mélange

Accessibility for All

February 2025

INVICTUS GAMES
VANCOUVER • WHISTLER 2025

THE EMPOWERED SPECIAL NEEDS MAMA BEAR JOURNEYS
We have the power to choose acceptance

BLOSSOMING HOPE ON STATEN ISLAND
What does it mean to plant roots?

DIANE PAYLOR
From personal struggle to community advocate

LEADERSHIP WITHOUT LIMITS
Ben Trockman's historic role in Evansville Government

COMMUNITY IS AT THE HEART OF
ConnecTra's mission

CHALLENGING MISCONCEPTIONS
A future doctor on disability and inclusion in medicine

ISSN 2563-5697

To Table of Contents

HERE YOU ARE

33.3373° N, 112.0562° W

Accessible meets unforgettable.

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

1 **Kartchner Caverns**

Immerse yourself in a literal hidden gem.

2 **Verde Canyon Railroad**

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

3 **Sedona Hiking**

Experience the Red Rocks on miles of accessible trails.

4 **Grand Canyon National Park**

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

5 Bartlett Lake

Cool off with Arizona Adaptive Watersports.

6 Desert Botanical Garden

A Sonoran Desert wonderland with endless smooth pathways.

7 Sunset Crater Volcano National Monument

Dark skies and stars await.

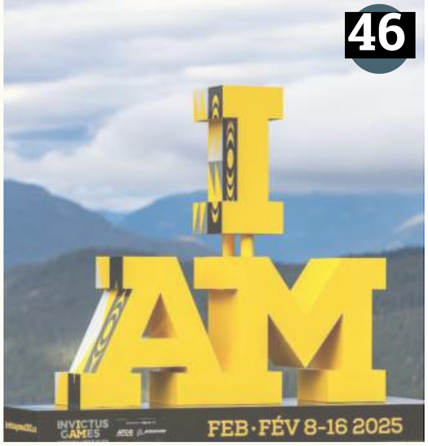
8 Bearizona Wildlife Park

Get up close and personal with North American wildlife.

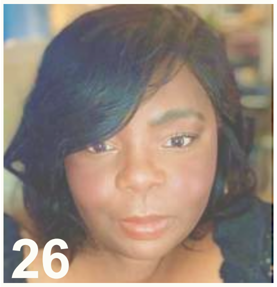
ARIZONA
THE GRAND CANYON STATE

VISITARIZONA.COM

CONTENTS



ON THE COVER
I AM Invictus Games sign in Whistler
Photo Credit: Jeremy Allen



@visitpenticton | #visitpenticton | visitpenticton.com

A City Designed With Everyone in Mind

From barrier-free beaches, to accessible trails winding through sun-drenched valleys, this is where memories are made. Whether you're exploring our smooth pathways, hopping on our accessible transit for a downtown adventure, or settling into your inclusive accommodation—every adventure is possible.

VISIT
Penticton

CLICK HERE to read the previous issue

Publisher: Mélange Publishing Group
Editor in Chief: Debbie Austin

Editorial Staff
Marina Apperley
Lucky Mae Fornoles

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS
Danniel Swatosh
Jennifer Hartley
Angela Lynn
Christine Staple EBanks
Jeremy Willinger

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

CONTACT US

- Comments
- Share a story
- Contribute an article

email: marina@readmelange.com

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

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

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

Editor's Note

For too long, the world has tried to define disability as something to be pitied, overcome, or tucked away. However, people with disabilities are redefining what's possible. Whether the world is ready or not, their stories are here to be seen, heard, and . . . it's impossible to ignore. People with disabilities are not waiting to be placed in someone else's story—they are writing their own and tearing up old scripts as they go.

Let's step into that space with them.

Athletes are preparing to take on the Invictus Games 2025, where grit will meet glory on the world stage. These athletes aren't competing for approval. They will be claiming the podium in Vancouver and Whistler, shattering limits and carving their names into history.

Athletes aren't the only ones making an impact—bloggers with disabilities are using their platforms to challenge perceptions, amplify voices, and build communities that refuse to be ignored. From personal essays to hard-hitting advocacy, they are redefining representation in real time, proving that lived experience is the most powerful kind of expertise.

In Deaf Insights with Angela Lynn, we dive into the nuances of Deaf culture and communication through the lens of someone who lives the Deaf experience.

We roll up our sleeves with Smile Farms on Staten Island, New York, who shows by their action that meaningful work belongs to everyone, not just those society deems "employable." Yes, employment is a right, not a favor and they are leading the way.

Future doctors like RJ Roggeveen are advocating for better inclusion. Parents are breaking outdated myths. Leaders aren't just stepping up—they're refusing to step aside. And through it all, one message rings clear: disability isn't a limitation. People with disabilities are leading, innovating and thriving. Some loudly, some quietly, but all without waiting for permission. Their stories challenge outdated perceptions and demand a world that values inclusion as a necessity not charity. We're not talk about inspiration but about equity, representation and breaking barriers that should never have existed in the first place.

As you turn these pages, let them serve as a reminder that the future is being built, shaped and led by those who refuse to be defined by anything but their own limitless potential.

Happy Reading!

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

To Table of Contents

Ximuwu Lodge: Premier Accessible Safari Experience

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

XIMUWU
KLASERIE

Ximuwu Lodge: Where Luxury Meets Accessibility.

WHEELCHAIR
SAFARI.COM

Blossoming hope on Staten Island

By Jeremy Willinger, Constructive Pertnerships Unlimited (CPU)

James C. with a recent harvest

What does it mean to plant roots? For the people with intellectual and developmental disabilities supported by CP Unlimited (CPU), it means literally putting vegetables into soil while simultaneously grounding their work to an expansive vision of inclusivity, independence, and purpose.

On Staten Island at the organization's Cora Hoffman Center on the aptly named Forest Avenue, two plexiglass greenhouses sit behind a metal fence, a warm respite from any outside coldness. They are stocked—depending on the season-with peppers, cabbage, kale, lettuce, Swiss chard, herbs, beets, and more. No matter the weather, it is always balmy and close to harvest time in the greenhouses.

Erected in 2021 in partnership with the non-profit Smile Farms to help provide meaningful employment, vocational, and educational opportunities for people with disabilities in agriculture and hospitality, it is one of 10 campuses across New York City and Long Island. Like what we teach our children: it is what is on the inside that counts; while flora is growing, so is hope. The greenhouses support two full-time workers with disabilities who enjoy the full process of the planting process. “I love the greenhouses,” says CPU's James Cuomo, who has worked with Smile Farms for more than two years.

Peppers grown are harvested and turned into *Heat with Heart*, a line of hot sauces under the Smile Farms label whose proceeds are re-rooted and routed to programs to help persons with disabilities. Either the red or green versions will spice up any dish, and all go great on a tortilla chip. "We are incredibly proud to partner with CP Unlimited. It's truly inspiring to witness the sense of pride they feel as the peppers they've

To Table of Contents


Staten Island Borough President Vito Fossella at the CPU greenhouses


NYS Senator Jessica Scarcella-Spanton with James C. at the CPU greenhouses

grown are transformed into a marketable product—a tangible accomplishment that reflects their hard work and purpose," said Beth Karcher of Smile Farms.

More of the space is devoted to other crops which enhance diets and fine dining across New York. On one hand, CPU shares the produce with the people supported by the Agency throughout Staten Island which reduces the time needed to procure fresh, healthy foods. In residential and Day Hab settings, CPU is augmenting health in as many ways as possible. Additional dirt is devoted to supplies for two of New York's leading restaurants, Temple Court and Craft NYC, both by celebrity chef Tom Colicchio.

Harvests are also sold directly to consumers on Staten Island and in farmers markets in Manhattan and other NYC boroughs. At Smile Farms-sponsored events and other venues, CPU offer hot sauces and fresh produce as well as information about the greenhouses. The latter is the most important, because each interaction is a chance for a person with disabilities to be an educator and to show off their pride in representing a great cause while practicing social skills.

Officials including New York State Senator Jessica Scarcella-Spanton, Assemblyman Sam Pirozzolo, and Staten Island Borough President Vito Fossella are among some of the boldfaced names to visit and be provided a tour by one of our gardeners. “CP Unlimited does such amazing work for those living with disabilities and we are honored to work with them,” said Pirozzolo on his visit.

The benefits of gardening have been documented and include reduced stress, better physical health, deepened social connection, and more pleasant mood. Amplified within those advantages are consequential improvements for persons with disabilities. “The greenhouses are significant for the people we support and our organization. Providing these individuals the most comprehensive suite of options for education, engagement, and entertainment is a central part of our mission to help people with disabilities achieve fulfilling lives. We are proud to have our greenhouses be a place of inspiration and success,” said Joseph M. Pancari, President & CEO of CP Unlimited.

On a recent episode of *Staten Island Disability News,* Jessica Ann Francese, Director of the Day Program on Staten Island for CP Unlimited shared a few stories, but none more poignant than when she highlighted how transformative the space has become. “Watching James and the other workers and volunteers is inspiring. They are so proud of their peppers and plants, and it teaches them so many lessons every day: those of patience, reward, hard work, and perseverance,” she said. “It was a corner of our parking lot that used to just have four cars…now we have a space that is feeding Staten Island!” ■


Planting peppers for hot sauces

To Table of Contents

RJ Roggeveen is a 25 year old Metis, originally from Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada. Growing up, he enjoyed science and helping people which made him gravitate towards a career in medicine. At 18, he moved to Halifax, Nova Sctia to study Medical Sciences at Dalhousie University.

Mid way through his undergraduate degree, he sustained injuries from a roller-skating fall which was followed by a substantial loss of movement and coordination in his legs. At 22, he became a full-time wheelchair user and relearned skills to live independently. Going through his own health journey, he was able to see health care from the patient perspective. "I was surprised to learn that many healthcare professionals don't know how to manage long-term disability or navigate the rehabilitation care systems. Because of this lack in knowledge, I fell through the cracks and saw a delay in access to these services," RJ shared. From these experiences, he decided to attend medical school, with the goal of combining his lived and learned knowledge to improve patient care."

RJ graduated from the Recreation Therapy program in 2023 and is now pursuing his medical degree.

Challenging Misconceptions:

A future doctor on disability and inclusion in medicine

Congratulations! What inspired you to pursue medicine, and how has the journey been so far?

I'm now in my 2nd year of medical school and the experience has been hard but rewarding. Medical education challenges you in every way, and adding my disability to the mix has not been easy. Being the 1st wheelchair user to attend my medical school meant that the program had not previously been adapted. Everyone is learning as we go. I am very impressed to see the changes that have been made, knowing that the next student in a wheelchair to enter the program will have fewer barriers than I did.

What are some common misconceptions about becoming a doctor as a wheelchair user?

The biggest misconceptions people have are that I am not physically capable and have limited career options in medicine. These misconceptions are created from misunderstandings of the doctor role, combined with disability being viewed as "less than". I have learned how to adapt my clinical

To Table of Contents

skills to the patients' abilities, my abilities and the space we are in. In many ways, I feel more confident assessing patients in different settings because I have more than one way of performing certain skills. As for specialties I could pursue, there are doctors in wheelchairs who have done emergency medicine, surgery, trauma, pediatrics, physiatry, family medicine and more. Everyone in medicine is always adapting their skills and abilities—those of us in wheelchairs are just doing it more.

How has your disability given you unique professional and personal advantages that your peers may not have experienced?

My personal experience with disability has made me more comfortable interacting with patients and building rapport. When I am examining a patient, I know what it's like to be on the other side—to feel vulnerable, concerned and confused about my health. It isn't an experience I ever wanted to have, but if it had to happen, I'm glad that my experience is helping me become a better doctor.

When in the hospital on clinical rotations, I enjoy talking with patients who are new to their wheelchairs because there is an instant sense of ease in the discussion. Non-disabled people are uncomfortable talking about disability and the day-to-day experiences that come with it. It's nice to be the person someone can talk to, who understands and doesn't bring their own discomfort into the discussion.

How do your peers and educators interact with you, and do you handle those interactions?

I have had great experiences with my educators in clinical settings. There are initial questions or unease around not knowing how to teach a disabled student. That often goes away as they see me performing skills just like my classmates. When I am looking to adapt a skill, I do ask my educators' input on the adaptation. This helps me ensure I am getting the same result and it brings them into the discussion.

Photo Credit: Dave Morash

What changes in the medical and educational fields would help more people with disabilities pursue careers in medicine?

I would like to see universities adapt their programs without needing the admission of a student with a disability. You can wait for a student to be admitted and then adapt the program or you can adapt the program and encourage those with disabilities to enter. The latter is how we make schools truly accessible, recognizing the value that disabled students bring to their future careers.

Has being a medical student given you a better understanding of navigating the healthcare system as a patient? If so, how?

Most definitely! Being a medical student has helped me understand my own health and the systemic barriers in place that impact patient care. I am able to see behind the scenes, where doctors are advocating for their patients in a stressed system with limited resources. As a patient, I sometimes felt that my healthcare team was not on my side. As a medical student, I now understand that I am part of my healthcare team and the barriers being put up are not intentional but are systemic.

You're involved in adaptive sports like surfing. What motivated you to start?,

The first year after my injury I tried as many parasports as I could. It started off as a way to meet other people with similar experiences. Sports later became an area where I could push myself and excel in outside of the barriers I encountered in my daily life. It was more rewarding to catch a wave surfing than to not fall transferring from my chair to the shower.

I first got involved in adaptive surfing through *Life Rolls On*, where, with a whole team of volunteers, I caught my first wave. Following this event, I found the *High Fives Foundation,* who has supported my recovery and surfing journey. Through Hive Fives I got my own WaveSki and learned how to independently do seated surfing. Surfing became one area where I could be outside of my wheelchair, in nature, and just have pure joy for the sport.

To Table of Contents

Your social media documentation of the challenges you faced when your apartment building's elevator was out gained significant attention. How did that impact your advocacy approach?

In the summer of 2023, my building elevator was scheduled for replacement with only five days' notice. Living on the third floor, I would sit on the steps and lift myself up each step just to get in and out of my apartment building.

I decided to document this experience on social media, showing the climb up and down the stairs each day. I ended up moving out of the building before the elevator was fixed. I knew the solution shouldn't have to be to move out, but any legal process was going to take months and I needed an immediate solution.

Documenting that journey changed my social media platform into an advocacy lens.

What message do you want to share about the importance of inclusivity?

Including disabled people in everyday education, jobs, and opportunities can only benefit our world. Disability is a natural part of life that many people will experience. In a world where people with disabilities are valued, our perspective and ability will shine through in every field. In medicine, we are most likely to interact with disabled patients, yet they are least likely to see themselves represented. That fact alone impacts patient health and wellbeing. I want to see a world where disability is different and valued. ■

To Table of Contents

To Table of Contents

Camosun College

The transformative power of education

By Jennifer Hartley

There is something magical about hearing your child's name and watching them cross a stage in a cap and gown. And it is something I never thought I would experience.

"Hi, my name is Jacob. I have a cluster of letters after my name —ADHD, severe OCD, autism, epilepsy and other intellectual disabilities—and I have holes in my brain from a stroke. But neurodivergence can be cool, even if it has a bunch of challenges. I think my story is the story of a lot of neurodivergent people but we don't really get a chance to tell it, so I am. Optimism can happen in many ways and my education story is just one of them."

Indeed. Jacob is brilliant. (I know, every mother says that…) An auto-didactic learner, he has an encyclopedic knowledge of eclectic topics, but none of it has come from books because he can't focus on words. "I don't have the patience to read for longer than five seconds—unless it is a recipe." He has learned from watching YouTube videos over and over again. "I know a lot about crocs, alligators, caimans and any crocodilian; world geography; world history; cooking. Go ahead and ask me."

Jacob is the guy you want on your team on trivia night at the pub and thanks to his cooking obsession, our home is often filled with delicious aromas.

When Jacob graduated from

high school in 2022, I worried about what was next. Traditional post-secondary education was not possible but I'd noticed Camosun College in Victoria, British Columbia, where we live, has a School of Access with programming specific to students with unique educational challenges such as Jacob's. Bingo. He applied to the Employment Training and Preparation program (ETP), designed for adults who experience barriers to education and/or employment.

There are programs for customer service, Farm to Table and EARTH Gardening and all three have classroom time, and depending on the program, have garden time and hands-on experience. Students also have the opportunity to earn certifications such as First Aid, WorldHost and FoodSafe.

Jacob was accepted and I am proud to say has studied in all three streams. He began in January 2023 and hasn't looked back.

Laura Friesen, Chair of ETP: "We meet our students where they are on their life journey and work with them, supporting and encouraging them. We focus on the individual; we believe every person has the potential to succeed and we want to provide that opportunity."

Jacob agrees. "Each person learns at their own speed and they respect that. Laura has taught us that everyone is different and has a story to tell that makes this world a richer place. Thanks to her, I love growing plants and working with them. She has reinforced life skills too. I know I tend to speak too much and she has taught me how to let other people talk. I know it is a very important skill to learn, and even though I was terrible at it for a long time I'm working on it."

ETP is like family as it cares for the individual's psychological and behavioural learning needs. When Jacob has a bad day, becomes overwhelmed, is exhausted or can't cope, everyone is supportive and understanding. "Laura and the team work with me to provide what I call a toolbox to identify what I need when stuff gets tough."

One of the goals of ETP, and inclusive education generally, is to make the participation of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in post-secondary education and society the norm.

Laura: "Our students are active and valuable campus members, participating in all aspects of student life."

Jacob agrees. "I have made friends at the College and that was a culture shock in a good way as socially, high school wasn't a good experience for me."

ETP works with local businesses and organizations to promote inclusivity and show the enormous contribution their students can make in society and workplace. Jacob has had work terms in a café, a seniors' residence and a museum. The first two were experimental, but with his love of history, he found his home in the museum community and now volunteers part time at the Ashton Armoury and the Shaw Centre for the Salish Sea. Jacob has also begun the intake process to volunteer at the Royal B.C. Museum.

Camosun, a local Indigenous (Lekwungen) word meaning "where two waters meet and are transformed," is so appropriate. Jacob, without exaggeration, has been transformed and I like to think he has had an impact there as well. Jacob has crossed the stage twice and this June, he will again do so to receive his last ETP diploma. It will be bittersweet because Laura and the ETP team have become family. What comes next? Stay tuned . . . ■

> "Neuro-divergence can be cool, even if it has a bunch of challenges
>
> ~Jacob

To Table of Contents


CAMOSU
COLLEGE
Congratulations


Dyslexia can affect children's reading, writing, spelling, memory and organizational skills.

Mothers, metaphors and dyslexia:

What language reveals about the challenges of a child's learning disability

By Jenna Abetz, Associate Professor of Communication, College of Charleston

Alarm bells. Red flags. A labyrinth.

These are just a few of the metaphors that mothers of children with dyslexia use to describe the journey from noticing their child's literacy challenges to receiving a diagnosis and then advocating to secure services to help their children succeed. By paying attention to the images used in these metaphors, teachers and administrators can better understand the difficulties parents and children face and learn to be more responsive.

In 2021, as my child entered third grade, I was sure she had dyslexia – a learning disability that can affect reading, writing, spelling, memory and organization. For advice and encouragement, I turned to an online support group for parents of children with dyslexia, which affects between 3% and 7% of the population worldwide. I noticed that when the mothers in the group described their experiences in social media posts, they frequently used metaphors.

As a communication researcher, I wondered what lessons about this experience could be drawn from this use of metaphors – a figure of speech that makes an implied comparison, such as "heart of gold" or "a roller coaster of emotions." I decided to find out. It turns out, the mothers' metaphors not only reveal much about the challenges these parents face, but how to help them overcome those challenges as well.

A closer look

Over a six-month period in 2022 and 2023, I analyzed 579 posts by members of the online support group. The posts, all written by mothers, were selected from thousands by eliminating those that simply shared resources or

To Table of Contents


Mothers of dyslexic children often assure each other that there is ‘light at the end of the tunnel.

motivational quotes.

The mothers who posted were often overwhelmed by their child’s diagnosis. They wrote of learning to cope with the pain of seeing their child struggle and the difficulty of working with school systems to get their child needed support. They used metaphors to make sense of their emotions surrounding the dyslexia diagnosis, their interactions with schools and their identity as advocates.

The metaphors provide clues to improving the way schools work with children with dyslexia – and other learning disabilities – and their families. For instance, knowing that many mothers describe the process of obtaining support for their child as a “labyrinth,” schools could focus on reducing bureaucratic barriers and providing clearer, more accessible pathways to intervention.

Motherly instincts

Mothers often describe the early stages of this journey – before a child’s diagnosis – as knowing something is wrong but being unable to put a name to it. “Looking at his spelling and reading with him is setting off my alarm bells,” one mother commented. Said another, “Are these red flags or just me reading too much into things?”

Once the mothers had a word – dyslexia – to identify the cause of their child’s difficulties, they dived headfirst into research, seeking resources to help their child succeed. Many compared this experience to being “caught in a whirlwind” of new information.

“I am in overdrive googling, reading, watching videos and reaching out,” said one mother. Another called the diagnosis an eye-opener. “We are beating ourselves up for the times we saw his refusal to do spelling words or writing as being lazy or not caring.”

Mothers encouraged one another to trust their instincts. One admitted, “I knew in my bones something was wrong.” Another mother commented: “Stick to your gut. If you have any inkling that your child is off track, do not wait for anyone else to step up — be your child’s champion.”

Navigating schools

Although children with a diagnosed disability are entitled to an individual education plan, or IEP, getting help from the school district for a child with dyslexia, or another learning disability, is often difficult. Many mothers compared this experience to navigating a maze or a labyrinth in which they encountered numerous obstacles. They commonly characterized the complicated, tiring series of steps required for securing an IEP as “a lengthy journey,” “jumping through hoops,” “a charade” and an “uphill battle.”

They often viewed the educational system as intimidating and unyielding. The maze metaphor emphasizes the confusion many parents feel when trying to understand the jargon and legal


Services for dyslexic children can be difficult to access at school

To Table of Contents

The resistance mothers encountered largely reflects the high costs of special education services, which, coupled with a lack of funding, spreads school resources thin. While schools will conduct an evaluation to determine if a child qualifies for additional help, they do not provide a detailed diagnosis, and such evaluations often take place after a child has fallen behind academically.

An educational psychologist can provide a diagnosis of dyslexia after an extensive evaluation process, but this testing is expensive, costing as much as US$5,000, depending on the location and the specialist selected. To further complicate the situation, a private diagnosis does not guarantee support from the school district.

Showing the way

The mothers' language serves as a guide on how to approach the process. They warn each other not to delay raising concerns: "Do not get buried in the wait-and-see approach, this is a wait-to-fail approach," urged one mother.

Another mother advised, "You have to be the squeaky wheel – squeak with data and the law under your belt."

Research shows that providing supports for children with dyslexia is more than a request for an accommodation; it is a battle for educational equity. Children whose dyslexia is not recognized may be viewed as less intelligent and less motivated by teachers and other children.

As a result, dyslexic children may not thrive socially, emotionally or academically.

Reframing dyslexia through metaphors

Mothers use metaphors of distance to convey that dyslexia is a long-term journey that requires sustained effort, patience and endurance.

"This is a marathon, not a sprint, and we are on the right course," wrote one mother. "It's a tough, long slog, do not forget to celebrate the small victories along the way," said another.

The language shows the difficulties that mothers face not only in securing vital support services for their children, but also in learning to support and accept their child and the way dyslexia impacts them.

Focusing on the whole child, instead of the child's limitations, can help mothers see that dyslexia is just one aspect of their child's identity. "We can't fix them because they are not broken," wrote one mother.

Despite the challenges, many moms agreed that "dyslexia is a gift not opened in school." While traditional classrooms may overlook their children's talents, they noted their children's creativity, resilience and "outside the box" thinking. They hold onto the hope that their children will find places where they can flourish. ■

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

To Table of Contents

Accessiblity — MEETS — Adventure

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

PLAN YOUR ADVENTURE NOW

KRISTEN DEANDRADE

Photo Credit:
Monica Lokitus

AUTHOR OF

Little Legs, Big Heart: One Girl's Journey of Acceptance, Perseverance, and Growth

To Table of Conte

Bean Gill: Turning paralysis into power

What do you do when life serves you a plot twist that nobody could see coming? Benveet (Bean) Gill knows. In July 2012, a virus snuck into her spinal cord and left her paralyzed from the waist down. One minute, she was walking; the next, she wasn't. But this isn't a sob story. It's a lightning bolt of a tale about flipping the script, breaking molds and proving that the rules we think we live by are optional.

Bean Gill, a born-and-raised Edmontonian, has moved beyond just existing in her world—she has rebuilt it. She's vivacious, unapologetic and magnetic, with energy that practically crackles when she speaks. "Yeah, I got paralyzed, but that's just a thing that happened to me. It's not who I am," she says with a shrug, as if the entire medical event were as mundane as losing a sock in the laundry.

But there's nothing mundane about what happened. The paralysis affected her legs, but it handed her a challenge—and she's the kind of person who answers those with gusto.

First victory: Wiggling a toe

Bean was an x-ray tech before her injury, raking in six figures and living a life fueled by paychecks and pleasure. "I made a lot of money and lived a very nice life," Bean shared. "Whatever I wanted, I bought." But after paralysis threw her financial and physical independence into chaos, she had to rethink everything. Her first victory? Wiggling her big toe.

"It's wild," she says, recounting the months of effort that went into moving one tiny part of her body. "You don't realize how powerful something so small can feel until you do it." That wiggle was her proof that recovery was possible—slow, sure and anything but linear. She leaned into the process, day by day, until her body started listening to her brain again. Movement returned, not symmetrically or dramatically, but like puzzle pieces slowly snapping into place.

"One of the misconceptions of paralysis I want to squash is that once you're paralyzed, you can't feel anything, you can't move anything," Bean said. "While this is true for a small percentage of cases, most people with spinal cord injuries can actually move and feel below their level of injury and recovery can and does happen. And what mine looked like specifically is it started with me wiggling my big toe on my right foot." That small movement became a pivotal moment, proving that progress is possible. Over time,

To Table of Contents

her body began to reconnect, piece by piece. Even more than a decade later, her recovery continues, driven by persistence and a belief in what's achievable.

Introducing ReYu: A revolution disguised as a recovery center

Bean realized the world needed to see what was possible when you stop underestimating the human body. That realization took shape and became ReYu Paralysis Recovery Center, a nonprofit she launched in Edmonton. ReYu isn't your average clinic. It's a place where paralysis meets possibility every day. It's science, sweat and a refusal to believe in the word "can't."

Inspired by her own recovery and a game-changing visit to an activity-based therapy center in California, Bean came back to Edmonton determined to create something similar. "When I rolled into that facility, it was the first time I didn't feel like I had a disability. It was like, 'Oh, this is where I belong.'" That sense of belonging was something she wanted to replicate—and expand upon.

Since opening its doors, ReYu has welcomed over 400 clients, ranging from kids to seniors, all with neurological conditions. They come for recovery, but they leave with something bigger: confidence. At ReYu, kids take their first steps after doctors said they never would. Adults regain mobility and ditch wheelchairs for walkers. It's not about miraculous transformations but about hard work and relentless belief in progress.

Breaking the confidence barrier

Bean doesn't mince words about the challenges people with disabilities face—not just physical ones, but the psychological walls that society loves to build. Confidence, she says, is the real game-changer.

"When you feel good about yourself, you're unstoppable," she explains. "You'll apply for that job, go out to eat with adaptive utensils, or ask someone out without second-guessing yourself. That's the real win."

And it's not only clients who leave with a different mindset after sessions at ReYu. Volunteers and able-bodied visitors walk away transformed, too. Bean loves to challenge them to try navigating life in a wheelchair, if only for a few minutes. It's not long before they see the cracks in a world built for a narrow definition of ability.

Fun is mandatory

If Bean has a personal philosophy, it's this: fun is non-negotiable. "If I'm not having fun, what am I even doing?" she asks, half-joking but also completely serious. Fun isn't an escape from the hard stuff—it's how she powers through it. Whether she's throwing a birthday bash for ReYu (yes, they celebrate it like a person) or organizing wheelchair washes for the community, she injects joy into every corner of her work.

One of her favorite events? The

To Table of Contents

5K Walk, Run, and Roll. It's a fundraiser with a twist: able-bodied participants are encouraged to complete the route in a wheelchair. "You think it's easy until you hit the first hill," Bean laughs. "Then you get it."

Pushing the narrative

Bean's reach extends beyond ReYu. She's also the star of Push, a CBC Gem docuseries about her life and the lives of her "wheelie peeps." Over two seasons, it peeled back the curtain on the realities of living with disabilities, mixing humor, heartbreak and raw honesty. The show wasn't renewed for a third season, but its impact was seismic.

"Parents of kids with disabilities have told me, 'Now I know my child has a bright future,'" she says. "That's why we did it. That's why it matters."

What's next for Bean?

The horizon for Bean Gill is always expanding. ReYu is growing and Bean is also diving deeper into keynote speaking, sharing her story and shattering stereotypes on stages across the country. She's also cooking up ideas for new media projects, always looking for fresh ways to educate, inspire and entertain.

But no matter how big the vision gets, her roots stay planted in the same belief: inclusion isn't some lofty ideal. It's the only way forward. "If we're separating ourselves because of how we look, move, or think, we're all losing. That's not humanity; that's fear. And I don't do fear."

Wiggle your toe

What do you do when life pulls the rug out from under you? If you're Bean Gill, you wiggle your toe. Then you wiggle something bigger. Then you get out there and shake the whole world. Because sometimes, the smallest moves can change everything. ■


Bean and family

To Table of Contents


Diane Paylor

Diane Paylor:
From personal struggle to community advocate

Meeting Diane Paylor is like stepping into a whirlwind of energy and purpose. An author, editor, cancer survivor, advocate and yoga instructor—she's also a force of nature, reshaping every challenge life sends her way into something positive. In a conversation, her words hit with precision and purpose, leaving you both inspired and introspective. Diane has a way of making you see your own life through a sharper, more generous lens. Today, her work is rooted in advocacy, health and community, but her influence extends far beyond labels or titles.

When asked about how personal challenges have shaped her perspective, she doesn't flinch. "You never know how life changes," she begins, drawing us into a tale of her brother's unexpected disability and the death of her mom, which shook the foundation of her world. One day, everything is steady, and the next, you're standing knee-deep in chaos. But Diane doesn't let the storm swallow her. Instead, she reflects: "You might not need help today, but tomorrow you could be the one standing in line, hoping someone sees you."

Diane's world shifted on its axis when her days of feeling unwell demanded she look inward and outward simultaneously. Her body whispered of trouble long before she listened, but when the message became a roar, Diane had no choice but to face it head-on. Hers wasn't a casual tussle with discomfort; it was pain, hospital stays and that gut-deep knowledge that something wasn't just off but wildly, frighteningly wrong.

It's easy to think of illness as a thief, robbing you of energy, peace, or the illusion of invincibility. For Diane, though, the thief also brought a gift: clarity. "You don't know how much you've ignored yourself until your body forces you to pay attention," Diane says. But she doesn't speak of regret; she talks about awakening. "I used to think I'd always be the one helping others—family, friends, strangers. But then I realized I needed help. Real, deep help. That's when Achievable Health entered my life."

Achievable Health is an important pillar in Los Angeles for individuals and families navigating health challenges, particularly those with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). But Diane wasn't part of their core demographic, which made her experience there both revelatory and affirming. "When I went to them, they didn't care that I didn't fit the profile," Diane says. "They cared that I needed care." And care they did. From physical health to mental well-being, the team at Achievable Health listened to Diane, to her words and what wasn't said in the spaces between them.

Diane vividly recalls her first encounter with Nurse Practitioner Richardson at Achievable Health. "She didn't just listen—she heard and even caught what I wasn't saying. When I told her about my symptoms, she didn't brush them aside or chalk them up to something trivial. She leaned into my fears and said, 'We're going to figure this out.'" That approach became a lifeline for Diane, leading to tests, referrals and eventually a diagnosis: cancer—a word heavy with implications, but in Achievable Health's hands, it wasn't the end for Diane. It was a beginning.

Cancer changes you. That's a cliché until it's your life, and what this meant for Diane was an overhaul—physically, emotionally and spiritually. "I used to be so functional," she says. "Always moving, doing, organizing. And then . . . I wasn't. It was like my body staged a rebellion, and my spirit had to follow." But

To Table of Contents

Achievable Health didn't let her slip into despair. They crafted a net of care that went beyond the clinical: mental health support, community resources and an acknowledgement that Diane's voice mattered.

That voice, as anyone who knows Diane can attest, is one of her superpowers. Whether through storytelling, advocacy, or writing, her voice resonates. "I think about the women I taught yoga to," she reflects. "Black women, older women, women who've carried the world on their backs. Teaching them to breathe—just breathe—felt revolutionary. And as a board member at Achievable Health, I'm telling my story to help others breathe through their own challenges."

Grateful for Achievable Health's role in her survival, she joined their board to amplify the organization's impact. She became not just a recipient of care but an architect of it for others. "Advocacy isn't a job; it's a responsibility," she says. "Especially for those of us who've been given a second chance."

It's not just about medical care for Achievable Health either. They are reshaping the narrative around what health equity looks like. As Diane puts it, "They're a model of what care should be: attuned, human and unyielding in their commitment." And through her storytelling, Diane ensures their work reaches ears that need to hear it.

Beyond Achievable, Diane's life has shifted to adaptation and rediscovery. Once a yoga teacher who guided others through poses and breathwork, she now focuses on the mental and emotional aspects of the practice. Chronic pain from cancer treatments has limited her physically, but it's deepened her understanding of acceptance. "Life is different now. My practice is different. But that's the thing about yoga and life: it evolves with you."

Fun isn't a forgotten concept in Diane's world, either. She finds joy in jazz performances, the stock market (yes, really), and the art of storytelling. "I've always been a bit of a dancer," she says with a laugh. "But these days, it's more about the rhythm of life. Listening, adapting, moving when I can and resting when I can't."

Her advocacy has also expanded into financial empowerment. "I got into trading during my cancer journey. It was a way to feel in control when everything else felt chaotic," Diane shares. She's turned that interest into another means of connection, bridging gaps in financial literacy for others who might feel excluded from that world.

What does Diane Paylor want you to take from her story? That being heard can save your life. That care is not a luxury—it's a right. That your voice, no matter how faint, matters. And that communities like Achievable Health aren't just places of healing but engines of change.

"When you're in the thick of it," Diane says, "you don't see the other side. But if you trust the people around you, the process, your own strength—you'll get there. And maybe, just maybe, you'll be able to light the way for someone else."

Diane Paylor's light is unmistakable. And thanks to her, countless others are finding their own paths forward, one story, one breath, one step at a time. ■

Diane teaching her first yoga class in 2017

Diane teaching her first yoga class in 2017

Diane at a yoga event with her favourite DJ

Her book, Yin Yoga | www.dianepaylor.com | Achievable Health

To Table of Contents

The Empowered Special Needs MAMA BEAR Journeys

By Christine Staple Ebanks

The Special Needs Mama Bear Spirit

Have you ever watched a mama bear—whether in a nature documentary, on social media or even in person? You've likely noticed her fierce determination to protect, nurture, and guide her cubs as they navigate life. She stands strong in the face of threats, tirelessly searching for what they need and adapting to every challenge to ensure they survive and thrive.

As special needs mamas, our fierce love and determination become second nature. Facing our child's diagnosis with strength and focus transforms us into formidable advocates and the most dedicated supporters and cheerleaders. Along the way, we take on what typically requires a team of multidisciplinary specialists—mastering medical terminologies, therapy techniques, and specialized care strategies—all to meet our child's unique needs. Even when it doesn't feel like it, we are doing an incredible job because whichever role we step into, our mission remains the same—empowering our children to thrive and reach their full potential.

From overwhelmed to empowered Mama

I still remember when my son was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. He was only nine months old, and though I was already a mother to three young children, the diagnosis stripped me of everything I thought I knew about parenting. Suddenly, I was insecure, afraid, and second-guessing myself. That was twenty years ago, and today, my son is an amazing young man, disability and all. He is the life of the party, with a million-dollar smile that infuses warmth into everyone's lives.

The Mama Bear determination

But my journey to this point didn't come easy. At the time of his birth, we lived in Jamaica, where services for children with disabilities were limited. Like the mama bear, I grew into the advocate I am today, stepping up to speak for him. It wasn't easy, but my love for my child and my desire to see him receive the support he needed was compelling. I founded the Nathan Ebanks Foundation, where, for fifteen years, I became the voice and face of the disability inclusion movement in Jamaica. Later, we moved to the United States for his high school years. While services were more extensive, they were often challenging to access. I had to learn how to be my son's voice, fighting for the individualized services he needed to ensure his educational experience was meaningful. I also found many mothers were experiencing challenges, so I founded Raising Special Needs Inc. To provide parenting education and coaching services.

Today, I have truly leaned into the *special needs mama bear* title. But that was not always the case. I still remember the first time I was called that—Nathan was two years old. At first, I didn't think much of it. It wasn't a role I consciously chose but rather one I grew into out of necessity. However, looking back on our journey—Nathan graduating high school to a standing ovation in 2018, his transition into a well-adjusted and confident young man, his debut speaking engagement at a middle school, and the systems that have improved because of him—I realize what an honor that title truly is. It has also inspired me to use the systems I have created in our lives

To Table of Contents

Nathan's graduation

Nathan's speaking engagement

Nathan and his family

and through my practice to support other mothers in finding their roar. This is why I developed the Special Needs Mama Bear Principle and System, which I will introduce in my upcoming book, *The Special Needs Mama Bear Playbook: Empowering Families One Special Journey at a Time.* I have found that the power of choice empowers us rather than obligates us; it transforms the journey, growing our confidence and enabling us to thrive, find joy, and discover purpose in raising and supporting our children with disabilities. While we may not have chosen for our child to have a disability, we have the power to choose acceptance—to embrace them as they are and create a fulfilling life for ourselves, our child, and our family. And I am eager to share this with you, our readers.

Empowering our Special Needs Mama community

As special needs mamas, fierce love and determination become second nature. When faced with our child's diagnosis, we tap into strengths we never knew we had, transforming into formidable advocates and dedicated supporters. We take on what usually requires a team of specialists—mastering medical terms, therapy techniques, and

To Table of Contents

specialized care strategies—to meet our child's unique needs. Even on the toughest days, we rise to the challenge, proving that our love knows no limits. No matter the role we step into, our mission is empowering our children to thrive.

Today, over 1.3 billion people worldwide live with disabilities, and behind many of them are families, figuring things out one step at a time. No two journeys are the same, even with identical diagnoses. The availability of healthcare, education, and support systems can make all the difference, yet these resources are not always within reach. The services we see today didn't originate from governments or organizations—they began with parents and individuals who spoke up, demanded change, and paved the way for progress. When we don't share our voices, those who create policies and programs may never truly understand how to support us and our children. That's why our voices matter.

The Special Needs Mama Bear principle is built on this belief. When parents feel empowered, they move beyond simply surviving to truly thriving—and that is the ultimate goal. This segment is dedicated to sharing our journeys, learning from one another, and building a supportive, confident community of mama bears who inspire and uplift each other every step of the way. ■

> "While we may not have chosen for our child to have a disability, we have the power to choose acceptance—to embrace them as they are and create a fulfilling life for ourselves, our child, and our family."
>
> *Christine Staple Ebanks*


Nathan's 2025 school portrait

Join the Special Needs Mama Bear community

We invite you to join the Special Needs Mama Bear community of empowered special needs parents. In this segment, we will share inspiring stories, practical strategies, and expert insights to help you navigate your journey with confidence.

Share your story for an opportunity to be featured.

Join our community on social media by following us:

Facebook @cstapleebanks

Instagram @ @cstapleebanks

LinkedIn: christinestapleebanks

and tag a friend or five, whoever can benefit from joining our movement. Your voice is vital in building a stronger, more connected network of Mama Bears.

Like bears in the wild, we are stronger together. Let's celebrate our victories and advocate for a more inclusive world for our children.

Want to share your story?
Email me at:
contact@thespecialneedsmamabear.com

Your journey may inspire and uplift others in our community.

To Table of Contents

To Table of Contents


4Wheel City

Disabled Lives Matter:

How Hip Hop amplifies voices of resilience in a crisis-driven world

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

As I write this on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, I reflect on how we can advance the work of building a society with equality, freedom, and justice for all. Dr. King's words from his Letter from Birmingham Jail resonate deeply: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." (2020). Statement Against Racism from the Society of Urologic Nurses and Associates. Urologic Nursing, 40(4), 162. Imagine a world designed with our most vulnerable in mind—a stronger and more resilient world for everyone. From universally accessible built environments that foster a sense of belonging, equitable access to education and healthcare that addresses diverse needs, to inclusive emergency preparedness plans, such thoughtful design would benefit us all. As Judy Heumann said, "Disability only becomes a tragedy when society fails to provide the things we need to lead our lives." Activist Judy Heumann led a reimagining of what it means to be disabled - Disability Advocacy Resource Unit (DARU). By centering inclusivity in all aspects of society, we create a future where equity isn't just a dream but a lived reality.

In the spirit of naming some of our past heroes, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Judy Heumann, I name visionaries 4 Wheel City, founded by Namel "Tapwaterz" Norris and Ricardo "Rickfire" Velasquez, who intertwines the creative and powerful energy of hip-hop music with the mission of disability advocacy. I got the opportunity to chat with Norris about how the cross-pollination of these two movements not only pushes the needle on the momentum but enriches each other, fostering a

To Table of Contents

more inclusive cultural and social landscape.

4 Wheel City released a remastered version of *Disabled Lives Matter* song, amplifying the critical need for improved emergency procedures for people with disabilities. The song was created when Marcie Roth from the National Disaster Strategies Organization reached out to 4 Wheel City following Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. "That experience opened our eyes, and we realized it wasn't just a song—it was the beginning of a movement," says Norris.

As we continue to witness the impacts of climate change and the increase in environmental disasters, the duo hopes the song inspires critical conversations about the importance of accessibility and inclusion. "Crises like the California wildfires, where people with disabilities are often overlooked," Norris adds. "It's about making sure no one is left behind."

"Music is a universal language," says Norris. "It grabs attention and connects people emotionally," adds Norris—having the power to bridge the gap between cultures. "Through songs like *Disabled Lives Matter*, we can amplify the voices of the disabled community, highlight the barriers they face during crises," says Norris with a call to action for "relief organizations, policymakers, and the public about the need for accessible evacuation plans, shelters, and resources"

Hip-hop has always been more than music—it's a movement, a radical act of joy and resistance, empowerment and transformation. In 4 Wheel City's song *Shining and Rolling*, they transform pain into a celebration of radical joy and resilience, claiming space in a world that often denies it. Norris shares that *Shining and Rolling* was produced by Hit-Boy through a partnership with UnitedMasters and RAMPD to create a track that celebrated disability culture while delivering a sound the streets could relate to. "We wanted to show that being in a wheelchair doesn't mean you can't shine or roll through life with strength and style. I hope the song inspires pride, confidence, and resilience in the disabled community and helps break down stereotypes."

Shining and Rolling has transcended its role as a song to become the symbol and namesake of the "Shining and Rolling Award." 4 Wheel City gave the first award to Ms. Wheelchair NYC Khalia Hayslett in 2023 at The Axis Project's RollOut Jam, an all bodies roller party in Rockefeller Center that featured 4 Wheel city and along with other performers from the disability community. This award honors "individuals who embody the spirit of shining and rolling—those who inspire others and live life to the fullest despite their disabilities." says Norris. They most recently gave the award to MiaMoney at The Axis Project's Holiday Jam, where both Miamoney and 4 Wheel City performed. He'd love to see the award grow into something bigger. "It would be amazing to have people from all over the world nominated or apply for the award, making it a global celebration of resilience and empowerment," says Norris.

Norris has not allowed adversity to define him "I've learned to turn my pain into purpose. Through my music and advocacy, I share my story to inspire others, break barriers, and prove that disabilities are not limitations—they're a part of who we are." At 17, Norris was accidentally shot in the neck by his cousin, and Velasquez was struck by a stray bullet. They grew up in the same neighborhood and met right after their accidents when Norris' mom asked Velasquez to


Disabled Lives Matter

4 Wheel City


SHINING AND ROLLING

TapWaterz

MiaMoney

Ms. Wheelchair NYC Khalia Hayslett

befriend him, both being wheelchair users.

Since that fateful meeting in 1999, they have collaborated with music icons like Snoop Dogg and Stevie Wonder and performed at prestigious venues such as the White House and the United Nations. They also advocate for an end to gun violence and perform at hospitals, schools, and rehab centers. Norris's journey has taught him that adversity is a part of life but doesn't define you. “I've learned to turn my pain into purpose. Through my music and advocacy, I share my story to inspire others, break barriers, and prove that disabilities are not limitations—they're a part of who we are.”

Even though 4 Wheel City is starting to hit its groove, the music industry has significant room to grow in supporting artists with disabilities.

“This means providing platforms, resources, and opportunities while ensuring that events and spaces are fully accessible. Inclusion should be a priority, not an afterthought,” says Norris. Norris's tip for young artists with disabilities who want to break into the industry is to “Embrace your disability—it's part of your story and your strength. Have a purpose behind your art, seize every opportunity, and let your light shine. Don't let anyone tell you what you can't do."

4Wheel City gun violence conference

When 4 Wheel City was featured on NY1 as New Yorkers of the Week, it marked a monumental moment for the duo. After the segment aired, a man approached Velasquez

To Table of Contents

and Norris, expressing how their story inspired him to keep going and never give up. “He wasn’t in a wheelchair,” Norris recalled, “and that was the first time I realized our message wasn’t just for people with disabilities—it was for everyone.”

What may still be a dream for today, for Norris, “Unlimited access means never having to wonder if a place is wheelchair accessible or if it can accommodate me. It’s about having the peace of mind that I can go anywhere and have the same opportunities and experiences as everyone else. Equal access should be a given, not a privilege.” So, until unlimited access is reality, 4 Wheel City will continue to inspire us all, reminding us of the power of resilience, creativity, and unity.

What's next? Good things are on the horizon, as they just dropped the "4 Wheel City Hip Hop Since 1999" mixtape. On Valentine’s Day, they will release "Unconditional Love," Norris’s single featuring James Ian. Plus, they’re gearing up for the 2025 Disability Hip Hop Jam. ■


4Wheel City at the United Nations


4Wheel City with rollers at Disability Pride Parade


4Wheel City with Queen Latifah

Stillness in motion: Mindfulness and meditation for people with disabilities

The world moves at a relentless pace. It hums with urgency, pressing in with its noise, demanding attention. For those living with a disability, the weight of daily responsibilities—appointments, accessibility struggles, societal expectations—can add an invisible layer of exhaustion. The mind, much like the body, carries tension, worry, frustration.

But somewhere within the rush, there is stillness waiting to be noticed.

Mindfulness is presence. It is the quiet awareness of now—not tangled in yesterday's regrets or lost in tomorrow's uncertainties. For those navigating disability, this practice becomes more than relaxation. It is a way to reclaim space in a world that often asks for too much.

Breath as an anchor

Breath is always available, steady and unfailing. It does not require movement, energy, or effort beyond simple attention. The air enters the nose, cool and even. It fills the lungs, then releases, carrying tension with it. Counting can help—inhale for four counts, exhale for four.

This small act shifts the body's rhythm. It creates a moment of calm between discomfort and reaction, offering a pause when everything else feels overwhelming.

Meditation that adapts to the body

The common image of meditation is rigid—a silent room, a still body, an empty mind. But real meditation bends and adapts, fitting each person in their own way.

For those who cannot sit still, awareness can happen in motion. A wheelchair user might focus on the rhythm of their movement, the way their hands grip the wheels, the feeling of each push forward. Someone with chronic pain can practice body scanning—mentally checking in with different parts of the body, not resisting discomfort but acknowledging it without judgment. A person with ADHD or

To Table of Contents

sensory sensitivities may prefer guided meditations with soft music or nature sounds, something gentle to keep attention anchored.

There is no single way to meditate. The experience is shaped by the individual, not the other way around.

Engaging the senses

Stillness is not always easy. Engaging the senses can offer another way in.

TOUCH: Holding a textured object—a smooth stone, a cup of warm tea, a soft fabric—grounds awareness in the present.

SOUND: Noticing layers of sound—the hum of a fan, the rustle of leaves, the distant murmur of voices—gives the mind something to hold onto.

SIGHT: Observing a single object, tracing its shape, color, and shadow, slows racing thoughts.

TASTE: Taking one small bite of food, letting each flavor unfold fully, can be a quiet act of presence.

These moments of focus redirect the mind from spiraling worries toward something real and immediate.

Compassion for the self

Some days, mindfulness will feel easy. Other days, the mind will wander, frustration will take over, or pain will overshadow everything else. That does not mean failure.

Society often pushes the idea of constant progress, urging people with disabilities to "push through," "overcome," or "prove" something. Mindfulness offers a different message: exist as you are. Breathe through this moment. Nothing else is required.

That shift changes everything. Not the world. Not the disability. But the way each moment is met. And sometimes, that is enough. ■

> “Your mind knows no barriers—find peace where you are.

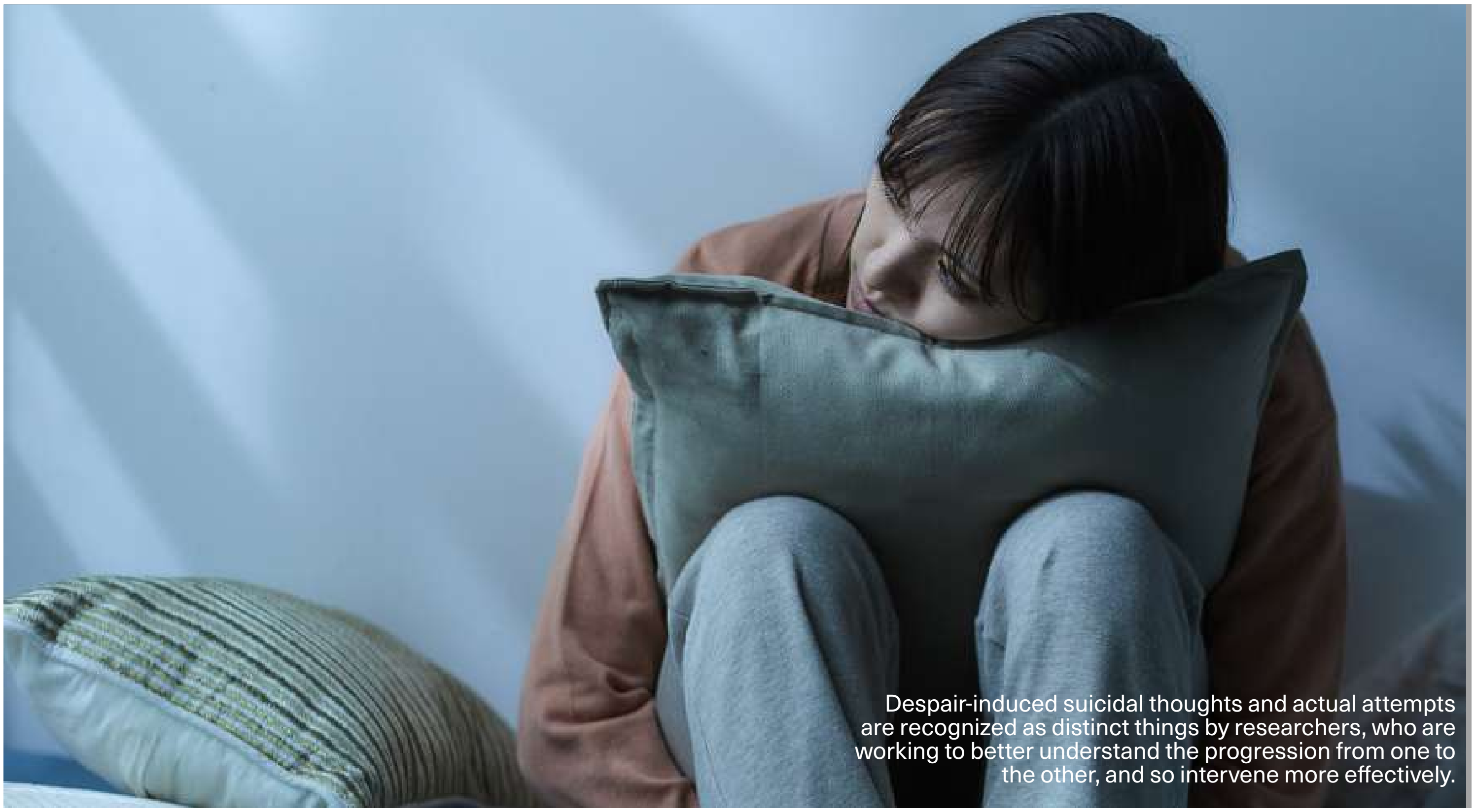
To Table of Contents

THE MIND

Short-circuiting the suicide cascade

Psychologists are seeking better ways to cut the link between dire thoughts and fatal action. Among their strategies: individualized plans for pulling back from the brink, and limiting access to deadly means, especially guns.

By Charlotte Huff



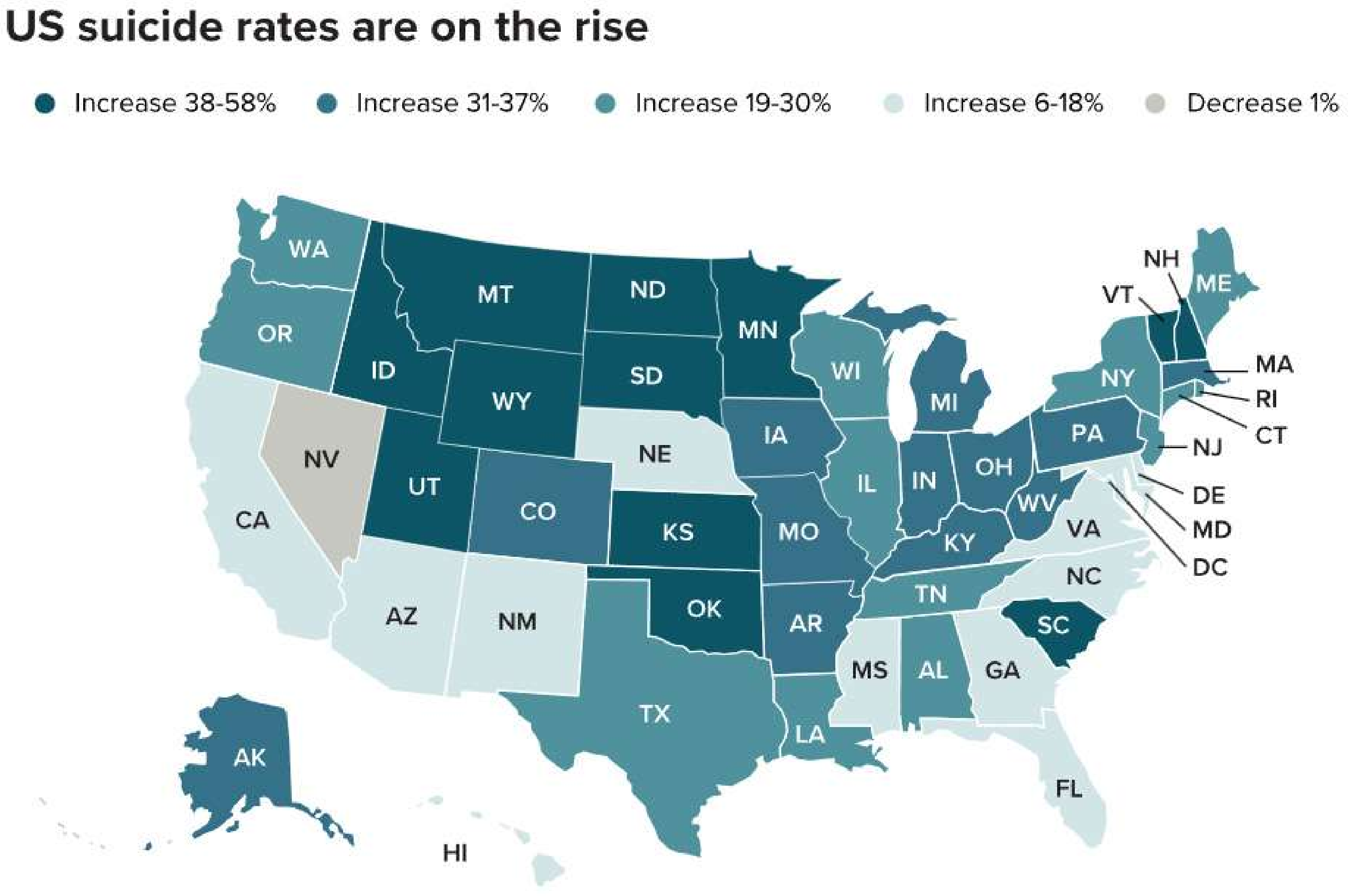
Despair-induced suicidal thoughts and actual attempts are recognized as distinct things by researchers, who are working to better understand the progression from one to the other, and so intervene more effectively.

The suicide rate in the United States continues to spiral upward, with seemingly no end in sight. More than 45,000 Americans take their own lives each year, 33 percent more than did so in 1999, according to the most recent federal data.

It's a national public health crisis — one that researchers and clinicians have struggled to thwart because the triggers of suicide are so poorly understood. People may wrestle with suicidal thoughts for years, but not follow through. Depression and other mental health conditions are clearly risk factors, but such diagnoses aren't linked to roughly half of all US suicides. Some prevention efforts, such as asking a patient to sign a "contract" to not commit suicide, have proved to be largely useless.

But there's been some encouraging progress in recent years, both in understanding the suicidal thought process and in developing individual and societal interventions to better assist those caught in the crucible of such a crisis. Instead of encouraging people to sign no-suicide contracts, clinicians now are more likely to work with a patient to design a personalized prevention plan to use when suicidal thoughts flare. Clinicians and suicide prevention experts are tackling how suicide is portrayed in the media, working to debunk misunderstandings and trying to slow access to pills, guns and other means, particularly for individuals who have expressed suicidal thoughts.

To Table of Contents



US suicide rates are on the rise

SOURCE: CDC'S NATIONAL VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEM; CDC VITAL SIGNS, JUNE 2018

KNOWABLE MAGAZINE

Across the United States, suicide rates are rising. Here are the percentage increases for different states from 1999 through 2016. Read more about the statistics at the CDC's website.

"From a clinical perspective, we can do a lot better than just leaving people on their own to figure out how to deal with not killing themselves," says Barbara Stanley, a clinical psychologist at New York City's Columbia University. "We can give them strategies and skills."

What turns thought to action?

Some 15 years ago, researchers began to view suicide as two distinct processes —suicidal thoughts, also called ideation, and the progression that can lead to an attempt. That shift in thinking has spawned research on when and how ideation leads to action, and the risk factors involved.

David Klonsky, a psychologist at the University of British Columbia, and Alexis May, then a graduate student and now at Connecticut's Wesleyan University, posited that three steps tip the balance from ideation to action. They explore their Three-Step Theory, and several others with overlapping elements, as part of a look at suicidal ideation and attempts in the 2016 Annual Review of Clinical Psychology.

The first step — the psychological groundwork — is laid when someone is living with unremitting emotional or physical pain, which is further amplified if it's overlaid by a sense of hopelessness: a feeling that there's no way out. "Another way to think about step one," Klonsky says, "is that it's creating that desire to not want to be alive."

The second step in the theory rests on the degree to which

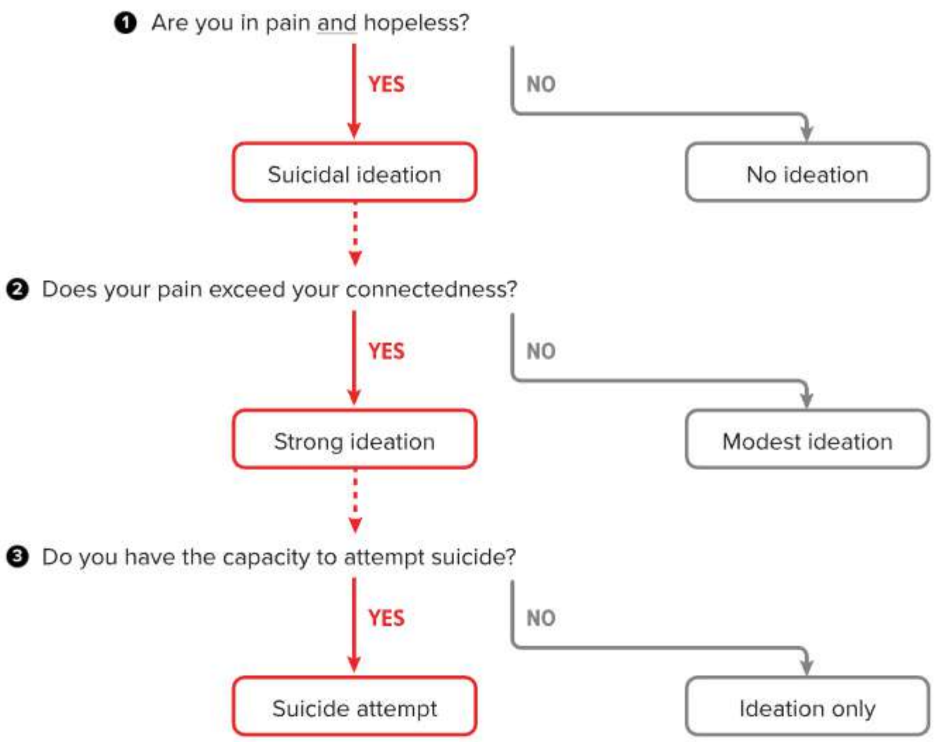
To Table of Contents

that pain and hopelessness is ameliorated by connectedness to others or to a broader community. Those ties might be rooted not just in personal relationships — a challenge in today's America where loneliness appears to be on the upswing — but also connections to a job, a personal cause or even the outcome of the current football season.

If bleakness and disconnectedness align, a person becomes vulnerable to taking the critical third step: the leap from thoughts to action. Basic personality plays a role here: Someone less squeamish about blood and violence will have lowered sensitivity to inflicting pain and harm on themselves. But in large part, the leap to step three is a matter of practical capability — access to lethal means and the knowledge to use them. In America, that often means guns. "If someone is living with a firearm and they … know how to use it, their practical capability is very, very high," Klonsky says.

Heightened practical capability can also figure in the emergence of apparently related suicides, such as the unsettling deaths this March involving survivors of the Parkland school shootings. Knowing that someone you know, or who appears similar to you, has committed suicide can make taking one's own life seem more feasible, suicide prevention experts say.

The path from suicidal thoughts to self-harm



SOURCE: E.D. KLONSKY *ET AL / AR CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY* 2016 KNOWABLE MAGAZINE

Of the people who think about suicide, relatively few go the next step and translate their thoughts into action. This image depicts the path by which suicidal thoughts (also known as suicidal ideation) lead to follow-through. Pain and hopelessness without a counterbalancing connectedness to people and other valued things intensify the ideation. Then comes "capacity" to act, which is somewhat influenced by personality but even more by easy access to, and knowhow about, the means to carry out an attempt.

A troubling influence

For this reason, experts were highly critical of the popular Netflix dramatic series "13 Reasons Why," which first aired in 2017 and featured a teenage girl who, after her suicide, released 13 score-settling tapes describing the ways people in her life had failed her. Not only could other teens identify with the girl, but the program also showed the method in graphic detail, presenting suicidally inclined viewers with a means.

"That was a lot of the backlash with the show," says Catherine Glenn, who studies self-injury risk factors in adolescents at the University of Rochester in New York. "That played out [the method] in almost a step-by-step fashion." And hospitalizations for suicide attempts and suicidal thoughts did indeed increase after the show aired, according to a recent study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health.*

But there is a surprising safety net for all potential suicide victims: time. It's on their side if they can be kept away from guns or other immediately lethal means. Research shows again and again that the window of peak suicide risk is narrow, frequently just an hour or so, and sometimes less than 20 minutes. "The choice to take one's life is rarely a long-term stable choice," Klonsky says. "It's usually made in the moment of crisis that's not as bad even five or six hours later."

Keeping the window to life open

Still, clinicians are frequently faced

To Table of Contents

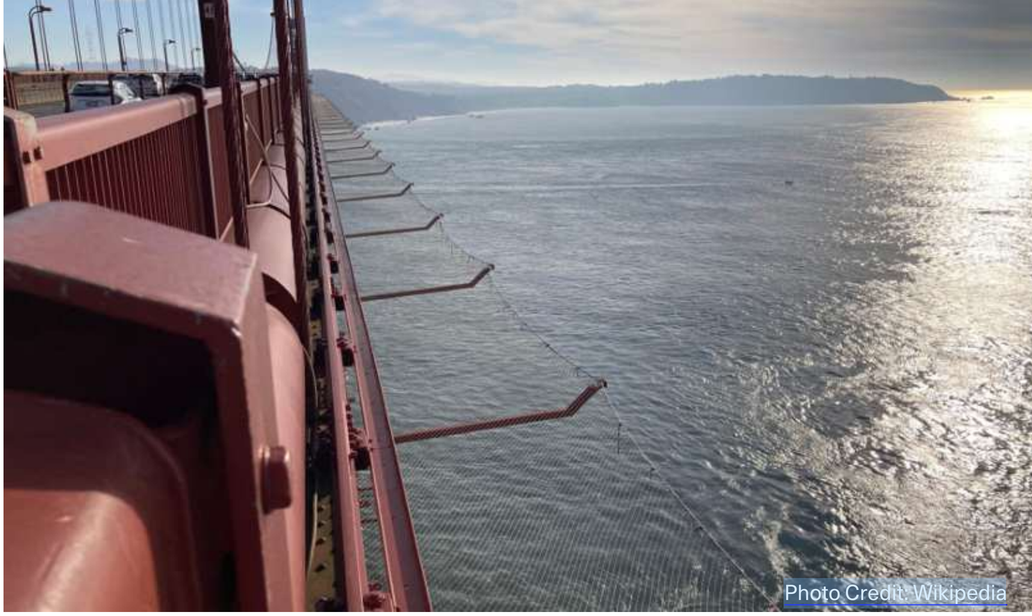


Photo Credit: Wikipedia

The crisis moment triggering a suicide attempt can be very brief, and measures to deter action can make the difference between a life fully lived and one cut short. The safety net shown in this artist's rendering is under construction at San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, where almost 1,700 people have died by suicide since it was built in 1937. The nets will be installed 20 feet below the sidewalk and extend out 20 feet, retaining views from the bridge and the structure's iconic appearance, while making it harder to jump into the water.

suicidal thoughts — but not ill enough to be hospitalized. How best to keep them safe in the weeks and months to come?

"By and large, if someone is in your office or in an emergency room, they at least have mixed feelings about killing themselves," says Stanley. "As a clinician, you align with the part of them that wants to stay alive."

Previously, and sometimes even today, patients who have expressed suicidal thoughts or attempted suicide have been asked to sign a contract promising not to try again. Research into this contractual approach has been limited, but what data exist don't show benefit. There also are some practical reasons why this approach has proved to be a non-starter, Stanley says. Patients have described the paperwork as little more than a way to shield clinicians and clinicians' employers against future liability. Plus, a contract by definition requires that both parties "have skin in the game," Stanley points out. "For a no-suicide contract, the only person giving is the patient."

Instead, clinicians have begun working with at-risk patients to create individual prevention plans. Working together, they design a concrete series of steps for recognizing a burgeoning suicidal crisis and heading it off.

Patients identify warning signs, such as drinking more, or spending a lot of time alone. With clinicians, they brainstorm coping strategies and ways to distract from or soothe their mood, such as doing chores or listening to music. For times when they need outside help, they list names of close friends, family members and mental health clinicians.

The plans are not a substitute for treating underlying risk factors such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, but they do provide something tangible to rely on during a person's darkest moments, says Stanley, co-developer of one such approach called the Safety Planning Intervention. "When you're in a suicide crisis, you're not thinking straight — you don't want to have to think."

Stanley says she has many examples in which the plan made a difference — such as, one time, "somebody going to the George Washington Bridge, realizing that the safety plan was in his pocket, feeling it, and saying, 'OK, let me try this first instead of jumping.'"

A recent study in *JAMA Psychiatry* of the Safety Planning Intervention reported that it cut short-term suicidal behaviors nearly in half. It looked at 1,640 patients getting care at Veterans Affairs emergency departments, finding that among 1,186 who completed a plan and got at least two follow-up phone calls shortly after hospital discharge, the rate of attempts or near attempts in the subsequent six months was 3 percent, versus 5.3 percent for 454 patients getting usual care, which was typically referral to a mental health clinician.

How guns make a difference

These prevention plans often also involve restricting access to suicidal means. Researchers affiliated with Means Matter, a Harvard School of Public Health campaign, have promoted this approach with strategies that include reducing access to dangerous or lethal doses of medications and storing guns away from at-risk individuals or, at a minimum, locking them up. The campaign is working with an array of gun owner groups and gun shops across the country to promote suicide prevention as a basic tenet of firearm safety.

One frequently cited study in the *2007 Journal of Trauma* found

To Table of Contents

that access to guns does make a difference. It compared a group of states with high rates of gun ownership to a second group with low ownership, and found suicides in the first group were nearly twice as high. Virtually all of that disparity was attributable to firearm suicides; there was scant difference in non-firearm suicides between the two groups. The pattern remained in a study published in 2013.

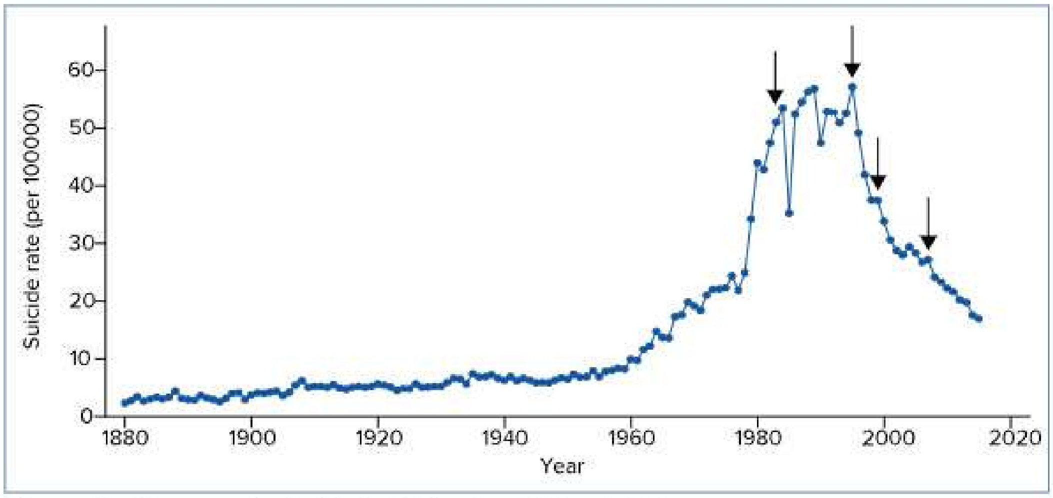


Figure: **Incidence of suicide in Sri Lanka, 1880–2015**
Arrows show timing of pesticide bans (1984: parathion, methylparathion; 1995: all remaining WHO class I toxicity pesticides, including methamidophos and monocrotophos; 1998: endosulfan; 2008: dimethoate, fenthion, paraquat). Suicide data were obtained from police records.

A graph shows dips in suicide rates in Sri Lanka after it outlawed various poisonous pesticides. Read more about it in a 2017 paper in the *Lancet.*

CREDIT: D.K. KNIPE *ET AL / THE LANCET GLOBAL HEALTH* 2017

“When you try with a gun, you usually don’t get a second chance,” says Matthew Miller, one of the studies’ authors and a suicide researcher at Boston’s Northeastern University who has studied access to firearms.

While any discussion about gun restrictions can become a hot-button subject in the US, researchers can quickly check off numerous examples where blocking access to means has saved lives. When the United Kingdom discovered a less toxic form of gas to fuel ovens and heaters, the rate of suicides by domestic gas fell to nearly zero by the late 1970s. Similarly, banning the most highly toxic pesticides commonly used in Sri Lanka reduced that country’s overall suicide rate. And suicide barriers on bridges — such as the steel net now under construction beneath the Golden Gate Bridge — have reduced the incidence of suicide by jumping.

There’s good reason to be hopeful about interventions like these, particularly because the popular perception that someone contemplating suicide is nearly unstoppable is wrong, Miller says. A 2006 study he was involved with, based on a survey of 2,770 members of the public, found that 34 percent didn’t believe installing a barrier at the Golden Gate Bridge would avert even a single death. In other words, they believed that 100 percent of potential jumpers would have found another way. “That just shows you in some sense how fatalistic people are,” Miller says.

In reality, most people’s unsuccessful suicide attempts do not ultimately lead to a later death by suicide — a fact that offers hope. One analysis of 90 studies, which followed people who had been treated for self-harm, found that while some had gone on to attempt again, more than nine years later just 7 percent had taken their own lives.

“If people have a suicidal crisis and don’t die,” Klonsky says, “they’re overwhelmingly likely to live a life that does not end in suicide.” ■

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

To Table of Contents

Read Accessible Journeys magazine HERE.

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

Debunking myths about disabled parents

Parenting is often seen as an act of love and patience, a role that demands a lot in the face of life's unpredictabilities but is admired by society. Yet, when a parent has a disability, society's perception shifts. The admiration for parenthood becomes skepticism. Can they handle the physical demands? Will the child suffer? Who will be the "real" caretaker? These whispered doubts and misplaced concerns form an invisible wall, built by stigma and reinforced by outdated myths. But myths crumble in the face of lived experience.

Myth #1: A disabled parent can't meet their child's needs

The image of parenthood often includes a physically active figure—chasing a toddler, lifting a child onto their shoulders, tying tiny shoes. When disability enters the picture, people assume that these moments are lost. But parenting is not just about physical tasks; it is about presence, love, and adaptability. A mother with paraplegia . . . when her daughter was born, people asked, "How will you carry her?" She responded by designing a lap-friendly baby carrier and modifying her wheelchair for safe, secure transport. As her daughter grew, so did her mom's adaptations—lowered cribs, voice-controlled devices, creative ways to play and bond. The needs of a child are met not by the ability to run but by the ability to love, nurture, and problem-solve.

To Table of Contents

Myth #2: Disabled parents rely too much on others

Society celebrates interdependence until it involves disability. Then, suddenly, seeking help becomes a weakness. The truth? All parents rely on support systems. Grandparents babysit. Partners share responsibilities. Friends offer advice. The difference is, disabled parents are often made to feel like their need for assistance is an inability to parent at all.

A visually impaired father . . . laughs at this assumption. “Sure, I can’t drive my son to soccer practice, but neither can parents who work late shifts or don’t own a car. We all figure it out.” He walks with his son to practice, listens to the games through the cheers of the crowd, and coaches him in ways that have nothing to do with sight—teaching him patience, creativity and strength.

Myth #3: The child will be burdened

One of the cruelest assumptions is that children of disabled parents will suffer, that they will be weighed down by responsibilities they shouldn’t have to bear. But ask those children, and they will tell you something different.

A yung lady growing up with a mother who used a wheelchair . . . this meant learning early that ability is not a measure of worth. “I never saw her as ‘less than,’” she says. “She showed me how to be strong in ways people don’t always notice—through problem-solving, through never giving up, through finding joy in ways others overlook.” Children raised in diverse households don’t see their parents as burdens; they see them as role models, as individuals who navigate life differently but no less beautifully.

Myth #4: Disabled parents are an exception, not the norm

Disability is not rare. According to global statistics, millions of parents navigate disability while raising children. They are not anomalies and they are certainly not inspirations simply for existing. They are parents—changing diapers, making school lunches, arguing over bedtime routines—just like any other.

The difference is that they must constantly prove themselves in ways that other parents never have to.

Breaking the stigma, one story at a time

Every assumption about disabled parents is built on an ableist framework that prioritizes one kind of body, one kind of mind, one kind of parenting. But real-life experiences dismantle those assumptions every single day.

The truth is, disability does not define parenting ability. Creativity does. Love does. And those things exist beyond the boundaries of ability.

The next time someone wonders, “Can a disabled person really be a good parent?”—the answer is not just yes. It is a resounding, unshakable, **of course**!■

To Table of Contents

INVICTUS GAMES
VANCOUVER • WHISTLER 2025

PRESENTED BY · PRÉSENTÉS PAR

ATCO BOEING

To Table of Contents

PHOTO: Jeremy Allen

FEBRUARY 8 - 16TH. VANCOUVER WHISTLER 2025

Invictus Games

A mythic odyssey of the unconquered spirit

The Invictus Games are about medals but they are also about moments. The moment when a competitor crosses the finish line against every doubt, every scar, every day they thought they'd never stand, swim, or race again. Born from a vision to honor those who have given their bodies in service, the Games are a battlefield of a different kind, where strength is measured not in force, but in the refusal to quit.

What began in 2014 as an idea has become a global movement. Year after year, veterans and service members take to the track, the court and the water, not for sympathy, but to prove, in the most undeniable way, that the fire within them burns brighter than anything life has taken away. In Vancouver and Whistler 2025, that fire will blaze again and the world will watch as warriors rise to compete, to claim their space, their power and their future.

Imagine a landscape scarred by conflict, where the echoes of battle meld with the silent whispers of healing. Returning from the desolation of Afghanistan, Prince Harry witnessed a poignant scene: the solemn procession of a Danish soldier's coffin alongside the fragile, yet unyielding, forms of three wounded British soldiers. In that crucible of sorrow and awe, the seeds of the Invictus spirit were sown. Not long after, a pilgrimage to the US Warrior Games in 2013 imbued him with the resolve to craft an arena where the battles fought within could be celebrated through sport.

The very name, Invictus, resonates with the cadence of an epic poem by William Ernest Henley—a sonnet of defiance and determination penned in 1875. Invictus means "unconquered," a tribute to the indomitable souls of those who dare to rise, again and again, from the crucible of their own frailties. With the mantra I AM—a stirring echo of the poem's final lines, *I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul*—the Games invite every competitor to wage a personal war against despair, emerging as architects of their own destinies.

The journey of the Invictus Games traverses continents and cultures:

London 2014: Where it began, under the watchful eyes of the United Kingdom.

Orlando 2016: A vibrant chapter in the heart of America.

Toronto 2017: Where the spirit found a home in the welcoming arms of Canada.

Sydney 2018: Amidst the sunlit vistas of Australia.

The Hague 2022: A phoenix rising from the ashes of postponement, destined for rebirth.

Düsseldorf 2023: Echoing the relentless rhythm of triumph

And now, Vancouver and Whistler 2025 . . . A ground-breaking confluence of two communities, heralding a new epoch as the first Invictus Games to celebrate winter adaptive sports and to embrace an alliance with British Columbia's First Nations people.

Yet, the Invictus Games are more than the sum of medals and records. They are a catalyst—a renaissance in the way society perceives recovery, a clarion call that sports can heal not only the body but also the spirit. Research bears witness: those who dare to compete experience profound and lasting benefits, transcending the mere physical and venturing into the realms of mental and emotional resurgence.

As if scripted by destiny itself, the invitation to host the next chapter of this grand saga has been extended. Birmingham, UK, with its vibrant pulse and storied heritage, has been chosen to host the Invictus Games 2027—a decision that whispers of new legends waiting to be written. Washington DC, USA, once stood on the precipice of this honor, and six cities in total stirred the global spirit with their aspirations to host this celebration of the unconquered.

The Invictus Games are not confined by the boundaries of sport or geography—they are a living, breathing homage to the human spirit. Every competition, shared victory and setback is a reminder of the athletes courage, perseverance, and their unyielding will to rise.

The Games are about medals, but they are also about moments. Powerful moments that endure long after the competition ends! ■

To Table of Contents

Invictus Games Ceremony Toronto 2017 | Photo Credit: PRP Productions Toronto

A historic first

The Invictus Games make their winter debut

The Invictus Games Vancouver Whistler 2025 will kick off in spectacular fashion on February 8, 2025, with a star-studded opening ceremony at BC Place in Vancouver.

This historic event will not only mark the first-ever winter edition of the Games but will also feature an electrifying lineup of performers, including Chris Martin of Coldplay, Katy Perry, Noah Kahan, Canadian legend Nelly Furtado, and Quebec's own Roxane Bruneau.

With 532 competitors from 25 nations, the Games will showcase both winter and core adaptive sports, from alpine skiing and skeleton to wheelchair rugby and swimming.

Set on the traditional, unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples, this event highlights the power of sport in physical and mental healing, while also honoring the sacrifices and contributions of military personnel.

Beyond competition, the Invictus Games build a global community that encourages personal growth, renewed confidence and a shared sense of purpose. Athletes from around the world come together not just to compete, but to inspire one another and show that injury or illness does not define them.

The event also raises awareness about the challenges veterans face and highlights the importance of rehabilitation, mental health support and inclusion. Ultimately, the Invictus Games are a powerful display of human spirit, teamwork, and the drive to overcome obstacles—both on and off the field.

Let the Games begin! ■

PARTICIPATING NATIONS

Afghan Unconquered . Australia . Belgium . Brazil . Canada . Colombia . Denmark . Estonia . France . Georgia
Germany . Israel . Italy . Lithuania . Netherlands . New Zealand . Nigeria . Poland . Republic of Korea
Romania . Ukraine . United Kingdom . United States

INVICTUS GAMES
VANCOUVER • WHISTLER 2025

LIVE STREAM

Tickets | Schedule | Results

Sports categories and venues

Visit the Invictus Villages located in Vancouver and Whistler. Pop in and participate in their **free activities:** interactive exhibits, competitor meet-and-greets, live entertainment, medal celebrations, big-screen sports action, and more.

Shop for Invictus Games 2025 Memorabilia

Interested in learning about the Indigenous visual identity of the Invictus Games? Click here.

To learn more about the Indigenous Peoples of Canada: Click here and here.

Prince Harry
Photo Credit: Invictus Games Vancouver Whistler 2025

Biathlon
Photo Credit: Jeff Vinnick

INVICTUS
GAMES
VANCOUVER • WHISTLER 2025

PRESENTED BY · PRÉSENTÉS PAR

ATCO BOEING

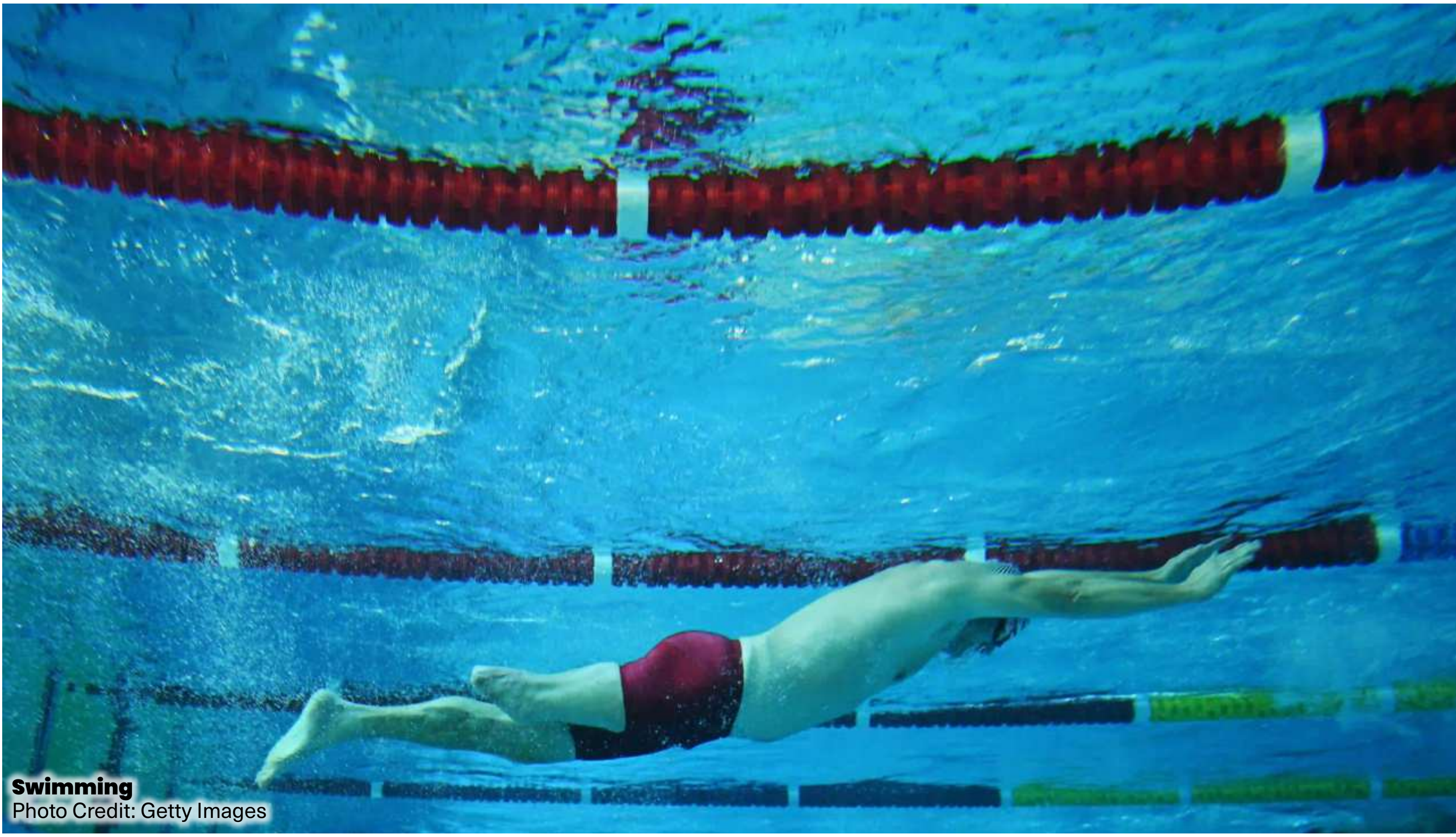
Wheelchair Basketball
Photo Credit: Johann Michael Schelle

Skeleton
Photo Credit: Jeremy Allen

Nordic Skiing
Photo Credit: Jeff Vinnick

Wheelchair Rugby
Photo Credit: Jeremy Allen

Wheelchair Rugby
Photo Credit: Tim Richter



Swimming
Photo Credit: Getty Images

Sitting Volleyball
Photo Credit: Johann Michael Scheller

Alpine Skiing
Photo Credit: Jeremy Allen

Ben Trockman

To Table of Contents

Leadership without limits:
Ben Trockman's historic role in Evansville Government

When Ben Trockman enters a room, it's with purpose and determination that's impossible to miss. A spinal cord injury at 17 may have altered his path, but it fueled his mission to redefine what leadership looks like. Now, voted in as Evansville City Council president in January 2025, he's not just taking charge—he's reshaping the very foundation of leadership itself.

In a city that had never seen someone with a significant physical disability hold this kind of public office, Trockman is the definition of bold leadership. He's not afraid of the spotlight but he's far more interested in reflecting it onto the causes and communities that matter most.

Before becoming Evansville City Council president, Ben Trockman cultivated a rich history of advocacy, leadership and breaking barriers. At Old National Bank, he developed an innovative mentorship program that paired executives with young professionals with disabilities, redefining workplace inclusion and opportunity. As a national ambassador for Easterseals, he travelled the country, championing disability rights and advocating for impactful policies in cities like Washington, D.C., and Chicago. His experiences advocating on Capitol Hill ignited a passion for public service and inspired him to take his leadership to the local government level. From his work in corporate inclusion to

To Table of Contents

his commitment to community advancement, Trockman has consistently dedicated himself to building a more accessible and equitable future.

Life changed on a dime

At 17, Ben Trockman was your average small-town Indiana kid. Sports, independence and the adventurous spirit of youth were his trademarks. Then, a motocross accident hit pause on everything he thought he knew about his life. "I was independent, stubborn, and invincible—or so I thought," he says with a laugh that carries no bitterness. The accident catapulted him into a world where he needed others for nearly everything. But while his body learned new limits, his mind refused to stay boxed in.

He dove headfirst into physical therapy, his education, and eventually a career in public relations and advocacy. For eight years, he worked at Old National Bank, where he launched a nationally recognized mentoring program connecting young people with disabilities to corporate leaders. The goal? To obliterate stereotypes by pairing talent with opportunity. And while that job gave him a platform, it also sparked an idea: why not bring that same passion for inclusion to city government?

A campaign worth every penny

Running for office isn't for the faint of heart—or the faint of wallet. "When I was told the amount of money I needed to raise to run for a city council seat, I almost quit right there," Trockman admits. But he didn't. He put in the work, knocked on doors and in 2020 became the first Democrat in 65 years to hold his district's seat.

His win wasn't just historic; it was magnetic. It pulled conversations about disability, access and inclusion into the halls of power where they belonged. Trockman brought his lived experience into every decision, whether it was improving sidewalks, pushing for bike lanes, or making public spaces more accessible. "I have a friend who drives his wheelchair everywhere—even through the most inconvenient places. Every time I see him, I think: we've got to do better. Not only for him, but for everyone."

A leader who leads by example

Ben Trockman is the kind of leader who instantly makes people feel seen and valued. Whether he's working with voters, city council colleagues, or young people with disabilities who look up to him, he approaches every interaction with warmth and authenticity. For Trockman, leadership is about connection—listening, understanding, and finding common ground. His ability to genuinely care about the people around him has made him a trusted voice in the community, working to create meaningful change. It's not just his position that sets him apart but the heart he brings to it.

Trockman takes his responsibilities seriously. As council president, he's focused on collaboration. "Leadership

To Table of Contents

isn't about having the loudest voice," he says. "It's about listening. Listening to your constituents, your colleagues and the people who challenge you."

He's also deeply focused on representation. For Trockman, visibility isn't just personal—it's systemic. "If someone in a wheelchair can be president of the city council, what else is possible? For kids growing up today, I want them to look at me and think—why not me?"

Breaking down barriers, one policy at a time

One of Trockman's proudest accomplishments is Evansville's "Complete Streets Ordinance," a policy ensuring sidewalks, bike lanes and other public infrastructure prioritize accessibility. "The focus extends beyond wheelchairs. It encompasses mothers pushing strollers, older adults, and anyone who needs safe, connected pathways," he explains. The ordinance, now shaping the city's future, highlights Trockman's focus on delivering actionable change over empty promises.

The legacy he's building

Trockman doesn't just want to be remembered as a groundbreaking leader. He wants to leave behind a community where inclusion isn't revolutionary—it's expected. "My family has this legacy of service," he says, reflecting on his grandfather, who offered legal aid to anyone in need, and his father, a judge who started Indiana's first treatment court for people battling addiction. "If I can even do a fraction of what they did for Evansville, I'll be happy."

But his aspirations go beyond family tradition. Trockman wants to create a city where babies can grow up and think, "This is a place worth staying in. This is a community worth leading."

A different kind of power

Ben Trockman's leadership is proof that power doesn't come from titles, but from action. As Evansville moves forward, it is clear that the city is better because Ben Trockman decided it could be. Leadership is his way of life. And Evansville is all the stronger for it. ■

Ben is a Communications Strategist at Change for Balance

To Table of Contents

Disability Foundation Program Manager Eric Molendyk (left) and ConnecTra's Executive Director, Graeme Wyman present at Abilities Expo.

Community is at the heart of ConnecTra's mission

In a city as dynamic as Vancouver, BC, Canada, there is a hub of energy that quietly transforms lives, reshaping what connection truly means for people with disabilities. That hub? It's ConnecTra—bringing people together, amplifying voices and redefining what's possible. Forget the ordinary. ConnecTra isn't in the business of doing what everyone else is. It's carving paths where there were none and turning ideas into life-altering initiatives. And it's doing it with the kind of heart that makes a city proud.

The Disability Foundation

Under the visionary umbrella of the Disability Foundation, ConnecTra thrives on the belief that engagement—in any form—ignites a spark. As Graeme Wyman, ConnecTra's Executive Director said, "When people are out and active, it's not just their physical health that benefits. It's their entire sense of self." And that's what founder Sam Sullivan, a quadriplegic and former Vancouver mayor, envisioned. He believed that "getting people active enhanced their quality of life and helped them deal with isolation," Graeme shared. The origins of the Disability Foundation are deeply rooted in addressing isolation for people with disabilities.

ConnecTra operates as part of the Disability Foundation Network which is a group of six associations that collectively enhance the lives of individuals with disabilities:

(1). Tetra Society of North America – Innovating assistive devices through a volunteer-driven approach.

(2). Vancouver Adapted Music Society (VAMS) – Championing accessibility in music in a fully accessibility recording studio, the only one of its kind in Western Canada.

(3). Disabled Independent Gardeners Association (DIGA) – Encouraging adaptive gardening in community spaces.

(4). British Columbia Mobility Opportunities Society (BCMOS) – Offering adapted outdoor activities like hiking, kayaking, and hand cycling.

(5). Adaptive Sailing Association of British Columbia (ASABC) – Providing accessible sailing experiences.

(6). ConnecTra – The linchpin for information, resources and community building.

To Table of Contents

The synergy of these societies allows ConnecTra to promote accessibility in diverse ways, from adaptive recreation to technical innovation. So whether it's adaptive sailing on the cool waters of Jericho Beach, hiking the rugged trails of Pacific Spirit Park, or strumming a guitar with the Vancouver Adaptive Music Society (VAMS), ConnecTra builds bridges—mental, emotional and social.

The Abilities Expo

One of their flagship programs, instrumental to making connections, is the Abilities Expo. Think of this event as ConnecTra's annual love letter to the community. Held every year at Vancouver's Roundhouse Community Center, it is a bustling, vibrant, no-holds-barred celebration of accessibility. With over 50 vendors, dynamic speakers and immersive showcases, this event is a playground of possibilities. And every booth, lecture and performance echoes ConnecTra's goal to break barriers and build connections.

Community first, always

The organization acts as both a megaphone and a meeting place, promoting not just its own programs but those of countless other organizations. Service Mondays, for instance, spotlight different community groups—from BC Brain Wellness to Accessible Media Inc.—offering resources that might otherwise be hard to find.

Its *Accessible Community Forums* are another masterstroke. These events dive deep into topics like accessible travel, built environments and the arts, giving people with disabilities the floor—and the microphone. This is not token gestures but real conversations that lead to real change—a lively discussion featuring Tourism BC, Vancour Airport representatives and government officials, all engaging directly with the disability community. That's the power of ConnecTra.

604 Access

Let's talk about a game-changer. ConnecTra's newest brainchild, 604 Access, is poised to revolutionize how Vancouver approaches accessibility. The idea is elegantly simple: assess the accessibility of local businesses, music venues, restaurants and more, then share that information in an easy-to-navigate portal. It's a win-win: businesses get guidance on becoming more inclusive and people with disabilities gain confidence in where they can go and what they can do.

"We know not every business can be universally accessible," explains Graeme, "But starting the conversation, educating and making incremental improvements? That's how change happens."

The power of partnerships

Beyond the connection with the five organizations under the Disability Foundation Network's umbrella, ConnecTra is deeply entwined with the BC Spinal Cord Injury Community Services Network (SCI5), collaborating with groups like Spinal Cord Injury BC and Neil Squire to expand its reach and impact.

Corporate sponsors like ICBC have also stepped up, supporting programs that ripple outward into the broader community. And while Connectra doesn't focus on advocacy per se, it empowers others to do so, offering platforms and opportunities for people to speak their truth.

Beyond the numbers

Impact is tricky to quantify, but it's palpable in every program, workshop and event ConnecTra hosts. Take their *ConnecTogether* initiative, born out of the pandemic. It's an online haven where adaptive yoga, creative writing and life coaching thrive. It's where someone can log in, feel seen and realize they're part of something much bigger than themselves.

And then there are the personal stories—like the client who rediscovered music through VAMS, using a specially designed piano stand, or the woman who found her voice (literally and figuratively) in a creative writing workshop. These aren't just anecdotes; they're proof of what happens when an organization listens, learns and leads.

Lessons for the world

What can others learn from ConnecTra's approach? Start with intentionality. Every program, every partnership, every pivot is done with purpose. It's about showing up, learning from mistakes and constantly asking, "How can we do better?" As Graeme Wyman admitted, "ConnecTra doesn't claim to have all the answers, but it's committed to finding them—whether that means purchasing new tech for the deaf and blind community or expanding arts programming for our clients."

The road ahead

Looking forward, ConnecTra holds the promise of leading the way, showing Vancouver and the world that when you remove barriers, you don't just make life better for people with disabilities. You make life better for everyone. ■

To Table of Contents

Navigating love, family and connection on the autism spectrum

Love is not a language spoken the same way by all. For some, it is read in the spaces between words, in a glance that lingers, in the unspoken ease of an embrace. For others—especially those on the autism spectrum—it is a puzzle, intricate and fascinating, but frustrating in its unwritten rules. Relationships, whether romantic, familial, or social, are landscapes where the path is not always clear, the signposts often written in invisible ink. Yet, for those who walk this path differently, love is no less profound, no less real.

There is an art to communication, one that does not always rely on intuition but on structure, clarity, and directness. While many find comfort in unspoken emotions, the autistic mind may seek the honesty of words laid bare, the security of explicit understanding. It is not a lack of feeling but a different way of perceiving it. Misunderstandings bloom in the gaps between perception and expectation, but when met with patience, these gaps can be bridged.

Romantic relationships, often a maze of signals and subtleties, can feel overwhelming. The nervous thrill of flirtation, the unspoken give-and-take of courtship—these are not always instinctive, but they can be learned, embraced, and even redefined. For those on the spectrum, love flourishes not in games or guesswork but in the comfort of shared interests, in the steadiness of routine, in the raw and beautiful truth of simply being oneself. Connection is not about following a script but about finding someone who values the story written in one's own voice.

Within the walls of family, love can be both sanctuary and storm.

To Table of Contents

A child retreating into solitude may be seen as distant when they are simply seeking peace. A parent's attempt at affection might feel overwhelming rather than reassuring. Siblings may struggle to find common ground when their worlds are built on different blueprints. But in understanding comes harmony. When families learn to translate each other's languages—whether spoken, written, or felt in the smallest of gestures—love becomes a space where everyone belongs.

Friendships, too, are not bound by convention. They are forged in the quiet solidarity of a shared interest, in the comfort of predictable companionship. They do not need to be loud or constant to be meaningful. For the autistic individual, connection is often found in the spaces where expectations fade and authenticity is allowed to breathe. It is not about being part of every conversation, but about being understood in the ones that matter.

Love, in all its forms, is not a puzzle to be solved but an experience to be felt—on one's own terms, in one's own way. And in that, there is not just acceptance, but beauty. ■

> An autistic mind sees the world through a lens uniquely its own—one that notices patterns others miss, finds beauty in detail, and cherishes routine as a source of calm. To love an autistic individual is to embrace a new way of seeing, to discover magic in the everyday.

If you knew Suzy . . .

Suzy turns 'nevers' into milestones and obstacles into stepping stones


Jane and her daughter, Suzy

Every so often, a story walks into your life which reminds you of the power of never saying never. Jane Fischer's is that kind of story.

Jane's life started like many others. A bright college graduate, she stepped into the classroom as a teacher, fueled by a passion to shape young minds. Then came marriage and children. The first few chapters of her life read as expected until the arrival of Suzy, her second child.

Suzy was born with severe medical and developmental challenges, and the prognosis was grim. Jane, then just 24 years old, was handed a laundry list of nevers: Suzy would never walk, never talk, never learn. But Jane wasn't interested in anyone else's script. Instead, she rolled up her sleeves, wiped away the tears and wrote her own. And now Jane, a resident of New Jersey in the United States, has written a book about the story of her fight and journey for Suzy. *If You Knew Suzy: Pushing Past the Boundaries of Never.* (September 2024, G&D Media)

"At 24, I had no idea where to start," Jane says. "But I knew I had to start somewhere."

Suzy's early years were a whirlwind of hospital visits, therapies and sleepless nights. Jane plunged into the world of special needs, armed with nothing more than fierce maternal love and a refusal to accept limitations. She became an advocate for Suzy, eventually earning her certification as a teacher of special needs children and later working as a learning consultant. Jane's advocacy did not stop at her daughter's needs. She spearheaded socialization programs, founded special education PTAs and fought tirelessly to ensure children like Suzy weren't just present but truly represented.

But this story isn't about Jane. It's about Suzy, an extraordinary individual whose determination to persevere and find joy in life serves as a constant source of inspiration, despite the significant challenges she has faced throughout her life. Over the years, a phenomenon Jane calls "The Suzy Effect" emerged. Doctors melted, skeptics softened and strangers became friends, all drawn to Suzy's radiant smile, pure-hearted kindness, sincerity and lack of guile. "Suzy has this uncanny ability to remember a lot of facts and details about people—she's become my memory," Jane said, "Her ability to connect with others is miraculous. She has melted the hardest of hearts just by being kind and good."

To Table of Contents

Suzy's story is a chronicle of challenges, living with significant medical complexities, including a rare genetic syndrome that's required two kidney transplants. But from a young age, she defied expectations, surpassing predictions from medical professionals. Suzy has been a volunteer at a preschool for over 20 years and views her work as the "best medicine" which keeps her motivated and fulfilled, a dazzling light of positivity, charming everyone she meets with her remarkable memory and warmth.

Self-advocacy came naturally to Suzy, whose vibrant personality effortlessly drew people to her. Continued advocacy remains a central part of Jane's life, extending beyond advocating for her daughter to champion others with similar challenges. Jane's latest advocacy effort is a book chronicling Suzy's journey, *If You Knew Suzy: Pushing Past the Boundaries of Never.* It's written to honor her daughter's life and to inspire other parents who are navigating the labyrinth of raising a child with disabilities. "I wanted Suzy's story to be remembered," Jane shares. "She may never marry or have children, but her life has made a difference."

The impact of raising Suzy rippled across Jane's family. Suzy's older sister became her first teacher and cheerleader, weaving therapy into games of house and school. Her younger brother, seven years Suzy's junior, grappled with complex emotions as he surpassed her developmentally. Despite the challenges, both siblings emerged kinder, more empathetic—champions of inclusion and acceptance. And then there's Jane's husband, a silent hero working long hours to support the family's needs. "He knew there was no stopping me," Jane laughs. "But it took both of us—in our own ways—to keep this ship afloat."

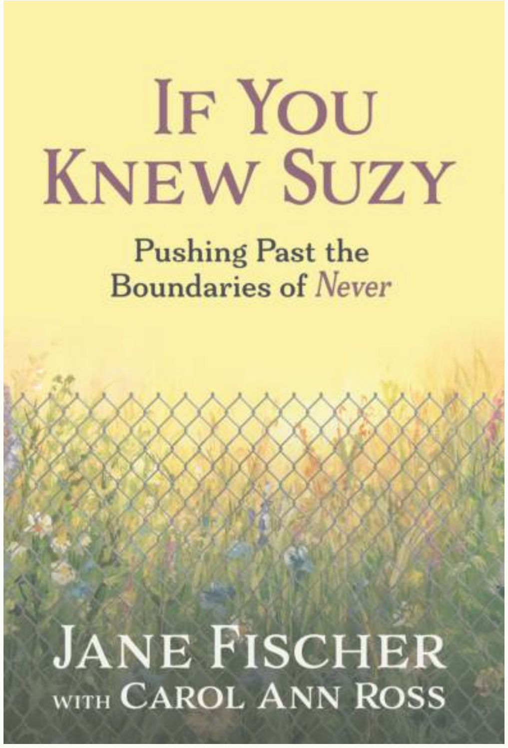
Suzy's family have embraced the journey, remaining immovable by her side, nurturing her growth and celebrating her achievements. When asked what message she would share with the world, Suzy's response is simple and profound: "Don't ever give up. Keep on fighting and never say can't." It's a mantra she's lived by, turning nevers into milestones and obstacles into steppingstones. Jane shared, "We went to a book signing a few weeks ago, and Suzy was asked, 'How do you keep your upbeat personality?' And her reply was, 'I guess I was just born that way.' Jane continued, "With her beautiful smile and always a kind word, I truly believe that she is God's child—an angel on this earth!"

Jane wants Suzy's life to resonate long after they're both gone, to remind the world that every life, no matter how challenging, has infinite value. If You Knew Suzy: Pushing Past the Boundaries of Never is a legacy about every parent who has been told their child's future will be a series of closed doors. "No one knows your child like you do," Jane insists. "Listen to your gut. Don't let anyone sentence your child to a life of nevers." Society tends to fit everyone with a disability into one-size-fits-all molds but Jane's advocacy underscores the need for tailored support and resources. Her message to policymakers: "We need more options, more education and more support—for families, for siblings, for everyone involved."

The journey has not been easy, but Jane wouldn't trade it for anything. "Suzy has taught me more than I ever taught her," she says. "She's my greatest teacher, my angel."

And what does Suzy think of the book? Ever the optimist, she's ready for stardom. "She thinks she'll be on Oprah," Jane chuckles. "She doesn't realize Oprah's book club is no more, but who knows? Suzy's got a way of making things happen." ■


Jane Fischer



Read more about the book:
press release

Purchase a copy here.

To Table of Contents

Disability representation in media: Breaking free from stereotypes

Media can make or break the way people see the world. It builds heroes, shapes perspectives and paints entire communities with a few strokes of a script. Yet for decades, disability representation has been a mix of invisibility, pity, or cliché-ridden nonsense.

But the world is waking up. The call for better, richer and smarter portrayals of disabled characters isn't a whisper anymore. It has become an earthquake shaking the foundations of an industry that, for too long, got it all wrong.

The lazy tropes that won't die

Hollywood and mainstream media have a long history of one-dimensional, uninspired disability tropes. Some refuse to fade away, no matter how outdated or ridiculous they are:

The Tragic Soul: Life with a disability is presented as endless sorrow. Cue soft piano music, longing stares and a storyline soaked in misery.

The Inspirational Machine: A disabled character who exists solely to make others feel good about themselves. "If they can do it, what's your excuse?" Exhausting!

The Evil Cripple Trope: A scar, a limp, or a wheelchair—voilà, instant villain. Because apparently, a physical disability equals moral corruption?

The Punchline: Someone's disability is reduced to a gag, like a lazy shortcut to humor. Just no!

A shift toward something real

Change is happening, and not by accident. Disabled actors, writers, and directors are forcing the industry to move past its outdated nonsense and tell stories that actually reflect reality. The new wave of representation means:

Disabled Actors Playing Disabled Roles: Shocking, right? No more able-bodied actors winning

To Table of Contents

awards for pretending to struggle with something they've never lived.

Stories That Aren't Just About the Disability: Complex, messy, interesting characters whose disabilities are part of their lives, not their entire identity.

Authentic Writing Teams: Because lived experience can't be faked. More disabled writers and consultants means fewer cringe-worthy missteps.

Films and shows that are getting It right

Some creators are finally figuring out that people with disabilities deserve better:

A Quiet Place" (2018): Millicent Simmonds, a deaf actress, didn't just play a role—she shaped the way the film told its story. Authentic, immersive, and a major step forward.

Sex Education (Netflix): Isaac, played by George Robinson, is complex, sometimes likable, sometimes infuriating—just like any great character. His wheelchair isn't his personality.

Crip Camp (2020): A documentary that doesn't sugarcoat disability activism. No sad violin soundtrack, just real people changing the world.

The Peanut Butter Falcon (2019): Zack Gottsagen, an actor with Down syndrome, leading a mainstream film? Unheard of in Hollywood—until now.

CODA (2021): A coming-of-age story that puts Deaf culture front and center. Troy Kotsur, Marlee Matlin and Daniel Durant aren't just playing Deaf characters—they are members of the Deaf community.

Then there's A Different Man (2024) with Adam Pearson, an actor with neurofibromatosis. His presence contributes to the growing representation of individuals with disabilities in cinema.

Why this matters

Representation isn't just about seeing oneself reflected on screen. It shapes how society treats disabled people, how laws are written, and how kids grow up viewing the world. The more authentic and layered these portrayals, the harder it becomes for ignorance to thrive. It's about getting rid of outdated, patronizing nonsense and embracing the fact that disability is part of human diversity—not a plot twist, not a punishment, not a tragedy waiting to be fixed.

Where do we go from here?

The industry has started moving, but the road ahead is long. More disabled storytellers need to be in charge. More networks and studios need to do more. Audiences need to demand better and reject the same old tired tropes.
It's happening. Slowly, loudly, irreversibly. The script is being rewritten, and this time, the disabled community is holding the pen. ■

> Authenticity is the heart of true storytelling. Disabled voices deserve to be seen, heard, and celebrated on every screen.

To Table of Contents

Deaf Insights

with Angela Lynn

Happy 2025 through Deaf Insight

As we step into 2025, I am excited to reflect on the similarities between Deaf and hearing cultures worldwide. Though our methods of communication may differ, the values we share - respect for identity, storytelling, and connection, are universal. By exploring these commonalities, we can see how deeply interconnected we all are.

Whether you are part of the Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or hearing world, I hope this article inspires you to embrace the shared humanity that binds us all.

1. Respect for identity: words matter

Language reflects how we see each other, and using the right terms fosters understanding and dignity. In Deaf culture, terms like Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and DeafBlind empower and celebrate individuality. Outdated terms like hearing impaired focus on deficits and are discouraged.

Similarities to Hearing Cultures:

- **United States:** Within Indigenous communities, such as the Cherokee or Navajo, reclaiming cultural identity through proper terminology is vital. Misrepresentation - such as calling all Indigenous peoples “Native Americans” without acknowledging tribal specificity ignores the diversity within these cultures.
- **Canada:** Among the Inuit, the term Eskimo is no longer acceptable. Instead, Inuit and other self-identified terms honor their cultural dignity. Similarly, assuming igloos represent all Inuit traditions oversimplifies their complexity.
- **India:** Generalizations about India’s rich diversity—like referring to all South Asians as Indian or ignoring regional languages, fail to recognize the country’s cultural depth. Celebrating distinctions like Bengali, Tamil, or Punjabi identities mirrors the respect the Deaf culture emphasizes for proper representation.
- **Middle East:** Referring to the entire region as Arab overlooks the diversity within, such as Persian, Berber, or Kurdish cultures. Just as Deaf cultures focus on self-representation, hearing cultures here advocate for using terms that honor unique identities.

Respect for terminology in both Deaf and hearing cultures reflects the shared value of preserving and celebrating identity.

2. Storytelling: A shared tradition across cultures

Deaf Culture:

Storytelling is an essential aspect of Deaf culture, expressed through ASL poems, vivid folklore, and visual jokes. These performances preserve history,

To Table of Contents

strengthen community ties, and pass on values.

Similarities to Hearing Cultures:

- **United States:** Storytelling is a cornerstone of African American culture, especially through oral traditions rooted in the struggles and triumphs of history. From folktales to modern spoken word, these narratives echo the Deaf community's emphasis on preserving identity through performance.
- **Canada:** Indigenous communities, including the First Nations and Métis, use storytelling as a way to connect generations. Sacred tales about the land, ancestors, and animals reflect the communal and educational purpose of Deaf cultural narratives.
- **China:** Traditional Chinese opera tells stories through music, costumes, and intricate movements. These visually engaging performances mirror Deaf storytelling's use of expressive visuals to captivate audiences.
- **Hawaii:** Hula, the Hawaiian storytelling dance, combines movement, chants, and rhythm to preserve and pass down history, much like ASL storytelling connects Deaf generations.

Across cultures, storytelling binds people together, teaching values and preserving collective memory.

3. Long goodbyes: A universal gesture of care

Deaf Culture:

In Deaf culture, goodbyes are rich, layered, and heartfelt. Conversations linger as people make plans, share final thoughts, and savor the connection before parting ways.

Similarities to Hearing Cultures:

- **France:** French goodbyes are famously long, involving multiple rounds of conversation at the door or even outside. These extended farewells reflect care and respect for relationships.
- **Persian Culture (Iran):** Goodbyes are a ritual in Persian households, beginning indoors, continuing through the hallway, and often extending to the car. These layered goodbyes emphasize affection and the importance of connection.
- **Italy:** Italians bid farewell with warmth and repetition, often involving hugs, kisses on the cheeks, and promises to stay in touch.

To Table of Contents

- `United States (rural areas):` In tight-knit rural communities, goodbyes often stretch into long conversations, as neighbors and friends value each moment of connection before parting.

Long goodbyes, whether in Deaf or hearing cultures, are about more than just parting - they reflect love, care, and the human need for connection.

Conclusion: Finding Unity Through Shared Values

Respect for identity, the power of storytelling, and the warmth of long goodbyes are universal across cultures, Deaf and hearing alike. These shared traditions remind us that while our communication styles may differ, the essence of connection transcends boundaries.

Let us celebrate these parallels and honor the diversity that enriches our world.

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

Sunflowerly yours,

Angela Lynn

Read more 'Deaf Insights' by Angela Lynn

Breaking Barriers: Advocating for Inclusion and addressing audism

Inclusion and Awareness

Celebrating diversity & inclusion: Reflections on World Inclusion Day

Deaf and hard-of-hearing travellers

Deaf etiquette

To Table of Contents

THE SPOKE APP

SPEECH-TO-TEXT, SPEECH-TO-SIGN LANGUAGE...

Adoption is straight forward.

1. Open the Spoke App (No download required)
2. Spoke only requires a smartphone
3. No integration with airports and airlines systems is needed

CATCH EVERY WORD

Spoke captures live and other airport announcements, and delivers them directly to users' smartphones in their preferred language or sign language.

GET SPOKE NOW

Get and share flight info and announcements in 50+ languages inclusive of sign language. Get notifications on delays, gates etc. Connect via video with a certified interpreter who can provide two-way translation. Our specialized Chatbot provides information on accessibility travel.

THESPOKEAPP.com

SPOKE@METCOVE.com

To Table of Contents

Voices Without Limits

Spotlight on bloggers with disabilities

The digital world has given rise to a diverse range of storytellers, and among them are bloggers with disabilities who are breaking barriers, raising awareness, and redefining what it means to be a creator. From lifestyle and travel to advocacy and personal journeys, these individuals are using their platforms to educate, inspire, and challenge societal perceptions.

In this section, we celebrate bloggers with disabilities. Whether they are sharing lived experiences, offering accessibility tips, or building inclusive communities, their voices deserve to be heard.

We highlight their stories, amplify their messages, and explore the powerful role blogging plays in disability representation.

Eleanor Segall Mandelstam
Blog: Be Your Own Light

Eleanor Segall Mandelstam is a UK-based mental health advocate, writer, and blogger who has lived with bipolar disorder and anxiety for over 20 years. Through her blog, *Be Your Own Light,* she shares her personal experiences, offering support, inspiration and practical strategies for mindfulness, relaxation and resilience. Her work is especially impactful for those navigating the challenges of in-home hospice care, providing guidance for both patients and caregivers in stressful and emotional times. With honesty and compassion, Eleanor continues to break down stigma and promote mental well-being through her writing and advocacy.

Edith Solenne Monk
Blog: Think in Decimals

Edith Solenne Monk was just 16 when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. *Think in Decimals,* is her blog which she has been writing since 2015. An avid traveller, she is also a dedicated advocate for disability awareness, shedding light on challenges such as workplace discrimination and gaps in the social care system.

Scott W. Fedor
Blog: Scott W. Fedor

Scott W. Fedor's blog is a platform where he shares personal reflections, motivational insights, and updates on his journey following a severe spinal cord injury that left him paralyzed from the neck down. Through his writing, he discusses overcoming challenges, the power of acceptance, and developing a resilient mindset. His blog serves as an inspiring resource for those facing adversity, offering hope and encouragement through his firsthand experiences.

Dan and Jennifer Digmann
Blog: A couple takes on MS

Dan and Jennifer Digmann are MS advocates, bloggers, and authors who share their journey of living with multiple sclerosis through their blog, podcast *A Couple Takes on MS*, and book Despite MS, to Spite MS. Married since 2005, they use their platform to inspire, educate, and support others facing similar challenges.

To Table of Contents

Ryan Atkins
Blog: Flat on my back

Ryan Atkins' blog, Flat on My Back, serves as a powerful platform where he shares his journey of resilience after a life-changing spinal cord injury. Through personal reflections and insights, he writes about overcoming adversity, embracing faith, and finding purpose despite paralysis. Using voice-activated technology, he connects with readers facing their own challenges, inspiring them to push forward with hope and determination.

Zachary Fenell
Blog: The Cerebral Palsy Vigilante

Zachary Fenell, known as the *Cerebral Palsy Vigilante*, is an author, advocate, and motivational speaker dedicated to raising awareness about cerebral palsy and promoting inclusivity. Living with CP himself, Fenell uses his experiences to inspire others, encouraging perseverance and self-acceptance. Through his books, blog posts, and social media presence, he shares insights on overcoming challenges, fostering resilience, and breaking societal barriers. His work emphasizes that disabilities do not define a person's capabilities, making him a powerful voice for the disability community. Fenell's advocacy continues to empower individuals to embrace their uniqueness and pursue their goals fearlessly.

Hayley Goleniowski (mom)
Blog: Downs Side Up

Hayley Goleniowska is a passionate advocate for individuals with Down's syndrome, inspired by her daughter, Natty. Through her blog*, Downs Side Up,* she shares personal experiences to challenge misconceptions and promote inclusion. She collaborates with educators, speaks at events, and contributes to various platforms to enhance understanding and support for children with additional needs.

Elin Williams
Blog: My Blurred World

Elin Williams is a visually impaired blogger and disability advocate who runs My Blurred World, a blog dedicated to raising awareness about sight loss and sharing her personal experiences. Diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa at a young age, she uses her platform to challenge misconceptions about visual impairment while offering insights into accessibility, lifestyle, and self-confidence. Through her writing, Elin aims to empower others with disabilities and foster a more inclusive society. Her work has gained recognition for its authenticity and impact, making My Blurred World an inspiring space for many.

To Table of Contents

The evolution of accessible gaming

The gaming industry is undergoing a radical transformation, one that prioritizes inclusion over exclusivity. Once a space dominated by rigid designs and unyielding control schemes, gaming is now becoming a place where everyone, regardless of ability, can fully participate. Thanks to relentless innovation, developers and tech giants are finally making accessibility a top priority.

For many, video games are a lifeline, a way to experience freedom, friendship, and adventure. Yet, for too long, the industry turned a blind eye to those who couldn't fit into its rigid control schemes. Gamers with mobility challenges, visual impairments, or other disabilities had to fight an uphill battle just to play. But things are changing—fast.

Adaptive Controllers:
Not long ago, if you couldn't hold a traditional controller, your gaming journey hit a dead end. Now, technology is rewriting the rules. Microsoft took a bold step forward with the Xbox Adaptive Controller (XAC), a sleek, customizable device that ditches complexity in favor of pure accessibility. Sony's Access Controller followed suit, proving that accessibility isn't an afterthought but a necessity. And then there's the QuadStick, a brilliant piece of engineering that lets players command the action using only their breath and mouth movements. Gaming is no longer just a privilege—it's a right.

Gaming is finally speaking the language of accessibility. Developers are embedding features that let players shape their experience:
Remappable Controls: Because your hands shouldn't dictate how you play.

One-hand mode: Letting players

To Table of Contents

thrive without limitations, specifically designed for gamers with only one usable hand.

Voice commands and eye-tracking: This technology helps people with limited mobility control games, navigate menus, and perform actions without needing to use a traditional controller.

Some games celebrate accessibility! *The Last of Us Part II* took innovation to the next level with a deep accessibility suite, ensuring no player was left behind. *Forza Horizon 5* didn't just add subtitles—it brought sign language interpreters into the mix, shattering communication barriers. Even indie gems like *Celeste* are pushing the envelope, proving that accessibility isn't about making things easy—it's about making things possible.

True change isn't just about technology—it's about people. Organizations like AbleGamers, SpecialEffect, and Warfighter Engaged are fueling a revolution, making sure the gaming world listens to those who have been ignored for too long. Meanwhile, disabled gamers themselves are taking the stage on Twitch and YouTube, not just playing—but leading, inspiring, and demanding more.

The gaming industry is standing at a crossroads, and the path forward is clear. With VR, AR, and AI-driven advancements, the next generation of games won't just be accessible—they'll be boundless. The question isn't whether gaming can be inclusive; it's whether developers will rise to the challenge.

The joystick is in the hands of people with disabilities which is an indication that the industry has started listening, but the work is not done. The future of gaming goes beyond graphics, speed, or realism—it's about making sure that, no matter who you are, you can pick up a controller and play. Because gaming is for everyone. ■

> Gaming is a gateway to social connection, competition, and self-expression. The push for universal accessibility ensures that everyone, regardless of ability, can experience the joy of gaming. Because when everyone can play, everyone wins.

Gaming?

The Twitch Streamer is Using Face Recognition to Make Video Games More Accessible

Source: Wired.com

Developer Valentin Squirelo introduced PlayAbility, a program that enables disabled gamers to interact with games through their facial movements, offering an alternative to traditional adaptive hardware.

Electronic Arts (EA) has released 23 new tech patents for free use by other developers, covering tools for speech and audio generation and recognition. These technologies aim to assist players with speech disorders or communication difficulties by offering personalized audio experiences.

To Table of Contents

http://

Snippets from the www

Nexer Digital encourages inclusivity and accessibility in Fintech with new ‘I Matter Too’ campaign

In June 2025, the European Accessibility Act will enhance access to digital products and services for disabled and older individuals in the EU. To raise awareness ahead of this deadline, Nexer Digital has launched a campaign called "I Matter Too."

Read the full article.

OneCourt pioneers accessibility for sports fans

Seattle-based startup OneCourt is pioneering a new level of accessibility for sports fans who are blind or have low vision. By integrating haptic vibrations and audio commentary, OneCourt translates live sports data into an immersive experience that allows individuals to engage with the action using their sense of touch and hearing.

Read the full article.

EyesRo launches on Indiegogo to transform eye health accessibility

PixelRo Co., Ltd. has announced the launch of its innovative app, EyesRo, on Indiegogo. Designed for eye health monitoring and education, EyesRo empowers users to manage their vision from home. With increasing vision-related issues from screen time and aging, the app provides eye tests, personalized recommendations, and educational resources in one user-friendly platform.

Read the full article.

Billy Bishop launches Sunflower Hidden Disability program

Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport (YTZ) has joined the Sunflower network of over 280 airports, enhancing accessibility for travelers with hidden disabilities. Passengers will now receive personalized assistance from check-in to boarding for a smoother journey.

Read the full article.

To Table of Contents

How scientists with disabilities are making research labs and fieldwork more accessible

In an effort to raise awareness about accessibility challenges in research, scientists and students explored a rugged landscape using canes and a strong support system. A drone captured beautiful aerial views of a serene blue lake for those unable to participate physically.

Read the full article.

Banking without barriers

In today's fast-paced tech world, it's vital that banking services are accessible to all. Malintha Fernando, Global Head of Digital Experience and Accessibility at HSBC, is leading initiatives to enhance the bank's inclusivity for customers and employees.

Read the full article.

This B.C. mom asked local grocery stores to bring in special carts for son who has a disability. They did.

Caroline's Carts aim to enhance the shopping experience for families with special needs by addressing accessibility gaps. These carts provide a safe, secure, and accommodating option for shopping, which not only fosters independence for children with disabilities but also empowers families to participate in routine activities, such as grocery shopping, with less stress.

Read the full article.

The pathologizing of disability: Why academic medicine must prioritize accessibility

Recognizing the importance of diversity and inclusion, physicians with disabilities provide crucial perspectives on medical education. Their experiences reveal systemic barriers, adaptations, and necessary changes to create a more inclusive environment for future medical students.

Read the full article.

Migrants with a disability: 5 insights to understand an 'invisible' problem

Labor market inclusion for migrants is a complex issue shaped by factors like gender, race, nationality, age, and education. However, migrants with disabilities face significant but often overlooked barriers in finding employment opportunities.

Read the full article.

Charlottetown man finds hope with new job board for people with disabilities

The Untapped Talent platform is an innovative initiative aimed at connecting employers with underrepresented talent pools, especially individuals who face barriers to employment. This platform acknowledges the significant potential of candidates who may be overlooked due to factors such as disabilities, socio-economic status, or non-traditional backgrounds.

Read the full article.

To Table of Contents

mélange

FashionAbility

MAGAZINE

LAUNCHING SOON!

Inclusive Beauty
makeup tips

WARDROBE ESSENTIALS

Adaptive
Fashion Editorials

Adaptive
Clothing Hacks

Fashion Industry
Voices

Shopping
GUIDE

Adaptive Fashion Trends

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