S3, E 17 — Opening Doors for Greater Accessibility with We Hear You

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 00:01

Hello and welcome to Changing What's Possible: The Disability innovation Podcast brought to you by Cerebral Palsy Alliance Research Foundation or CPARF. I'm your host, Dr Marie McNeely, and this season, we are excited to bring you cutting-edge stories and insights on research, technology, and innovation for people with CP and other disabilities. Before we introduce you to today's guests, I'd like to take a moment to tell you about 3forCP, CPARF's grassroots fundraising initiative for cerebral palsy research and disability innovation. Whether you level up a read-a-thon, a sip-and-paint event, a comedy show, or something else that you love, 3forCP gives you the chance to make a difference in your own signature way. Head to 3forcp.org to get started, that's the number 3, F, O, R, C, P, dot O, R, G. And now we'll get started with today's episode. You'll hear from two guests, Pierre Paul and Ashley Schreck.

Listeners, Pierre is founder and CEO of We Hear You — one of the startup companies in our 2024 Remarkable US accelerator program. He'll be talking more about We Hear You in the first half of the episode, and in the second half, you'll hear from Ashley, Director of Marketing at Epic, an organization that's been partnering with We Hear You to test their products and provide feedback, and we're looking forward to learning more about our guests, the story behind We Hear You, and the products that they've created. So Pierre, thank you so much for joining us today. How are you?

**Pierre Paul** 01:35

I'm doing so well. Thank you. Honored to be here. So appreciative for this opportunity.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 01:40

Well we are excited to learn more about you and more about We Hear You. So can you start by telling us more about yourself?

**Pierre Paul** 01:47

Yes. So my name is Pierre Paul. Name actually pronounced pi-eh-he because I was born in Brazil. So my name is in Portuguese, but it translates to Pierre, born in Brazil. Grew up between Guyana and Ohio. Very interesting jump there, but at a young age, I really decided that I wanted to master the art of public speaking so I could use my voice to advocate for individuals from all different walks of life. And so I really built up my life around the ability to utilize rhetoric to benefit the lives of others, a love and a passion for music and helping the world grow and helping people realize the strength that lies within and that really encapsulates the work that I do and why I do the work that I do.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 02:28

I love it. So then, can you tell us what drew you to entrepreneurship and maybe starting a company at all?

**Pierre Paul** 02:34

Yeah. So interestingly enough, I was supposed to go to law school, so I had taken the LSAT and I was ready to go to go to law school. And then I had a dream, a literal dream, to invent a sign language translator, which was so unique because I had never had copious amounts of experiences with deaf and hard of hearing individuals in my life. So when I had this dream, it was almost this moment of, if there's a God above, there's a sense of humor that they have because I spent my whole life working on public speaking and my ability to use rhetoric, just to be given a vision to invent technology for community of people who communicate very differently, very beautifully, a different way. And that is how I ended up in the entrepreneurial route. It was a stroke of luck or divine intervention, if you will, have been pushed me in this direction.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 03:22

Very cool. So then can you maybe go into some detail on what motivated you to found We Hear You specifically, and how did you get started with the company?

**Pierre Paul** 03:30

So after I had this dream to invent this sign language technology, I was like, Well, who am I to deny what has been given? So I started working. I woke up the next morning, I contacted Bethany, who's now the Chief Operating Officer of We Hear You. I'm like, “Hey, I have this idea. Let's build some new technology.”

And we got started, we're knocking on doors to see who wanted to help us out. And we found some people who said yes. We took a lot of no's, but I've always been told that our good yes is protected by a million no's, so we got those millions of no's, but when we got the yeses, that is what then pushed us to start inventing. And so we launched one of the first commercially available sign language translators in 2020 right before covid hit, and then covid hit, the world is shutting down, but we're still building and we're still growing.

And while all of this is happening, I then have an idea for another invention, a device to open doors automatically. And at this point, I didn't fully know where this idea was supposed to go, how to place it, but that's the beauty of having a network surrounding you. Because I ran into an individual. Her name is Cardin Wycoff, and her last name had caught my attention because I was a hall director in Wycoff Hall, and we're talking, and she invites me onto her podcast called “Freewheeling With Cardin.”

And Cardin has muscular dystrophy, and I say, Cardin, “I had this dream the other night about a device that opens doors automatically. What do you think?” And Cardin gets serious for a second, and she goes, “Pierre, there's nothing more embarrassing than being an adult pinned between the door and the frame of the door as you're just trying to maneuver through. And when the door is so heavy you can't push it off of you, the problem intensifies.”

And so from there, I now have these two ideas from completely different worlds, but I know that I have to do something with them, and I was just fortunate to have a team of people and a community around me who encouraged me to follow these dreams, and so we then created two different companies, started building them out separately, and now here I am, years later on this entrepreneurship journey.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 05:33

So can you tell us a little bit more about We Hear You, what is the mission of the company?

**Pierre Paul** 05:37

So We Hear You. Our vision is to see a world where diversity and inclusion is never the afterthought of innovation. It is always the foundation with the mission of creating new innovative pieces of technology to make the world more equitable. We use the resources that are available to us to make the world a more equitable place. There's so many technological advances that are possible because of how far we have come as a society, that it is really inexcusable to have a world that is lacking in inclusivity and accessibility when the tech is here. And so our mission is so unique because we are driven by that realization of what technology can do, and then make sure that it does do what people need the most.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 06:23

Then can you describe how did you come upon the name We Hear You in terms of sort of encapsulating all these different ideas that you had, or the broad mission that you have into a company?

**Pierre Paul** 06:34

I love poems. I love poetry. I grew up reading poetry, writing poetry, and so when I called Bethany the next morning after having the dream, and she's asking a series of questions. I realized a lot of her questions are why this and how this, and why this, and how this. And I realized that my answers are all in the same vein. It's because I hear the struggles of people around me, even if I'm not a part of that group. That's the beauty of being an ally.

And so when the question is asked, “Why? Why do we do what we do?” The answer simply is, because *we hear you*. We hear the struggles that you are faced with. We see you as people. And so the name really is to encapsulate. No one has to go unheard, no matter their exceptionality, their disability, their differences, their beauty, everyone has a space to be heard, and they're seen and heard by We Hear You as a company, and by the partners that support us as well.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 07:28

Well, I think that is fantastic. And Pierre, let's talk more about the company, and perhaps we'll focus first on this sign language translator. What problems did this product solve?

**Pierre Paul** 07:38

So we started with a sign language translator. Found a way to translate American Sign Language into speech and text without using technology and without using any unique cameras, just leveraging a camera that you would find on any smart phone. That's where we got started. We started with a simple finger spelling model, and then moved to full gesture recognition.

We were honored to have done a pilot in partnership with one of our favorite companies, Synapse, out of the UK. We did a partnership with them and Air Emirates to help customers as they maneuver through that giant, beautiful airport. From there, we are building out our technology. We have a new pilot program coming out where sign speak a company out of New York, and we're going to be helping Ameren Electric ensure that they can actually reach and communicate with deaf customers to understand what services Ameren offers. So that's where we started with the sign language side.

Not sure if I can say too much about what's happening with the sign language translator, but we are parting ways with it respectfully to a company that is Deaf-run for them to take that and take it to the next level.

Because while I loved being founder and CEO of the sign language part of the company, I'm an ally in the space. I'm a guest in the space, and I've been honored to be a guest in the space, but it is a technology that I would rather be run by a Deaf-led team. So that is a little secret that is on the horizon for the We Hear You sign language translator side of things, and that's product one.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 09:08

Interesting. And can you explain just how this sign language translator works?

**Pierre Paul** 09:13

So I will say my background, bachelor's in political science, Master's in nonprofit leadership. So my world is not in the data science, computer science space, but the way that it works. When I approached my team about this, I used my strengths, which is researching, and I gave them a 300-page brief, and I said, “Hey, here's all of the research that has been conducted. Here are all of the different deaf scholars and hearing scholars that came together talk about how this problem has been solved in the past, how it should have been solved, and how it should be solved in the future.”

And so with that, we learned that using gesture recognition, object recognition, neural networks and a bunch of other fancy-dancy technical terms, we could translate sign language in real time if we collect. Did enough data to then feed into an AI generated system to say — hey, when you see the sign for Hello, my name, you're going to recognize it instantly, the same way that if you speak into Google Translate and say Hola, it has heard it so many times — it's been trained on so much data that it knows that.

The difference is with sign language, the language is beautiful because it is a vocal verbal language in one sense, but it also is more expressive because of how it utilizes the body. And so we had our team sitting in rooms, training data for hours at a time, feeding it into the system, and we really prided ourselves on getting 98% accuracy before we would ever put it out, for anyone to test it out, because that level of accuracy is something that we knew was possible. Once we achieved that, we couldn't go back. And so that's how the sign language translator works. We put it on a tablet or a phone, you sign into it, and you can start generating that sign into speech for the hearing individual or into text, and then vice versa, working on a way to turn speech into sign language, using an AI-realistic person to then make sure that two-way communication is fluid.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 11:17

That makes sense, and I love that it goes both ways because I think that can be a challenge with translators, where it may be good at recognizing or translating one language, or maybe just certain accents or voices, but the translator may struggle going the other way, or maybe not recognize some voices as well, but it sounds like you've been able to solve for both sides of the equation, which is really exciting,

**Pierre Paul** 11:40

Yes, and it definitely is a unique challenge, and we're so humbled to be working alongside companies like I mentioned earlier, like the Science Speaks, like the Synapses, because they are other individuals in this space, in different parts of the country, and we've all come together in a way to solve this problem. Some of us are doing this piece better and that piece better, but when there's collaboration over competition in business, it benefits the community that you aim to serve. And I think that is one thing that I've learned over the years that I've been so proud of.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 12:10

Well, Pierre, we appreciate you sharing this part of your story, and I know the sign language translator was just the beginning. You've moved on to a new suite of products as well, and we want to make sure we have a chance to talk about those in detail. So can you tell us a little bit more about this door opening system and the problems that this system solves?

**Pierre Paul** 12:28

Yes! Product two is a series of devices that make doors easier to maneuver through. Right? Put simply, doors are difficult. They sometimes don't have the weight that we want. They are too heavy. They're not automatic. If they are automatic, the button doesn't work. And we saw these problems, we heard the struggles of people around us. So we created a product called the Hero Door opener, which is a portable operating system that's just like one of the small hinges that you see attached to the top of the door. We made one that is battery powered, that can be plugged into a wall outlet, that is very small, lightweight, less than 15 pounds, but has the torque needed to open virtually any door without having to hardwire it into that building or get that bulky automatic door system that a lot of people are used to seeing.

This solution is patent-pending currently, and it's going to be revolutionary, not just for the ADA the Americans With Disabilities Act, but also for nations that don't have a Disability Act that drives them to commit to change and bettering the world.

This will allow historic buildings to become automatic without having to hardwire into the infrastructure of this unique building. This will allow residential homes, hotel room doors to become more automatic in a way that is affordable and reasonable, and the possibilities are endless. So that's what we created on the push side of things.

And the way that our hero door opener works. It works with an app that we created that allows you to use voice activation, “Hey, Siri, hey google, open the door,” or just set it to auto open when you get within range. It works with a fob, with the entire space that is pressable. So that's for our friends with limited dexterity. So you can press it with your chin, you can press it with your wrist, you can press it with your elbow, and it will open the door from 15 to 20 feet away. And it still works with the conventional wall button that has our push logo that lets you know there is accessibility right around the corner.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 14:29

That's very cool, and you described a little bit how it works. But let's talk from a customer or maybe company side. If someone wants to use these products, how does that process work, and what are the steps involved?

**Pierre Paul** 14:41

Absolutely, and the push side of things is where we're really putting all of our efforts towards, and that's where the Remarkable cohort has come into play and really taking us under their wing and giving us mentorship and guidance and love and support and feedback and pushback, and all the things that help you grow.

When it comes to the push side of things, we're getting our e-commerce up and running right now, so people can go on the website and start pre ordering the hero, and they can order a push fob, and they can download the app from the App Store. You can find it on the Google Play Store or the Apple App Store under push door opener. And then once we start getting our reach out there, it will be second nature for you to have the push app ready to say, “Siri, open this door,” when I'm walking into this ice cream shop in the middle of Chicago or into a restaurant in Texas.

And so that's kind of what the process would look like. A lot of times, individuals go to businesses that they love, but that business isn't accessible, and sometimes they make excuses for the business, but we're here to take away the excuse. We want people to reach out to us and say, Hey, I love frequenting this one location, but if the doors were more accessible, I would go more regularly, and my friends would go more regularly. And I know people would support this business because they're more accessible. We want those names of those businesses, those stories, and then we will do the heavy lifting to get them outfitted with the technology they need to make the institution more accessible, and then people just download the app for free and then move in that direction.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 16:08

So for a company that wants to have the system make their doors more accessible, how long does it take? What's the process in terms of getting the equipment, installing it, and then having that final accessible door?

**Pierre Paul** 16:21

For a business that already has an ADA compliant door, or, I guess, an automatic door, the ADA’s vague nature doesn't necessarily specify it's automatic, but for a company that has an automatic door, they can get one of our receivers that retrofits their door to work with our Bluetooth app and our fob and a skilled electrician can do that in about 10 minutes, and that's for doors that are already automatic. For doors that are not and they want to purchase the hero, the beauty of the hero is that it takes about five minutes to install it because it is so lightweight and there's no hardwiring that is required.

And so you put it up on the door, you put two screws into the top of the frame, two screws onto the door, and then you plug it into a wall outlet next to you, or you leave it plugged in overnight and then when you get inside of the business, you take the plug out of it, and it has a charge that can last up to three days. And so it really meets people where they are. It is easy to install. You don't need an expert electrician to do it for you, and it's going to be functioning beautifully and making your institution accessible.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 17:24

Perhaps a more technical question, Pierre — how does the door know when to close? So if someone pushes, you know, the normal accessible door button, like you said, it doesn't always stay open long enough, how does the push system know when the person is through the door and it's safe to close?

**Pierre Paul** 17:40

I love that question. And so that really brings up a major problem that we've seen the door hits you and the door is heavy, and once it does that, you can't just repress the button, unless you have Mr. Elastic arms, and then you stretch around and hit the button. So the beauty of the app and the beauty of the fob is that you can repress the button on the app or on the fob or restate, push and the door will then automatically stop and open as you get through it. That's one solution. In the future, with the hero, we're going to be adding it on the app where you can set the time that you want doors to stay open for you, because nobody knows what you need better than yourself. So if you walk up to, let's say, a restaurant door, and you're with a friend of yours, and they have their set five to seconds, because in five seconds they can do it, and yours is set to 15 seconds, and in 15 seconds you can do it, as you approach the door, the door recognizes the signal using BLE, and there's radio frequencies as well, but the Bluetooth component is where it's really pinging and speaking to one another — it is going to know your specific setting, and then that is going to allow the door to stay open for the time that you need it.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 18:49

I think that's so cool that it can be customized so that each person can have their needs met as they're using this product. So you mentioned some of the key features already, Pierre. Can you go into maybe some of the details of the product features, perhaps, of the push and hero door opening system, specifically that make them different from any other options that are available from people with disabilities out there today?

**Pierre Paul** 19:10

So when it comes to what we're doing with the hero again, we're in a beautiful phase where we are going to be releasing onto the market here soon and testing them with some of our partners, Epic in Peoria, Special Olympics in Wisconsin, United Access in St Louis, Busch stadium. We're going to be testing with some of these partners, and what they're going to be getting is a version of the hero that allows you to use an app that showcases where there are other push accessible locations, and where there are railings, where there are ramps at different businesses. Because we're leveraging open source data that Google made available, and we just put it in one space so it's your accessibility stop and go shop.

In addition to that map function, there is just a voice activation function on the app that allows you to say, “Hey, siri, Hey, Google, hey Gemini, push,” and the door will open when you're within range. And then we're hoping to add a feature that allows you to go to a business that doesn't have the push and just simply ping it. And so we get a notification that, hey, this business here is one that I like, if you could make this one push accessible, and then we'll have an auto message go out to that business so that they can then know that there are people who would frequent more if they had more accessibility.

In addition to that, our push fobs. What makes our fobs unique is that the entire face of the button is pressable, and it comes with attachments, like a watch function, like a wheelchair function, like a crutch function that curves around that mobility aid to then help the individual have that on them at all times. Other competitors in the space have created RF remotes that ping to doors, but they're made without thinking about our friends with limited dexterity, right?

So if you have limited dexterity, using your thumbs to press a button is not the same as having the entire face be pressable, so it can be pressed with any part of your body — meeting you, where you are giving the economy back to the individual. And then finally, since we are using BLE and RF, we can create a wall button that allows you to press it and still open the door, if people still prefer that as an option, right? The beauty of inclusivity is giving multiple options that solve multiple problems, realizing that not every two users are the same, and that's really the product offering that's wrapped into the hero door opener and the entire push suite of products.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 21:36

That's so cool. So thinking about the landscape out there today, who do you think Pierre could benefit from using your products?

**Pierre Paul** 21:43

My answer instantly is — everyone can.

If I'm narrowing it down, hotels and hospitals really come to mind, and I'll break that down. When it comes to hotels, there are accessible rooms, and that's beautiful — love that that's an offering — but the doors aren't always accessible. So the reason that they haven't been made accessible is because to make your door automatic, costs really anywhere between five and $10,000 when you factor in the hardwiring costs and the electrician coming in.

With the hero door opener, hoping to be priced around $1,500 it now drastically decreases that cost. So now hotels can make their accessible doors automatic, and they can make the regular room doors automatic as well, because that is a feature that benefits all people. So I think that's one market that we're definitely targeting, as well as hospitals.

If you've ever been to an emergency room, you've seen that moment, or if you've watched too much TV, you see that moment where they're pushing the bed and they have to get through the double doors. On TV, they make it look effortless, but in reality, you have to stop, press the wall button and then continue to push through the door, kind of breaking your momentum, breaking your movement. So what we are seeing is all the nurses, all of the doctors, having a fob on with our hip so that their personal device to open the door when they need to, or using the app and saying push so they don't have to break their momentum. Not to mention how many high touch surfaces there are in a hospital, everyone cannot be touching that button because it's terribly unsanitary.

So those are kind of the two areas that we're seeing heavily focusing on and really pushing to get into end of ‘24 into ’25.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 23:26

I love it. I think you brought up some really good ones. Hospitals and hotels are huge, but I could see a lot of value in, you know, apartment buildings, even going into any building, like when I think about myself. So I do not have a physical disability that makes it difficult for me to enter or exit doors, but sometimes I'm just carrying a lot of stuff or have other needs that make it difficult for me to be getting into and out of doors. You know, whether it's like I've got a dog on the leash helping a family member, whatever the case may be, I could really see wide appeal.

**Pierre Paul** 23:57

I could not agree more. And I think that's what we notice when we look to beautiful, accessible inventions. Closed captioning on television screens now benefits the masses. Curb cuts now benefit the masses. These innovative, accessible inventions that were created for one purpose showcase the beauty of how accessibility makes the world better for all. How many times have you walked into a building your hands are full. You're trying to hit the button with your butt to try to spin around on the shimmy and then get through the door. Imagine if you can just, say, “push,” and the door opens, or just get within range of the door open. It makes life more convenient, and for those who need it the most, who might have a physical functioning difficulty, they now have this opportunity to exist comfortably, beautifully, as they would like to, in a world that recognizes the challenges that we built because we haven't always built with inclusivity and accessibility in mind.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 24:56

Absolutely, and I think that's an important transition here you mentioned the. You sort of came up with this idea and started developing this product, but I think being able to incorporate feedback and perspectives from people with disabilities in these design stages is critical. So Pierre, can you talk about what that experience was like and how you incorporated some of that feedback or perspectives as you were developing this push and hero door system?

**Pierre Paul** 25:20

So we did something that is pretty frowned upon business, but it was the right decision, us as a team, and it's always showing itself in different ways of our life to show that it was the right decision.

We had an amazing launch. We broke even after six months, we launched. We did $62k in sales in the first year. We're seeing the success. People are liking push. We're putting the receivers in, we just have the fob at this time, and I tell my team, we need to pause, we need to freeze what we're doing, because we need to actually collect feedback from the community that we are serving. I was like — tes, we have members who are part of the disabled community on our team, but that is such a small sample size, compared to the city that we were in, which was Peoria, Illinois.

And so what we did is we went out and we spoke with our partners, people who had worked with us, people who had worked with us. We spoke with members of different communities that were in, visiting, we reached out to some of our partners and said, “Hey, this is what we're building. You like it so far. You're letting us test it. Give us the raw feedback.”

And the feedback that we've got is what sprung board us into our next phases. The feedback was — this is great, this is beautiful, this is innovative. But what about individuals who cannot press the button?

And at this time, we had, and still have, a member of our team who has quadriplegic and we're figuring out how we want to innovate next, and we have created a version of the push device in partnership with her, that fit on the back of her head rest so that when she uses her head to move her chair, it would then actuate the push bob as she approached the door. But as we're learning with the community and building with the community. It gets us, why not make this an app so that Sabrina can say, “Hey, Siri, push open the door” however she chooses to and give that autonomy and freedom back the user. And that was one of the feedback that helped push us in the next direction.

Then we have partners like Epic that are saying, This is great, but the battery life could be longer because we're pressing it X amount of times a day. And of course, you went through that testing phase, and you do all of these things in the lab, but when you put it out into the world, there's so many different challenges that you can't foresee.

And then that final piece of feedback that we received so frequently on the surveys we conducted was, “Hey, we love seeing this all 0ver Peoria, but my business doesn't even have an automatic door because we can't afford it with our budget. What about us?”

And that was a moment of — Wow. These businesses are seeing how beautiful accessibility is, and they don't even have to be a disability owned business to see and love the value, but they're coming to us humbly and saying, “Hey, we want this. And like, you're helping a lot of people out, but we can't even afford the first step of getting that door to be automatic.”

And so that's when we met as a team, and that's when we decided that the phase two was going to be the hero and was going to be the push app. And then we were blessed to get a grant from the city of St. Louis Arch grants. They gave us $100,000 to come to the city and make it more accessible. And so we started building and scaling. And then we get Remarkable and we start building and scaling. And now here we are pending ready to hit the ground running and really pick back up where we left off, with that $62k with the getting throughout the Midwest, working with Bradley University and Illinois Central College and so many different places, Knox College, and just ready to really get back to where we were because we stopped, because we needed to communicate with the community, because We are building with and for the community as allied guests in that space.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 29:04

That's amazing. I think so important, like you said, to kind of hit that pause button and just make sure that you're on track, kind of get a pulse from everybody, to make sure that you're not making these assumptions that I think can sometimes happen when you're making products for a group, and you think this is a problem they have, right? And this is the way to solve it, right? Just getting that feedback can really open your eyes, I think. So, it's wonderful to hear that you've been incorporating the feedback and perspectives of people with disabilities and really serving the community to get an understanding of whether your products are meeting their needs. And it sounds like there's a lot of exciting things in store for you personally, Pierre and for the future of We Hear You, but what is your vision for the future of the company?

**Pierre Paul** 29:47

So my vision future of the company, I don't see any reason that We Hear You and the hero and the push product should not be household names that are championing accessibility around the globe. I have a large vision to help be an ally that reforms the Americans With Disability Act to be a bit more specific and a bit more really inclusive, because it was an amazing stepping stone to having everyone be recognized and appreciated.

But there is work that needs to be done, and I've seen that, and I've spoken to so many individuals in the space, and I've read it myself, and I see where there's some holes. So on the horizon, really is an overhaul to the ADA, using some of my political connects from back in the day when I was more in the political space, really the advocacy and the love of the work that we do that is next on the horizon, but that's further down the road.

I think in the immediate future, we're going to get our E commerce up on the website. We're going to get the hero door opener out in the world. We're going to get the push app in people's hands, and we're going to keep innovating with the community, refining building, and just making sure that diversity and inclusion is not the afterthought of innovation, but instead it's the foundation.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 31:02

I love that. And if we get to a future, hopefully soon, Pierre, where every business has one of these systems, how do you, I guess, control, or have you thought about yet, how you control you mentioned, someone has to be within 15 to 20 feet of the door to open the door. How do you keep every door from opening when someone's close on a strip mall or something like that?

**Pierre Paul** 31:22

That's a great question, and that is a fun problem that we've enjoyed tackling, right? And so the beauty is — I mentioned earlier, kind of in that longer version of the mission technology is advancing so quickly, and that problem has already been solved. It's used with geolocating and with directionality and with different credentialing systems that we can add for specific businesses and specific phones and versions of the app. So that problem has already been solved, and it's going to be something that we can't wait to run up against, because as we build now, we're ready to solve it, but once we are so widespread, it would be a very beautiful day when you walk down a boulevard, but doors side by side by side, and they just all open. It'd be a pretty funny sight. It probably wouldn't be great for, you know, energy efficiency, so we're working on it. But that is a problem that we have thought about, and luckily, there is a pretty comfortable solution that exists.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 32:12

Wonderful. Well, we appreciate you dreaming big about the future of the company. If you captivated our listeners and they would like to learn more, Pierre, where should they go or what should they do?

**Pierre Paul** 32:23

Absolutely, you can find me on LinkedIn. I love LinkedIn, just Pierre Paul. Find me on LinkedIn. You can go to We Hear YouASL.com we're going to be going through a rebranding here soon as we transition to really be focused on the hero and the push suite of products. But you can reach out on the website. Find me there. Honestly, I'm always traveling. So if you have me on social media, sometimes I post about where I am. So I'm constantly traveling. I love to get to learn from new people, new experiences. And if you need any diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion trainings, you can also find me on my personal website, ThePierrePaul.com so so many different ways to reach me.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 33:02

Fantastic. Well, Pierre, we appreciate you joining us to share your insights and experiences with all of us today. It's been a pleasure.

**Pierre Paul** 33:09

Thank you so much.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 33:11

Well, thank you again, Pierre and now listeners, I'm excited to introduce you all to our second guest, Ashley Shrek. Ashley is Director of Marketing at Epic, and she's had an opportunity to use we hear use product, and is going to share her experience and insights with all of us today. So Ashley, welcome to the show. How are you?

**Ashley Schreck** 33:32

Thank you so much for having me. We're thrilled to be a part of this conversation with Pierre and his team.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 33:37

Well, we are so excited to learn more about you and the work that you're doing and your experiences and interactions with We Hear You and their products. So perhaps, to start us off, can you tell everyone a little bit more about yourself?

**Ashley Schreck** 33:49

I am a young professional leading a very small team as part of a agency that helps adults with disabilities and their needs. So we are in the state of Illinois, and we help adults across 15 counties with educational, residential, clinical, and job placement programming. And we are excited to partner with a company like We Hear You and Pierre Paul for the innovative things that they're thinking of that then reflect our population served.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 34:18

wonderful so let's talk about the story there. Where did you hear about We Hear You, and how did you get connected with Pierre?

**Ashley Schreck** 34:25

Pierre is a very dynamic speaker, and Peoria is a little big city, and it's really easy to interact with people and know who people are.

You really don't get lost here in our area. And so Pierre really made a splash, as you've seen, he's a dynamic speaker, and it was something that we really wanted to seek out more about when they were first creating that ASL translator.

At Epic. We do have people that use sign language, but we have very few staff that are able to then communicate with those people, so we either have to pay to get them trained, or we have to seek out that specific talent, or have some sort of interpreter. So we were really interested from the beginning with the ASL translator, and what that could potentially do for our staff and communication. So we were really excited about that.

And then as we got to know them, and they created the push, we got even more excited on how we could use that product right now. So they generously donated a few fobs to us, and we were able to then do some beta testing and get them in the hands of individuals that are in wheelchairs or have mobility challenges, and then kind of give them the feedback on usability. And as Pierre said, we tell them about, you know, the battery usage and how it works. They set up their device on our doors. We were able to kind of walk their team through even that process, like, how long does it take to get installed? What does this take? How easy was it? Was it challenging at all?

And then we were able to then really talk to them about the individual users. Some have mobile dexterity in their fingers. Some don't. So what was the next thing? We were really excited about utilizing the push. We also were a little bit unique in that our building is locked down during the day, so we had the additional challenge of using the fob, but also then connecting with our third-party security system, and how we can make those two devices work together.

We were so excited to have the new expansion of the Bluetooth device, along with the app and the voice activated. That is going to allow so many more individuals the accessibility to use whatever door that pushes on. And then the next thing we'd like to talk to them about, which they're going to work through is, you know, it's voice-activated. But what about our friends that use a DynaVox or some sort of artificial voice for themselves? Would the push app be able to pick that up? Or how they could use that with their DynaVox, for example? We’re really excited for what could be next on this push device, absolutely.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 37:01

And I think as someone working in the disability space, sometimes you feel like you're overwhelmed with or bombarded by these different products, some of which may work better than others. What really made you want to try products from We Hear You? What convinced you?

**Ashley Schreck** 37:14

Yeah, well, first of all, they graciously donated the item. So as a nonprofit, you know, we can't always afford this adaptability technology because of the sheer cost of it. So the fact that they were willing to invest in us, first, was pretty impactful. They said, “Hey, we want to give you these at no cost. All we want is your feedback and your participation.” So we were thrilled with that.

But secondly, it was made here in Peoria. This was a local company. These were people that we know, and we knew that we had a role to play in providing them that feedback to make their products bigger and stronger. And our goal is to also then come alongside them and really communicate as to why other people should be getting on board. We have the firsthand testimonials from people who are using it. They are so, so, so excited for the increased independence they're going to have.

Like we said, you know, we've got some individuals who they can't reach across their body because one side is stronger than the other to push those buttons. So having that fob, having the app, having the voice activation, really allows them to open the door by themselves, which people take for granted, especially with the push button. They think it's accessible for everybody, and it's actually not.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 38:24

Definitely. So what has your experience been like so far working with We Hear You the company and using their products.

**Ashley Schreck** 38:31

We've been thrilled to work with. We Hear You just the excitement from their team. And when you sit down and talk with their team, you know they get it. They get our space.

Pierre has said specifically that he is not of this population and neither am I myself. So we really have to get the voice of the user, and they get it.

They could have just made this they could have pushed it to market as many accessible things are. They don't take the end user into consideration.

And the We Hear You team has taken it all the way every step of the way. They're asking for feedback. They're asking for testimonials. They're physically here, interacting with our individuals at Epic so when they're strapping it around their wheelchair, they're asking them, where do you like this to fit best? What works best for you? So their boots on the ground, working with individuals to find their best need and to make sure they're not just coming up with a product, but they're potentially creating the best product out there.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 39:29

So it sounds like you've had a positive experience perhaps with We Hear You so far. Can you tell us about what are some of the things that have changed since you started using this door system?

**Ashley Schreck** 39:39

Absolutely. Our individuals don't necessarily have to have a staff person open the door for them anymore. Again, we have a security system on our doors, so without that additional step, you wouldn't be able to open the doors by yourself, still needing to ask for assistance to enter our building, which they enter every day, sometimes multiple times a day. So having that key fob, along with our security system, allows them to be more independent. They can go do their jobs during the day by themselves, without needing to be asked to be let in, whether that's by our receptionist or another staff member. It makes their day more efficient, and it's one less thing that someone with a disability has to ask somebody else to do for them. So it's a confidence booster, it's a morale booster. It's them doing something for themselves because they can, which is very exciting.

And we're also extremely excited to be working with them to test their new products. So it's not just the push fob and the app. We're extremely excited about the hero door opener, because as Pierre said, it really changes the game for other doors that either can't have the traditional accessible door push button or you just can't afford it. So we're really looking forward to testing that in our residential homes. So what does that mean for someone who can be more independent in their own home? We're really excited to share that story.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 41:01

Definitely. And Ashley, I think you brought up a really good point here with the security system. I think this is something that's quite common. I mean, a lot of businesses, things like restaurants and shops, the doors may be unlocked open for customers to come in all day, any time of the day, during business hours. But in other buildings, you know whether it's an apartment building or whether it's just kind of a more secure work environment, you're going to have that security system to contend with. So was it difficult to get these two systems to work together, or what was that process like?

**Ashley Schreck** 41:32

So we were able to connect, We Hear You, with our current third-party security host, and they were able to talk through the tech and the basics of it, all that you know, is way above my marketing degree, and really find those challenges. And so, as Pierre said, they're looking to how can they create that tech where it talks together, or it's all created in one device? Is there a day when our security fob could be inside our own push fobs?

That's something that their team has the creative control to kind of figure out and work through. So right now, we were able to stick our security fob and tape it, if you will, onto the push remote. And so we kind of have two fobs in one, and it works well right now, but we would love to get to the point where that security tech is on our push fobs, and we only have one device instead of two sandwiched together.

But that's what his team knows, and his team hears that, and this team is working on it. And for other companies, it's going to be a much easier solution, but the fact that they just didn't say, “No, your security system isn't going to allow this to work. Let's move on” — we decided to work together and try to find a solution to keep testing the device. So there's no excuse. Just because you have a security system doesn't mean you can't have the push fob, because there's ways to make it work together.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 42:51

Definitely, and I think that's something we sort of touched on, this idea that we're finding a way to make it work for everybody. So perhaps this is a broad question here. But who do you think might benefit, perhaps benefit most from using We Hear You’s products?

**Ashley Schreck** 43:04

Oh my gosh, literally, everybody I know, Pierre hinted at this a little bit, but people with disabilities, it's the largest and fastest growing minority, and it's the only minority that most of us will probably end up in at some point in our lifetime. Disability is such a broad umbrella term, I don't think people realize that adding that accessible for one is accessible for all.

You know, how many times have you used an elevator or an escalator or, you know, some accessible tool that we all now use? Or how many people wear glasses or contacts? That's an accessible tool that is now just not thought of, because the majority of us have it. So really, anybody could be using this technology. Think about a mom with a stroller trying to get her stroller through the door. I mean, you name it.

And the electric door opener is not something new. We've done our research as well, and the electric door openers were actually first introduced in the ‘70s, but the ADA wasn't until 20 years later, in 1990. And as Pierre mentioned, the ADA is just a baseline jumping off starting point for required basic human needs for accessibility. And actually, the ADA does not, in fact, require doors to be automatic. It just requires them to be “accessible.” So there's so much more room to grow, to get above and beyond the requirements of the ADA to make every place inclusive and accessible for everyone.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 44:32

Absolutely, I think you brought up a really good point there. Sort of the ADA standards are the bare minimum, the floor. I think the ceiling is so much higher. So there's so much room to grow. And I think you brought up a really great point in terms of the different types of people, different sorts of scenarios where people could benefit, whether they have a disability or not. And I really love this idea of, sort of the transitions along a person's lifetime. You mentioned, anyone could become disabled at any point. And I think this idea of having more accessible doors, in this case, can really help people maintain their lifestyle and age in place as well.

**Ashley Schreck** 45:07

Absolutely, and that's something that we offer at Epic we're helping adults, really. We meet them around the age of 16 now they can be in school longer, so we're meeting them around 16 or so, and then we're with them sometimes till the end of their life.

And we see their aging challenge on top of their disability challenge, and to know that there's a company out here that is creating accessible tools, but not only creating accessible tools that are accessible to people, there's a difference between having it be accessible but then be accessible to get. So it's easy to install, it's easy to get, it's easy to carry, it's easy to navigate. There's something to be said about that as well.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 45:47

Definitely. Well, we appreciate you sharing your insights. Do you have a message, Ashley, that you would like to share with listeners out there who might be considering trying products from We Hear You?

**Ashley Schreck** 45:57

Absolutely if you have the means or just curious to try this? Please do. We're encouraging all employers, business owners, to install this tech, because the more we get it out in the public, the more that spurs interest and intrigue and other companies to install it as well. The US could be the most accessible country if we all get on board with something as simple as installing the push device on your door, whether it's hardwired or not, the hero door, the push fob.

If it's just something that we provide people, it'll become the next norm. What if the next installment of our Apple watches and Google watches is that you've got the push app on your watch and everybody now just become an automatic door opener just as we wear glasses or contacts today, would be an amazing and amazing thing.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 46:48

I love that just kind of shifting the culture, making it part of everyday life. I think that's amazing, absolutely. Well, Ashley, we really appreciate you joining us on the show. It's been such a pleasure to chat with you today.

**Ashley Schreck** 47:00

Oh, it's been an honor to be included in this conversation, and just to support We Hear You in the work they're doing.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 47:06

Well, thank you so much for your time.

**Ashley Schreck** 47:07

Thank you so much.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 47:08

Listeners, as always, it's been great to have you here with us as well. We'd be grateful if you could take a moment to leave us a review on your favorite podcast platform to let us know what you think of the show. We look forward to connecting with you again in our next episode of Changing What's Possible.