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Hey everyone, I'm thrilled today to be having a conversation with Carrie Jack, who is the Inclusion and Accessibility Coordinator at Recreation Nova Scotia. Carrie, can you please introduce yourself to our listeners? Absolutely. Yeah, so as you said, I'm the Inclusion and Accessibility Coordinator for Recreation Nova Scotia, a position that has been with Recreation Nova Scotia for the past three years, so I'm the second person to have that position. um

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I've been here for about a year, but prior to that, I was a recreation director with the municipality of the district of St. Mary's for about 11 years. So I have a municipal recreation background, but now I'm thrilled to be able to bring that knowledge and my interest in inclusion accessibility to the whole province and work with many municipalities and recreation organizations throughout Nova Scotia.

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That's so great. And for the listeners who may not know exactly where St. Mary's is, could you give us a little geographic breakdown?

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I can because whenever I wear that name tag that says St. Mary's, I always without a doubt have somebody come up to me and start talking about the university and I have to back them up and go, no, no, not that one. uh So St. Mary's is a large geographical municipality, but it is in Guy'sborough County along the Eastern shore. So most people when they hear Guy'sborough County, they recognize the municipality of the district of Guy'sborough.

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um and not so much St. Mary's. uh So it is small in population, about 2,200 people, but goes all the way from Ecom-Secum, which is split between Halifax and St. Mary's, um all the way up to uh Goshen area. So um right sandwiched between many municipalities, Halifax, Pictou County, Antigonish, and Guy'sboro. Wow, okay. um Thank you, because I, even though I...

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you know, have lived my life in Nova Scotia, I wouldn't have been able to truly pinpoint that. And many people will say, no, I don't know where St. Mary's is. And then I'll say, have you ever been to the historic Sherbrooke Village? And they'll say, oh, yes, we've gone to the village many times. And I'll say, well, then you were in St. Mary's, silly. OK, that's so great. So I'm really excited to have this conversation today about, uh you know, we're talking about the built environment, we're talking about accessibility and recreation.

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And I just want to start with um what kinds of things are you seeing,

again, across the province as organizations begin to implement some of the elements of the built environment standard? Oh, my goodness, so much. m Recreation is a sector that em sometimes gets overlooked, but when we want to brag, it's the first thing that comes up for people in communities about the cool things that...

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um organizations or municipal governments are doing to make things more accessible for community members. um And so one thing I do want to say is that although the built environment standards are just out this year, the recreation sector has been working on these types of improvements, changes um for many years. Shelburne County has a small day park called Welcome Park.

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ah It is a wonderful little accessible park that has many different elements, all in which are connected through accessible walkways and different elements to make it accessible. So the parking lot is accessible when you first come into Welcome Park. It's connected to a trail system through an accessible trail. Then it has a Mobi mat, which connects to the beachfront.

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um And has all these unique opportunities for people of all different kinds of abilities to experience different types of recreation. So swimming, trails, um sightseeing, nature. So that's a really great one that comes to mind when we think of the built environment standards. And of course they were working on this before the built environment standards come up. another really cool Can I interrupt you? Absolutely. And just ask you to define or share like what is a Mobi map?

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What is the purpose and the impact of a Mobi Mat? So a Mobi Mat is essentially a big mat that goes over rough terrain. So it doesn't necessarily always have to be on sand, although when we're talking about Mobi Mats, oftentimes they are. So it's this big mat that rolls out over rough terrain and gives a sturdy surface for

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uh wheelchair, uh an accessible um mobility aid like a hippocamp or a beach wheelchair and it gives that sturdy surface for them to go down over that sand which would be nearly impossible for many um aids with wheels and enter water or enter a space that wasn't accessible to them beforehand. ah So you're seeing many provincial parks

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feature Mobi mats, which is great. And yeah, so it just gives that accessibility to a new space. Yeah, it's so great. I mean, I love exploring Nova Scotia beaches in the summer and more and more I'm

seeing Moby mats like from lakes to beaches. it seems like it's becoming a much more uh a practice and an approach on many in many locations.

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Absolutely, and they come with their own challenges. uh I know that I was discussing Moby Matz with em a recreation professional in Richmond County um for one of their beaches, and it has a lot of installation needs, and then it needs check-ins on regular basis. When weather comes, you have to pull parts of it out. So they are challenging, but they give so much access to people who have never had access before. Exactly.

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And just bouncing back to Welcome Park, was one of the examples, or it is one of the examples that is being included in a new resource that is uh being released in its entirety on December 3rd by Active Abilities Canada. And it's called the uh municipal guide uh in quotation marks. It has a longer title than that. But what it does is it's giving promising practices to municipal recreation departments across Canada.

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on how to make their programs, their spaces, their policies, their culture more accessible to people with disabilities. And Welcome Park is one of the examples that is included in the built environment section of that guide. And so people all over Canada are going to learn about our little Welcome Park in Shelburne County and the amazing work that they've done.

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That's so great. And we'll make sure to add that resource to our online searchable resource hub focused on accessibility resources. So thanks for pointing that out. Any other uh examples across the province? Yeah. um Hiking Nova Scotia, we are um going to feature them in our December newsletter, Recreation Nova Scotia. Each month I write a highlight of a best practice from around recreation of the province.

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And Hiking Nova Scotia has this amazing workshop called the Hiking Buddies Workshop. And what it does is it teaches people to be guides for people with vision loss or um blind people and take them on hikes. And so the workshop so much. I'm a hiker and I'm like, oh wow, wow, okay. That's a very unique opportunity.

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It is and they got a lot of hype for this program. They were on CBC News, they were on Global. um And so we wrote an article about this and they got funding from the Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage through the province to develop this workshop um with

guidance and leadership from um a person who is blind. And the first part of the workshop immerses um people into the world of what it is like to have.

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vision loss and be outside. So I think the people are blindfolded and guided through so they can really experience what the hiker would be experiencing. And then the second part is now how do you take that person through the woods? em And it's a really powerful uh training workshop that they've developed. now they are hosting, em or I think it's coming up this weekend, em

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a blind um and vision loss hiking event with all the volunteers that they have trained through this program are going to come and assist people to go for a group hike. That's so great. Love that example. Yeah, absolutely. um Some other shout outs for built environment. um I know this is more on the inside of a facility, whereas the built environment looks at the outside of uh

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of spaces, but Cape Breton University, um they just did uh work on their rink and made it completely accessible to sledges. um And it is now home of women's hockey in Cape Breton, which is really fantastic. And so again, describe a sledge for me. Oh, yeah. OK, so a sledge is a full body skate, if you can kind of picture that in your mind.

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So it has um sledges or like the blades on the bottom um and a person sits within the sledge and is buckled in and then you use picks for both of your hands to move you throughout the ice. And so you can use a sledge uh just to go skating in a seated position or you can use a sledge ah to play hockey. So your picks would have your blades, like your hockey.

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blades at the sticks um on the ends of them and you would use your pick and then use your hockey stick to hit the puck through the ice. So can be used for both of those activities and also used for able-bodied people or people with disabilities and are becoming very popular at different rinks throughout the province. That's so great and I love how these examples, so one is you know an outdoor park in a small town

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One is in an arena at a university and then the other one is kind of a province-wide program that really is about kind of peer-to-peer support uh and really, you know, being able to take recreation kind of anywhere, right? Because we were blessed in Nova Scotia to have so many great outdoor spaces and hiking spaces. So...

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Absolutely. I love those different examples of, you know, indoor, outdoor. And I know that when we think about recreation, a lot of people do think facilities like a rink, a swimming pool. um But we know that there's so much more than that, as you've talked about parks, trails, beaches, sports fields, like all of that. So how are organizations really approaching uh recreation and outdoor spaces?

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through even broader than the built environment through a larger accessibility lens. Yeah, you really teed up a project that I'm super excited about and something that's not really new to the recreation sector in Nova Scotia, but we're continuing to see grow and that's equipment loan programs. And I think, and I don't want to be quoted as...

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but I do think that Nova Scotia is leading the way on these types of programs. We're not seeing a whole lot of research being popped up around the country on equipment loan programs, and we're doing a lot of work here in Nova Scotia. So an equipment loan program is hosted by an organization, and that could be municipal, uh community, nonprofit, uh private, and what it does is it makes recreation equipment accessible to loan.

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for users. And so the idea is that a person can go to one of these organizations, fill out some paperwork, and hopefully for either free or very low cost, take a piece of recreation equipment off site and use it wherever, whenever they would like. And the accessibility side of this is that adaptive equipment is growing.

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in these programs, many more organizations are seeing the benefit of making these pieces of equipment accessible to their community because oftentimes they're very expensive. so families or individuals may not be able to afford to go and buy a hippocamp, which is an accessible, like all-terrain wheelchair or a beach wheelchair. um

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accessible life jackets, things that, you know, we're not always thinking about that are pretty essential to recreation activity. Sledges is another thing that's in equipment loan programs. And so these programs are growing in popularity across Nova Scotia. This year, we partnered with Dalhousie University and did a survey of equipment loan program managers to see how these uh programs are working, where there's opportunity to support, who's using them.

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those kinds of information. had 46 unique responses from organizations who are hosting equipment loan programs. And now we just launched this week on Wednesday a community of practice for all of those programs to come together, learn from each other, and figure out how Recreation Nova Scotia can continue to support these programs to grow or just maintain what they have now.

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And one really great program I'd like to highlight for their accessible equipment is Andy Ganesh County. We did a video series this year for National Accessibility Week and highlighted recreation, or sorry, Andy Ganesh County Recreation for their equipment loan program and all of the partnerships that they've made in Andy Ganesh County to make this uh equipment more accessible. We talked to a family that used their equipment, a partner at CACL who has made

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kayaking and canoeing accessible to people with disabilities through their, they have these pieces that go on to the canoes to make them almost catamarans and makes them much more stable for people to be able to get in and out of them. And just let us know what CACL is. Okay, I'm probably going to struggle with what CACL is. It's an organization within Antigonish County that serves people with disabilities. Okay, okay, great.

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um Again, what an amazing example of a program that's really meant for everyone. um And then the lens of accessibility. So ensuring that as part of those equipment loans, there are accessible devices and things that people can borrow.

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And then I think the other piece to that, which we often forget about is just this program being new and growing in Nova Scotia, that element of a community of practice, because what we don't want to do is do this work alone. And in a silo, what we want to do is, yeah, okay, if Auntie Ganish is doing a really great job, how can Shelburne or Glace Bay or somewhere else or Yarmouth learn from what they're doing, what's worked, what hasn't?

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And I think this is a really big uh piece of the work of accessibility in Nova Scotia, that recreation Nova Scotia is doing such a great job around, is that building the capacity of organizations to learn and to grow. uh Certainly that's a big uh idea or it's a big uh purpose of the ACE program, so Accessibility Confident Employers. want...

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employers across Nova Scotia to feel like they have the capacity to really put some of these ideas into action. What's beautiful about the

recreation sector is there's so many practical ways to kind of do this. um So are there other examples or models that really stand out um from whether it's design or implementation or maintenance or research that others could learn from?

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Yeah. One program that really stands out to me, and again, we did a bit of a highlight on it for our Accessibility Week video series, is the Halifax Lancers, um a great organization in the downtown of Halifax, I think the only of its kind in Canada. m They have a therapeutic writing program that is out of this world. So I just saw...

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um on social media that they concluded this session of it, but we were able to highlight that program and um some of its writers in that series and it literally brought tears to my eyes. um Seeing people who say that when they get on a horse, they find their legs, the horse is their legs. um

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or connecting through horses uh on an emotional level, um it's phenomenal. with their therapeutic riding program, which I guess I should give a little bit of a description of what that is, is um it allows people with disabilities, both cognitive and physical, to ride horses uh with guides and horses that have been approved for that.

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kind of a program, so gentle horses who are not easily spooked or anything like that. And they use volunteers from the community and some of those volunteers have disabilities as well. uh They started in the therapeutic riding program as a rider and now are volunteers within the program. the Lancers has also installed a lot of accessible features in their barn to make people be able to access horses. So they have a full wheelchair ramp.

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that allows people in wheelchairs to mount horses. um That's incredible. Yeah, and really great surfacing in their indoor riding ring. So even people within wheelchairs can ride on their sand surface. somebody was leading a horse in their chair. um So it is a phenomenal program that shows recreation in action and the power of recreation.

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They're really trying hard to make their programs accessible at an affordability level as well as a cultural uh level and have been doing a lot of work on anti-racism as well within their organization and facility and trying to open their doors to more and more people. So that's a really great example of a uh program. And also we featured

this past year, the Halifax Central Library.

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for reaching the gold standard in the Rick Hansen Foundation certification, which is no easy feat. They have to reach 80 % in a bunch of different categories of accessibility. And they did reach that in August. So a really great example of um taking those certification standards and putting them in action. So now, Keri, you know what my next question is gonna be. I know. Break down that Hansen.

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certification for me. I wish that I could do a great job of this but I am actually trying to learn more about the Rick Hansen Foundation certification but essentially it's a national standard certification that a person can go take to do audits of facilities and figure out the areas in which need to be improved um to be accessible in a wealth of different areas so not just physical disabilities but

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you know, lighting and sound pollution and all the different areas that we make space. Signage, wave finding, all of those things. yeah, absolutely. All of the things. So it is vast and that is probably why I have a difficult time explaining exactly what it is. The training is extensive to become certified and then like the Halifax Public Libraries, it is extensive to then use.

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So it is, but it is one of the only tools that we have um across Canada that organizations can get that really good audit and then work through um trying to make those improvements. So to hit gold is incredible, but to even have the audit done is phenomenal for organizations. um And, you know, this is the answer to...

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who can do audits that I keep getting. had a housing organization reach out to me and say, want to do an audit of a new low income housing project. So it can be, we want to have a accessible unit. Who do we go to? And that was the answer was the Rick Hansen. So there are um auditors throughout Nova Scotia that can help organizations. And yeah, I would love to be able to take some of their training to make it

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a better answer the next time somebody goes, what is the Rick Hansen Certification? think that's a really great answer. And as you said, there are uh people who work within organizations who are Rick Hansen Certified. There are also independent contractors who are Rick Hansen Certified. And really to figure out where some of the gaps are in your physical space, so built environment, as you say, this is kind of the

standard across Canada.

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So a great thing to really highlight here in this podcast, in this episode focused on built environment. Kerry, I'm curious for you personally, what keeps you going in this work? What motivates you to, I mean, you've told so many positive stories. I imagine, um sounds like your work, you can see the impact of your work, but what really keeps you going? Oh my gosh, great question. um

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I, yeah, it's easy to work within recreation and get hooked on this sector when you see the fruits of your labor. I started our EDIA Highlight Series a little over a year ago. diversity, inclusion and accessibility. accessibility. You got it. So, and it's been actually super hard to find...

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people to share their stories. uh Most of the stories I've told, I've curated myself because I've done research on who's doing what across the province. And it's because recreation is for the common good. And we, as a sector, we get in there, we do the event, we do the work, it is great. And then we move on to the next project. And we're not looking a whole lot to pat ourselves on the back or celebrate those success stories because we're just on to the next thing.

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And working with people who have that mentality m is addicting. And surrounding yourself with that positivity. And it doesn't say that it doesn't come without its challenges, it really does. um But it's just an all around fun and rewarding sector to be in. on a more personal note to this question, um I think I have a personal connection to accessibility.

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that I never knew that I had, but maybe was always kind of in my heart without knowing it. But a couple of years ago, I had some um personal struggles with my mental health and I was diagnosed with ADHD and tried to figure out what that meant and realized I had all of um these challenges that existed that I didn't know. ah

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I mean, I knew they existed, but I didn't know what it was that was kind of hindering me. And so I had to kind of create a lot of these uh supports for myself to be able to manage that ADHD, which came down to accessibility. And I was leading the way in some of that work for my, at my workplace, you know, putting a sign on my door that said, please do not disrupt me, but I'm available by teams because every time somebody would come in my door, would,

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delay my work, you know, by hours or even days. So I needed to stop those disruptions. And, you know, I have two young children that very well could have some of those same challenges. And so creating a world where they're accepted, that I don't have to beg for resources for them or myself, um and teaching them that

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people with disabilities are just as um worthy of these spaces that we're able to enjoy and these activities that we're able to take in um and making sure that they grow up in without an ableist um society, that it's just normal for them to, and this work isn't as tiring or...

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we don't have to put so much effort into it because it just is. That's kind of a part of what keeps me going. Yeah, thanks so much for sharing a little bit of your personal journey there too. it is, as we know, the biggest barrier is really ableist attitudes. And so, of course, obviously, like physical spaces and lack of accessibility and communication and transportation and all those things, but all of that is caused by those

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by attitudes, stereotypes, all of those things, right? So as we shift ableist language, ableist attitudes, ableist approaches, this is what we're really beginning to see in the province. And it really sounds to me like Recreation Nova Scotia is leading the way. And really uh the stories you've shared are such a testament to that. So I really thank you for.

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bringing the perspective to us today and sharing the impact of some of the work you're doing. So thank you so much. Absolutely. Yeah, thank you. I'm so proud um to work for Recreation Nova Scotia and the spaces that we belong to and that we put effort into. And this is one of them um that we just love to be in. um And we just hosted our conference in October.

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And once the intake was done for all of our presentations and our schedule was done, I looked at it and it was 80 % accessibility conversations. We had New Dawn come in and do a session at our pre-conference. m We had m the accessibility directorate hosted a session and we had Active Abilities Canada coming and talking about the municipal guide. yeah, it is...

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in the recreation field and the work that we're seeing across the province is amazing. And I wish I could sit here and talk all day about all the other amazing examples, because there's so many more

that I wasn't able to touch on, but the work is phenomenal and uh it's going to keep going. Thanks so much, Kerry. That was so great. I think this is going to be a really popular episode because of just the really practical stories that you were able to tell.