

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 this episode of Accessibility Ally, I talked to Vanessa Furlong. Vanessa is an artist and mental health practitioner based in Halifax, she worked with Erin Ball to create LEGacy Circus, a contemporary arts duo combining the use of leg attachments, mobility aids, and traditional and non traditional circus apparatuses. Vanessa shares her experiences and perspectives of being a mental health practitioner, and an artist with her own invisible disability.

I want to welcome you to the podcast today. Can you please introduce yourself to our listeners, including you know, any of your social identities that you're comfortable sharing. Who are you? Why are you on this podcast?

Vanessa Furlong 1:10

That's a great question. Okay, I'm happy to explore that part. The things that I do know is my name is Vanessa Furlong, I'll identify as a disabled, queer, artist. And also someone working in mental health, and a white woman, middle-aged, tea sipping a human being.

Corrie Melanson 1:33

You don't look very middle-aged to me. But you know, that's maybe because I'm more advanced in the middle-age category. So tell us a few things about you that I know we want to explore today. Tell us about your connection to LEGacy Circus. What was it? How were you connected to that?

Vanessa Furlong 1:55

So LEGacy Circus started up with Erin Ball, and myself. In 2016, the two of us met. There was a group of us that were selected to produce a show in a week under a mentor. And we were selected from all different areas.

I think the mentor had a vision. And we were just bringing our own stories, our own expertise into that. And what came of that is we all got together as a community, and told a story. So we did that for a week. And Erin and I were paired off to do a scene together. And it just worked really well. So from there, Erin and I had decided to explore this a little bit further. In particular, just the ways that we explored access and circus and our personal stories and how can we translate that onto the stage. So we did that and then toured all over? And wrote a full show, I think the final showing of that full show would have been Ship's Company Theater, actually, in 2022, or 2023. And yeah, we've since then, picked up on other projects and sort of dissolved that company.

Corrie Melanson 3:29

So what were the unique elements of that show, or that that company?

Vanessa Furlong 3:35

So it was an exploration of our experiences in disability, and our life stories and how we came to be who we are and the exploration of circus and what that meant to us now, and then who we were together. And then from that, we realized that a lot of the access that we were putting into the show, were enhancements to the show. And so we had applied for funding, and had worked to collaborate with other disabled artists to find out other ways that we could enhance, the storytelling elements, and how we could make it so that the folks who were on stage and our audiences were able to feel like they were a part of that community.

Corrie Melanson 4:29

So give me some examples of that.

Vanessa Furlong 4:33

So in the early days, we worked with Alex Palmer, who's with Graeae Theatre. And so Alex is a blind artist that went through our whole script with us. And what we did was scene by scene at each circus element, we would freeze so that Alex could feel what those shapes were, that we were making with our body, and to create this narration that allowed for enhancing the experience. Not audio description, but a narration that sort of described what the shapes were and the intent behind them to enhance our story. So that was one of the aspects that we had learned.

Corrie Melanson 5:21

So for anyone who is blind or low vision, they absolutely could still experience the show.

Vanessa Furlong 5:29

That's exactly it. And from that we have come to learn from some of our audience members, that folks who may not be processing what the story was about, we're also picking up on some of those descriptions and being like now, okay, that's what that is.

Corrie Melanson 5:44

That's kind of like, for example closed captions, that might be meant for one kind of disability, serves or actually works for many different people who have different kinds of barriers, right? So yeah, maybe folks in the audience, as you said, had like processing issues or other barriers. So yeah, that's really interesting.

Vanessa Furlong 6:09

Yeah, and things like that have evolved over time. Because we learned about things like, sound direction. So it's like if we're making some organic sounds over here, that already communicates where we are on the stage, and take that route over the description of things, which can be just too much information. So how can we use music and text to still keep it artistic? But also to give those accessible enhancements.

Corrie Melanson 6:42

What kind of reaction did you get to your show?

Vanessa Furlong 6:46

I mean, the show was, is very much a roller coaster of emotions, you know, there's funny moments, there's really tender moments. And so for the most part, a really positive response, just folks being like "these are things we hadn't considered. Thank you for sharing your story." And just a lot of that. And then there were folks who were like, "Have you thought of this, I would really love to work with you, and try this out." And so I think just starting our conversation on Where can this go next?

Corrie Melanson 7:26

So if you're willing to share, can you tell us a little bit about what were the elements of your story that you shared in the show? Whatever you are willing to share in terms of your own disability, and or maybe even the intersections kind of connected to Erin?

Vanessa Furlong 7:44

So this particular show had very little of my story in it. This was a really powerful piece about Erin's story. And so my piece in it, I was a stilt creature, who had come and found Erin in the woods. And so, was being led by Erin, through this adventure of discovering what it was to have access to all these different ways of playing with legs, and particularly in circus and just what that meant for movement. And I guess in connection to myself, personally, it was about how impactful that relationship with Erin was to me, because of the leadership because of just being given permission to be in someone else's story and to explore in that way. But yeah, we did, briefly, look at what was the before story, or the prequel that would have included a little bit more of my story, but this particular show that we worked on, that was Erin's.

Corrie Melanson 8:59

And so Erin has a physical disability.

Vanessa Furlong 9:03

Yeah. So Erin is a below knee amputee. Okay, um, double below knee amputee.

Corrie Melanson 9:09

And so you explored that connection to legs in different ways. Is that where the name LEGacy Circus is from?

Vanessa Furlong 9:18

Yeah, yeah. So where I was exploring with stilts, and Erin was exploring. So we used the play on the words with LEGacy. Yeah. And just that exploration of different attachments.

Corrie Melanson 9:24

What would you say, when you talked about the audience? Particularly them saying like, "Oh, I never thought about these things before." What were some of those things that came out that they hadn't considered before the show?

Vanessa Furlong 9:45

I think in the early days, because I do think people are growing more aware of ways that they can use some access enhancement, it was using narration and that we incorporated a touch tour. So we allowed folks to come and touch the props, touch the stage, get a bit of a tour of where everything was, so that the description made, hopefully even more sense. And, you know, having our script and program available online for screen readers, and so we had like a QR code folks could scan, then they could have access to the program information.

Corrie Melanson 10:36

Even your use of the term 'access enhancements.' That's actually not a term that I use. And I do a fair bit of work in this field of accessibility, but 'access enhancements,' I really like it. Lately, we've been talking more about like, what's proactive kind of accessibility versus like responsive? So proactive is kind of all of those things that you've been talking about, like ensuring that no matter who's in the audience, in this case, they they are accessing the story through whether it's text, touch narration, or screen readers. Sounds like you kind of covered all of that. But yeah, I really liked that access enhancements. It's an interesting term.

Vanessa Furlong 11:22

Yeah because, especially when you're applying for funding, it's one of those things where access, usually when you're in the performance world is something that folks tack on after. And it's like, whatever we have left in the budget, you know, maybe we'll get an ASL interpreter. And so it was really important that it became not just this afterthought, but it was a part of the process itself. You know, we're going in considering these things. We're hiring folks from those specific communities to let us know, this is how we think it should be done. And then as you were saying, with the responses afterwards, we're going to find out all the ways that we missed, right? Let's take that, lets go the next step further. Because I think it at first, it became very overwhelming to think of, because it's impossible to be totally accessible at the first shot. That's just not, and that shouldn't be the ultimate goal. Because it's impossible with such intersectionality in the world to be so fully accessible, right? But how can we make it so that you at least feel welcomed and wanted in that room?

Corrie Melanson 12:33

Yeah, yeah. And are more and more theater and arts events doing more of this in a more proactive way? Like, is that kind of your experience being in that community?

Vanessa Furlong 12:50

Yeah, and I mean, my experience with it is quite limited based on what communities I'm in. I am seeing it pick up a lot more in this community. I think that once a few folks started doing it, everyone got really excited and started adding it in. But where I'm not traveling as much and visiting with other communities, I have no idea where it sits, but I do think that it is picking up, yeah.

Corrie Melanson 13:18

I see more cases, when I've gone to shows, where ASL is there, and it's part of the invite. But also things like Relaxed Performances, and that's become so with different kinds of spaces;

lowered noise, lowered lights, like that kind of approach where there's a recognition that we all need different kinds of things to be able to enjoy and participate in arts and music. These are important things.

Vanessa Furlong 13:54

Absolutely yeah. And even the call out Nocturne had recently. Nocturne is offering up a low sensory, and so they're looking for proposals for that as well. And so I'm like, it's gonna have its own section it sounds like.

Corrie Melanson 14:11

Tell us about Nocturne in case our listeners don't know what Nocturne is.

Vanessa Furlong 14:21

Yes! So, am I the person who should be explaining? I don't know, if I do them justice. But, Nocturne is a festival. It's an arts festival, curated by different artists each year. And essentially, it's just art all across HRM. And so Halifax Regional Municipality. So there's art that's happening, that's free to the public. It had in the past been a festival that occurred over several days. I'm not sure if they've gone back to the one day route. But yeah, it's a full event of free art.

Corrie Melanson 14:55

Yeah. And I know typically, as you say, it was kind of that one day, one evening. And then they incorporated like multi day or some virtual things. But yeah, I think that's so interesting that an organization like Nocturne is putting the call out out there for artists to create sensory friendly. Absolutely! And so I know we wanted to talk today about ableism? And how do we disrupt ableism in our workplaces, in our communities? And so first, I guess, what does that mean? What does ableism mean to you, in your work as an artist? And there's no wrong answer to it.

Vanessa Furlong 15:51

Yeah, yeah, ableism is a tough one for me, because it's one of those things where it was an ism, that I didn't realize, I was so heavily a part of, until I started deconstructing. And I guess I'm trying to create more access as an artist, and then realizing I'm still just as stuck in the system. And so internalized ableism are the ways that I continued to contribute, even as an advocate was wild. So there were a lot of really uncomfortable moments for me. When you know, you think that you're doing the right thing, you think you're following the right path? And then you're like, 'Oh, my word.' There's someone else who reminds you, wait, that thing that's happening, that's ableism! You're like, 'there's so much left to do.' For me right now, it is a daily uncomfortable conversation. I mean, the work that I do, the art that I'm pursuing, even just those moments where you're lying in bed at night, and you're thinking about your life, you realize, I said that I did that. That ableism, is the thing that haunts all the work that I'm doing. But, I think that is a gift in itself, you know, the fact that it is something that I can consider and can continue to challenge. I think it is a gift.

Corrie Melanson 17:37

And when I think about ableism, like, sometimes it is hard to describe, right? So that it's the assumptions we make about people, or even the stereotypes that we might make about people who have disabilities, or we perceive to have disabilities, or even the assumptions we might make about someone who we perceive as not to have a disability, for example. And sometimes it's under the surface, invisible, that part of the iceberg that's under the water. Right? So what are those, assumptions? Someone told me just the other day that even though they are a person with a very visible physical disability, they use a wheelchair, they have a shoulder brace all of these things, but because of that I didn't even think to ask them if they disclose about their disability. And because I thought, well, it's so obvious, right? You roll into a room. And then the person was like, yeah, except not on Zoom. People only see me from the shoulder up. So unless I actually disclose to them, they don't know.

So, can you describe your work that you do now?

Vanessa Furlong 19:04

I work in hospital right now doing therapeutic play. But I'm also pursuing a master's in psychology. So all of my work is heavily focused on mental health.

Corrie Melanson 19:19

And so given that, mental health is, is a disability, like how are you how do you see kind of ableism kind of rearing itself are showing itself in the work that you do in in hospitals?

Vanessa Furlong 19:34

So, in particular, to the work that I'm doing, because I'm in hospital, it's been super interesting. Out in the world, I'm trying to apply disability justice as much as possible, and in what I'm doing, I'm considering that model. But, when you go into the hospital, you're working around folks who are still making the shift from the medical model, even just to a social model.

Corrie Melanson 20:05

So we're gonna have to go back to talk about all these models. So first, you started with disability justice. So what does that mean to you?

Vanessa Furlong 20:26

It is considering intersectionality. When we are talking about fighting an 'ism,' we need to consider that all 'isms' need to work as a collective right? And that the folks who are given 'leadership' in change should come from those who are experiencing the most oppression. And so considering that everyone's experience is different, then everyone's going to experience disability differently. And everyone's going to have different ways that they are oppressed. And so all of that needs to be considered as a whole. We cannot blanket experiences.

Corrie Melanson 21:17

Well, and also it comes from the perspective that, disability is not a white male issue. Right? Sometimes when we look at disability history, for example, it's only highlighting, white people who have fought for disability rights or disability justice, but doesn't always take into account

again, those intersectional perspectives. So knowing that, for example, the Black Panther movement, actually, there were a lot of ways that disability justice and civil rights kind of work together and came together to fight for rights. So I think about it in that sense, sort of like how feminism has been very critiqued for being so white, and only really highlighting that history of feminism. So in that similar way. But I don't know, that's just the way I see it. And then you talked about being in hospital, a lot of people are coming from a medical model. So the medical model really sees disability as defining a person, right, and, and medicalizing a person, like how would you define it?

Vanessa Furlong 22:38

Yeah, so medical model, meaning that there is something that needs to be fixed. And so, the example that I always liked using was, the medical model is seeing that the wheelchair is the issue, so let's install a ramp versus the stairs are the issue.

Corrie Melanson 23:04

And then the social model, really seeing more that the environment is creating the barriers, not to disability, is typically how I describe it. But again, how would you, describe the social model?

Vanessa Furlong 23:20

So social model being, it is the systems that are designed to make it so that we cannot all access everything. So that was sort of that movement. And since then it's grown into disability justice and so forth. But social and medical model are two things that are sort of clashing right now in hospital. So you know, you've got the folks who are in medical model, they have their reasoning, social model is now being taught in hospital to staff and everything. But I don't think it's fully there yet.

Corrie Melanson 24:07

So where do you see that tension or that clash come into play in your work?

Vanessa Furlong 24:13

Yeah, that's hard, as sometimes it's terms that are used, particularly when it comes to charting. I think there's a whole lot that could be done to fix that. Even just in how we talk to the people who are accessing those services. And then how they're treated or handled. There are some folks who I think it's just a matter of checking in with them on what standard practice it is that they're following. But I am seeing a bit of a clash, or feedback like "well this is the way it's always been done," or "this is the way it's always been said." It is certainly improving but there's ways to go.

Corrie Melanson 25:02

Yeah. And I imagine those distinctions can be quite subtle, right? So as you're saying, it's about the way someone might be making assumptions, or the terms that they might use, or how they might talk to someone in a way that they don't mean to but is wrong. Similar to inspiration porn, that idea that says "oh my gosh, you're so amazing, because you have this disability." I was in a workshop recently, and I was just like cringing inside, because someone did this.

So how do we address some of these things that are very subtle, right? So there's ableist behavior, but there's ableism, in policies and systems and in ways that things happen. So just like any other kind of inequity, it's personal. It's interpersonal. And it's structural at all those levels. And sometimes really hard to identify. How do we change this or address this, and what do you think is helping to make the shift or make the change?

Vanessa Furlong 26:38

The conversations like this are happening more often, and committees are being put in place to address a lot of this, like policies are being rewritten. And we have, you know, newer generations coming in to work, who are expressing the importance of this. So, you know, I think the the climate is changing.

Corrie Melanson 27:08

And I mean, what we know from some of the other episodes, and folks that we've talked to is, that there's that legal kind of framework in terms of the Accessibility Act. And we can follow the things that are in the Accessibility Act, and that there are standards coming from all of that. But what I hear you talking about, too, is more that there's a shift in mindset. Especially when people have been exposed or educated. I mean, as a middle aged person, I can say, the younger generation is thinking more about equity and thinking more about making sure there's access for everyone. And in a way, that's quite different. Because it's because we are embracing the idea that disability is more of a large continuum on a spectrum. And there is not just one one way of being.

Vanessa Furlong 28:14

I think that's what is speeding up that process, is that we do have more folks entering into these systems who disrupt them.

Corrie Melanson 28:23

What keeps you going in the work that you're doing as an artist, as a therapeutic practitioner, as a mental health practitioner, as an artist?

Vanessa Furlong 28:40

Oh, such a good question.

I think, just in the recognition of how long I went not understanding how my own brain worked, and why it was that I felt that I wasn't fitting in, or that things were harder, and slowly learning that about myself, and then forming a community of folks who also wanted to make change for themselves and for community. I think that was what further motivated me. Because once I was able to figure out how I was gonna navigate through things, then I was like, Well, how do we, how do we make a bigger community of folks to navigate together? So that was it because it can be quite isolating. When you're used to being one of the few people who is doing that work, you really crave having more folks at the table. So finding who those folks are.

Corrie Melanson 29:59

That's great. And then what gives you hope for a more accessible future?

Vanessa Furlong 30:08

I think the folks who needed to be given the platforms are taking those platforms, and are leading the way. I think that's what gives me hope. The folks who started out and may be you know, weren't necessarily the ones who needed to lead. Stepping back and kind of passing the mic. I think that's what's giving me hope.

Corrie Melanson 30:38

So what I actually hear in that answer is ally ship. So, of course, the name of this podcast is accessibility ally. But that's kind of a big piece of ally ship that I actually think is overlooked sometimes, is actually, the need to remove yourself so that you can give that opportunity, that space, that platform, to someone who has lived experience, or someone with a different perspective, or someone who has been traditionally or historically marginalized. I think what we don't often talk about when we talk about allyship, and the importance of it, is you have to notice that there is that opportunity. But then it's the courage to step back and create that space, kind of for someone else. So I hear you're really talking about that.

Vanessa Furlong 31:52

Yeah. And that was a huge shift for me. Because, as I was saying, in the beginning, this was the thing that I was doing, it was all of my art, I was, going around and doing the workshops, and everything else, doing the interviews, and then I was like, hold on a minute. Although I'm a part of the disability community, I carry a great deal of privileges. And I have access to a great deal of opportunities, but the issue is that there are a lot of folks who could be speaking to a lot more experiences than I ever could. And so I had to step back and give that up. And so even coming here to talk, I was like, am I, should I be the person? I felt that for a long time. And now it's time for someone else to remain being that ally and being within that community, and sticking to the work that I'm doing but to pass the mic.

So is there circus in your future?

Yeah, there's absolutely yes! There's circus in the future. I've definitely shifted, where I'm back in school, to putting my focus on that. But I'm continuing into circus. Unfortunately, I had to take a break from circus. And that was very hard. The person I was doing a lot of really exciting exploration with, their health took a turn. And so I had this moment of 'now what?' and I didn't want to continue without them. And I was like, Who even am I? Without them? Because I just I didn't know with all the stories that we were telling together. I was like, I don't want to do anything else. So anywho I am taking a break. And I'm re exploring that. But I do have plans. I just got confirmation of a cabaret. I'll be performing in for a disability arts festival. Something that's very exciting. So there are three things in the works.

Corrie Melanson 34:04

I like that. I often say to people like this is just my latest obsession, or these are all the irons I have on the fire right now because I think obviously you're very creative and have lots of ideas. So I like ending there. There's lots of things. Thanks so much Vanessa for yeah chatting with me today. Really appreciate it. Thanks for tuning in. You can learn more at our website, seachangecolab.com - I hope you'll join us for our next conversation!