Authentic Inclusion with Emily Ladau

[00:00:00.17] LILY BOND: First of all, happy Global Accessibility Awareness Day to everyone. We will refer to this with the acronym GAAD sometimes today. And thank you for joining today's session, "Authentic Inclusion with Emily Ladau." To introduce myself, I'm Lily Bond. I'm the chief growth officer at 3Play Media, and I use she/her pronouns. I'm a white woman in my 30s. And I've been with 3Play for about 11 years.

[00:00:25.94] I'm very excited to welcome today's guest, Emily Ladau. Emily is a passionate disability rights advocate, writer, and communications consultant who's been using her voice for change since the age of 10 when she made her advocacy debut on Sesame Street. She's the author of Demystifying Disability and currently serves as editor of Able News at the Viscardi Center.

[00:00:47.07] Emily also co-hosts The Accessible Stall podcast and consults with organizations to help make cultural spaces more inclusive. She's received numerous honors for her work, including the Paul G. Hearne Emerging Leader Award and the Henry Viscardi Achievement Award. Thank you for being here to celebrate GAAD with us. Emily, thank you so much. I will hand it over to you to give a quick introduction of yourself before we dig in.

[00:01:11.19] EMILY LADAU: Yes. Hi, everyone. Happy Global Accessibility Awareness Day. It is, I like to joke, my favorite holiday. I am a white woman. I have brown hair pulled back in a ponytail, big purple glasses, and I am wearing an orange and blue and white floral dress. And I am coming to you from right outside of New York City. It's so great to see so many of you coming from all over. And I cannot wait to get into this conversation.

[00:01:43.47] LILY BOND: Amazing. I grew up right outside of New York City, so we'll have to talk about that later.

[00:01:49.06] EMILY LADAU: [CHUCKLES]

[00:01:50.40] LILY BOND: So Emily, to get started, you wear many hats. We just talked about several of them. How has your lived experience shaped the work you do today in access and disability inclusion?

[00:02:02.35] EMILY LADAU: This is a great question. So what you're not able to see in the screen is that I am a wheelchair-user. And what you're also not able to see in the screen is that I have significant hearing loss and often wear hearing aids. So in regard to my experiences, I have always experienced the world as a disabled person. But my perspective on being a disabled person has evolved quite a bit over time.

[00:02:36.41] So when I was younger, one of the biggest compliments that you could pay me was to say, oh, well, I don't even think of you as disabled. Or oh, I forgot that you use a wheelchair. And it wasn't until I got to college, actually, that I finally started to realize that was essentially saying, you need to erase an entire part of me in order to see the whole of my humanity.

[00:03:07.81] And I didn't want that to be the case. I didn't want people to see me without recognizing a part of my identity that is so integral to how I experience the world and how the world experiences me. And so I had always, in one way or another, been an advocate. But at the same time, I really found myself shying away from disability until I finally learned to embrace it and to be proud of it as part of my identity.

[00:03:41.68] And I recognize that everybody is really on a different point in that journey. And I think that it's so crucial to recognize that there are more than a billion people who have some type of disability around the world. And I hope that I'm preaching to the choir on some of these statistics. But I think it's an important reminder that, if you've met one disabled person, you've met one disabled person.

[00:04:08.99] And my experience has shaped the work that I do as an advocate. I'm especially passionate, of course, about physical and environmental accessibility, about providing captioning and accessibility for people with hearing disabilities. But those are my lived experiences.

[00:04:27.02] And beyond that, there is such a multitude of other experiences of disability that, while I don't have personal lived experience with them, I'm still incredibly passionate about making sure that access is not just focused on one area, but focused more broadly on how we can create access for everybody.

[00:04:49.45] LILY BOND: Amazing answer. It's interesting you say that your personal relationship with accessibility and advocacy has changed a lot over time. You have been advocating since you were 10 years old, so it's really interesting to understand those things in context.

[00:05:11.78] I am curious-- what's changed the most in accessibility conversations in that time since when you started when you were 10? What hasn't changed enough? How has your approach to advocacy changed in that time? We'd love to hear more.

[00:05:30.38] EMILY LADAU: I'd actually like to take it back even a little bit further because there's an interesting dynamic that I'm really lucky to have in my life, which is that my mom also has the same disability that I do. And I know that some people hear that and think that it is sad or tragic. But it's actually something that has really shaped my lived experiences in many ways.

[00:05:55.58] And it's very interesting because, not only do I have the perspective of how advocacy and accessibility and inclusion have changed over the course of my life-- and I'll be 34 in July. My mom, who is 30 years older than me, has the "pre-Americans with Disabilities Act" experience of growing up with a disability.

[00:06:21.59] And so I have the insight from her of what's changed in terms of, how was accessibility while she was growing up versus how was accessibility while I've been growing up? And what's really interesting is that it's changed in a lot of ways. And yet, in some ways, it remains the same. And I always say, you can create a policy, but you can't legislate an attitude.

[00:06:49.97] And so even though we have had disability rights laws in place for decades, even though we are coming up on the 35th anniversary of the ADA, and even though it was made explicit that the ADA absolutely cover digital accessibility, we are still having a lot of the same arguments, fights, conversations that we were having that led to the passage of the ADA in the first place.

[00:07:18.44] And so much of that is because, yes, we have created legislation. But we now need the attitudes to shift with it. And so, in terms of what has changed, there's so much that I no longer have to worry about because there are ramps, there are elevators, because captioning has become more so the norm and is more readily available. These are all things that are of benefit to me.

[00:07:47.57] However, there are plenty of moments where I encounter a store that's inaccessible, where captioning is not made available, where we're not providing sensory spaces for people who need quiet, where we're not ensuring that we are providing gluten-free food for people who have dietary restrictions.

[00:08:11.81] These are conversations that we shouldn't have to be having in terms of access so many years after the passage of all these laws. And yet, it feels like we've seen the ADA as, that's it. But it's really the floor. It's not the ceiling. And so we have so much more to do and so much more to go.

[00:08:35.82] And I think that Global Accessibility Awareness Day is an important reminder of that. But I also really encourage people not just to focus on accessibility one day out of the year. It's something that matters for everyone every single day of the year.

[00:08:54.76] LILY BOND: Absolutely. That is a very important point and a great way to say it. And thank you for sharing your story and how it connects to your mother's. We've certainly seen a lot of strides in the last 30 years. And policy is important, but, as you said, policy is not the end-all.

[00:09:12.62] And policy was written at a specific point in time. And the world has evolved and changed since then. And we need to evolve and change too. And you can't legislate an attitude, as you said. I would love to hear more about what role you think mindset and cultural shifts play in driving true inclusion outside of the policy standpoint.

[00:09:34.18] EMILY LADAU: I think we cannot underestimate mindset enough because it is one thing to ask for accessibility. It is another thing to understand why accessibility is so essential. And I'm sure that so many of us here are already familiar with the curb-cut effect, which is the idea that, if we don't have a curb cut, then not everybody can get up and down from street to sidewalk.

[00:10:04.44] But if we do have a curb cut, then it's usable by everybody, whether it's a person using a mobility device, somebody who is pushing a stroller, somebody who is riding a skateboard. Everybody can use the curb cut. And it seems like such a simple concept. But I encourage people to take it further and think about, not just actual curb cuts, but especially now, digital curb cuts, I like to call them-- providing captioning, providing remote options, providing interpretation on Zoom events like we're doing today-- creating curb cuts everywhere that you can.

[00:10:47.04] And once we start to have that mindset shift and look for where we can create the curb cuts, we can create more accessibility. But we can't think of it as "doing someone a favor" or treating someone in a "special way," and I say that with air quotes. We have to look at it as, accessibility is going to improve the world for everyone. There is no one who is harmed by accessibility. It can only create a better world for everyone.

[00:11:21.61] So once we stop looking at it as, this is just something that we have to do because the law says that we have to do it, and instead, look at it as, this is something that we do because it's not going to hurt me, and it's going to help everyone, I think that's the mindset shift that is going to get people to not only comply with accessibility laws but take it further and recognize how we can integrate that across all areas of our lives, whether it's compliance or not.

[00:11:56.14] LILY BOND: Yeah, great point. And I love the phrase "digital curb cuts." As a captioning company, at 3Play Media, we've been thinking about captions as this universal design concept and as part of the curb-cut effect for a long time. And I'm definitely going to have to use the "digital curb cut" phrasing myself as we talk about it.

[00:12:17.74] We have a great attendee question that I think really fits with this topic that I want to get to. The question is, how do you effectively change mindsets that get people, not only to see why accessibility is needed, but that they actually become champions of accessibility? The best way I've seen working so far is building relationships, but that takes time. Do you have any other tips?

[00:12:38.14] EMILY LADAU: Relationship-building is key. I appreciate that question so much. But I also think-- and just hear me out here-- that sometimes the question is, what's in it for me? And I don't want to say that in the sense that I think people are selfish. I just think that people are focused on what's going on in their immediate world. And perhaps, if they don't experience a disability or if they don't experience your disability, they're not thinking about why accessibility is so essential.

[00:13:16.08] And so that's when I bring up in the conversation that the disability community is one of the only communities that anybody can join at any time. And that's not a threat. I think we're pretty fun. I think we're pretty cool. But it's a reality. It's a natural part of the human experience. And so why wouldn't you want to create a world today that is better for you tomorrow if something is to happen in your life or the lives of your loved ones that would necessitate needing accessibility?

[00:13:52.54] And I wish that we could all look much further outside of ourselves to think about why accessibility is beneficial. But sometimes, starting with that "what's in it for me" really helps. And then, of course, taking that further-- because I do believe the best in people. And I do believe that most people don't just think about, "What's in it for me?"

[00:14:17.98] So then the question becomes, how is the rest of your environment, your world, your community going to improve if you create accessibility? Whose experiences, perspectives, opinions are being left out of things right now that could be-- they made that much richer by having them as part of the work that you're doing, as part of the events that you're having, as part of the activities that you're involved in?

[00:14:46.47] So think about what you're missing out on. Who's missing from the conversation? And then it's not just, what's in it for me, but it's, who's missing? And how can we all benefit from a richer conversation when everybody is involved?

[00:15:03.95] LILY BOND: Those are great tips. And I love the way you framed both of them. As we talk more extensively about focusing on mindset shifts, I do want to talk about the fact that we're in a time where conversations around inclusion, and especially disability inclusion, are being increasingly politicized. And that mindset shift may be regressing. How can advocates reframe that narrative to show that accessibility benefits everyone? And how can we navigate this time where there is a lot of concern around the continued push for inclusion?

[00:15:44.91] EMILY LADAU: I want to acknowledge that, I imagine, just statistically speaking-- and I am not a mathematician-- but that there are people from across the political spectrum who are joining this conversation. And when I talk about disability in relation to today's political climate, I know that disability does not discriminate. It is part of every group. It is part of every community.

[00:16:18.82] People of all political ideals have disabilities. And so I give that caveat before I even answer this question. Because I want to acknowledge that disability has become increasingly politicized. But the reality is that, every issue is a disability issue because every issue impacts disabled people. And so when it comes down to it, it should not be a matter of politics. It should be a matter of humanity.

[00:16:54.92] And going back to what I talked a little bit about earlier, this concept of "what's in it for me?" sometimes I have to take, especially with people who are focusing on removing budget that could support things like accessibility-- I have to say, are you really thinking about the business case?

[00:17:18.55] And I don't think that disabled people should be reduced to talking points or dollar signs. But I do think that, when you have 1 in 4 adults in the US who have some type of disability, and when the CDC recently said that the number of disabled people is over 70 million in the United States alone, you're missing crucial business opportunities and crucial opportunities for people to contribute to the economy simply because you are going to deny people access and opportunity from the outset.

[00:18:00.84] So while perhaps it might save you money in the short term-- because you did not integrate accessibility, because you did not hire a disabled person, because you cut some of the budget that would provide supports and services for disabled people-- in the end, you're not thinking forward, and you're not thinking long term, where you are then cutting people off from what they need to become full and productive members of society.

[00:18:35.91] And I don't think that anybody's humanity should be judged based on productivity. But I also think that, right now, reframing the narrative requires explaining that short-term financial savings doesn't help anyone in the long run. Because we're so focused on, how do we pinch pennies and less focused on, how do we give everyone opportunity so that we can all be successful and thrive?

[00:19:11.25] LILY BOND: Yeah, all of that was very well said. I had to write down, "It should not be a matter of politics. It should be a matter of humanity." You're full of great sound bites today. But I would like to acknowledge what you said earlier about not celebrating accessibility only one day of the year. And you started talking about business here and how to create an ROI.

[00:19:33.27] Many, many companies are focused on accessibility and remain focused on accessibility. But how can they avoid performative inclusion and, instead, foster real representation and engagement and long-term relationships and value?

[00:19:51.43] EMILY LADAU: It's such an interesting question. Because, on the one hand, I notice so many people who are disheartened when companies don't acknowledge days like Global Accessibility Awareness Day or Disability Pride Month. But at the same time, we don't want that to be the only time that you're acknowledging the importance of accessibility, the importance of inclusion.

[00:20:18.95] And I always say, when the calendar page flips, this issue is still just as important as it was yesterday. And so even though Global Accessibility Awareness Day is the third Thursday every May, what about the second Thursday? And what about the first Thursday in August? Does accessibility still matter then? And of course it does. And so I don't necessarily want to know just what you're doing one day out of the year, although that is important, and it is a way to signal your commitment.

[00:20:56.28] I want to know what you're doing 365 days a year, whether it is more inclusive language in your marketing, more inclusive imagery in your marketing, taking the time to openly foster conversations about accessibility and accommodations and support needs in the workplace, focusing on care for people's mental health, focusing on how we can create more adaptability and flexibility and hold on to remote working as an option, for example.

[00:21:35.37] When it comes down to it, I don't care so much about the language that you use. I don't care about the social media posts that you make one day out of the year. What I care about is, what are your policies and practices every other day of the year to make people feel welcome? And that takes more commitment than just putting up a post on social media. But if we're talking about ROI, it's tenfold, if not more.

[00:22:07.33] LILY BOND: Yeah, absolutely. And I love the focus on commitment being an ongoing goal. We often hear that accessibility is a practice, not a checkbox. So how do we ensure that accessibility efforts stay people-centered, that we're not just building accessible tools, but truly asking disabled communities what they need? We often hear "nothing about us without us." What does that mean in practice? And how can companies inherently build that type of culture?

[00:22:41.30] EMILY LADAU: I think we have to take it further from the idea of "nothing about us without us" to the idea of "nothing without us." Because disabled people are very often pigeonholed, if we are included at all, in accessibility work, in the work to focus on diversity, equity, inclusion. We are called upon only when there's need for accessibility testers.

[00:23:15.23] But what if disabled people were part of every process, regardless of whether it was disability related or not? And I think that's the key shift there. "Nothing about us without us" is a great rallying cry. But what will disabled people think of if they are brought to the table much earlier in the conversation, not just to talk about accessibility, but to bring their expertise and their lived experiences that can change a product, a service for the better for everybody?

[00:23:53.47] So I think that we have to move away from this idea that people with disabilities should only be working on things related to disability. That being said, of course people with disabilities should be working on things related to disability. But it shouldn't just be that.

[00:24:11.92] And I think that that becomes the downfall too often of companies that are well-meaning and want to be more inclusive. But then they say, well, we contracted with a few people with disabilities to test this product. Or we brought a disabled person on to get more information about the end-user experience. What about bringing us in from the beginning? What about "nothing without us," so that we're not just one checkbox on your compliance list, but we're actually actively part of every phase of the conversation?

[00:24:51.49] LILY BOND: Yeah, I love that. And as you've said multiple times, anyone can become a member of the disability community at any time. Accessibility really is a universal design concept. It is truly an everyone thing. And having people with disabilities involved, not just on the things impacting people with disabilities, but on everything is really critical, especially from the beginning.

[00:25:16.96] I'm curious-- shifting gears a little bit, do you think that mainstream narratives around accessibility are inclusive of the full spectrum of disabled experiences? Or are we still seeing stories left out?

[00:25:31.91] EMILY LADAU: [SIGH] Gosh, absolutely not. I do not think that we have remotely reached full or peak inclusivity when it comes to mainstream narratives of disability. And first of all, that's because, in many cases, there still are no mainstream narratives of disability that are consistent. We certainly have mainstream representation. But it's spotty. It's not yet something that is strong and consistent and positive.

[00:26:05.33] The ones that we do see coming up are, of course, the narratives of people with disabilities being inspiring for doing something like simply getting out of bed in the morning and going to the grocery store. Or we see the story of a disabled person who is portrayed as a victim or as tragic or as a villain. There are these very standard stereotypical narratives that we see.

[00:26:34.04] But so often, those are about people with very specific types of disabilities. I often joke that I am practically the stereotypical stock photo of disability if you see me in person because I'm a white woman who uses a wheelchair. And when you type disability into a search bar on a stock photo website, you're probably going to get a white woman who uses a wheelchair.

[00:27:01.26] The difference is that I'm not sitting in a hospital-style, medicalized-looking wheelchair. And I don't have my arms spread wide while the wind is flowing in my hair at the beach. But mainstream media has a particular idea of what disability looks like. And in many ways, I am that. But there's so much more that's non-apparent, that we don't see.

[00:27:29.76] And we have to be so much more aware of that than we are now. And that's what I'm constantly asking people to recognize. Yes, when you look at me, you see my wheelchair right away. But I have hearing disabilities. I have mental health disabilities. I have chronic illnesses. You don't see any of those when you look at me, but they're still very much a part of my story.

[00:27:52.95] But it's not the story that gets told in the mainstream media, because what they're looking for is the story of the stereotypical person who uses a wheelchair who overcame something and inspired everybody in the process. And until we move away from that mindset, as that being the only experience of disability that we can put out there in mainstream media, we are completely missing the bigger picture.

[00:28:21.74] LILY BOND: Yeah, that's extremely well said. And thank you, too, for calling out these narratives and stereotypes for disability. I think that's really important. You have, obviously, in your role and your experience, consulted for many industries. You just mentioned a lot of misconceptions, a lot of stereotypes. What's one misconception you wish more of the companies you consulted with would understand about disability inclusion?

[00:28:57.54] EMILY LADAU: I have been thinking about this for a while. And I have finally, I think, distilled it down to a couple of keywords. There is a misconception that people with disabilities are, one, helpless and, two, hopeless. I think that's really what it comes down to.

[00:29:20.26] And you can obviously draw larger connections in terms of what that means. So it can look like being financially burdensome. It can look like being so distraught that you are disabled that you don't want to show up in the world-- the helplessness, the hopelessness-- in need of help, or feeling despair because you have a disability. And I want to debunk those misconceptions.

[00:29:50.08] Disabled people are not helpless, nor are we hopeless. We do need support, but part of being human is needing support. I often talk to people about language. And one thing that comes up a lot is, why say the term "disabled" instead of "special needs?" And I think this is particularly relevant to this conversation and this question because I would like to know, what about my needs are special as a disabled person?

[00:30:27.40] I have human needs, and everybody has human needs to function in a way that works for them in the world. If you want to talk about my special needs, I would really love it if you would fan me and feed me grapes and treat me like a queen. Those are my special needs. Everything else is just me being a human. And so if I could debunk one myth, no matter what the industry is, it would be that disabled people are not helpless. We are not hopeless. We are humans.

[00:31:03.89] LILY BOND: Very well said. I also have those special needs.

[00:31:07.67] EMILY LADAU: Yes, as we all should.

[00:31:09.60] LILY BOND: Yes. As you just said, language is such a powerful tool. Language around disability has changed so much over time. And how do you think those shifts in language have helped or hindered progress? Where do you think we stand now? What are some of the terms that you think are misrepresentative or hindering progress?

[00:31:36.70] EMILY LADAU: Can I be very honest? I would say my answer would have been different probably a year or so ago. Because a year or so ago, I would have taken a deep dive into the nuances of the language that we use. And that's something that's still very important to me.

[00:31:58.31] There is a lot of stigma and stereotypes and discrimination that show up in how we communicate. But right now, I am encountering a world where I am not allowed, in some cases, to use the word "accessibility" to talk about accessibility, where I am not allowed in the work that I do to use terms like "disability inclusion."

[00:32:27.77] And so, while, like I said, months ago, my answer would have really taken a deep dive into some of the nuances of language, I have now gotten to the point where I am encouraging people to feel comfortable with saying the words "disability" and "accessibility" unapologetically and proudly.

[00:32:52.65] And so often, people say, well, that's so silly. Of course it should be OK to say "accessible" when we're talking about accessibility. But it's become a, quote-unquote "bad word." "Disability" has become a bad word. And I want people to become comfortable with the idea of disability and with the idea of accessibility, not as scary concepts, but as things that we need and things that we are.

[00:33:28.71] We are disabled. Say that word. Accessibility is important. Say "accessibility." So I wish that I could go further on that answer. But right now, I am literally asking the bare minimum. Don't be afraid to say the words "disabled" and "accessible."

[00:33:47.10] LILY BOND: Yeah, I think that's a great call-out. And yeah, seeing terms that are just core to this experience and this community, having to be used almost as an act of-- yeah, I don't even know what to say about it. But I will move on and appreciate the response.

[00:34:10.89] As we talk about this concept of language, representation, and identity, we acknowledge how not all disabled people identify with a singular community. What can we learn from that complexity, from this idea of intersecting identities and how that impacts the disabled community?

[00:34:33.29] EMILY LADAU: This is such a crucial question. And I've touched on this a little bit in some of my other answers. But like I believe I said earlier, if you have met one disabled person, you've met one disabled person.

[00:34:49.86] And I am a white woman with physical disability. I am not representative of the whole of the disability experience. And what happens very often is, I exist at this nexus of privilege and marginalization where people will bring me in to have a conversation just like this one.

[00:35:19.11] And people will tune in to that conversation. And then people will say, well, I've heard the perspective of someone with a disability. I can check that box off today. But I am one person out of billions of people.

[00:35:34.98] And I am someone who has the privilege to have turned my experiences into a career. I am someone who has a degree of socioeconomic privilege, someone who graduated college. I am someone who has family support, who's not worried about, let's say, food insecurity or housing insecurity at this moment in time.

[00:36:00.66] And yes, I am someone who is marginalized in certain ways. But I also experience privilege. And so I want people to be very conscious of the fact that there is no singular experience of disability. Disability cuts across all identity groups. And there's so much that I don't know about other people's disability experiences as much as they don't know about my experiences.

[00:36:30.46] And I don't want people to think of intersectionality as a buzzword. I want people to think of it as a fact. I want people to recognize that diversity is a fact. By simply existing on this earth, we are all diverse because none of us are exactly the same. And so intersectionality is not just a concept in social justice. It is a reality. We all have multiple and overlapping identities that we experience.

[00:37:09.43] And once we start to recognize that none of those exist in a vacuum and that we all show up as our whole selves-- I can't just take off a part of my identity and put it on the shelf at night-- that's when we start to be more conscious of how we can create a more accessible world because we recognize that there is a diversity of experiences, a diversity of needs, and that's not a bad thing. It's just how it is.

[00:37:41.77] LILY BOND: Absolutely. We had a comment in the chat sharing a recent experience that I think is worth sharing. The comment was, I had some pushback around disability pride events because of LGBTQIA pride-- sorry, I repeated that. And someone had said something like, as a white cis hetero guy, I'm uncomfortable with the phrase "disability pride." I don't have a good response to that. I have a lot of thoughts and a lot of responses, but I don't know how to address that concern in an inclusive way. Do you have any advice for this person?

[00:38:17.95] EMILY LADAU: There's a lot of overlap in the language that different marginalized groups use to express themselves. And I think that pride has become largely associated with the LGBTQIA community. But when disabled people took on the concept of disability pride, of course, it was motivated by the pride movement. However, it wasn't meant to be appropriating it or co-opting it. It was, instead, meant to be an acknowledgment of the fact that we are proud of who we are as disabled people.

[00:38:57.01] And so, yes, pride as a concept, is something that very much originates with the LGBTQIA community. However, pride as a concept is also something that we can acknowledge from a respectful place, and we can honor and celebrate disability pride without taking away from celebrating other communities.

[00:39:18.99] Also, because the disability community holds people of all identities, I think we can also recognize that, when we're celebrating disability pride, we should and can celebrate so many identities under that umbrella. And so it's really all about recognizing a respectful overlap in concepts, rather than assuming that anyone is trying to take away from someone else's pride in their identity.

[00:39:50.14] LILY BOND: A respectful overlap-- I think that's great framing. With our actions, there's often a gap between intention and impact. What do you wish more people, allies or otherwise, understood about how their framing of disability lands with broader communities?

[00:40:13.33] EMILY LADAU: Intent versus impact is a conversation that I have a lot. Because, of course, I do not want to think ill of people. And I think that most people have the best of intentions, even if they don't recognize the impact of what it is that they're saying. And so I try to always take a bit of a step back in a moment where I'm feeling hurt or harmed by something because we live in a world where we don't give each other grace.

[00:40:48.78] We are very, very quick to post something on social media, to send off an angry message without thinking about how we can look at something as an opportunity to bridge a gap or to create a connection. And I think that's how we end up alienating people rather than welcoming them into the conversation and offering them a learning opportunity.

[00:41:17.10] And I'm not saying that people with disabilities have an obligation to always be teachers. But what I am saying is that, if we could all give each other a little more grace and stop to think for a moment about whether someone's intent matches the impact or if they were well-meaning, but the impact still didn't land in the right way, and go from there.

[00:41:44.32] And I know that is asking for a lot in a world where people are constantly subjected to stigma, to discrimination, to ableism. But if you can find it in yourself to take just a moment and say, the impact matters, but the intent also matters. And if the intent wasn't to be malicious or harmful, can we look at this as a learning moment or a teaching moment and a moment to strengthen how we relate to one another? I think we'd all be better off.

[00:42:21.20] And I know that when people hear me say this, they think that I just have rose-colored glasses on about how the world works. And I know that that's probably true in some cases. And I also don't think that you always have to be the one in a moment where the impact was harmful, even if the intent wasn't, to fix that. But I also think that, if we just took a bit of a step back each time, it might help us create better connections.

[00:42:57.31] LILY BOND: Yeah. I love what you said about learning and giving grace. And I think it's a very common human fallacy to assume that others think like you do. How does that show up in conversations about accessibility and advocacy and why can assumptions sometimes be problematic?

[00:43:15.47] EMILY LADAU: Gosh, this is a good one because there are so often people I know who just assume that their needs should be fully understood and fully met without them articulating what those needs are. And to be very fair, yes, there are laws in place that account for accessibility. So absolutely, we should be anticipating accessibility needs, both in terms of compliance and also because it's the right and good thing to do. But sometimes it's better to just have a conversation.

[00:43:56.58] And I think that this is where things often get lost in translation. Because I have had so many people who have assumed that my wheelchair can just bump over a few-inch step. And I've also had people who have assumed that their doorway was too narrow, and so they just didn't invite me to something.

[00:44:23.95] Instead, if we just have a conversation about access needs and support needs, I think it will avoid so many of the issues that we encounter. And of course, I'm talking about physical accessibility here. But this is absolutely applicable to digital accessibility as well. It would be great if I showed up to every event and every event had captions in place for me.

[00:44:51.23] But if you're not going to make the assumption that captions should just be there, ask the question. Say, are there access needs or support needs that you have in order to successfully participate in this event? So avoid assumptions altogether. Of course, there are steps that you can take so that people don't always feel like the burden is on them to advocate, to speak up, to ask for what they need. But remember that accessibility is a two-way street, and a conversation can make all the difference.

[00:45:26.93] LILY BOND: Yeah, absolutely. And as we think about advocating for needs, do you have tips for how people can advocate for themselves? We have a number of attendees, sharing in the chat, experiences that they encounter regularly that are frustrating. And I think any advice you have would help.

[00:45:43.59] EMILY LADAU: I do want to say I have been watching the chat, so I really appreciate what everybody has been sharing. And I wish they could just have an individual conversation with every one of you. I really do. Because I know that so much of what we say in these conversations resonates. And sometimes it feels like no one else is recognizing these experiences.

[00:46:08.03] And so it's as wonderful for me to be able to share as it is to have other people share their experiences with me. And I have thought long and hard about the best advocacy advice that I have, because I'm still learning, and I'm also very bad at taking my own advice.

[00:46:28.60] But what I will say is, the world is limiting enough. We don't need to be more self-limiting. And I know there are so many times, when I have been afraid of taking up space, when I have felt like I am asking for too much, when I have felt like my needs are over the top, when really they are just what I need to show up in the world, and I keep quiet.

[00:47:04.36] And I like to say that I just twist myself up like a pretzel and make myself small and keep quiet, and I don't ask for what I need. And then, in the end, I'm the one who suffers because I was self-limiting. And how much better would my experience have been if I just said, I really need captioning? I really need a gluten-free option. I'm sorry, but I can't go because there is no elevator.

[00:47:34.01] If I just said that in the first place, I think it would at least be a step in the right direction. That's not to say that everybody is receptive to providing accessibility and support and accommodations. And I'm not saying that there are always easy answers. But I am saying, if the world is limiting you, you don't need to also limit yourself. You deserve to take up space.

[00:48:04.15] LILY BOND: Absolutely. That's amazing advice. And I think we also have a lot of allies in the chat. And similarly, what advice do you have for allies who want to take some of that advocating burden off of people with disabilities? How can allies support disability inclusion without centering themselves in an effective way?

[00:48:33.95] EMILY LADAU: Well, first and foremost, "ally" is not just a title that we give ourselves. I know that we want to put a little name badge on that says, "Hi, my name is Ally." And then, we want to follow that checkbox. I know we talked about checkboxes earlier. We want to follow that checklist and check off those boxes.

[00:48:56.79] And then, at the end of the day, we want that gold star that says, I was a number one ally today. Look, I know that, secretly, we all just want to be patted on the back sometimes. But ally is not an identity. Allyship is about taking action. And so it's one thing for you to say that you're an ally to the disability community. It's another thing to show that in action and in practice.

[00:49:28.00] And as cliche as this sounds, allyship actually is a journey and not a destination. So we don't reach the end of the checklist and wash our hands of being an ally. Allyship is something that is ongoing in how we think about how we show up in the world and what we can do to support the people around us. And one of my favorite things, which is a very tangible takeaway, is to start doing access check-ins with people in your life.

[00:50:02.14] And this is not a concept that I created by any means. But it's a concept that I've learned from other people in the disability community that has become really important in my life. So if I am planning a gathering or if I'm planning an event or if I am starting out a meeting with someone, I can take a moment and say, I just want to check in with everybody.

[00:50:27.57] Are your access needs being met right now? And if not, is there something we can do in this moment to meet them? Or is there something that we can anticipate for next time to meet them? And it doesn't mean that you're going to come up with the solution immediately, but it starts the conversation. And sometimes it's a very simple change.

[00:50:48.72] Maybe it's saying, I can't have my video on today. Maybe it's saying, next time, could you send me those materials in advance. Or would you mind checking that the restaurant actually has gluten-free options on the menu before inviting me? So it's really just about those little moments of conversation that make a huge difference.

[00:51:14.58] LILY BOND: Yeah, I love the concept of access check-ins-- something I will start doing more. But access does change all the time. Access needs change all the time. And also, technology and the available accommodations are changing all the time. And what was the best access yesterday may not be the best access tomorrow. So it's a great reminder to do those consistently.

[00:51:41.10] I loved the examples you shared of how you and others can influence their own spheres in a positive way and make it more accessible. I think, if everyone did that, it would have a really profound impact. What trends or encouraging shifts are you seeing in how disability and accessibility are being talked about right now? I know we've talked about some of the flip side of that, but would love to think about what is going well.

[00:52:07.93] EMILY LADAU: I am not always an optimist. I would say I'm more of a realist than anything, but I'm certainly not pessimistic either when it comes to how we think about disability and some of the advancements that are being made.

[00:52:25.82] I think that there is a lot more thought going into inclusion and access, even if we're not using those words anymore. I noticed so many companies are leaning into accommodations as standard practice above and beyond compliance with the law and recognizing that everybody can benefit from flexibility and adaptability.

[00:52:55.70] I say so often that the silver lining of what we experienced during the pandemic-- and I don't say that lightly, because there was so much heartache and heartbreak during that time. But we learned what we can do digitally. We learned a lot about how to operate in the virtual world. And the fact that many places are still holding on to those learnings and those lessons is something that is really heartening to me because it's creating digital curb cuts for people to participate, to bring it back to that term.

[00:53:35.39] I'm also feeling really hopeful every time I am surrounded by disabled people who have not given up the fight and who are very much focused on continuing to advocate, continuing to show up, continuing to put themselves out there. I have, I would say, successfully trained my algorithms so that a lot of what I see on my social media is actually quite hopeful.

[00:54:04.09] It's a lot of disabled people who are going to D.C. to advocate, who are talking to their local legislators, who are sharing their experiences, who are reaching out across the aisle. And I'm feeling very heartened by that. I know that this is where I get a little bit into that almost cheesy motivational speaker territory.

[00:54:27.97] But I am not a motivational speaker by any stretch of the imagination. This is about as close as I get. I always say that if you throw a stone in an ocean, it ripples outward. And it may feel like it doesn't have an impact, but that ripple is going to meet the ripples of other people who are also throwing stones in the ocean and eventually create a wave.

[00:54:54.16] And even if you feel like you're not doing much, you are doing something every time you throw a stone in the ocean, whether it is one post on social media or one conversation or one petition you signed or one call that you've made to a legislator. And every time I see people who are engaging in that kind of activity, it makes me feel really hopeful.

[00:55:20.35] LILY BOND: Yeah, I love that analogy, and I think you're doing a great job stumping as a motivational speaker, even if you don't consider yourself one.

[00:55:28.79] EMILY LADAU: [CHUCKLES]

[00:55:30.85] LILY BOND: We do have time for one more question, and I want to shift gears a little bit to the future. It's Global Accessibility Awareness Day 2025 right now. We've talked a lot about what meaningful accessibility looks like today. But what do you hope it looks like in 10 years or even in 50 years?

[00:55:50.02] EMILY LADAU: Well, I, for one, would like to put myself out of a job. I would be delighted. I mean, I'd probably be a little bit aimless and purposeless at first, but I would also be absolutely thrilled if everyone who was constantly advocating for access and inclusion could instead shift to another job because it was no longer necessary to constantly be advocating for access and inclusion.

[00:56:19.96] So my dream Global Accessibility Awareness Day, several years on from now, would be one where we are celebrating all of the progress that we've made without simply being aware of accessibility. It wouldn't be a day to remind people so much of the importance of accessibility as a day to reflect on how far we've come in creating accessibility. So that's the dream.

[00:56:48.90] Do I think we're going to get there? I don't know. I hope so. But in the meantime, I'm incredibly heartened by the fact that we have Global Accessibility Awareness Day because it means that we have these opportunities to come together as a community and to remind people that we are here. We are not going anywhere. And we deserve access just as much as anybody else to the world around us.

[00:57:14.50] LILY BOND: The perfect note to close on. And I think your vision of the future sounds beautiful. And I hope we come to realize it. That is all the time we have today. Emily, thank you so much for celebrating GAAD with us. It was such a pleasure chatting with you.

[00:57:29.29] And thank you to our audience for being here, asking great questions. It was such a wonderful chat going on. I'm going to have to go back and read all of it when I'm not distracted by also chatting with Emily. Thank you, again, to everyone for joining. I hope you all enjoy the rest of your day. And Emily, again, thank you so much for joining us.

[00:57:48.56] EMILY LADAU: Thank you, everyone. Happy Global Accessibility Awareness Day.