

Corrie Melanson 0:00

Welcome to Accessibility Ally. It's a podcast featuring guests with a range of disabilities and social identities. They share provocative ideas and challenge allies to disrupt ableism. And I'm your host, Corrie Melanson. Thanks for tuning in. On today's episode, we have a conversation with Michelle and Morgan, two women who both have physical disabilities and what accommodations looked like for them in their educational journeys. They talk about things that worked for them, as well as things that don't work. We tackle the question, how do we better support people with disabilities on their educational journeys? Really excited to talk today about education. What does accessibility look like? Both from the perspective of someone who supports students in post secondary, but also from the perspective of someone who is a recent graduate and had the experience of being in a post secondary setting, and facing some barriers in that setting, but also what kind of supports might have been available? But first, of course, we just want to start with getting to know who you are. So Michelle, can you introduce yourself and just tell us about you? Not so much your role yet, but all about you?

Michelle Mahoney 1:25

Okay, thank you. My name is Michelle Mahoney. I live in here in Halifax. While actually just outside of the city, I live with my husband, Chris. And we have a four year old Nova Scotia Duck Toller named Gus. And, yeah, I have a physical disability called Arthrogryposis, which is lack of muscle in various joints. It affects my arms and legs. But I consider myself to be a regular human, just doing the same thing as everyone else. I have a university degree. I can drive a car, I live in a newly well, seven years now built home with my husband, it's an accessible home and, you know, with just the the right things in place, you know, I can do anything.

Corrie Melanson 2:18

Amazing. Thanks, Michelle. What about you, Morgan.

Morgane Evans 2:21

So my name is Morgan. I have mild right sided perasis as a consequence of a neonatal stroke. So the stroke happened when I was around three months old to maybe even earlier than that they're not really quite certain but I got diagnosed when I was nine months old. And that really just means that my right side is weaker than the left. I grew up with like, a lot of different types of accommodations, throughout elementary into high school as a post secondary. I am also from the US. So coming to Canada was also kind of an interesting experience in terms of accommodations, because the laws are different. My experiences are a little bit different. And like Michelle, my family also has a Toller but his name is Keji.

Corrie Melanson 3:14

Michelle, what barriers do you face as a result of your disability? Both at work in the community? What, what are some of those barriers that you have faced through your life?

Michelle Mahoney 3:27

Well you know, first of all, I grew up in a small town called Springhill, Nova Scotia. Yes, home of Anne Marie. And yes, I do know her, and I love her. So growing up in a small town, you know,

everybody knew who we were, everybody knew who my family was. I'm also a twin, I have a twin brother, and he does not have a disability. So every year my mom would have to go into my school and educate the teachers that they would be having a student with a disability in their class that year. And just some of the accommodations that I would need, I would need extra time for tests and, and stuff like that, but I didn't really need a lot, accommodations. There was one time where I had an operation on my feet. And I couldn't go to classes on any floor other than the first floor. And I couldn't even go to the cafeteria. So I had to eat in the principal's office. My best friend came and ate with me every day.

Corrie Melanson 4:25

That went over really well in junior high? You like cozying up to the principal.

Michelle Mahoney 4:29

Kind of yeah. When it came time to go to university, I wanted to, of course. When I was diagnosed with my condition, my doctor said to treat me like you would a regular kid and that's exactly how I was raised. So when it came time to go to university, I wanted to do that too. I wanted to go away to university and I looked at StFX because, small town. I was going to come to the city but I found it too big for me at that time. I spent some time at the rehab center to come up with gadgets and stuff to go away with to university. And I found it was a really difficult time being in the city because I thought of the city as an awful place because that's where I came for surgeries and doctor's appointments. So alternatively, I looked at, at St.FX. And I mean, I call it the most inaccessible campus in the world, but they really did bend over backwards to accommodate my needs. And since my mom didn't come to St.FX, I had to figure things out for myself. I had an attendant who would come in and help me every day and get dressed, and do everything that I needed help with. And, you know, I figured out how to do things on my own. So I tell people that I graduated in May 1995, with what I like to refer to as a Bachelor of Arts with a major in Independence, because that's what I learned. I became independent. My marks were horrible, but the life lessons I learned were invaluable.

Corrie Melanson 6:11

Morgan, what about you? What barriers have you experienced as a result of your disability growing up? Also specifically in the education settings that you've been in?

Morgane Evans 6:25

Yeah, so I grew up in a little bit of a bigger town than you did. I grew up outside of Washington, DC. Since I was really young, my mom documented everything, like every single piece of doctor's notes. Even from when I was diagnosed, I still have to this day, notes dating back to when I was born in 2001. I don't really remember everything, but I know the fact that my parents had to fight for me sometimes to get certain types of insurances, certain types of education support. I got an IEP when I was fairly young, it is an Individualized Education Plan.

Corrie Melanson 7:10

I think in Nova Scotia, we call them IPPs. Yeah, Individual Program Plan, but it's the same idea.

Morgane Evans 7:15

It's Federal in the States. There are similar things across all provinces in Canada. And I went to a private Elementary School, which claims that they are really inclusion focused, but not in my experience. There is a lot of toxicity between the teachers and students. And it was very ableist. I had a lot of bullying growing up, I got diagnosed with anxiety when I was eight, even though I had an IEP, which federally all public schools have to follow. Private schools do not have to follow that plan. So that was also really complicated, getting my education at that age. After I finished elementary school, my parents were like, we can't continue like this. We can't continue sending you to private school, because you're miserable. And also, it's kind of expensive. And so I went to public school and that really helped me become the person I am. At the public school that I went to, the middle and high schools were pretty good in my area. So I had a lot of support with my counselors. Kind of like ensuring that I had the best education as possible. There were some teachers that were not that great at following my accommodations. I didn't really have that many accommodations. I had extra time. I had somebody to fill in the bubbles on my Scantrons sheet as I tend to skip lines with my eyes. So I had somebody to do that for me. I had a calculator, to do math tests, any type of math test and it was really nice. And yeah, I decided to move to Nova Scotia to Dalhousie, which is where I went to university because I really want a change of experience and it's also much cheaper than in the States. And I just wanted to branch out from like, where I grew up. And, you know, accommodations wise, at Dalhousie I had a really good case manager through the Accessibility Center who really helped me. But there were still a lot of challenges, for example I require a note taker, because I can't write that much as I have tendinitis. Dalhousie leaves that duty up to voluntary students, and even though it is a paid duty, nobody really does it; even though there is a financial incentive. And I would see all of these emails saying "someone in your class still requires notes, and that was me. I couldn't be like, "Oh, I can do it," because I'm the one who needs them.

Corrie Melanson 7:15

So students have to volunteer, even though they do get paid, they literally have to say, "Okay, I will take that on."

Morgane Evans 10:11

You know, as a student, your life is just chaotic.

Corrie Melanson 10:22

Sometimes it's hard to add one more thing. Or maybe it's a question of, 'am I a really good note taker?' 'Can someone read my notes? Or am I good enough at this?'

Morgane Evans 10:35

Yeah. And I also had an accommodation where all my textbooks could be online. But that was really confusing one to try to access. I have that because of my chronic pain issues from my disability. And so that was also annoying to do, because in high school did, I could have that pretty easily. I would have one extra copy at school and at home, because I had two copies of the same textbook, generally. University, it's not like that. So that was also an accommodation.

That one was really kind of difficult to get. But I also had extended time, which was great. They were really helpful and great with that.

Corrie Melanson 11:20

Yeah. And Michelle, you know all about accommodations in the post secondary sector, because you are the Accessibility Officer at Kings, and from my understanding the first Accessibility Officer at King's. So it's not that they haven't had those services, but in the past, they've been shared with Dalhousie University. So why is it important that King's has this role now to have staff that is focused on accessibility? And what are you noticing from the students who you're interacting with?

Michelle Mahoney 11:58

I see students can be frustrated with the with accessing services. My specific role as an Accessibility Officer is supporting students to navigate the processes of the Student Accessibility Center. You know, last year, I walked a student over there, because they didn't know where it was. And I waited for them when we walked back together. And I was even able to set up an accommodation for a student without involving the Accessibility Center. So if I can do those sorts of things at Kings, if they allow me to do it, that's what I do.

Corrie Melanson 12:32

What are some of those common accommodations that students need?

Michelle Mahoney 12:40

In some classrooms, they have the chair with the side desk that you pull up. They come in left handed and right handed options. I even remember having issues with those myself, so we've had some students having issues with those sorts of setups. So, I would arrange for a table and chair to be put in a classroom

Corrie Melanson 13:05

I'm actually surprised those are still in classrooms!

Michelle Mahoney 13:08

So things like that, maybe like a chair, like a different kind of a computer chair; a more supported chair.

Corrie Melanson 13:24

Part of your job too Michelle is about supporting students, but what about like faculty and staff?

Michelle Mahoney 13:32

Yes, absolutely. So I assist faculty and staff. So right now we have an Accessibility Plan. The university has an Accessibility Plan. So I'm working on the different phases of that. I help faculty and staff with, just easier processes of understanding what is the duty to accommodate. And recently I put together an easier table format for faculty, outlining different processes. If a student requests an accommodation, then what is the faculty's responsibility once a student

requests an accommodation? So I just put it in a really easy format instead of just giving them the webpage to read. I try to 'Kingsify' everything because Kings is a part of Dal. And, you know, once students are finished their first year at Kings, because a lot of our students do the foundation year program, you then take classes both at Kings and Dal.

Corrie Melanson 14:46

So partly what I'm hearing too allows me to imagine that you're solving the concern of faculty, who might be thinking, 'Oh, okay, one more thing to do.' So you're making the process a little bit clearer and making it so they say instead, 'oh, okay, if I do this one thing,' for example, adding closed captions to videos, or just making sure my PDF documents are accessible, 'then that's going to mean that maybe fewer students need accommodations.' Do you ever get pushback from staff and faculty?

Michelle Mahoney 15:20

You know, it can't all happen in a day. And, I'm there as a cheerleader as an advocate. I will do whatever I can, for a student. I think, I think that faculty and staff are so busy, but I'm hoping to run my course 'Foundations In Accessibility' for our faculty and staff. I think my entire message to faculty and staff is everybody has to get it and just know that, just changing some things or coming out of your comfort zone could help students. It's not about altering a course, you know, you can't alter a course. It's just students might learn differently. And what can you do to help that student to obtain that course. I always said things 'I'm not going to apply to be a firefighter,' because, let's, let's face it, the helmet will look terrible on my head. But with all due respect, I'm not going to apply to be a firefighter because I can't climb a ladder. Students that come to Kings and Dalhousie are smart, they want to get an education. And if we could, as administration, alter some of that to to make it easier, then wouldn't it be wonderful for everybody. Everybody learns differently.

Corrie Melanson 17:27

Yeah, we were talking in a previous podcast about neuro divergence. So again, brains that work differently, and how we're hoping in the future that might be similar to being left handed. So that we will get to that point where that is widely understood; that students and people learn in different ways and need different ways to interact with information and learning.

Michelle Mahoney 18:01

Well, and I think that it's hard for people to understand when they don't experience it themselves. So, I think that we are all going to acquire a disability at some point in our lives. And until it directly affects you, you don't see it, you don't. And that's unfortunate. Because, my every other day, I downhill ski, I water ski. I do these things just like you, I'm just hanging out with my friends waterskiing, I might do it differently. But, I'm still enjoying the sport. It's a matter of, seeing things differently. One of the things I could tell you about even coming in here today, the barrier was that I couldn't access the toilet paper. So the lovely Connor out there put his hand up under the toilet. Those are barriers every day.

Corrie Melanson 19:13

Right? You talked about a straw. So a small thing like a straw. You said every beverage you drink, whether it's coffee, tea, beer, water, whatever it is, you use a straw, and so if there is no straw in a restaurant or on a flight or whatever, then you can't drink the beverage. So something as simple as a straw! That is a great analogy! So similar to talking about needing extra time on assignments or tests, or having someone check off those ovals when the test is set up that way. So Morgan, what do you wish was available for you in post secondary that you didn't get?

Morgane Evans 20:01

Honestly something like what I grew up with, which is something that was more protected federally, or nationally. Because in my experience, that really helped me because it helped me feel protected. It was the law that teachers have to follow, or they're gonna get in trouble. Not every teacher did that. There are some teachers, that didn't do that, of course. There's also another thing that my state has, which is a 504 plan, which is similar, but that's only state protected. So I feel like something like that, was very helpful, because you had a case manager, you had yearly meetings to go over accommodations to see if your needs changed. I'm not quite certain if that goes up to university level in the States though. But that was very helpful. I think that should be definitely done more. At Dalhousie, like the fact that I had to say, every single semester, that I need accommodations, when I've been disabled since birth is so annoying. And also as a student, you can forget, and only remember to ask for these accommodations after the deadline. Then your accommodations, just like go away. So I think definitely there needs to be more protection for students. That's what I felt. And I was a part of the Dalhousie Disability Advocacy Society. And so we tried to do a lot of awareness work, letting them know we exist, we have accommodations. But I still think the Accessibility Center needs to do more. Or, there needs to be more protections for students in Nova Scotia. That was something that I wasn't really aware of until I met with other students who are disabled through the society. I think the dailies for me personally, is definitely more protections and making sure that, students can have those accommodations and feel safe and feel listened to.

Corrie Melanson 22:34

And I know there's a lot of hard working accessibility officers like you, Michelle, right? So, lots of people out there wanting to make a difference. But sometimes it's at that structural level that is a little bit hard to implement, or there's pushback. And we do know that there are accessibility standards around education that are being developed here in Nova Scotia, as well as a national commitment to accessibility by 2040, whatever that actually means. So you know, what, I guess is we'll wait and see what that looks like. And or, we all need to be doing some advocacy around that. But I guess, Michelle, what advice do you have for people trying to be accessibility allies? The name of this podcast is Accessibility Ally. So for me, as someone who doesn't have the type of physical disability that you have, or that Morgan has, like, what can I be doing? What can your colleagues be doing? To be to be an ally around accessibility?

Michelle Mahoney 23:40

Well, you did it today, you you greeted me at the door and opened the door for me over there, like, you get it. And I just want more people to get it, and have an understanding that people with disabilities are just people, we're just people. And you know, we have the same needs and

wants as everyone else. It just might take us a little longer to get there. And what we might need is those supports to help us along our way. And, you know, why? Why should we be held back because of our disability? And I feel that I'm an ally because I feel I'm that person at Kings that can help students navigate the processes, I'm there to help faculty. We recently changed a threshold in a bathroom one day, and I came to that bathroom and the threshold was gone, and I was just so excited, and nobody else is gonna understand that or see that but boy, that was cool. And you know, yes, we have to educate the world. I'm constantly educating people about bathrooms, and built environment,

Corrie Melanson 25:05
Mindsets and attitudes!

Michelle Mahoney 25:09

Yes, yeah. I'm really excited that our that our province has this mandate to be accessible by 2030. And I always say, I hate to be the guy that has the job on January 1st 2030, going around the province with his clipboard, making sure everybody's got all their standards met, cuz that's gonna be a long day for that guy. And, I think that we're talking about it, and we're doing things about it. And we are committed. And, I think I was the first Accessibility Officer hired in the province. But not only that, I'm a person with a disability doing this work. Like, how cool is that? I've gone from an administrative role to a leadership position. And, you know, talk about impostor syndrome, I've had that once or twice or 17 times, but, how cool is it that me as a person with a disability with this lived experience, that I get to do this work?

Corrie Melanson 26:15

How empowering it must be for students who also get to see your example. Right? And also get to understand that someone who's supporting them really does get it. So Morgan, what gives you hope for an accessible future?

Speaker 1 26:36

I hope that more people listen to us. Because as Michelle said, We're people, we both drive, like you said, you ski I also ski, I grew up skiing.

Morgane Evans 26:49

I sit, ski, I stand to ski, but I do not use the poles.

Speaker 1 26:51

The thing with ableism is that it is all around us, and not every disability is the same. And so it's constantly a learning and unlearning, even for disabled people. Because every disability is different. Everybody has a different kind of experience. And so that is that why I just want to be listened to, or respected, and be understood, even though that is really difficult sometimes, because not that many people are educated about disabilities in the first place. Like, my kind of umbrella term for my disability is Cerebral Palsy. So when I tell people that they don't think of somebody like me, they don't understand that it's more of an umbrella term.

Michelle Mahoney 26:53

Mine is under the umbrella of muscular dystrophy. Guess what, that would have been lovely to have known when I was growing up, because I never knew that. I did not know that.

Corrie Melanson 27:53

I have to say I was a little overwhelmed when you introduced yourself as both of you and you had these long names for your disabilities. I wanted to ask you more but like, I don't really know what those things mean, because they're very medical terms.

Michelle Mahoney 28:18

Because nobody's heard of our conditions. But people have heard of Cerebral Palsy, right? I always say disability doesn't come with a book of instructions. Like, wouldn't that be great? Oh, my God. Like, let me tell you all the stuff you're entitled to throughout your life, wouldn't that just got the best?

Morgane Evans 28:37

And even like with my disability as well, people didn't even know that children could have strokes. Or that babies can have a stroke. Or another thing, I never had surgery. I had Botox when I was nine to loosen the muscles on my right side. So I tell people that I have Botox. Even as a child, they're always just like, "What are you talking about? Why did you have Botox? Like, that's so strange."

Corrie Melanson 28:40

No wrinkles in the forehead. Right?

But what I hear you saying Morgan and what like in the message, is every disability is different. You both have physical disabilities, but what you might need or the accommodations you might require could be very different. Other folks have more invisible disabilities, their accommodations might be different, or they might be the same. But the important piece I hear you saying is to really seek out, listen to, and understand lived experience, from a whole range of people with disabilities. And of course, so that there's more education, there's more respect, and that there's a different mindset so that we're not having to face ableist attitudes, spaces, processes, every day, all the time. And I know the idea of an accessible Nova Scotia by 2030 doesn't mean that will go away. But hopefully that will mean that there's some movement towards things being easier to access for a larger group of people. So I want to thank you, Michelle, I want to thank you, Morgan, for sharing your experiences here today. I'm looking forward to lots more conversations with both of you. Thanks for tuning in. You can learn more at our website, seachangeocolab.com. I hope you'll join us for our next conversation.