 140/90 mmHg, the person is said to have high blood pressure. Researchers have calculated that in people ages 40 to 69, for every 20 mmHg increase in systolic blood pressure and 10 mmHg increase in diastolic blood pressure, the risk of coronary heart disease and stroke doubles. Worldwide, some 1.28 billion people between the ages of 30 and 78 have hypertension, most of them living in low- and middle-income countries, and more than half of them are not treated, according to a 2021 study published in The Lancet. This is despite the fact that hypertension can be easily detected by measuring blood pressure — at home or in a health facility — and can often be effectively treated with low-cost medications.

Today, a new generation of blood pressure devices aims to make it easier to diagnose — and control — hypertension. Unlike traditional devices, they do without the arm cuff and offer blood pressure values on demand, should the user press their finger on a sensor, or continuously, if measured by a watch, ring or bracelet.

"Regular blood pressure monitoring in all adults would improve hypertension awareness. For those who have hypertension, it may improve their control," says Ramakrishna Mukkamala, a bioelectrical engineer at the University of Pittsburgh, who coauthored a look at blood pressure

The Samsung Health Monitor, a photoplethysmographic technology that allows blood pressure measurement through the Samsung Galaxy Watch, was approved as a medical device by the South Korean Ministry of Food and Drug Safety in April 2020.

CREDIT: MARCO VERCH / FLICKR

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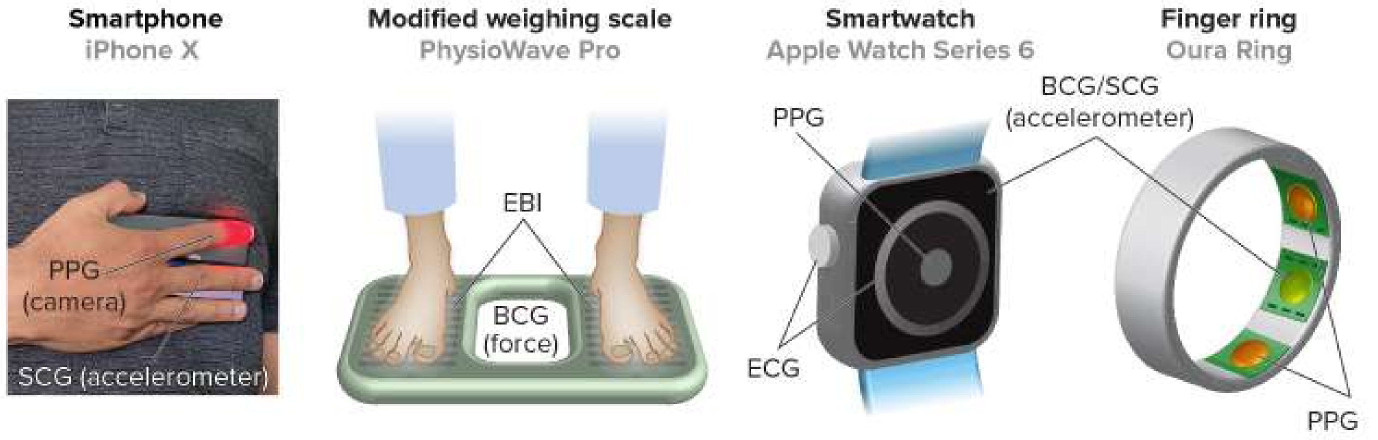
Blood pressure sensors in everyday items



SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM R. MUKKAMALA *ET AL* / *AR BIOMEDICAL ENGINEERING* 2022

KNOWABLE MAGAZINE

New blood pressure measurement technologies are based on methods that use miniaturized sensors inside everyday items to "pick up" indirect signals, from which the blood pressure value is estimated. These include photoplethysmography (PPG), electrocardiography (ECG), ballistocardiography (BCG), seismocardiography (ECG) and electrical bioimpedance (EBI).

measurement using cuff-free devices in the 2022 Annual Review of Biomedical Engineering. "For example, if patients continue to see that their blood pressure is high, they may finally become compliant in taking their medications."

Leaving the cuff behind

The measurement of blood pressure goes back almost three centuries (see sidebar), leading to the procedure that we all know and that our family doctor performs when we have checkups: A cuff goes around our arm and is inflated, then deflated, in a controlled manner, to determine our maximum and minimum blood pressure.

But the use of inflatable-cuff blood pressure monitors has some drawbacks. For one thing, unless people have home monitors — and a survey of adults ages 50 to 80 in the United States found that only 55 percent of hypertension patients surveyed owned one — they must go to a pharmacy, doctor's office or health center to learn what their blood pressure is.

Another barrier is that repeated inflation and deflation of the cuff is disruptive and can cause difficulties when, for example, a patient is in the hospital and needs frequent blood pressure monitoring. And a third drawback is that since cuffs don't allow continuous measurement of blood pressure, they're only providing a measurement at a specific moment.

The new cuffless devices promise to reveal a more complete picture of physiologic changes in blood pressure that cannot be picked up with spot measurements, and instead give a truer blood pressure profile, says Alberto P. Avolio, a biomedical engineer at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, a coauthor of the article in the *Annual Review of Biomedical Engineering.*

The various cuffless measuring devices are based on methods that, instead of directly determining blood pressure, use sensors to capture various indirect signals. These signals are processed by different algorithms or sets of mathematical procedures to obtain the blood pressure values. It is like inferring fever by measuring an increase in palpitations and sweating instead of using a thermometer, or divining the result of a soccer match from outside the stadium by listening to the screams of the spectators.

One of the detection methods uses optical sensors. The technique is based on the principle of photoplethysmography or PPG: It consists of illuminating a segment of the skin and analyzing the difference between the light that is emitted by the instrument and how much is detected by a photoreceptor. This difference depends on the diameter of the artery, the blood volume and the concentration of hemoglobin (the oxygen-carrying protein) at the measurement site. During the systolic phase, when the heart pumps blood, the difference between emitted and reflected light will be at its maximum, because there will be more blood flow and

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thus more hemoglobin and other light-absorbing proteins; during the diastolic or relaxation phase, it will be at its minimum. The algorithm relates these measurements to blood pressure.

This is the same method used by the Apple Watch and other devices to measure heart rate, and by the pulse oximeters that became popular during the Covid-19 pandemic to record the level of saturation, or oxygenation, of the blood. It is also the method used by the Swiss company Aktiia's wristband, available only in Europe for now. This device automatically records blood pressure values over 24 hours, even when someone is sleeping, averaging the results every two hours and displaying the results through an app on a smartphone.

There are also electrical sensors, which are modified versions of the electrocardiogram that measures the electrical activity of the heart; mechanical sensors, used in ballistocardiography and seismocardiography, which attach to the surface of the skin to capture small variations in pressure; and bioimpedance sensors, similar to the instruments that analyze body composition by measuring the body's resistance to the flow of electrical current.

Calibrated and uncalibrated

There are two broad categories into which these new cuffless blood pressure measurement devices can be grouped: those that require calibration — periodic comparison of the recordings with those obtained with a manual or digital sphygmomanometer — and those that do not.

Both types of devices capture signals from the body noninvasively, from the fingertip, ear or wrist, to name the most common sites. The estimated blood pressure is then displayed or transmitted to nearby devices, such as smartphones or tablets.

One of the measurement methods that require calibration is the pulse transit time, or PTT, which represents the time in milliseconds that the pulse takes to travel between two arterial points: The stiffer an artery is, the higher the arterial pressure will be (because the pulse travels faster) and the lower the PTT will be. This method is the one with the most scientific evidence to date.

Another is based on analysis of the shape and amplitude of the pulse wave, which is the pressure wave depicting the propagation of the blood pumped by the heart through the entire arterial tree, and whose characteristics depend in part on the rigidity of the artery walls. In people with hypertension, the amplitude of the pulse wave is greater because the heart must exert more force to overcome the resistance of the arteries.

More recently, other devices have emerged that use images captured with a camera — like selfies — to detect changes in the PTT or subtle modifications in the color of the face, imperceptible to the eye, that accompany each heartbeat, thus reconstructing the flow of blood under the skin and the shape of the pulse waves.

Uncalibrated cuffless blood pressure measurement methods aim to eliminate the need to cross-check the device's measurements with those captured by a classic sphygmomanometer or digital sphygmomanometer. They use only machine learning and artificial intelligence to establish, from the signals captured by the sensors, the person's blood pressure values.

Just as a jet of water can exert more or less force on the walls of a hose if one changes the height or opening of a faucet, the analysis of oscillations or fluctuations in blood volume can be measured when a ring is worn and the arm is lowered, because the finger's internal blood pressure increases as it receives more blood flow due to gravity. Alternatively, a ring can also obtain measurements of the oscillations in blood volume by periodically applying gentle pressure on the finger. A sensor in a smartphone can also do this analysis when it is pressed following the instructions given by the device.

Other methods for uncalibrated devices use ultrasound waves to visualize variables such as artery dimensions and blood flow velocity, which are also related to blood pressure.

The road to clinical application

The development of these devices for measuring blood pressure without a blood pressure cuff is progressing rapidly, but that doesn't mean they are ready for use in the medical world. "Unfortunately, the pace of evidence, regulation and validation testing has lagged behind the pace of innovation and direct consumer marketing," write Stephen P. Juraschek, physician investigator of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, and colleagues in

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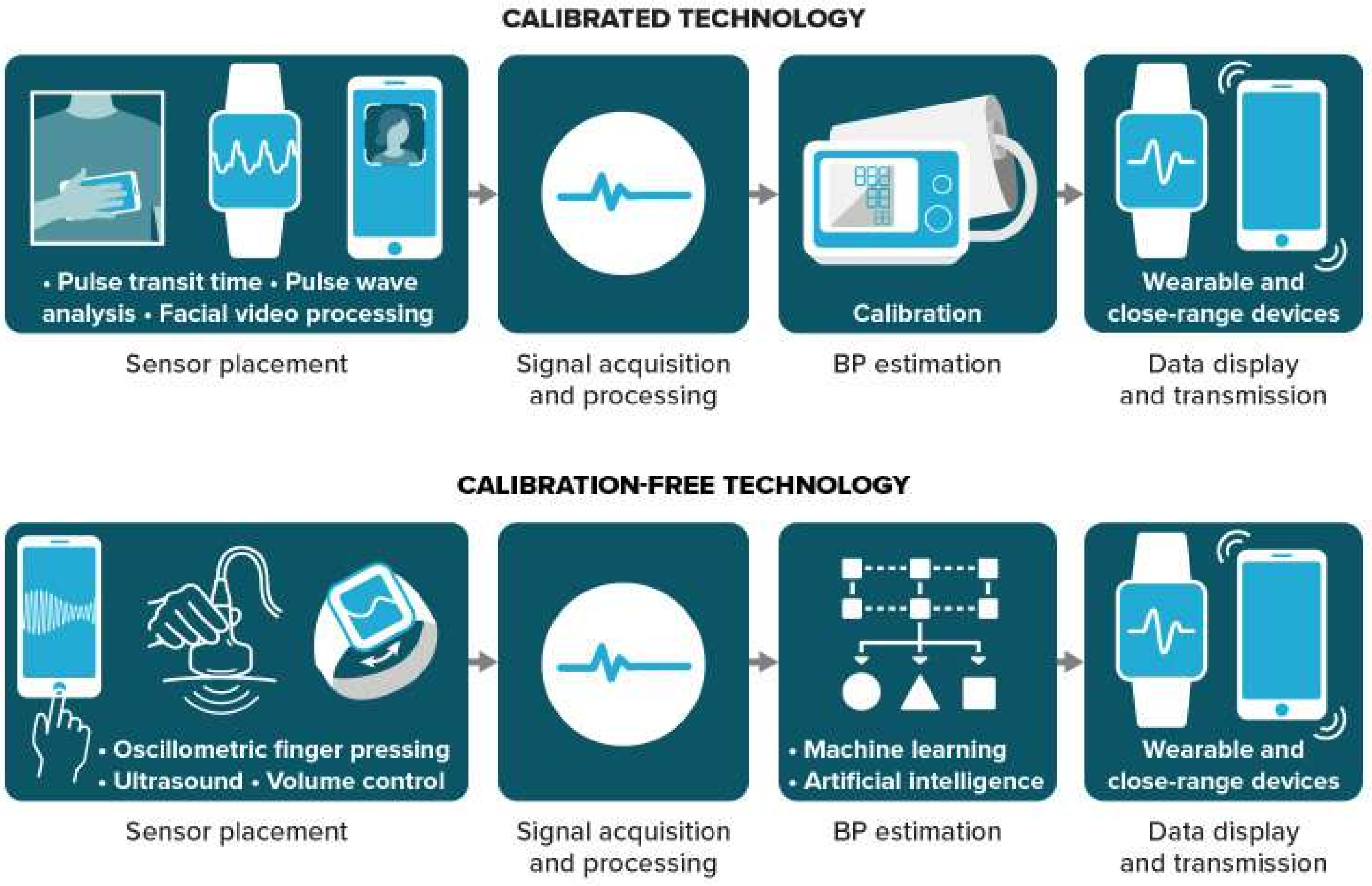
Calibrated and uncalibrated: Two major groups of cuffless devices



SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM D. GUNASEKARAN & J.M. TURNER / *CURRENT CARDIOLOGY REPORTS* 2023 KNOWABLE MAGAZINE

Cuffless blood pressure measurement devices are grouped into those that require calibration — periodic cross-checking of readings against those obtained with a manual or digital cuffed sphygmomanometer — and those that do not. Both types of devices capture signals from the body noninvasively and then display the results on devices such as watches, smartphones or tablets.

a review published in September in *Current Cardiology Reports.*

There is currently no standardized validation protocol to assess the accuracy of cuffless devices, as required by the US Food and Drug Administration, although several of these developments have already received marketing authorization in the US. The European Society of Hypertension, for its part, has issued guidelines that emphasize that, for now, cuffless devices should not be used to make diagnostic and treatment decisions. “The potential clinical value of cuffless blood pressure measurement is enormous. However, the caveats are equally large,” says James Sharman, an expert in blood pressure measurement methods and an exercise physiologist at the University of Tasmania in Australia.

Before wider use can be advocated, it will be necessary to test whether cuffless devices make accurate recordings and whether they have clinical superiority to the current standard of blood pressure measurement, as well as to determine how they would integrate into current medical practice, Sharman adds. In addition, since each device has its own algorithm and method for estimating pressure, each should demonstrate its performance separately.

This work is already underway.

According to the ClinicalTrials.gov database, as of October 2023 more than 10 studies to evaluate cuffless blood pressure measuring devices were recruiting participants.

Several studies have already been completed. In Switzerland, a team evaluated the use of such devices for ambulatory blood pressure monitoring (ABPM), which measures blood pressure continuously over 24 hours and is a better predictor of cardiovascular health than non-continuous measurements.

The study involved 67 patients who performed traditional ABPM, using a cuff device, but also had a watch-like optical sensor placed on their upper arm or wrist opposite the arm wearing the cuff. Although there were differences between the measurements of the two devices, the difference was small and within the limits recommended by the international standard. "These results are encouraging and suggest that 24-hour cuff-free ABPM may soon become a clinical possibility," the authors noted in their conclusions. In addition, study participants said that the optical sensor was more comfortable and overwhelmingly preferred it to its cuffed alternative.

In South Korea, meanwhile, a recent observational study followed 760 people who used a Samsung Galaxy watch approved in that country for one month to monitor blood pressure. The device requires calibration once a month, but interestingly, 75 percent of the participants did not rely on a single monthly calibration, as suggested, but performed more frequent calibrations. This allowed the researchers to determine that poor calibration can affect the device's measurements and that calibration processes need to be standardized to ensure the device's proper functioning.

But encouragingly, the study also found that "smartwatch-based blood pressure measurement is feasible for out-of-office blood pressure monitoring in the real world" — as, on average, participants measured their blood pressure 1.5 times per day.

Will the day come when we can accurately know our blood pressure just by looking at our smartwatch or cell phone? "Maybe in time, but not in the near future," Avolio says. More studies are needed, he says, before cuffless devices can provide reliable quantitative information to track physiological changes with acceptable accuracy.

Article translated by Debbie Ponchner

The author, Matías A. Loewy, is a science journalist based in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He studied pharmacy at the University of Buenos Aires, and the last time he checked, his blood pressure was normal.

This article was originally published in Knowable. Read the original article here.

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A lighthearted look at dating with a disability

Navigating the dating world can be like exploring an unfamiliar jungle—you're equipped with tools—confidence, curiosity and perhaps a dash of awkwardness in your back pocket. But when you're dating with a disability, it can feel like someone added a little extra spice to that adventure—let's say, a surprise hippo in your path, or a monkey tossing an unexpected coconut of assumptions your way. You laugh, you dodge, you communicate. And, just like everyone else, you'll eventually meet up with somone. You'll be wishing, looking, hoping for a spark to be ignited with that special person who sees you for *you.*

But first things first: let's talk about the profile pic dilemma. You've got two main options—be upfront and showcase the wheelchair, service dog, or whatever gear makes you *you*, or let your personality do the talking in your pics and bring up the disability in conversation. It's a toss-up! If you show it upfront, it might help weed out the "oh, never mind" folks, but some people prefer to lead with their smile, their hobbies and their wild love of sci-fi marathons. Either way, there's no one-size-fits-all, just go with the vibe you're most comfortable with. And remember, the right person? They're swiping because of *who* you are, not just the profile pic details.

Next, we've got the messaging minefield, where "So, like, can you...?" questions can either be handled with grace or a hearty eye-roll. A new match might mean sharing a bit about yourself and your disability. Do you jump right in, or let them bring it up? For a lot of people, humor is the go-to. Try something like, "Fun fact: my wheelchair is faster than most people's cars in a busy city!" Or a lighthearted, "If we date, I'll finally have someone to back me up in wheelchair jousting." Humor often helps break the ice, nudging potential partners past stereotypes and inviting them into your world.

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The real fun comes when you get to the first date. Here's the secret to a successful date: don't focus on the disability. Focus on *you*. Whether you're into anime, bowling, or skydiving (yes, that's a thing with adaptive equipment!), go where your interests take you.

Choose accessible locations, plan around any extra needs and head out confidently! You want the person sitting across from you to fall for the way you light up talking about your favorite band, or how your eyes widen when you share a travel story. Accessibility is a practical thing, but connection? That's pure magic.

The best part of dating with a disability is finding someone who gets it, who understands that you're not a "special project" or a mystery to be solved, but just you—flaws, quirks, charm and all. They'll get that you might need to adapt a little, and hey, they might surprise you by showing they're more flexible and open than you expected. Love, after all, is about discovering new ways to see the world, often through someone else's eyes.

Hit the pause button on hesitation and fear. Go on that adventure—texts, laughs, deep talks, casual talks and all the unique ways you bring your world into the jungle of dating. Ultimately, without being told, someone will embrace the whole *you.* Yes, that dating adventure may sometimes involve dodging a hippo or two, but how will you find that spark if you don't join in on the jungle expedition?

Go, give it a try! ■

> It's not about overcoming limitations—it's about celebrating each other's strengths! Finding that special someone means embracing what makes each person unique, finding joy in the journey, and building a love that thrives on adaptability, understanding, and acceptance beyond abilities.

Recommended dating app: Dateability.

How Vet Tix supports Veterans' mental health

Give something to those who gave

Vet Tix (Veteran Tickets Foundation) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing free event tickets to United States military veterans and their families. Since its founding in 2008, Vet Tix has distributed tickets toa concerts, sporting events and theater performances, helping veterans create lasting memories while overcoming social isolation and financial barriers. The program builds community connections and honors veterans by offering opportunities for entertainment, reconnection with loved ones and fellow service members.

The idea for Vet Tix came about in 2008 when founder Michael Focareto attended the Super Bowl and noticed that many seats were empty, while members of the color guard, invited to present the colors, had no seats to watch the game. This observation sparked the organization’s creation and since then, the program has grown steadily and made significant strides, particularly after 2013, when it gained partnerships with major sports teams such as the Arizona Diamondbacks. Today, Vet Tix has distributed nearly 25 million tickets to over two million members across the United States, including currently serving military members, veterans from all eras and Gold Star families. Impressively, the organization maintains administrative costs under 1%, ensuring nearly all funds go directly to supporting veterans.

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Expanded to serve First Responders with 1st Tix

In 2018, Vet Tix expanded its mission by launching 1st Tix, a program dedicated to first responders such as firefighters, law enforcement officers, EMTs, nurses and 911 dispatchers. Operating under the same principles as Vet Tix, 1st Tix provides free tickets to concerts, sports games and family-friendly events. This initiative acknowledges the mental health challenges that first responders face due to their high-stress jobs and aims to offer them a well-deserved break through entertainment and relaxation.

Promoting accessibility

Vet Tix and 1st Tix both play a vital role in promoting accessibility, particularly for those facing mental health challenges such as PTSD. Many veterans and first responders struggle with social isolation, anxiety and depression, which can impact their quality of life. These programs break down financial and logistical barriers, ensuring that all veterans and first responders can access enriching experiences, supporting mental health recovery and social reintegration.

With partnerships from organizations like Live Nation and nearly every major professional sports team in the United States, Vet Tix and 1st Tix have continued to expand their reach. These organizations now distribute millions of tickets to events ranging from local festivals to high-profile games like the Super Bowl.

As demand for tickets rises, Vet Tix and 1st Tix are committed to growing their membership and securing more ticket donations to ensure that deserving individuals can enjoy these valuable experiences.

Wheel-accessible Tickets

Wheelchair-accessible seating is not guaranteed, but if you meet the eligibility requirements under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), you may request ADA-compliant seating.

How You Can Help

Support for Vet Tix and 1st Tix can come through donating tickets or financial contributions to cover transaction fees. For veterans and first responders, joining is free. As the programs continue to grow, more smiles, memories and moments of joy will be created for those who have served their country and communities. ■

Donated by:
Seattle Kraken - NHL Hockey and
Veteran Tickets Foundation Purchases

"Thank you for giving this disabled Navy veteran tickets to Seattle Kraken. It brought joy to be able to enjoy an evening of watching my favorite NHL team! It helps me to get out and lift my spirits as I struggle with depression."

Elaine, U.S. Navy (Veteran)
2006 - 2007

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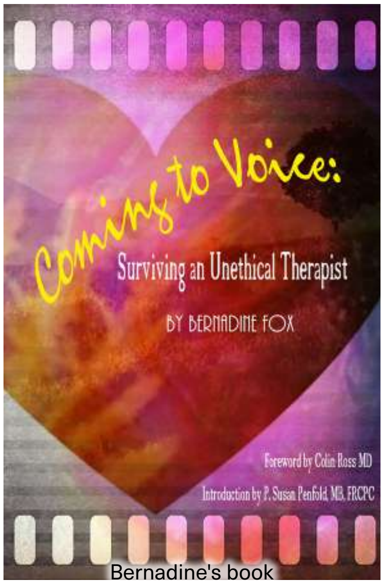
Emerging from the shadows of trauma and breaking the silence

Bernadine Fox was the 2022 recipient of the Courage to Come Back Award in the Mental Health category.


Bernadine Fox



Bernadine's book

Trangression Series

Early life and childhood

Bernadine Fox's life began in the vast openness of Alberta's bald flat prairie, a place known for its wild beauty and expansive skies, but for her, it was a place of darkness. Her childhood was marked by unspeakable abuse and exploitation at the hands of people she was supposed to trust. For years, she carried those early traumas in silence, turning inward, finding strength where most would find only despair. But trauma, especially from childhood, doesn't vanish with age. It shapes how you see the world, how you navigate relationships and how you protect yourself. For Bernadine, it created a quiet strength and a will to survive.

Trusting the therapist

But even with that strength, surviving childhood trauma is not the same as healing from it. Healing, she learned, would take years of reckoning with layers of pain, anger and trust issues that had been forged in those early years. As she began to explore mental health therapy to confront her trauma, she put her faith in the hands of a therapist, who seemed to represent everything Bernadine needed: a guide, a safe place, an ally.

Her therapist was reputable with a sterling reputation, highly respected in the mental health community as a leader in addressing trauma and abuse. She provided hope. She had impressive credentials and accolades. To Bernadine, it felt as if she had found a healer who understood her pain, someone who could help her navigate the shadows and finally emerge. But her therapist, Pam, was hiding something beneath her polished exterior—a dark agenda that would exploit Bernadine's trust and vulnerability.

Betrayal and manipulation

Over time, Pam shifted from a trusted therapist to a figure of manipulation and abuse. Under the guise of 'therapy,' her behavior became more invasive, leading to inappropriate and ultimately exploitative actions. What Bernadine thought was a therapeutic relationship was slowly dismantled by Pam's harmful motives, which were aimed at satisfying her own needs rather than helping her client heal. The lines blurred until Bernadine felt trapped, manipulated into believing she was complicit in the very actions that were causing her harm. Pam's tactics were classic, grooming Bernadine under the guise of a unique, 'special' relationship. The emotional hold Pam wielded over her was overwhelming, making it nearly impossible for Bernadine to see the situation for what it was—abuse.

Breaking free and starting to heal

Eventually, Bernadine found a way to break free, but the damage had been done. Her trust was shattered and the trauma of being abused by someone she trusted and who was meant to heal left her questioning everything she thought she knew about recovery, mental health and trust. She lost her therapist, but she also lost a piece of herself in that process, left to rebuild yet again, this time with fewer illusions about the safeguards in place to protect vulnerable clients.

Writing Coming to Voice: Surviving an Abusive Therapist

Writing became a tool of survival and clarity. Her book, *Coming to Voice: Surviving an Abusive Therapist* seeks to make sense of the betrayals she had endured and witnessed. Writing in the third person, she found a voice that was safe enough to explore the depth of her pain. In crafting her story, Bernadine was able to examine her experiences and begin to process them. This memoir was a bold claim of ownership over her own life story and an invitation for others to break their silence.

Advocating for survivors of therapy abuse

With her book, Bernadine wanted to provide hope and insight for others who had suffered in similar ways. Her book serves as a guide, shedding light on what therapy abuse looks like, how it manifests and the damage it causes. She wanted readers to understand the power dynamics in therapeutic relationships, especially the potential dangers when that trust is misused. And for those who might feel isolated by their experiences, her book is a reminder that they are not alone and that their stories matter.

With the book completed, Bernadine's journey took on a new dimension. She began advocating for survivors of therapy abuse, channeling her pain and insights into helping others navigate their own recoveries. Collaborating with *Therapy Exploitation Link Line (TELL)*, Bernadine works tirelessly to support others who have experienced similar betrayals. Through this organization, her advocacy is about speaking out and creating a community for survivors, offering them resources, connection and a platform to share their stories without fear or shame.

Addressing misconceptions and PTSD education

Bernadine's work with TELL also allows her to address one of the greatest misunderstandings around trauma and PTSD: the idea that it's linear or easily overcome. For most, PTSD is not a 'fixable' issue but a complex, chronic reality that resurfaces throughout life. With years of managing her own PTSD, Bernadine knows firsthand that the healing process is anything but straightforward. Society's misconceptions often worsen the experience, suggesting that trauma is a weakness or something that should be easily resolved with the right therapy. Bernadine challenges these ideas, reminding others that healing is nonlinear and deeply personal, with setbacks and successes that shape, rather than define, the survivor.

Creating awareness and empowering survivors

Advocacy, for her, is both a mission and a way to continue her own recovery. She believes that society must do more to recognize the dangers of therapy abuse, educate therapists on the consequences of boundary violations, and, perhaps most importantly, empower survivors to trust themselves. As a culture, she argues, we need to move away from pathologizing survival responses like PTSD and dissociative identities, instead seeing them as coping mechanisms—extraordinary tools the brain uses to protect itself in the face of overwhelming trauma.

Supporting healing in others

Bernadine's advocacy is grounded in the idea that trauma survivors should have ownership over their stories. She wants to see a world where mental health is approached with empathy, education and understanding and where survivors of abuse within the therapy system are not blamed, ignored or further traumatized. Her work with TELL allows her to offer direct support to other survivors, while her book and public speaking spread awareness on a larger scale. Ultimately, Bernadine has found her voice, and through her work, she helps others find theirs, proving that no matter how painful the journey, healing and hope are always within reach.

Mental Health

Bernadine's mental health journey is a complex story of survival, strength and transformation.

Living with the profound effects of complex PTSD from childhood until the early 90's, she has grappled with dissociative identities—a coping mechanism that became a defining part of her life. Her relationship with silence has been fraught. Once a suffocating reminder of past abuse, silence still haunts her, making noise an essential comfort to ward off nightmares. Anger, however, has become a powerful ally. Often seen as a burden, she has instead harnessed it as a driving force, fueling her advocacy and propelling her forward in the face of injustice. With unique healing practices and creative expression, Bernadine has rewritten her story, emerging as a formidable advocate for mental health awareness and justice for survivors of therapy abuse.

Mental health challenges, like any form of disability, deserve understanding, dignity and respect. Just as we accommodate physical disabilities, we must recognize that mental health conditions require support and empathy, not stigma. Whether visible or invisible, disabilities shape lives in ways that call for societal change, acceptance and genuine inclusivity. True progress comes when we embrace mental health struggles as part of the human experience and commit to creating a world where everyone, regardless of their challenges, can find support, safety, and a sense of belonging.

Bernadine is an author, artist, radio host, mental health advocate and public speaker who lives in Vancouver, Canada.

Tune in to listen to Bernadine on her syndicated radio program on mental health: ReThreading Madness

Visit her websites: Coming to Voice and bernadinefox.ca

Visit Therapy Exploitation Link Line (TELL) website for more information about this support network.

Bernadine at Vancouver Coop Radio

Nominations are open for the 2025 Courage To Come Back Awards

VANCOUVER, CANADA: *The Courage To Come Back Awards* are once again accepting nominations for 2025, honoring individuals who have triumphed over significant life challenges and now make a remarkable impact within their communities. Presented by Wheaton Precious Metals, these awards recognize unsung heroes whose resilience and selflessness often go unnoticed yet deeply enrich the lives around them.

These awards do more than celebrate the remarkable stories of these individuals—they also amplify their voices and the causes they champion, providing encouragement and recognition that inspire continued positive change. The recipients of these awards become role models, igniting hope and motivation in others facing similar obstacles.

In 2022, Bernadine Fox was honored with a Courage To Come Back Award. Reflecting on how the award transformed her life, Bernadine shared:

"I was feeling quite down about my work. It felt I had been working so hard for so long and the gains being achieved seemed so insignificant. The Courage To Come Back Award changed that. I felt seen and heard. The issue I fight to change was recognized. And it was that internal change that happened that was the most significant for me. Because of that I have fought harder, spoken louder, and have made many inroads into that change. Behind all of that is remembering that Coast Mental Health Foundation believed in what I do and said so."

The 2025 award recipients will be celebrated before an audience of over 1,400 attendees at the Vancouver Convention Centre on May 7, 2025. In addition to this recognition, honorees will receive media coverage, with their inspiring stories shared across social media platforms.

The Courage To Come Back Awards will be presented in four categories:

- Addiction
- Medical
- Mental Health
- Youth

Lorne R. Segal, O.B.C., D.Litt. (Hon.), LLD. (Hon.), Chair of the Courage To Come Back Awards and President of Kingswood Properties Ltd., speaks to the profound impact of this annual tradition:

"As chair of the Courage To Come Back Awards, reading through the hundreds of nominations we receive every year is a moment I look forward to with great anticipation. All of them are true journeys of bravery, resilience and strength in the face of adversity. I am grateful to those that have the courage to share their stories with us."

To nominate an inspiring individual or learn more about the process, visit: www.couragetocomeback.ca/Nominations

DEADLINE FOR NOMINATIONS
Friday, January 17, 2025.

THE COURAGE TO COME BACK AWARDS WILL BE HELD ON
May 7, 2025.

NOMINATIONS OPEN
Wednesday, October 15, 2024

NOMINATIONS CLOSE
Friday, Jan 17, 2025

NEW FOR 2025
The Medical and Physical Rehabilitation categories have now been merged into one 'Medical' category to provide better clarity.

YOUTH NOMINEES are between the ages of 19 and 25

Jacob Schaff

Photo credit: Michael Sheen, Sheen Parasport

Jacob Sharff: US Open’s Wheelchair Championships use wheelchair mechanic

By Howard Blas

While the top junior wheelchair singles and doubles tennis players in the world battle it out on court in the US Open Junior Wheelchair Championships in New York, a very attentive man sits in a wheelchair nearby with a large black toolbox on his lap. Jacob Sharff, the wheelchair mechanic and owner of How I Roll Sports: Adaptive Sports Equipment for Adaptive Athletes waits to be summoned by walkie talkie to courts where wheelchair matches are taking place. When he is called, the clock begins ticking. “I have 15 minutes to make a repair or the player has to default.”

Sharff proudly reports that he can fix a flat tire in 4 minutes. “That would give me 11 minutes if something else happens.” Sharff humbly reports, “My biggest worry is that I won’t be able to make the repair.”

This has happened in past US Opens—when the top men and women players in two divisions—wheelchairs and quads—were also in town for the competition. This year, and every four years when the Paralympics take place, the US Open wheelchairs tournament takes a year off--though the prize money for those who would have participated is shared to help cover costs of travel and lodging.

Scharff laments an incident last year in the adult competition when a man in the quads division’s backrest post “cracked in half.” He reports sadly, “I couldn’t fix it—there were no parts.”

Sharff playfully reports, “I know how a firefighter must feel—we are either a hero or that guy who is always on edge, waiting!”

Sharff, a resident of West Palm Beach, Florida, didn’t set out to become a mechanic at the US Open and other pro and college wheelchair tennis events. When he became paralyzed and a wheelchair user after a car accident in 1999 at age 16, the now 42-year-old Sharff, who competes in paratriathlons around the world representing Team USA, discovered that the only source of sports equipment was medical supply companies. “You had to get your chair in the same place that sold catheters and hospital beds!” He began thinking, “How cool would it be if adaptive sports equipment could be sold in its own place?!” Sharff, who already owned the internet domain name howiroll.com—where he was blogging and sharing photos for what he describes as the “newly injured,” left his 9 to 5 job as a production coordinator at a tea company to start his own company in 2013. He reports, “20 to 25% of our business is international—I have sold to the Middle East, Australia and New Zealand!”

Several years ago, Sharff was approached to work at several university wheelchair tennis events and other USTA (United States Tennis Association) events. The USTA reports that it is “dedicated to providing top-flight programming and developmental opportunities to wheelchair athletes of all ages and backgrounds“ and invest in tournaments and player development.

Sharff can’t wait to be back in New York next year!

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Adam Berdichevsky and his son on a hike

Adam Berdichevsky at Paralympics '24
Photo Credit - Keren Isaacson

Defying terror, Adam truimphed on the Paralympic court

By Howard Blas

For most elite wheelchair athletes, the road to the Paralympics involves years of intense physical and mental preparation. For Israeli tennis player Adam Berdichevsky, the year leading up to the recent Paris Paralympics was also a year of fighting off terrorists and multiple relocations. Despite these extraordinary challenges, Berdichevsky proudly represents his country and serves as a role model for people with disabilities on and off the court continue to pay off.

Berdichevsky, 40, picked up wheelchair tennis after losing his left leg in a 2007 boating accident in Thailand. Berdichevsky and his then girlfriend (now wife), Hila, encountered a fierce storm. Their vessel capsized, sending both in to the rough waters. While saving Hila, Berdichevsky was reportedly sucked in to the engine, resulting in the loss of his leg.

In the years following the ordeal, the two married, Berdichevky became a mechanical engineer, and the family soon included three children. The family made their home on Kibbutz Nir Yitzchak, the same collective community where Adam grew up. Life on the kibbutz was usually tranquil, though missile threats from Hamas were not uncommon given their proximity to Gaza. Usually, the sounding of an alarm meant a short stay in the family's safe room until the imminent threat passed.

This all changed on October 7, 2023 when Hamas launched

4,300 rockets in to Israel and 6,000 Gazans breached the border into Israel in over 100 locations. On that day, 1,200 people were killed and approximately 250 were taken to Gaza as hostages. Israelis near the border hid and feared for their lives.

Adam and Hila Berdichevsky and their three children--ages six, eight, and ten- survived the Hamas invasion at Kibbutz Nir Yitzchak by remaining in a safe room and clutching the door handle for 14 hours to keep it shut. Once the imminent danger passed, the family then relocated to Eilat (in the south of Israel) for two months.


Adam Berdichevsky and Guy Sasson
Photo Credit - Keren Isaacson

Berdichevsky's friend and fellow Israeli wheelchair tennis player, Guy Sasson, had been living in Houston, Texas with his family at the time as part of his wife's medical training. Sasson suggested that the Jewish community bring the Berdichevsky family to Houston during these difficult times. “We are so thankful to the Houston Jewish community who provided us with a home, a car and school for the children,” reports Berdichevsky. “We were very welcomed!”

They family spent six months in Houston before returning to Eilat. Berdichevsky continues traveling around the world to tennis tournaments and the family is currently considering their next move, which may include returning to their adoptive community of Houston

Berdichevsky shares, “I always loved tennis and also wanted to play a professional sport so the two naturally combined.” But he acknowledges that playing wheelchair tennis in light of recent events has presented some of the biggest mental challenges he has ever faced. “After learning that six hostages, including a former classmate, were murdered in the tunnels by Hamas, I had to compete in my Paralympic match---but it was incredibly difficult.”

This served to further motivate and inspire Berdichevsky as he played tennis for his beloved Israel in the Paris Paralympics this past September. “I cannot say how much fun it was to represent my country like this,” reports Berdichevsky after his first round wheelchair tennis win in Paris. “The win, it was the first time I played in front of a crowd like this, and it felt like I played at home – it was very special. I was very happy I could give some good times to people amid all the bad days."

Earlier that same week, Berdichevsky served as the Israel delegations flag bearer. “The flag bearing was amazing, to walk with the whole Israel team was amazing – and everyone saw me on TV.” Berdichevsky lost his second-round match but he maintains his perspective given the ordeal he and his family survived on October 7th and the fate of so many others in his country. He observes, “It is much more important than ever to represent the country because of what happened and to be a model for all the soldiers who got injured.”


Adam Berdichevsky and family

And his advice to young people with disabilities: “Play a sport, whatever it is. It would make your life much happier.”


Adam Berdichevsky at Paralympics '24
Photo Credit - Keren Isaacson

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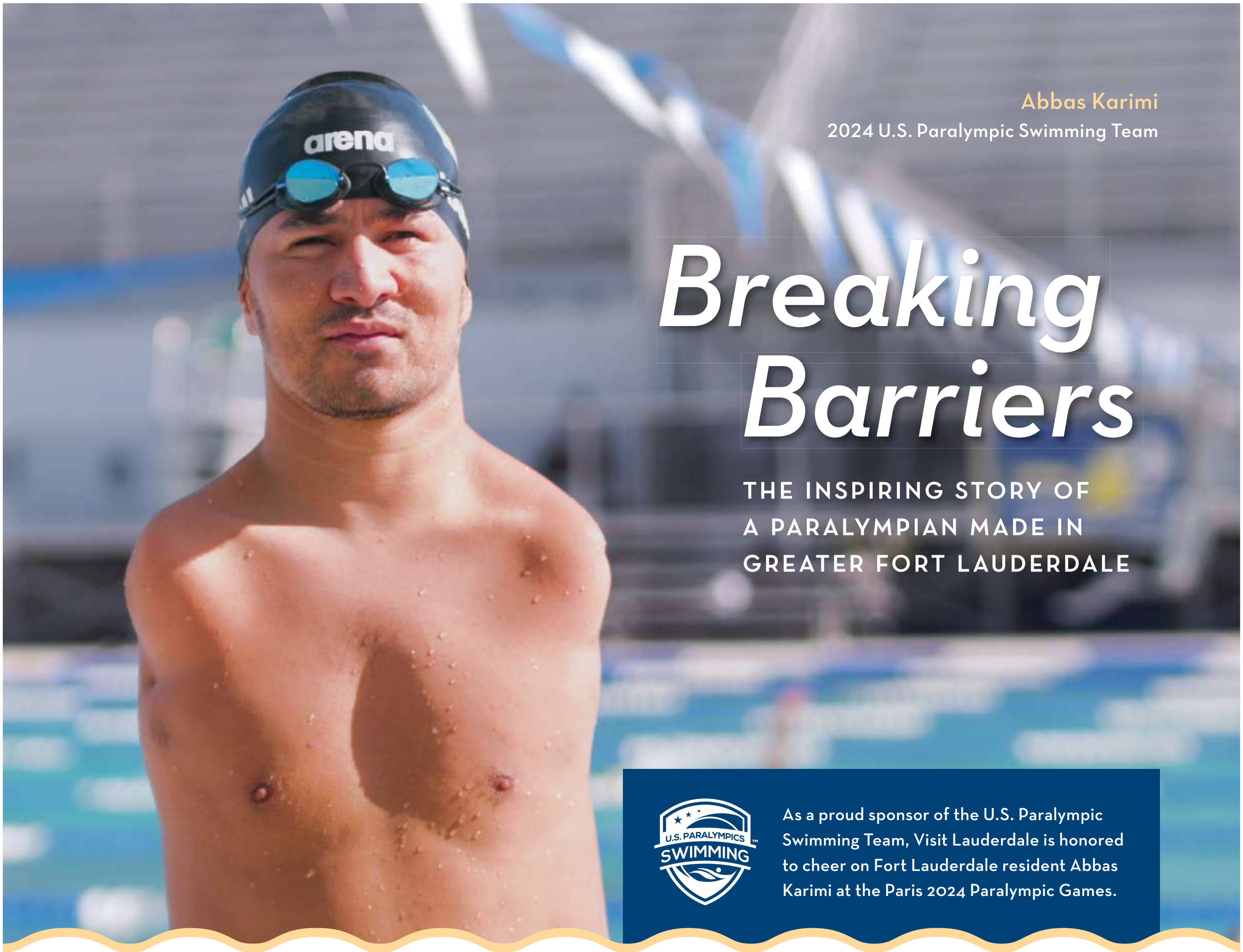

Abbas Karimi
2024 U.S. Paralympic Swimming Team

Breaking Barriers

THE INSPIRING STORY OF A PARALYMPIAN MADE IN GREATER FORT LAUDERDALE

U.S. PARALYMPICS SWIMMING

As a proud sponsor of the U.S. Paralympic Swimming Team, Visit Lauderdale is honored to cheer on Fort Lauderdale resident Abbas Karimi at the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games.



Unwavering Spirit

A Swimmer's Inspiring Journey to the Paralympics

In Greater Fort Lauderdale, we believe in the power of possibilities and the spirit of inclusivity. As a proud sponsor of the 2024 U.S. Paralympic Swimming Team, join us in cheering on one of our own, Abbas Karimi. Born without arms in Afghanistan, Karimi, a refugee, found freedom in the water. Today, he trains tirelessly in Fort Lauderdale, one of our 31 accessible communities that break down barriers to welcome everyone under the sun.

VISIT LAUDERDALE
EVERYONE UNDER THE SUN

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MAEGAN BLAU
Amaes Photography

Home designs for Every Body!

Maegan Blau’s mission to make accessibility beautiful

Maegan Blau is a visionary designer, an accessibility advocate, and an unstoppable force of creativity. But to leave it at that would be missing the nuance of her story—a journey that marries passion with necessity, and art with empathy. It’s rare to find someone who doesn’t just speak about change but actively embodies it in every space they touch. Maegan, founder of Blue Copper Design in Arizona, USA, is redefining how we look at homes, accessibility and the unspoken power of design to elevate lives.

Her origin story is not the ordinary entrepreneur tale of stumbling onto an idea over coffee. It’s a narrative soaked in lived experience and the practical realization that no one else was going to create the world she needed. Maegan has used a wheelchair for over 15 years due to a spinal cord injury, and it was this journey of navigating inaccessible spaces that lit the spark. What began as a search for a home that didn’t confine her within traditional, non-adaptive layouts has since evolved into a mission to transform residential accessibility across the country.

“I bought my first home when I was 20. Not because I wanted to, but because I had to,” she says, recounting the necessity of needing to renovate a space that could accommodate her. This wasn’t a luxury but a practical choice after the realization that accessible spaces didn’t exist in any meaningful way. Faced with the daunting task of transforming her new house into a functional and beautiful living space, she teamed up with a contractor. It was a conversation with him that would steer the course of her future: “He asked if I’d ever thought

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of becoming a designer. And, well, I hadn't. . . but looking back, I realized I'd been obsessed with design my whole life." That pivotal question wasn't just the starting point for a career, a key moment that unlocked a deeper passion she had unknowingly carried with her for years. With a family background in the furniture business and a longstanding love affair with HGTV, Maegan accepted the challenge; she ran with it, launching Blue Copper Design in 2018. But here's where it gets good: Maegan didn't just aim to be another designer; she set out to create a ripple effect in the world of accessibility. Her company is one of the few in the country to specialize in "barrier-free design," a term she has come to define in a fluid, almost philosophical way. "It's about removing barriers from spaces—not just for people with

disabilities but for everyone," Maegan says. She explains that while the term might bring to mind images of ramps and handrails, true barrier-free design is more holistic. It's about creating spaces that serve the people who live there, visitors, and even the home itself. "Homes have a soul," she quips, with the kind of wry insight that only someone who lives and breathes design can offer.

So, what does Blue Copper Design offer? Note that it's not just your standard home renovation company. Maegan offers full-service design, consultation and barrier-free design—all with a keen eye for creating spaces that are both aesthetically breathtaking and fully functional for those with mobility challenges. "We don't just throw up some grab bars and call it accessible," she says. "I make sure my designs look like anyone could walk into them and feel at home, whether they're disabled or not."

And therein lies the magic: Maegan's work goes beyond just meeting minimum accessibility requirements. She creates homes that are truly livable—beautiful, customized spaces that serve as havens for those who occupy them. She weaves elegance with practicality in ways that challenge the usual assumption that accessible design has to look clinical or bland. No. Maegan's designs are warm, vibrant and inclusive. They reject the notion that accessibility and style are mutually exclusive.

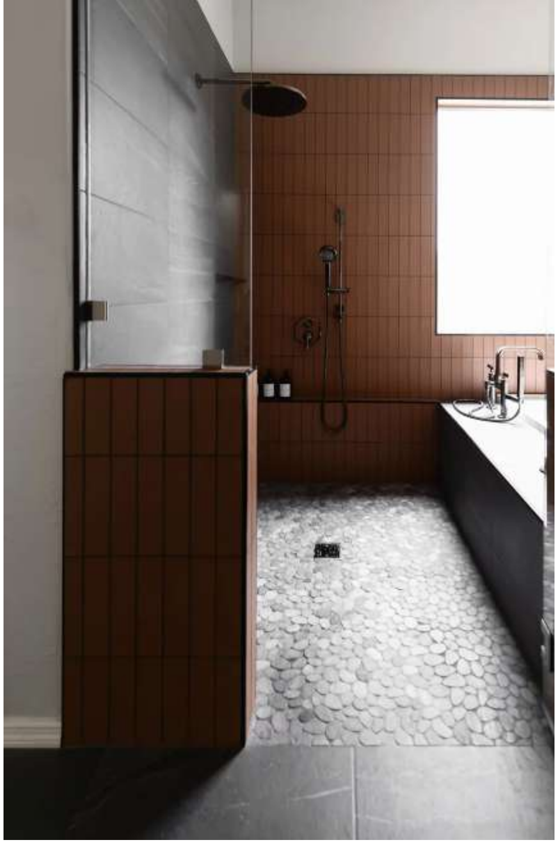
Now, for all the aspiring business owners out there, let's be clear: starting a company from scratch is no walk in the park. "There's a certain level of delusion you need to have at the start," Maegan laughs. "Because if you really knew how hard it was going to be, you might never start." But she did, and Blue Copper Design has flourished into a nationally recognized firm, consulting on projects all over the United States. Maegan's vision for her company is grander than merely growing profits. She's out to shift paradigms—to leave the world a little more accessible than she found it. "Right now, only 2% of homes in the U.S. are accessible, and that includes apartments. We're a long way from where we need to be."

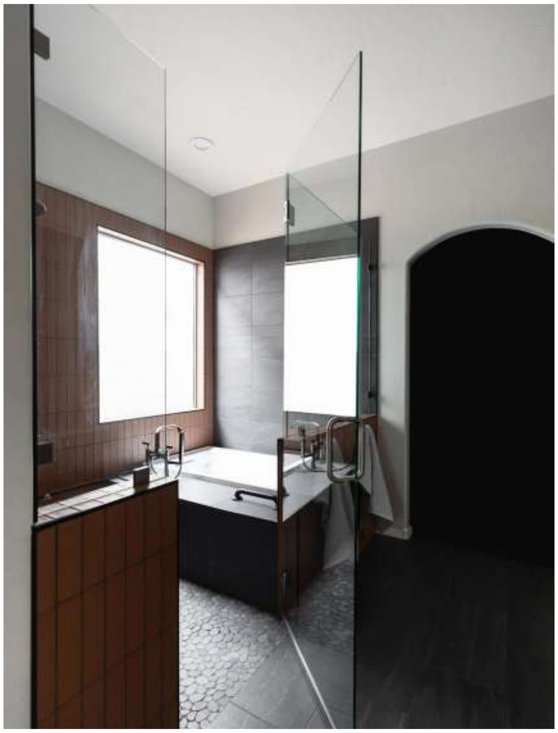
As the demand for accessible spaces grows—especially with more people choosing to age in place—Maegan is positioning her company as a leader in the movement. "People always ask if accessible design affects home value, and I'm here to tell you, it absolutely does. It adds value," she says firmly. "Not only are accessible homes in demand, but they're rare. There's a 98% gap in the market, and that's only going to grow."

Beyond her work with individual clients, Maegan is also looking toward the future—dreaming up collaborations with home builders and bigger brands to bring accessible design into the mainstream. Her aim? To make barrier-free spaces a norm, not a niche.

"I've noticed that when people see accessible designs that don't look like a hospital, it sparks something in them. They start to think about their own lives and how design impacts them. It's not always about being disabled; it's about creating a home that works for you, your family, your friends, everyone!"

The world often overlooks the needs of people with disabilities,





but Maegan Blau is quietly, but powerfully, making waves. And if you're wondering what her guiding philosophy is, it's this: "Design for everybody. Not just everybody . . . every body!."

She's bold, thoughtful and transformative—just like her designs.

Visit Maegan at BLUE COPPER DESIGN
bluecopper.design

Q&A

with Keely Cat-Wells

Founder & CEO of Making Space

Walk us through your background and what brought you to your current field

In my late teens, I danced my way into a prestigious London academy. I wanted to become a professional dancer and musical theatre performer. But one day, I woke up in tremendous pain. I saw doctors, they kept dismissing my symptoms as stress or an eating disorder. Before long, I was hospitalized and eventually given the right tests then, after many surgeries, I was able to eat again. Today, I live with chronic illness, chronic pain and a permanent ileostomy. I also live with the PTSD caused by the medical trauma I endured.

When I was well enough to leave the hospital, I took a trip to Los Angeles for a fresh start and to try and find a road back into the creative industry. But soon after, I lost a job due to ableism. These experiences drove me to start representing disabled talent, placing them in roles in Hollywood. That quickly grew into a full-fledged talent agency called C Talent.

At C Talent, our goal was to change the way the world sees disability through the power of entertainment and media. We placed disabled artists in roles with HBO's *The Last of Us,* the *Hunger Games* prequel, and major brands like Rihanna's *Savage X Fenty, Disney,* and *Amazon*. The talent we represented had a combined reach of over 50 million people. In 2022, C Talent was acquired, marking a major milestone for the creative industries and disabled community.

After selling my first company I founded Making Space, a talent acquisition and learning platform for companies to train, access and retain pre-qualified disabled talent. At Making Space we are building new pathways to employment by putting employer endorsed education at the frontend of the hiring process, which leads to better outcomes for both employers and job-seekers. Additionally, we are using the power of storytelling to shift the narrative. Sophie Morgan and I have also formed Making Space Media and under a first look deal with Reese Witherspoon, Hello Sunshine is telling the untold stories of disabled people

Tell us a bit about your organisation, Making Space. What inspired its creation and how does it help people living with disabilities?

Since the acquisition, I founded Making Space, a talent acquisition and learning platform for companies to train, access and retain pre-qualified Disabled talent. While we still have a focus on the creative industries, this solution

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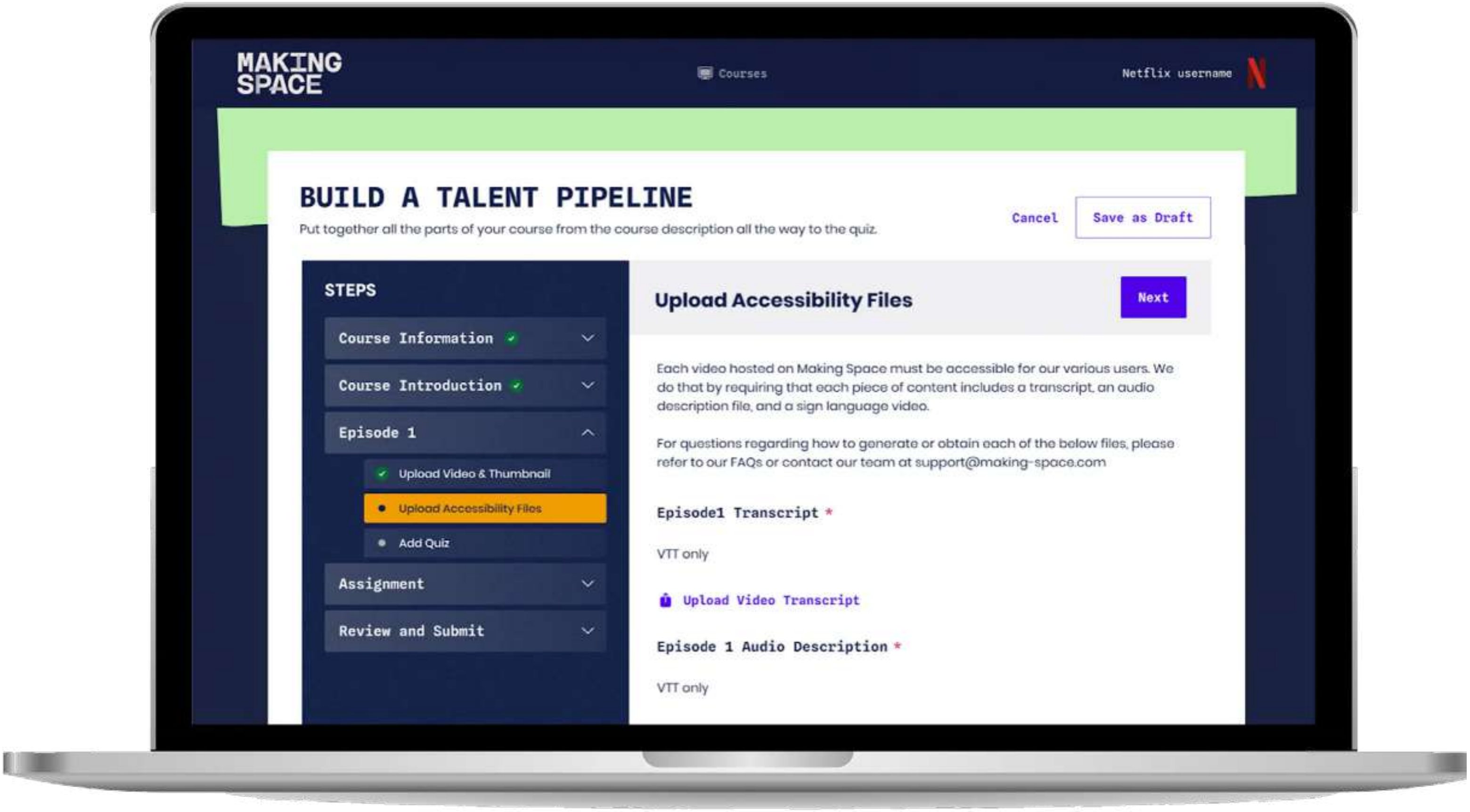

BUILD A TALENT PIPELINE

Put together all the parts of your course from the course description all the way to the quiz.

Upload Accessibility Files

Each video hosted on Making Space must be accessible for our various users. We do that by requiring that each piece of content includes a transcript, an audio description file, and a sign language video.

For questions regarding how to generate or obtain each of the below files, please refer to our FAQs or contact our team at support@making-space.com

Episode1 Transcript *

VTT only

Episode 1 Audio Description *

VTT only

is industry agnostic. Our mission is to create meaningful careers for disabled people and provide the necessary resources for them to become influential leaders.

Our platform bridges the education-employment gap by offering accessible, job-specific training and putting skill-based education as part of the hiring process. We collaborate with companies, creating courses that enable disabled candidates to gain skills and a competitive advantage that align directly with a company's needs. This approach creats a pipeline of prequalified candidates, democratized free & accessible education, presenting an opportunity to learn new skills, get to know more about the employer and create new pathways to employment. In addition, this provides better outcomes for the employer, helping them find higher quality hires at a faster rate and increase their retention rate. A win-win solution.

What is the core mission and vision of Making Space?

Our mission has always been to make space for disabled talent. We are committed to dismantling barriers and creating pathways to success through skill development, meaningful connections and opportunities for continual growth. By addressing and overcoming systemic challenges, we pave the way for sustained advancement and achievement.

What is the main goal of Making Space and and what drives your team to pursue this goal?

Lived experience of disability drives our team and we hope to change the statistic that disabled people are 2x more likely to be unemployed than non-disabled people.

Can you share any succes stories?

We have recently seen great success working with NBC Sports, a partnership working to increase the employment of disabled people both in front and behind the camera. Making Space and NBC Sports created free and accessible

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education developing a pre-trained talent pipeline from the disabled community, allowing NBC to access an untapped and under-represented workforce, paving the way for a historic increase in disability representation at one of the world's most recognizable media companies.

Talent from the pipeline were heavily featured in NBC Sports' groundbreaking coverage of the Paris Olympics and Paralympics. In addition, those in the hosting roles were the first-ever disabled hosts in NBCs history of the Paralympic coverage.

What changes do you anticipate in the employment market, and how is Making Space preparing to lead these changes?

The Bureau Labor of Statistics recently released the most sought-after skills and how relevant they are for current and future jobs by employers in the U.S. The majority are skills that disabled people have naturally.

Making Space has developed "Making Space AI," a tool embedded within a candidate's Making Space profile that turns the lived experience of disability into transferable skills, positioning what has traditionally been seen as weakness into a competitive advantage.

What are some of the crucial partnerships contributing along Making Space's journey?

We are proud to have partnerships with Netflix, NBC, Amazon, WGU and Indeed among others. Outside of our enterprise partnerships, we have community partnerships with organizations and other disability-owned companies which is incredibly important and we welcome anyone who is interested to get in touch with us.

Are there any upcoming projects we should look out for?

Making Space and Indeed will soon be releasing a course that is tied to many job openings for AI Prompt Engineering and another for Sustainability related roles. Be

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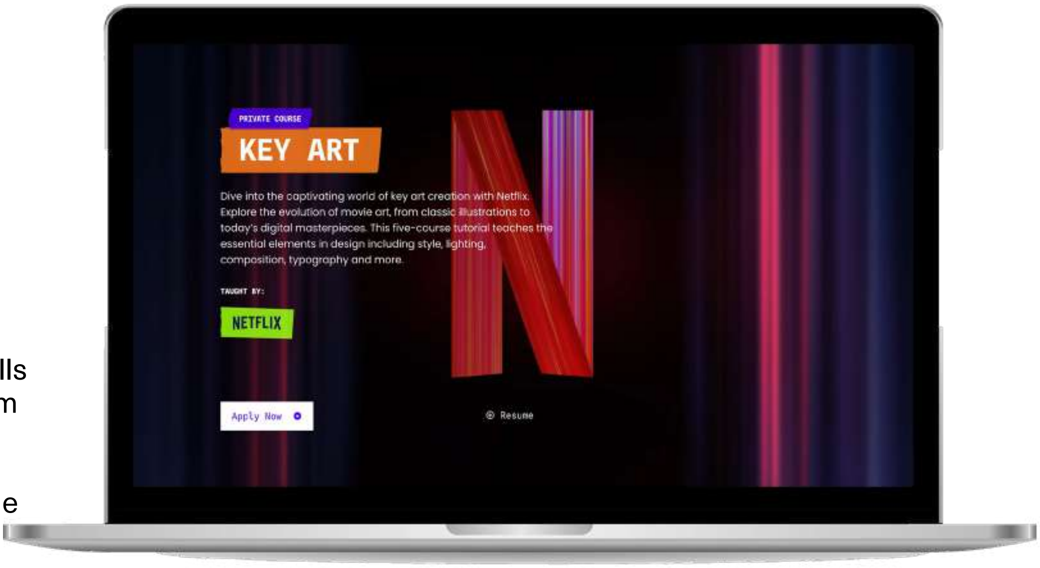
sure to sign up to Making Space for the latest updates!

What message can you share about the importance of inclusivity and the unifying power of community?

We must dismantle the intangible walls of prejudice and bias...We must reform systems like the restrictive asset and income limits tied to disability benefits that penalize Disabled people for working or saving too much. We must normalize disabled people being experts in subjects beyond just disability. We must recognize that disability intersects with all other aspects of identity. We must take a dynamic and nuanced approach to advancing the rights and opportunities of disabled people.



Dive into the captivating world of key art creation with Netflix. Explore the evolution of movie art, from classic illustrations to today's digital masterpieces. This five-course tutorial teaches the essential elements in design including style, lighting, composition, typography and more.

> Our mission is to create meaningful careers for disabled people."
>
> ~ Keely Cat-Wells

www.making-space.com

Insights

with Bart Vulliamy

www.BartVulliamy.com
@PhotographieBlack

Neurocapitalism

Neurodivergent capitalism is the involvement of capitalism, corporate capitalism, and consumerism in appropriating and profiting from the neurodivergent movement.

Autism Awareness month is April, and a blue shirt is found saying Practice Patience – Autism Awareness, and adorned with puzzle pieces all the colours of the rainbow. To someone who isn't neuro-inclusive, this shirt appears to be in support of autistic people, but it's a ruse. Blue is the trademark colour of a well-known organization that tries to cure autism, puzzle pieces are the outdated symbol of autism, and I predict that Autism Awareness will become an outdated term in a couple years.

The puzzle piece symbol is rejected largely by the autistic community for multiple reasons, but the main reasons for it are that it promotes the mentality that autistic people are incomplete or are missing puzzle pieces, and it treats autism as a disease that needs to be "treated" or "cured."

The origin of the puzzle piece symbol came from the National Autistic Society in 1963. It was created by Gerald Gasson, a board member for the National Autistic Society. Gasson and the board believed that autistic people suffered from a "puzzling" condition, so they adopted the logo of a puzzle piece with a weeping child, displaying the notion that autism is a tragedy. This visualization of autism has led to decades of autistic people receiving unwanted treatments and therapies to treat a disease that they don't have.

For corporations, and even individuals, to use the puzzle piece as a logo to represent autism and autistic people, is a signal to actually autistic people not to trust or support this business. I, and I'm sure other autistic and disabled people, notice what language people and organizations use when they talk about us.

The United Nations General Assembly designated April 2nd as World Autism Awareness Day in 2007, and subsequently, April became Autism Awareness month. The United Nations has observed the day as a means to affirm and promote the full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for autistic people on an equal basis with others.

Autism Awareness month ends at 11:59pm on the final day of April, and seemingly so does the support from corporations. This is the same for Pride month with the LGBTQIA2S+ community. The rainbow flags come down the day after pride month ends. Pride month (June in Canada) sees

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corporations like banks, grocery stores, insurance companies, and a slew of others, don the rainbow to show their support for LGBTQIA2S+ people.

Neuro-capitalism is an interesting thing, as I can go to any random supermarket and buy a stim toy if I needed one, but on the other hand, there is still little to no training of employees, management, staff on autism/adhd/bpd/ocd/tourettes.

Bringing awareness and fundraising for autism and neurodivergency is not a bad thing, but when the awareness revolves around outdated information and perpetuates stigma towards what autism is, then changes are needed. ■

> **The puzzle piece symbol is rejected largely by the autistic community for multiple reasons… it promotes the mentality that autistic people are incomplete or are missing puzzle pieces, and it treats autism as a disease that needs to be "treated" or "cured."** ~ Bart Vulliamy

RESOURCES

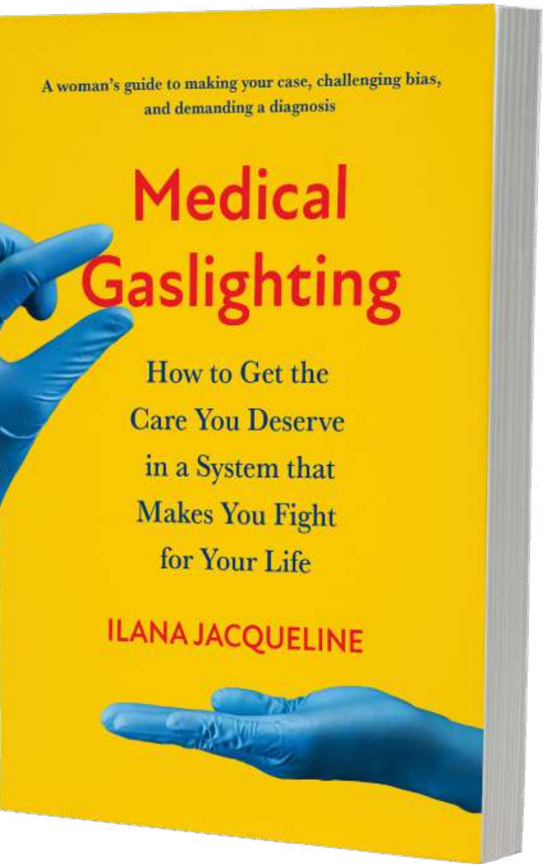
- The Real Costs of Rainbow Capitalism
- Autism Awareness Practice Patience T-shirt
- The Ableist history of the puzzle piece symbol for autism
- Perspectives on a puzzle piece
- Identity-First Language
- Before you donate, consider the facts

Illana Jacqueline

unveils Medical Gaslighting

Congratulations on the publication of your latest book, *Medical Gaslighting.* What inspired you to write it?

Thank you so much! This book was inspired not just by my own experiences of being undiagnosed and gaslit for 19 years before my rare disease diagnosis, but also by the stories of other patients I've worked with throughout my career in advocacy. I saw a lot of patterns in how patients with complex or unusual diagnoses were often dismissed or shamed by their providers. Originally, I really thought it was exclusive to rare disease. But once I moved my advocacy efforts more towards the focus of women's health—I realized, wow, this isn't just happening to rare disease patients, it's happening to patients with even the most common medical issues. Particularly, it was happening to women.



A woman's guide to making your case, challenging bias, and demanding a diagnosis

Medical Gaslighting

How to Get the Care You Deserve in a System that Makes You Fight for Your Life

ILANA JACQUELINE

What is your definition of medical gaslighting and how widespread do you believe this problem is in the healthcare system today?

I define Medical Gaslighting as *the act of a healthcare provider dismissing or ignoring a patient's concerns or complaints and leaving them without a clear treatment plan or diagnosis, often stating that the patient has an unspecified mental illness or is exhibiting an unnecessary amount of caution. My book goes through the multiple ways medical gaslighting can present. There is a general misunderstanding around tone. It's not always doctors who yell at you or berate you, or even say any of the familiar catchphrases of gaslighting like,"I think this is all in your head" – sometimes the tone is very calm, caring and supportive. But in the end, it still robs you of what you're looking for: a diagnosis, a treatment and a care plan that is well-thought out and investigated. I think the key to being your own best advocate is to participate and collaborate. Go to each appointment prepared with what you want to get out of it, come with evidence of your issue, and ask questions until you fully understand what the plan will be for you.*

Your work as a patient advocate is inspiring. What advice do you have for others thinking of becoming more vocal in their support of people with disabilities?

Advocates can have so many different jobs and skills. I think you first have to figure out what can you bring to the table to help your community. For me, I was focused on public relations, writing and social media. I was able to take those skills into a job as Managing Editor with a rare disease non-profit called Global Genes at the start of my career. There are so many great free resources that patients can utilize without having to go to school or pay for a degree. The Social Health Network offers a Patient Leader Certification course that I helped to design. It's 100% free and offers patients, caregivers, and allies an opportunity to explore how their skillsets can fit into the world of advocacy.

How does *Medical Gaslighting* build on your first book, *Surviving and Thriving with an Invisible Chronic Illness?*

My first book was really meant for young adults and adults who were recently diagnosed. I like to think of it as the beginner's guide to independence with a chronic illness or disability. *Medical Gaslighting* is really going deep into the subject of women's health and helping patients to gain awareness of how we're being treated in the exam room. It is also stuffed with examples, scenarios and advice on how to respond to it.

How can society work to erase *Medical Gaslighting* from the medical world? Do you believe it can ever be removed entirely?

Medical Gaslighting stems from medical bias, which is something that is deeply, deeply ingrained in the medical system. It's written into textbooks, coded into insurance and enmeshed in research. I think there are a lot of doctors who are firmly set in their way to continue practicing medicine the way it is. Fortunately, I think they will leave medicine one way or another within the next few decades, leaving room for new talent with better education to come through. Erasing medical gaslighting will not happen overnight, which is why I was so determined to create a resource for women to help them survive until that happens.

What do you hope to accomplish with the publication of *Medical Gaslighting?*

I'd like to keep women alive long enough to see changes in the medical system itself. I think there's also a lot of longing for understanding and direction when it comes to facing medical gaslighting. We want to be heard and understood, but we also want to know what to do about it. It's not enough to be aware and vigilant. The tools and strategy are so needed right now. I hope this book gives women methods to try that may actually make a difference in their care.

Medical gaslighting can have severe mental and emotional consequences. What are the psychological effects of this phenomenon, and how can patients heal from the trauma of being dismissed?

Medical Trauma can show up in many ways: depression from the hopelessness of not being believed. Anxiety from having to be in medical settings where they've experienced traumatic situations before. Hospitalizations and surgeries may cause recurrent stress from poor past experiences. I spoke with Dr. Michelle Flaum, acclaimed professor and creator of the first medical trauma course for Xavier University. She gave some excellent advice on different somatic therapies that might be more beneficial for patients than traditional cognitive behavioral therapies most patients are referred for. I shared this in my book.

How has your own experience with chronic illness shaped your perspective on the doctor-patient relationship, and what have been some of the most empowering moments in your healthcare journey?

I look at the doctor-patient relationship as a dating pool. You're going to find some great matches and you're going to have encounters that will make you want to climb out the bathroom window. As I wrote about in the book, I have had some truly awful, unnerving experiences with providers. But I've also had truly beautiful experiences as well. I've had physicians who were collaborative, empathetic and genuinely curious and innovative when it came to my treatment. I've seen great relationships come out of terrible experiences and I know how powerful it can be when a physician works with you instead of against you.

In your work as an author, patient advocate and influencer, are there any significant moments or achievements that stand out for you?

Writing the books were always a main goal of mine. I didn't even

anticipate taking my advocacy to social media, but that's been the biggest surprise delight so far—just seeing how receptive the internet has been in general to the kind of advocacy work I do and their interest in learning and applying self-advocacy to their own care through demonstrations of that which I portray in my videos.

What message would you like to share with the world about the importance of advocating for your self and others' rights as a patient?

The message is that while it may feel like there are so many gray areas, and there are so many things we ask for in so many different words, all self-advocacy is asking is to stay alive. It may be hard to see the forest through the trees when you're in the exam room, but it is life or death when it comes to self-advocacy. Your words and actions are the difference between getting a diagnosis and not, between finding appropriate care and settling for inappropriate care. It's hard work, grueling, but we have to do it.

Are there any new topics you're passionate about exploring in the future?

I'm really interested in how finance fits into the care and lifestyle of chronic illness. I think that will be my next big focus—how someone with a strong financial privilege copes with disease versus someone with less resources.

Her book can be found on Amazon, local libraries and on her website. An audio version can be found here.

Visit ilanajacqueline.com for more information. ■

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Recommended Book


Judy Sango

The Girl Who Walked Differently

The Girl Who Walked Differently by Judy Sango is a heartfelt, empowering story for young readers that embraces themes of resilience, diversity, and self-determination.

Following the life of a young girl with physical disabilities who dreams of becoming a judge and a disability advocate, the book offers an important message about perseverance and self-belief. Through the girl's journey, children and adults alike are encouraged to appreciate the strength it takes to pursue big dreams, even when obstacles stand in the way.

The story begins with the central character navigating her early school days, where she faces various physical and social challenges. Despite her differences, she possesses a spirit of determination and ambition that pushes her forward. This character, though faced with many hurdles due to her disability, remains hopeful and confident, embodying qualities that inspire readers to think beyond limitations. The narrative highlights how she encounters both supportive and dismissive attitudes in her community.

Through these experiences, young readers learn about the realities that people with disabilities may face and how societal attitudes can

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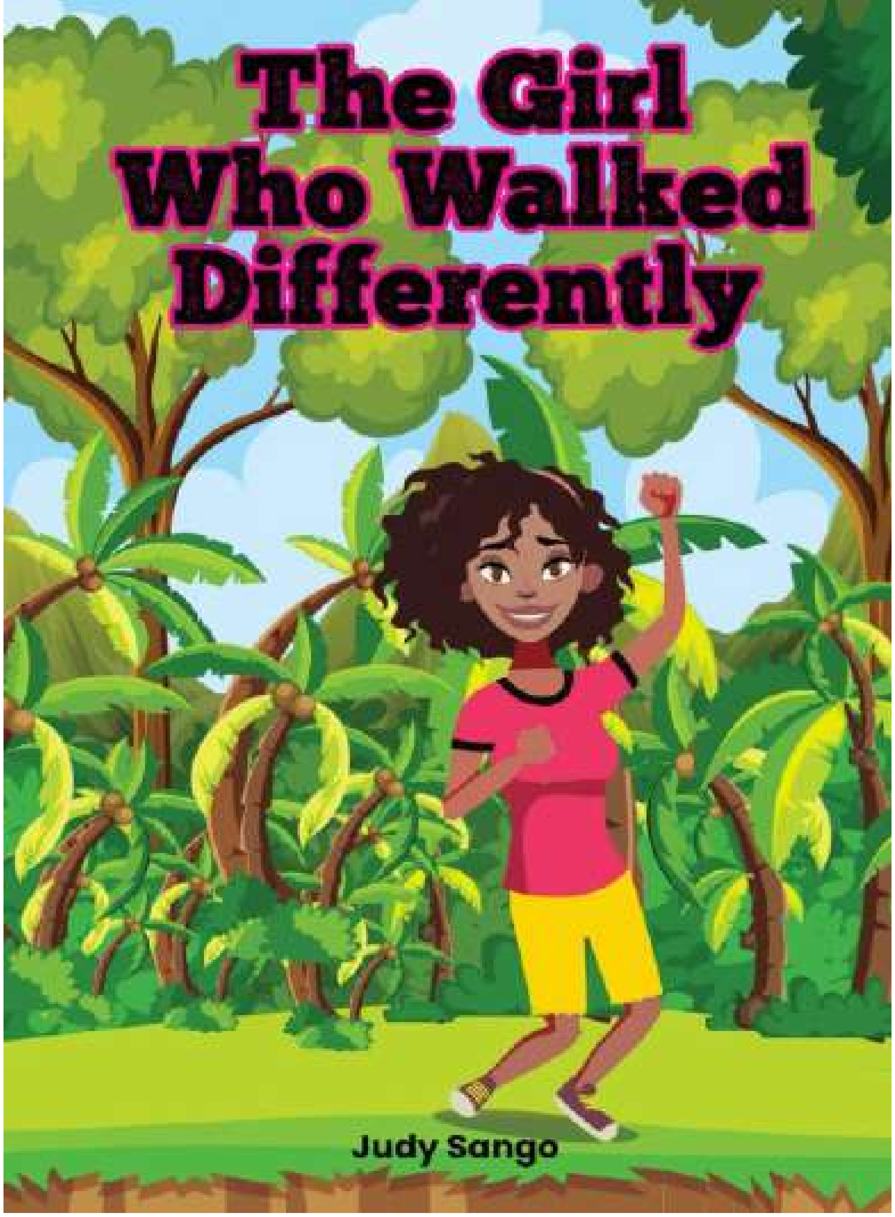
impact individuals' self-perception and opportunities. However, her ability to overcome these social obstacles becomes a core part of her journey and serves as an invaluable lesson in perseverence.

The illustrations complement the story beautifully, helping younger readers connect emotionally with the character and her experiences. Each image captures the emotions of her journey, from moments of self-doubt to triumphant realizations, making the story accessible even for those who are new to reading. The images also play a crucial role in representing diversity, portraying the central character's disability with sensitivity and accuracy, which can help children better understand and empathize with people who walk through life differently.

Beyond its storyline, *The Girl Who Walked Differently* introduces readers to important values like empathy, justice and inclusivity. The character's dream of becoming a judge speaks to her desire not only to overcome her personal challenges but to make a difference for others facing similar obstacles. This ambition adds depth to her character, making her journey about compassion and service instead of personal success.

For parents, teachers and caregivers, this children's book offers a way to open discussions about disabilities, inclusivity and justice. It can be a tool for building empathy in children, encouraging them to think about the importance of supportive environments and the potential that lies within every individual. It also underscores the importance of having goals and working towards them with courage, regardless of the difficulties one may encounter.



Intended for children aged 6 to 10, the book is ideal for bedtime stories, classroom readings and moments when children need a reminder of the power within them to achieve their dreams. It gently but effectively addresses issues of disability awareness and inclusion, making it a valuable resource for teaching children about diversity. In summary, *The Girl Who Walked Differently* is an encouragement to every child to chase their dreams with courage. Through this touching tale, Judy Sango invites readers to celebrate diversity and recognize the power of determination in achieving personal and communal goals.

This book is a hopeful and inspiring read, reminding readers that they, too, can walk their own unique paths confidently, regardless of the challenges they face.

Judy is currently:

- The youngest President of the Dominica Association of Persons with Disabilities
- Founder, President and Program Director of Youth With Disabilities Connections
- The Commonwealth Disabled Youth Forum's Caribbean representative
- Owner of Excel in Academics Tutoring Online Services
- Motivational speaker

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The power of possibility: How Jen Bricker-Bauer rewrote the rules of success

Jen Bricker-Bauer: a name that soars high in the realm of possibility and inspiration. A gymnast, aerialist and motivational speaker, her life is one big, beautiful contradiction to the word "impossible." Born without legs and adopted into a loving family, Jen has lived a life far beyond what most would dare to imagine. Her journey is a story not only about overcoming obstacles but about redefining them.

Let's start at the beginning.

Jen's early years were spent in a small town in southern Illinois, growing up in a family that didn't see her as different, even though she was born without legs. Her parents adopted her when she was just three months old, and they laid the foundation for what would be an extraordinary life by holding her to the same standards as any other child. The family had one simple rule: never say “can't.” This wasn't just a fluffy inspirational quote on the kitchen wall—it was a way of life and an expectation that whatever Jen set her mind to, she would figure out how to achieve it. And achieve it, she did.

By the time Jen was a young child, she was already excelling in sports—softball, basketball and her greatest love: gymnastics. Her strength and agility, combined

Jen and her husband

with an insatiable curiosity to push boundaries, led her to become the first person without legs to compete in power tumbling. She became a state champion in power tumbling and even placed third in the Junior Olympics. It was the first big step in a lifelong dance with gravity—one she would ultimately master through aerial arts and gymnastics.

But here's where the story twists in a way that even the most imaginative screenwriter might hesitate to pen: At 16, Jen discovered her biological sister was none other than Dominique Moceanu, an Olympic gold medalist gymnast. Yes, you read that right. The very sport Jen had been passionately pursuing her whole life, against all odds, was also in her blood.

As Jen transitioned into adulthood, her journey took her to places few have dared to go, both literally and figuratively. While most of us might think twice about hanging from silks, twirling mid-air, or performing on a trampoline in front of thousands, Jen embraced it all. After moving to Orlando and working at Disney World, she found herself drawn to the aerial arts. It was there that she met her coach, who not only taught her the technical skills but also saw in her the limitless potential that had always been there. What began as simple training sessions evolved into a full-blown performance partnership, and Jen found herself thrust onto the biggest stages of her life.

One of her most memorable experiences came when she joined the circus. Not just any

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circus, though—Britney Spears' Circus Tour. That's right, Jen was part of the acrobatic act in a world tour that exposed her talent to millions of people around the globe. Performing in front of 20,000 people, night after night, Jen faced the kind of high-stakes pressure that would make anyone sweat, but she handled it with grace. The intensity, the sheer magnitude of the spectacle—it all pushed her limits and expanded her horizons. "Nothing will ever be as intimidating again," Jen would say after completing over 40 shows on the tour. It was a crucible moment, one that solidified her confidence and showed the world that not only could she perform, but she could also dazzle.

Jen, husband and son

Her career continued to defy gravity—and expectations. One of her most breathtaking performances took place in Tokyo, Japan, where she performed an aerial act live for an audience of thousands at the famous Budokan Arena, as part of Japan's prestigious 24-hour TV program. Another surreal highlight was when Jen performed in Qatar for the International Paralympic World Championships, gracefully suspended from a hot air balloon. Yes, a hot air balloon. Let that sink in for a moment. It's not hyperbole to say that Jennifer's performances are unlike anything you've ever seen before. They are a physical manifestation of her belief that everything is possible.

And, of course, her story doesn't stop at performance. As a motivational speaker, Jen has travelled the world, sharing her message of resilience and possibility. Her speeches aren't only a recounting of her life's achievements; they're a call to action for anyone who has ever felt limited by circumstances. Her memoir, *Everything is Possible*, is an extension of that message, reaching thousands of readers across the globe in 11 languages. It's not a book about overcoming disability—it's a book about living fully, with no excuses.

Now, you might wonder, with all these incredible achievements, what's next for someone like Jen? Well, life continues to evolve. She's now a wife and a mother to a beautiful baby boy. And, as you might guess, she's still travelling, still performing, still speaking and—most importantly—still inspiring. Jen and her husband now perform together as an aerial duo, combining her acrobatic talents with his musical gifts, creating performances that are as unique as they are breathtaking. Their son is always by their side, absorbing the magic of the world his parents have crafted, a world where anything is possible.

When asked what advice she would give to others, especially those living with disabilities, Jen speaks from the heart: "Everyone is created with a purpose. We all have something to offer. Your gifts are just as valuable as anyone else's, no matter what your circumstances." She believes that people can be a source of inspiration in their own communities, whether they are in the spotlight or behind the scenes. Her words are a reminder that while her story may be extraordinary, it's built on a foundation of simple truths we can all embrace: hard work, perseverance and the courage to believe in ourselves.

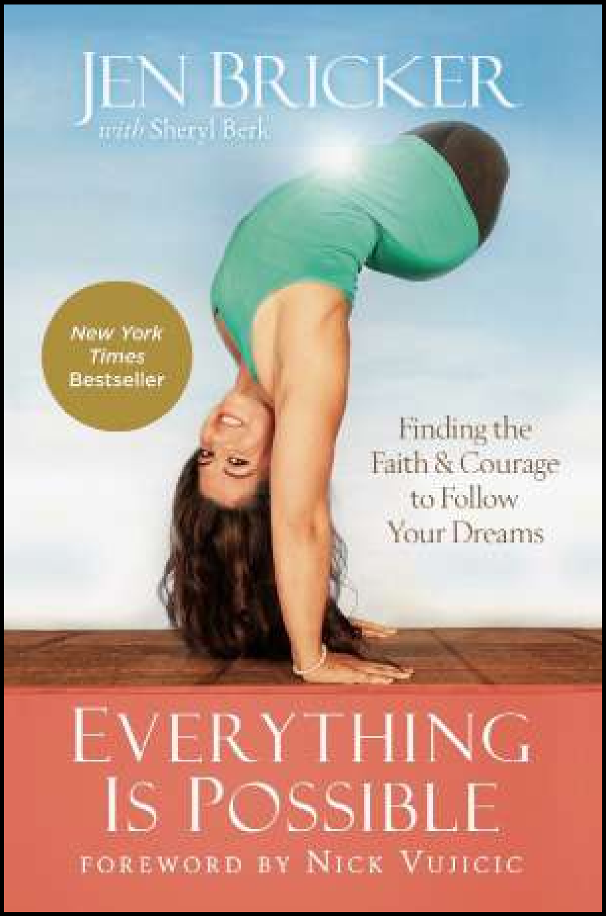
Jen Bricker-Bauer is a living reminder that the only limits we have are the ones we place on ourselves. So, the next time you find yourself doubting your ability to achieve something, remember Jen's story. Then, take a deep breath, look at the challenge ahead, and tell yourself: Everything is possible.

Get a copy of Jen's book, Everything is Possible on Amazon.

Order a personally signed copy here.

Visit her website: jenbricker.com

Jen, husband and son



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Who cares? How virtual health is changing in-home caregiving

By Alexandra Beukens | Julia Smith | Lindsay Hedden | Muhammad Haaris Tiwana

Seventy-five per cent of health care in Canada is provided at home by unpaid family caregivers. Not only is this essential health-care work often unrecognized and under-supported, it is rapidly changing.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many health-care appointments have shifted to telephone and videoconferencing. This change in the mode of health-care delivery has now become more fully integrated into the Canadian health-care system.

While a lot of policy and research has focused on the impact of this transition on doctors and patients, these changes also have important implications for caregivers.

With a growing portion of Canadians opting to age in place at home, family members will increasingly be relied upon to provide care. However, unlike professional health-care workers, family caregivers are generally not compensated for their labour.

In fact, the act of caregiving is associated with personal costs. Caregivers often must take time away from paid work to provide care, which in turn affects their financial security. Notably, women make up the major share of caregivers in Canada.

To better understand the needs of caregivers, our research team reviewed existing studies, and conducted interviews and workshops with caregivers and others taking part in virtual health. Our findings shed light on how virtual care has so far interacted with existing inequities to create opportunities and challenges for caregivers.

The impact of virtual care

For example, virtual care has reduced the economic costs of attending appointments by lessening the need for caregivers to take time off work. It has also expanded caregiver networks, allowing those living at a distance to be involved in a loved one's care, and opened new avenues for caregivers to find supportive communities and services online.

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However, caregivers also report encountering challenges with virtual care. Among these are experiences overcoming the "digital divide," which acknowledges differences in access to technology (such as limited internet access) and/or a lack of operational knowledge of digital devices.

Although technology and internet usage have become increasingly ingrained in the day-to-day lives of Canadians, individuals living with limited incomes, or who live in remote areas, still face barriers to reliable internet.

Our research suggests this limits options for accessing virtual forms of health care. Meanwhile, some patients who have more limited knowledge of digital technology rely on a caregiver to facilitate virtual appointments.

Other challenges with virtual care identified by caregivers include difficulty establishing rapport with a clinician during virtual meetings. This can be especially true for those without a designated family physician, who instead regularly meet with virtual walk-in doctors.

For Indigenous communities, this lack of a consistent point of care undermine efforts to access care that is free from racism, stigma and discrimination—something that is largely achieved through the long-term establishment of trusting relationships with patients and their caregivers in a community setting.

For caregivers of diverse languages, we found that virtual appointments outside of formal health-care spaces where interpretation services are more readily available often mean that they are called upon to translate language and cultural nuances with clinicians, adding to their responsibilities as caregivers.

Barriers and stressors

Navigating new virtual health-care tools can also create new stressors for caregivers. For instance, uncertainty as to where and how to follow up with a clinician, or concerns related to privacy and confidentiality. These concerns, amidst other barriers, can compound feelings of anxiety for caregivers already grappling with the stress of their loved one's care.

One community support worker we interviewed for our study noted that most caregivers in their program were seniors themselves, who were taking care of a spouse or an elderly parent. "So, they are seniors, too ... they may not have the technology skills to access to the virtual care." This includes hardware. The support worker noted that older caregivers may not have smartphones, tablets, laptops or even internet. This can create a financial barrier as well as a technological one: "For some low-income seniors, it's very difficult," they said.

These experiences make clear that, although virtual health care brings new opportunities that can alleviate access barriers for caregivers, there is also a risk of new challenges being introduced.

Health policymakers and clinicians must be attentive to caregivers' unique needs if we are to have truly equitable models for virtual care. Meaningful engagement with caregivers of diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds is a necessary first step.

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

Deaf Insights

with Angela Lynn

Bridging the Deaf and Hearing worlds

"The beauty of communication lies not in words alone, but in the hearts and hands that express them."
~ *Angela Lynn*

Communication takes many forms, yet both Deaf and hearing people share the universal need for connection and expression. By embracing these differences as strengths, we can foster a world where Deaf and hearing communities connect with ease, building mutual respect and understanding.

Understanding the Deaf experience

The Deaf experience is more than just living without sound - it's about seeing the world through a visual and tactile lens. Deaf culture, with American Sign Language (ASL) at its core, uses hand signs, facial expressions, and body language to convey meaning in a way that's rich and dynamic. For many, being Deaf is not seen as a disability, but as a unique identity that offers its own perspectives and ways of connecting with the world.

The Deaf experience also involves challenges, particularly in navigating a world designed primarily for hearing people. Barriers such as a lack of accessibility in public spaces, workplaces, and social environments often present difficulties. Yet, progress is being made. Small adjustments, like providing captioning in public venues, using interpreters in important meetings, or learning basic ASL, can make the world more inclusive and welcoming for Deaf people.

Hearing experience vs. Deaf experience in personal and professional settings

In personal settings:

Hearing experience: Hearing people typically communicate with spoken language, which makes casual conversations and gatherings smooth and effortless. Music and entertainment are experienced directly through sound, and communication in social settings usually doesn't require additional tools.

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Deaf experience: Deaf people often use ASL to communicate in personal settings, and social gatherings may require interpreters or written communication. Music and entertainment are experienced visually or through vibrations, and Deaf people may rely on captions or tactile aids such as SubPac vests. A SubPac vest allows you to feel sound through vibrations, enhancing music, gaming, and VR experiences. It adds a physical dimension to sound for a more immersive experience.

In professional settings:

Hearing experience: In the workplace, hearing people can participate in meetings, phone calls, and networking events without barriers. Professional environments are designed around sound-based communication, making interactions seamless.

Deaf experience: Deaf professionals may require interpreters or captioning in meetings, and socializing at professional events can be challenging without these supports. However, with proper accommodations like VRS or captions, Deaf professionals can thrive in their workspaces.

Inclusion in music

Music is often perceived as a purely auditory experience, but it can be inclusive in ways that go beyond sound. Many Deaf people enjoy music through vibrations, rhythm, and visual elements like synchronized lights. Providing lyrics transcripts and captions alongside music ensures that everyone can engage with the message behind the music.

Concerts, videos, and performances can be made more inclusive by incorporating interpreters, captions, and sensory-friendly options, ensuring that music is accessible to all.

Personally, I hold deep respect for artists who prioritize inclusion, not out of pity but from a genuine desire to create space for everyone. Coming from a musical family, I hope to deepen my own appreciation of music by purchasing a SubPac vest, which will allow me to feel the vibrations more intensely. Once I have it, I plan to write about my experience of inclusion through music.

Misconceptions about Deafness and hearing people

Misunderstandings between Deaf and hearing people are common but can be resolved through education.

Misconceptions hearing people have about Deafness

All Deaf people can read lips: Lip-reading is difficult, with only about 30-40% accuracy. Many Deaf people prefer ASL or written communication.

Deaf people can't enjoy music: Music isn't solely about sound. Deaf people engage with music through vibrations and visual cues.

Deaf people can't communicate without interpreters: Many communicate effectively through ASL, written text, or technology like video relay services (VRS), and do not always need interpreters.

Misconceptions Deaf people may have about hearing people

All hearing people can read lips: Most hearing people don't have lip-reading skills and rely on spoken communication.

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All hearing people enjoy music: Not all hearing people have a strong connection to music; preferences vary widely.

Hearing people can't communicate with interpreters in other languages: Interpreters aren't unique to the Deaf community, as hearing people also rely on interpreters for spoken languages. For instance, in a business meeting between an English speaker and a Spanish speaker, an interpreter helps both parties communicate, just like sign language interpreters do for Deaf people.

English Linguistics vs. ASL Linguistics: Two distinct but similar languages

Though English is an auditory language and ASL is visual, both languages share fundamental linguistic properties:

Syntax and grammar: English typically follows a subject-verb-object (SVO) structure, while ASL often follows a topic-comment structure. For example, in English, you say, "I am going to the store." In ASL, you might sign, "Store, I go." Despite these structural differences, both languages have their own consistent grammatical rules.

Non-manual markers vs. tone: In English, tone and stress are used to convey meaning, such as raising the pitch of your voice to ask a question. In ASL, facial expressions and body language serve a similar function. For example, raised eyebrows indicate a yes/no question, while furrowed brows indicate a WH-question (who, what, where, etc.)

Spatial grammar vs. pronouns: ASL uses space to represent subjects, allowing signers to point to different areas to refer to people or objects. In English, this function is achieved through pronouns like "he" or "she."

These shared linguistic principles show that ASL and English are both equally complex and expressive, even though they differ in their modes of communication.

Bridging the divide

Both Deaf and hearing people share common misconceptions about each other, but through open dialogue and mutual respect, these misunderstandings can be addressed. By learning from each other's experiences and perspectives, we can create a world where communication barriers dissolve, replaced by understanding and shared experiences.

Breaking misconceptions in romantic relationships

Both Deaf and hearing people often carry common misconceptions about one another, but through open dialogue and mutual respect, these misunderstandings can be bridged. When we learn from each other's experiences and embrace diverse perspectives, communication barriers begin to dissolve, replaced by deeper connections and shared growth. A relationship between Deaf and hearing people isn't limited by differences—it's enriched by them. It's not an 8/7 connection but a full 24/7 journey, where mutual understanding, love, and commitment create a bond stronger than any barrier.

Hearing partners: In relationships between two hearing partners, communication primarily takes place through spoken language, making interactions fluid and easy. These relationships, like any others, rely on emotional connection, trust, and open dialogue to thrive. The ease of verbal communication allows partners to focus on other aspects of their bond.

Deaf partners: For Deaf partners in a relationship, communication typically revolves around sign language, creating a shared cultural and linguistic bond. These couples often have a deep understanding of each other's visual and tactile communication styles, and their connection is enriched by the shared experience of navigating the world as Deaf people.

Hearing and Deaf partners: Romantic relationships between Deaf and hearing partners are a beautiful fusion of two worlds, creating a deep and meaningful connection. These couples often embrace a variety of communication methods: speech, gestures, sign language, or a mix of all three to express

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their love. While the differences in communication may seem challenging at first, they are only temporary. There's no need to panic; with patience and mutual effort, partners grow into each other's styles, making their bond even stronger. Through respect and shared commitment, these relationships blossom, showing that differences in communication can lead to deeper understanding and an even more profound connection.

The Power of inclusion

Inclusion is about more than just accessibility, it's about creating spaces where Deaf people feel respected and understood. Employers can support this by providing interpreting services and ensuring captions are available in meetings. Public spaces can offer visual communication options and captioning, particularly in entertainment venues and restaurants.

Inclusivity benefits everyone by fostering respect and understanding. Learning basic ASL or making small adjustments can go a long way in bridging the gap between Deaf and hearing communities. Hearing individuals also play a crucial role in fostering inclusion by becoming aware of Deaf culture and communication needs. Together, we can create a world where mutual respect and understanding thrive.
Inclusivity benefits everyone by fostering respect and understanding. Learning basic ASL or making small adjustments can go a long way in bridging the gap between Deaf and hearing communities. Hearing people, too, play a role in inclusion by gaining awareness of Deaf culture and communication needs, contributing to a world where mutual respect and understanding thrive.

Practical insights for better communication

Both Deaf and hearing people can take small steps toward fostering inclusivity:

For hearing people:
- Learn basic ASL, starting with simple signs like "hello" and "thank you."
- Use technology like VRS, text messaging, and captioning apps to communicate.
- Maintain eye contact when communicating, as ASL relies on visual cues.

For Deaf people:
- Share Deaf culture by teaching hearing people basic ASL or explaining aspects of Deaf life.
- Use tools like texting and VRS to bridge communication gaps.
- Be open to using a mix of communication methods, such as writing or gestures, with hearing people.
-

Bridging differences and similarities

At the heart of it all, Deaf and hearing people both seek connection and understanding. ASL and English, though different in form, are equally rich and expressive. By embracing these similarities and differences, we can bridge the gap between these communities and create a more inclusive world.

Fostering dialogue, addressing misconceptions, and promoting inclusion are key to building a compassionate future where every voice, whether spoken or signed, is celebrated. ■

Until next time,
Sunflowerly yours,

Angela Lynn

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

> **Both Deaf and hearing people share common misconceptions about each other**
>
> *~ Angela Lynn*

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Attention customers, the evacuation signal has sounded.
Please make your way to the nearest exit.

For Deaf people, train travel can be a gamble. But an AI-powered Auslan avatar can help

By Jessica Korte

For Deaf people, train travel can be a gamble. On an average day, nothing goes wrong: they catch their train to their destination and carry on with their business.

But when something out of the ordinary happens, the situation can quickly get scary, because most updates are only delivered by audio announcements. A Deaf traveller may miss their train because it was moved to a different platform, or watch as their station whizzes by because the train isn't stopping there today. They may also remain on a train carriage in an emergency after everyone else has evacuated, and have to be rescued by station staff.

Every single one of these examples has been drawn from the real life experiences of Deaf people in Sydney. But my colleagues and I are working with Sydney Trains and members of the Australian Deaf community to develop an advanced, artificial intelligence (AI)-powered signing avatar which can automatically translate audio announcements into Auslan.

Our work on the avatar also builds towards the next step: developing AI systems which can "understand" Auslan.

Journeys don't always go to plan

Earlier this year, my colleagues and I ran a pilot study with three Deaf train travellers in Sydney. As well as the stories they shared about what can go wrong during train travel, we learned they use tried and tested strategies for making their journeys go smoothly.

Their strategies might be familiar to regular commuters. For example, they would plan their journeys with an app, arrive early and look for signage to let them know if anything had changed.

But they also said they felt they needed to stand near information screens to watch for updates, and ask station staff or other passengers for information when the situation had changed. They also reported being hypervigilant while on the train, watching to make sure they don't miss their stop.

But these strategies didn't always ensure Deaf travellers received important information, including about emergencies. For example, while usually helpful, station staff were sometimes too busy to assist.

The greatest frustration came in situations where other passengers weren't willing or able to provide information, leaving our Deaf travellers to just "follow the crowd". This often meant ending up in the wrong place.

Developing a signing avatar

Speech-to-text software might seem like an easy solution to some of these problems. But for many Deaf people, English is not their native language and Auslan can be processed far more easily and quickly.

Our Deaf travellers told us that, in a perfect world, they would want live interpreters. However, automatic, AI-powered translation using a signing avatar displayed on a platform or train screen which could identify key words in an audio announcement, generate a sentence with correct Auslan grammar, and stitch together the corresponding signs from our vocabulary library was appealing for a number of reasons.

First, it allows for real-time translation of announcements that use known vocabulary – which is relevant in the trains-and-stations context, where many announcements cover similar topics.

Second, an avatar and its signing can be customised to the needs of a given situation, such as using information about screen location to ensure the avatar signs in the right direction while pointing out exits or other platforms.

Third, multiple signers can contribute signs to an avatar's vocabulary, which can then be smoothly stitched together to make a sentence.

And importantly, an avatar means no real person has to be the "face" of an organisation's automatically generated announcements. This is particularly important because the Australian Deaf community is small and close knit, and if something goes wrong with the translation, nobody suffers any reputational damage.

From a technical point of view, an avatar also allows us to ensure a minimum quality threshold for signing. We're using motion capture to make sure each sign in our vocabulary library is accurate, and movements are clear.

It also helps us avoid the "uncanny valley" – an effect where something human-like but subtly wrong is unsettling. We don't want any of the many-fingered monstrosities you may have seen recently generated by AI.

AI for everyone

This work is one step in our broader aim of creating an AI system which can understand Auslan. This AI could be used to help Deaf and hearing station staff converse, or to create "chatbot booths" or app-based assistants that would allow Deaf people to get information on demand in Auslan about their train journeys or other daily tasks.

Sign languages and Deaf cultures around the world have nuances and complexities that hearing researchers and developers of AI may not be aware of. These nuances and complexities must be embedded in new technologies, and researchers and developers must take a language-first approach to AI data collection and design with – not just for – Deaf people.

Only then will AI meet Deaf people's real needs: to ensure their safety and independence in every aspect of daily life.

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

> **For a Deaf traveller . . . when something out of the ordinary happens, the situation can quickly get scary, because most updates are only delivered by audio announcements.**

http:// Snippets from the www

MSP debuts enhanced accessibility programmes

Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport (MSP) is improving its accessibility program for travelers who are deaf or hard of hearing with two significant initiatives: enhanced visual messaging systems and staff training. These efforts aim to create a more inclusive environment at MSP, highlighting the airport's commitment to addressing the diverse needs of all travellers. Read the full article.

Innovative app 'GoodMaps' helping travelers with disabilities navigate Louisville airport

An innovative app, "GoodMaps," is enhancing accessibility at Louisville Muhammad Ali International Airport for the busy holiday travel season. It provides turn-by-turn directions to key locations, such as the TSA checkpoint, restaurants, shops, and terminals, making navigation easier for passengers, especially those with disabilities or first-time travelers. Read the full article.

Midland barber developing app to help families with disabilities find service providers

Local barber DeAngelo Sanchez is a dedicated advocate for individuals with disabilities, especially families with children on the autism spectrum. By using his skills as a barber, he has created a positive impact within his community.
Read the full article.

Hidden disability awareness campaign by Holywell mum

Sarah Williams, a 37-year-old mother, is passionately advocating for greater awareness and understanding of her son Archie's life-limiting illness. Through her efforts, she aims to shed light on the challenges faced by families dealing with similar circumstances. Read the full article.

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5 Tips for Voting With Mobility Challenges

Ensuring your vote is counted with minimal discomfort requires preparation and a clear understanding of the voting process. Here are some strategies and resources to help you accomplish that. Read the full article.

It can cost up to 39% more to thrive in the GTA if you have a disability: research

The Wellesley Institute's research reveals a significant issue: individuals with disabilities in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) face economic disparities, with costs of living up to 39% higher. This statistic highlights key concerns contributing to these increased living expenses. Read the full article.

Roberts Academy bringing students together through shared disability

The Roberts Academy at Mercer University in Georgia is the only school for dyslexic children outside of Metro Atlanta. This K-5 academy focuses on empowering students by highlighting their strengths and addressing their learning needs using evidence-based strategies from Vanderbilt University's Peabody College.
Read the full article.

Art exhibit 'For Dear Life' shows new perspectives on disability and medicine in the U.S.

"For Dear Life" is a significant exhibition in Southern California that explores important themes related to illness and disability through the lens of American art. It highlights how artists have engaged with these topics over the past several decades, especially in the context of societal changes and medical advancements
Read the full article.

Apple announces new accessibility features, including Eye Tracking, Music Haptics, and Vocal Shortcuts

Apple's new accessibility features demonstrate the company's ongoing commitment to inclusivity and improving the user experience for individuals with disabilities. These features utilize advanced technology to develop innovative solutions that enhance accessibility across their devices. Read the full article.

A Mom Chronicles Her Daughter's Journey While Living with a Disability

"If You Knew Suzy: Pushing Past the Boundaries of Never" is a heartfelt memoir by Jane Fischer, a dedicated mother and disability advocate. She shares her experiences raising her daughter Suzy, who has a developmental disability and is a client at JESPY House, exploring the challenges of parenting a child with special needs.
Read the full article.

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