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So happy today to welcome Heather Wilkinson from Wonderneath Art Society and Bianca Goh from the Nova Scotia Liquor Corporation or NSLC. And today we're really here to talk about accessible customer service. Now, that's kind of uh a big, heady uh title, but really a customer is anyone who comes through your door, whether you're a non-profit organization.

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for-profit or a public serving organization. So we might use different words, participants, um know, uh program users, clients, customers. So all of that really is included when we're talking about sort of goods and services. And we want to talk about this because this is one of the six accessibility standards being developed in Nova Scotia.

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by 2030, it's called the Goods and Services Standard. And so this really aims to ensure that all organizations, all businesses, all government services and public services are accessible to the people who are using those services. So really happy to have you here today, Heather. Do you want to introduce yourself?

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who you are and what is Wunderneath Art Society? Yeah, thank you for having me. Yeah, my name is Heather Wilkinson. I use she her pronouns and I'm a co-founder and director of Wunderneath, which is a charitable nonprofit arts organization that provides a physical studio space and offers community programming that

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kind of highlights artistic exploration and community connection and kind of uh the well-being that that offers all of us to engage in. And where are you based? We're based in North and Halifax. Okay. And are all of your programs uh at that physical location? Most of them are, but we also have a program we run seasonally in the summertime called the Artbikers, which is a team of artists that travel by bicycle with trailers of supplies and they go out into

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into communities, into green spaces outdoors and work with people there. So we do sometimes work with other organizations and go to their spaces, but most of our programming is designed to be out of our facility. Yeah, and so who are the people that come to your programs? Can you describe them? Yeah, I mean, they are just about anybody, which is part of the challenge for us, you know, to just make sure we can be welcoming on a really broad scale.

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Most of the programming that we run is all ages, it's drop-in, there's no cost to attend. And it's really a broad invitation with, I guess,

specific outreach, reaching out to people that might be facing barriers to accessing the arts em and just kind of looking to see, who's not showing up and how do we reach them? Yeah, that's great.

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Over to you, Bianca. Tell us about who you are and what your role is within NSLC. Thank you. um I think I have a bit of story building I need to talk about myself here because so yes, I'm at the NSLC. I joined the organization as the manager accessibility and this was to cover a maternity leave for Jen Christofi. I'm going to give her a shout out. She was the manager inclusivity and accessibility who went on maternity leave.

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So the NSSC brought me in to focus very specifically on accessibility and what does that mean for the organization? So we're looking at the development and the implementation of the current plan and then the development of the new end, which we have to do as a, I'm gonna get this wrong, but a PPSB, which is a prescribed public sector body. I did it. You did it. Perfect. I always confuse the And even though you explained it, so the prescribed...

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public sector body, what does that mean? So essentially we have a mandate or responsibility or really a legal mandate to the government provincially. We're called out in the Accessibility Act to make sure we are an accessible organization and that's through our support center, that's our distribution center, which is our warehouse also, and our retail stores that you see across the province. So we're making sure...

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that yes, the built environment is part of that, but it's about the attitude. It's about the service we provide our shoppers to make sure we're accessible, encompassing, all encompassing, all encompassing, all encompassing. You know what I mean. Like all together, all in one. um So we're making sure we're doing that for everyone that interacts with the NSLC. So I've had that opportunity to see and support specific programs over the year.

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Just recently I transitioned into a new role for project management, but I still get the opportunity to support the accessibility program at the NSLC. Yeah, that's so great. ah So what do you see, Heather, in the work that you do as like, is that lens of accessibility that you're bringing to participant engagement, program design, implementation?

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and evaluation, that experience of the people who come to your

location or engage in one of your programs. Yeah, I think that because we are really, because of the nature of the broad base of people that we're reaching out to, we're always looking to em think about there being more than one way to access anything that you're doing. So when you come into the space, there is more than one

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activity that you could choose to go to, that when you come to a project that we're highlighting that week, that it can be that if you came in with different levels of experience or abilities that there would be different, that there's more than one entryway into that project and there's not a specific outcome em about what it's going to be at the end. You it's really very process oriented and

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And really looking, always being aware of how might we adapt or make accommodations so it works for somebody. So they come in and feel like they uh are comfortable with the way that they can approach a project. Yeah, so I hear flexibility, I hear choice, I hear how you might adapt things. I imagine there might be a bit of support in there. Yeah, that's right. And we do always have artist facilitators that are on hand.

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to orient people to this space as well as to offer support or feedback. Often people are coming in and just wanting to engage and have a conversation about what they're doing too. Yeah, so great. um NSLC, large organization, so many locations across the province. What are some of the key ideas or themes that are really important as you're thinking specifically about customer service?

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Yeah, for sure. I think we really try to service our shoppers where they're at. And you'll see that service vary across our different retail stores because you have some that are very tight-knit communities, so they know each other. But then there's others who you kind of, let's say, use Halifax, for example. We might experience tourists who come in, right? So at the end of the day, we're making sure that we're providing a service that people are finding the products that they want, first and foremost, because that's what we exist through, whether that's beverage, alcohol, or the cannabis. uh

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making sure that we're doing it in a legal way as well because it is controlled substances. um But also making sure that people are getting what they want, which is what I said earlier, right? It's also about being good and kind and really nice about it, providing a way for people to get what they want in a way that meets them. So a good example that I can think of is I had one of our team members share a story about people who, someone that came in actually.

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and they were talking about how they weren't able to distinguish the difference between the two products that they bought. So was like glass bottles. And I think it was like, for example, two different wines. And the way that they do that, they supported this individual was, we'll put a rubber band on one to tell you that this is, let's say that red wine and the other one without the rubber band was white. And this was nice because it was a distinguishing factor for this individual to be able to interact with that product and know what they're getting.

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But was also that extra step that you see from our team members to really highlight, hey, we're going to meet you where you're at or support you where you need it and being helpful in that way too. Yeah. So I mean, as you're bringing up here, a huge piece of customer service is communication. Yeah. Ensuring that you're communicating in multiple ways. So to try to reach uh a range of customers or participants.

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but that you're also uh responding to maybe what those needs are. So you're asking people, know, uh maybe uh in a store environment, you're asking people who might have low vision. I don't know, like, you know, is there anything we can do to support you through this? Do you have, uh have you experienced that, like participants coming to your programs who have faced

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ah who have accessibility needs. eh Yeah, definitely. And sometimes that's clear and sometimes it's not. So one of the things that we do em is that when people come in, one of the most important things is just that somebody is there to welcome them at the door. We have a little sign in process and one of the things we ask is whether you've been into that space before. And if you haven't, then we will go give everybody an orientation to the space and go over both some of this.

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you know, kind of important safety considerations and also just places where we can help accommodate people. uh that might include like sharing that we have a low sensory room if somebody is feeling just a bit overwhelmed in the space or, you know, that we have, you know, how you can follow dots to get to the washroom or that we have noise canceling headphones. And we tell that to everybody so we're not making assumptions about, you know, can't always, you're not always aware about

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um what support people need as they come in. So we make sure that

information is shared with everybody and that they all know they can access it. Yeah, that's so great. so from low sensory to headphones to wayfinding and even someone greeting you at the door that like, as you talked about, Bianca, that like welcoming, inclusive approach.

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I know that the NSLC did a pilot project last year around uh kind low sensory hours. Do you want to talk a little bit about that? Yeah, I can. It's very timely that you brought up low sensory. So um as you mentioned, Corey, it was very much a pilot project, something we just wanted to test out. We didn't know how it would play out in a store, especially with a lot of, like I was mentioning earlier, the legal requirements of how we're supposed to sell a

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control substance. So what we did was kind of understand what components of the low sensory did we want to bring in. And what we really leverage was our, we call it our Community Accessibility Advisory Group, but essentially it's also the AAC, which is the Accessibility Advisory Council that we're supposed to have as per the Accessibility Act here in Nova Scotia. So we asked the feedback, what are the components of a low sensory experience that appeal to you or

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would help when it comes to aspects of sensory sensitivities. So we heard about the timing of when the experience happens, how long the duration of that low sensory experience happens. So we got all that feedback, we talked to our own internal teams about what made the most sense, especially from a cost-seller experience or shopper experience, I should say. uh And then so we tested it out in three different stores in the Halifax area.

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So we had very different experiences. What we learned was, um even though the focus was actually for the shoppers, we ended up seeing that the team members really appreciated it, a different experience. They said, oh, they felt like they could focus more. Oh, the lights that sometimes they didn't realize were maybe causing a headache or maybe just felt too much on that day. Maybe they were just experiencing some that day. And they said, oh, I felt like such a relief. And it was so interesting to hear that feedback because

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To be totally honest, I was thinking about the shopper. I was thinking about what are they doing the minute they walk in through the door, notice that the lights are dimmer, the sound has been turned off. We've modified our kind of communication and behavior kind of practices just a little bit to make sure that we're not coming on too strong as some people might experience. But ultimately at the end of the day, what we noticed was that it was a lot of benefit everywhere.

Now, of course, there's feedback about what does this do for

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um the vision lost community or individuals who identify as blind and what we learned was that yeah, it's a little bit of a different experience, but how do we make sure we're still not excluding them there? So that was the pilot. We're kind of in the process now of reviewing feedback that we've gotten because we did capture some feedback as a result of the experience and what does it mean about launching it in the future? What does that look like? Is it feasible? Do we have different versions of it because we know that

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Yes, this was kind of a one push to address as many sensory sensitivities as possible, but what if we just turn off the music for a bit? Or maybe instead, maybe the music can be on, but we'll leave, we'll dim the lights for a little bit. So are there versions of this experience that maybe we can roll out? Just because some of our stores are...

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you know, they don't have all the capabilities of some of the stores that we have in other areas here. Yeah, like some of your rural stores are just a little part of like another business, right? So what does that look like? Right. But at the end of the day, we still want to be able to provide a shopper experience that it feels better for someone who would benefit from a low sensory experience. Yeah, for sure. So to be determined on these. But it was a really great learning experience for us. So I know that we've kind of touched on a little bit of the like

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the physical that built environment um touched on a little bit of like sensory overload, which could be across a range of disability and accessibility needs. What about um for things like have you experienced people with service dogs or support people and how do you um build the capacity of your teams to then know kind of like how to address that or what to do and

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and maybe what not to do as well. What does that look like? Yeah, I mean, I think on our end, some of that has just come from experience. OK. But also, you know, we do uh work with people with different kinds of lived experience and em have had a couple of opportunities to have some funding to bring in, em to be working with artists with disabilities to kind of help identify areas within our space that we can work towards. so em

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Yeah, those are great questions because people do come by with uh

accommodating, I think, support workers is easy enough. We did some work with CNIB on some camps and kind of realized what we needed to do to make, you know, somebody came in with a service dog, kind of how to better accommodate them. And I guess one of the things that works for us is just that we do really regular debriefs with all of our programming to just look at like, you know, what were highlights and challenges of any situation and

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What are we learning from it? So I guess it's just that uh we're trying to make sure we capture the experience of so that we're always learning. That accessibility is something we're kind of striving towards and always exploring, thinking through strategies together to kind of improve as we go. Absolutely. So when I think about sort of like, I'm a person who thinks in like models. And so I think about

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What are the pillars of accessible customer service? so I think, yeah, so we talked about the uh accessibility supports and everything from kind of physical to sensory. um The other piece is people making sure that anyone with a support person or a service dog feels like um they can access the space, they're comfortable. um Feedback is such a big.

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Hiller of effective customer service. And you both talked about how you're building in ways for people to give feedback and to evaluate what's working and what's not working and that regular kind of continuous improvement. So to me, those are some big ones. There's also then like the how do you maintain certain accessibility? Like, I don't know in your space, Heather, I know it's two floors. Yes. Do you have an elevator? We do. You do. We have in our new space. that we've been in. Yeah. We have an accessibility lift.

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It's like a B class, it doesn't work quite like a regular lip, but it is designed for people with accessibility needs. And I know, I'm not sure many of your NSLC stores, I think, are on sort of ground level. Yes, of them. Yeah, most of them are. Obviously, there's more than just um an elevator in terms of physical accessibility. But what happens?

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So NSLC, I know you have the doors that open automatically, your elevator. So what happens when those things don't work? That's another big part of the maintenance and the communication around, you were expecting to come to Wunderneath today, but the elevator or the lift isn't working. Has that happened in your experience? We haven't had a lot of problems with that, just because mostly our second story is artists that are working.

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in the building and we can communicate pretty easily with them. It's less public access um on a regular basis. But certainly we sometimes have trouble with our door, which has an accessibility button, but as weather shifts, sometimes it sticks. And so just like being attention to when it's working and when it's not working. so then can we prop a door open or how do we, it definitely have to be aware of oh how people are able to access the space. Absolutely.

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um What about uh Bianca sort of training for, mean, NSLC again is such a large organization, the training for staff around accessible customer service and what to do in situations where a door may not be working or someone does have a service dog and making sure you're following all the legal requirements there. No, I think...

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There's a lot of parts to that. And the first thing that I was thinking about, Heather mentioned the CNIB. one part of that is... CNIB, let's say who they are. The Canadian National Institute for the Blind. I know, and this happens every episode where we're like, back up, stop. So yeah, thank you. Yeah, and they're a great organization because they're focusing on a very specific community. And we're talking about sight loss, blind, low vision, right? And they encompass a lot of that.

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So the piece that I wanted to touch on was about education. And they uh came to a lot of our meetings that we had. We had them in person. We had a virtual version as well to really just provide them that education guidance to our team members across the province about how do you interact with someone who has a service dog? How do you provide that more accessible shopper experience for someone who maybe just needs a little more support or maybe will raise that with you?

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So I think that's like the powerful thing about providing that knowledge and giving them very specific education. Not to say that it stops there, it's a continuous opportunity to learn. But when you involve the community to be like, this is what your experience is beyond what the law is saying. You get a little more of the like filling in the gaps, right? And I think we see that a lot with, yes, there's laws that tell us we need to be accessible. But it's like the how we do it.

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is where the community is super important. then someone like this, or not someone, some organization like the CNIB is very important as well. Absolutely. And so this conversation is so interesting because we have NSLC, which is, as we said, a prescribed public sector body.

They need to have an accessibility plan. They need to have a committee. They need to make commitments and strategies around and report back on them.

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Right now in Nova Scotia, a smaller non-profit, even big non-profits, even private businesses, so I'm a business owner, we don't have to have those things in place. So what I find so great about your story, Heather, is that you've been doing it very proactively, um even though there's not a legal mandate. And I'm not saying that an associate is only doing it because of that, right?

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There's a lot of, I would say, like support and positions being developed within the public sector and those prescribed public sector bodies to ensure that's happening. When the accessibility standards do become law in Nova Scotia, they're all supposed to be developed by 2030 and enacted. That's when we'll start to see the shift moving from public to

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the impact or nonprofit sector and businesses. And so it'll be really interesting to see, you know, what people can learn and what are they doing. But like what I'm what I'm kind of learning from this is your both of your organizations are being very proactive and responding to kind of what people are bringing to you. Yeah, I think that that responsive element is really important. And it's in general, like how we approach all of our programming, you know, looking at

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what we're seeing the need or what people are looking for and not finding in other places and responding. I think just when we were talking about uh kind of bringing in measures, like when I think about having somebody come in, it's also about like maybe having a conversation with the whole community about adaptations that you're making. know, when we had somebody come in with a... uh

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with a. uh

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with a site dog. One of the things we found was in a crowded, if the space was crowded or our facilitators weren't used to, you know, weren't used to coming around and kind of reaching into people, uh having a way to just see the dog on the floor, you know, like if people aren't used to having seen somebody in there with a service dog, then, you know, we realize, we have a concrete floor. If we just have like a foam mat we can put down that just both makes the dog more comfortable and also

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is a visual indicator for everybody else that's in the space to be aware. Yeah, absolutely. so the more we can kind of build up that language and some strategies that highlight an awareness for everybody in the space, that makes a really big difference. Yeah, and I think even though we might not have those accessibility standards in place, what we do have in Nova Scotia is a service dog act. And we have, and I'm going to get this wrong, but it's the kind of act

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protecting the rights of people who are blind. And so both of those things are in place and we don't hear a lot about them. And so like we, again, like every place, every organization business in Nova Scotia has to kind of abide by these um kind of regulations, I guess, which, you know, in Nova Scotia, it isn't mandatory for a service dog to wear a vest, um but it is, uh

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And sometimes I hear stories of like, oh, people are kind of buying the vests off the internet and like, you know, putting the, I would hope that's not happening a lot. um But just that idea of, you know, responding to um what the needs are of either the person with the service dog or the other participants to ensure that it's like,

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safe but also like you know that really inclusive experience for everyone. Anyways what I want to ask next is about sort of the is there a story that you could tell where you've really seen the impact of you know bringing this accessible approach and accessible lens to the work that you do? What I was thinking about as Heather was talking about like just yes there's like that response of like

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learning. think to come back is like, yes, we do have this legal mandate that work because we're a PPSB. But I think what we've noticed over the three years since we've had an accessibility plan is that people really are taking it to heart being like, don't, it's like, it's not the plan that's directing our actions. It's now it's just like, let's do it. Let's implement it in our everyday work. Let's keep it in mind. So I'm seeing it in our learning and development team where they're being really more intentional being like,

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Yes, we're reviewing our training, but let's consider the accessibility aspects of it. And you think about things like font color or the wordings that we're using. And that's not necessarily what they're doing, but that's an example of that intentionality. You see it with our communications being a little more plain and simple. You see it when we're reviewing buildings now or future renovations, we're starting to think about, okay, what does...

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Yes, the legal requirement asks for us, but what can we do a little more? And that's such a shift from when the accessibility plan was first launched for us because it was like, I don't know what I'm doing. The standards don't exist. Where do I look? Yes, other provinces are doing it. But it makes most sense for us. So was like, let's do a catch all. Whereas now as we develop our second plan, we're a little more like, oh, we know, we have a better idea. We don't know everything and we don't have all the standards. But I think we have a little more uh appreciation from our growth.

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of, okay, cool, I feel better. It's like, okay, what does this mean from an accessibility lens? What does it mean from an inclusive lens? Because they come together at the end of the day. So that growth is kind of the story we've seen at the NSLC. There was a lot of hesitancy, but I think now people feel a little more confident to be able to Even in the language, right? Like, what do we mean by disability or accessibility? And we've had other podcast episodes about that, so we don't have to do that every time.

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So even being comfortable having the conversations and say, think the key part for me is saying, I don't know what that is. I don't necessarily know how to do it, but like, can we get feedback from people with that lived experience or, and, and learn about this to be able to kind of do better. Do you, is there a, is there, do you have a story in mind? think of like one story because like it really, every session there are, there are examples, but I think that

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sometimes when people come in the door, maybe that immediate kind of physical accessibility is one of the things that is like the opener, right? So somebody is coming over, you know, in a power chair or a walker and they can get in the door and come into the space. And that's a really great first step, right? And then, but then you might see like, I think that it's like that, again, just staying with people and building relationships over time. then understanding this person would can hear or

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the people around them better if they're faced in this chair in this place. And they're starting to come regularly. So we make sure we kind of save that place for them. And then one of the staff is aware that they might need a little bit of extra support, getting reaching things or just getting started on something and just kind of checking in, you know, and as you get to know somebody, can find a support that

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are most appropriate for them. So it's about just building relationships over time too. And recognizing, right, like getting in the door is, you know, I think that was one of the biggest things for us when we moved into a physically accessible space was just like, oh, this is just the very tip of the, this is just the very beginning. And we have so much to learn, which is about, like you said, the customer service, like actually, you know, engaging with people and finding out all the different ways of communicating.

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you know, helping set them up physically and just in a space, you know, so that enables them to be feel more autonomous on their own. What I love about, course, like I want to say small, ah but also feisty, arts based, you know, community based organizations, I benefited a lot from Wunderneath during the pandemic. Right. So my kids were smaller and you like Wunderneath did

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bags filled with the supplies and the instruction that you could go pick up and I ended up going I'm like picking up 10 for like all my friends and neighbors and it like and it gave us something to do so I think about even as you tell the story of Wondernite how you continue to do that right to adapt to listen to respond to kind of what's what's coming up.

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And I know that space where I used to go pick up those bags had a big flight of stairs. And then you moved into a space that was accessible, right? Just those kinds of changes. And a street level and, you know, has windows. You can peek in before you go in. And just, know, for an arts organization, even recognizing one of the accessibility things is people are intimidated sometimes. So how do you give people information in advance as much as you can so that they can feel more confident walking in the door?

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And one of the things that we have done actually is on our website, we have an accessibility guide that's kind of living updated where, where it just describes like, this is what the space is. This is a picture of what the room looks like. You know, this just give as much information as we can so that for people in advance of coming so that they went by the time they come, they're already having a sense of familiarity or what questions they might have specifically or.

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just kind of what they're coming into. That is so great. think um so in my organization and through the ACE accessibility confident employers project, we do a lot of trainings and we're always asking people, know, what are their accessibility needs or supports that they have? we increasingly we've seen the ask for materials in advance and

to really understand like, okay, what's the agenda?

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What is the basic information? Could you send us the PowerPoint in advance? that's for, that meets a whole lot of needs, but it also like really increases people's like confidence and competence and like in a space, right? Whether that's virtual or in person. We do that even with our job interviews now, like when we're hiring people, we send out the questions to everybody the night before. Yeah. And you know, that is again, just like,

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You know, we're not trying to trick people. We actually just want to have a good dialogue with them about the things that are important to us about this position. And it has made such a difference to so many people for different reasons. Yeah, absolutely. I always like try to challenge people who are like, no, no, like 10 minutes. I'm like, no, no, that does nothing 10 minutes before because like, what are we evaluating for extraversion? Like, do you really want a company full of extroverts? Probably not. um So yeah, I love that.

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So I just want to uh give you some space to share anything that maybe you haven't had a chance to. Uncertainty, hesitancy about where do we start and then where do we go now? And it's really encouraging to see that there's now this momentum and confidence really to be like, okay, we have an idea of how we want to proceed. And we see this in so many of the things that the organization has taken on. So we talk about education.

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I think education being such a huge pillar to make sure that everyone feels confident to be able to be accessible and they're accessible and inclusive, I really want to say, in their everyday operations, their work, their being, right? And whether that's uh through the CNIB or education that we're partnering with other organizations to help make sure we are creating that space. It's also education in terms of like physical programs. So I talked about the low sensory experience, but we've engaged in partnerships with

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the NSCC, so the Nova Scotia Community College, with their Achieve program and having their students come in. And I think there's always something more powerful of being able to do it yourself than just being told what to do. And I think those are extremely important things. So it's these little things that just add up, that build this entire story of accessibility of where it is at the organization and where it can go in the future. And I think that's,

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the fun of it and the beauty of it. We don't know everything. think like that has to be clear. We never know anything when it comes to accessibility. But I think at the end of the day, that appetite to learn is always the most important piece. Yeah, great. Yeah. Yeah. I think that really just made me think about like just making steps like search mall, you know, and we've like just just don't wait till you've got the hopeful plan and then try and implement it like just.

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There's so much we can learn from our participants, our customers, from our staff, from the organizations that we partner with, and just start making like, oh, you see something that's a great idea? Let's just try that and add it in. And I think it's really worthwhile having, like we've got from some work that was done, kind of small, easy things, medium things, and things that cost more money and time to organize.

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You know, and that's great to have that plan. But then also just like every time you can learn and just bring something in, you know, we were working with a deaf artist and they asked if we could just put some mirrors in the space in different places so that if you were working somewhere, you can see, you know, who's coming up behind you or something like what a simple thing to be able to implement. We already had the mirrors in the studio, you know, just to be able to set them up. And so just like listening and creating opportunities for people to share.

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And um yeah, and just starting to make steps, because as you're doing that, people respond and they acknowledge it and might offer other suggestions when they see that this is something that you are thinking about that you're concerned with. You will have more opportunities to understand what other other changes you can make. Yeah, really builds that community trust, really builds the like the loyalty to um in terms of like, oh, I'm going to.

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I had a good experience going to invite a friend and that's so key. So I want to thank both of you. It's been really great to have just your very uh unique perspectives like large, across the province organization and a smaller arts-based, community-based nonprofit and some of the things that are similar, right? And some of the unique elements of each of your organizations. So thank you so much for joining. Yeah, thank you for having us. Yeah, was great. Thank you very much.

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inviting us. Great!

