

Changing What's Possible - S.1 Ep. 6 Transcript

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SPEAKERS

Hailey Brown, Dr. Marie McNeely, Lisa McEwan

D Dr. Marie McNeely 00:01

Hello, and welcome to Changing What's Possible: The Disability Innovation Podcast brought to you by the Cerebral Palsy Alliance Research Foundation. I'm your host, Dr. Marie McNeely. And this season, we are excited to bring you a remarkable stories of life-changing technology. And today we have with us Hailey Brown from the company Vacayit, and Hailey is going to talk about how their company has created a new travel platform for blind and low-vision tourists that uses audio to share stories, sounds and history from places all over the world. And in the second half of our episode, today, we're going to hear from Lisa McEwan, Head of Content at Vacayit who has been creating content for the platform tailored to people with low to no vision. So listeners, let's get started. Hailey, thank you so much for joining us on the show today.

H Hailey Brown 00:48

Thank you for having us!

D Dr. Marie McNeely 00:50

Well, I'm excited to learn more about you to learn more about Vacayit so can you first just tell us more about the company in your role there?

H Hailey Brown 00:57

So I am the founder and CEO of Vacayit, which we started about two years ago. So bit more about Vacayit is we created it because currently, there's a lack of information available online for blind and low vision tourist as there's so much in the world that's imagery. So we are creating an audio guide to the world. And we tell sounds stories and history clips from destinations all around Australia at the moment, but hopefully everywhere soon.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 01:24

Oh, that's phenomenal. I love the way you describe it as an audio guide to the world. I know I'm an audio person myself, I love podcasts. I love consuming things via audio even though I do have full vision. So I think this platform is just going to appeal to a lot of different people. So you alluded a little bit to the why - but can you tell us a little bit more about the origin-story and how Vacayit got started?

H

Hailey Brown 01:45

It actually happened quite quickly and out of nowhere. I was never searching for any idea to create a platform or to be a business owner. But I had an opportunity to present something to the World Tourism Forum Lucerne in March of 2020, about a gap in the tourism industry. And I was at dinner with one of my friends Henry, who has been blind since birth, and asked him about all of the problems that he has had in the past with travel. And this idea came up that he just wishes that there was more information available to people when they're traveling. And he told me some of the stories that he had experienced. And I think that was my aha moment where I realized there's so much in the world that's imagery. And over the past 20 years, we moved away from stories and we moved into imagery, but stories is what makes experiences. So that's where we kind of took the idea and run. Ended up winning the Innovation Award at the World Tourism Forum Lucerne, and now it's my full time job. And it's pretty awesome because we get to work with such fantastic people, and helping them to be more independent in their lifestyle. So whether that's being independent, meaning they have the information to put on more guides or doing it alone, we're pretty excited.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 02:59

That's phenomenon and you mentioned, you didn't plan to become an entrepreneur necessarily, or a business person. So what was that transition like for you? And how did you decide to take that leap?

H

Hailey Brown 03:09

So I've been pretty sure I was gonna get my dream job. And then very quickly, once I realized one of my mentors at the time, who's actually funnily enough now and general manager, Tomar, he made me go out and do a bunch of interviews with I ended up interviewing about 250 people. And every time I spoke to somebody, the same problem rose every single time, which is there's just not enough information, which makes it extremely hard and extremely tedious. And I think the more I heard, the more I was like, wow, somebody's doing this surely there's someone in the world doing this. And honestly, I sat down with my mom and my stepdad and middle of the year and realized they just said to me, why aren't you gonna go full time on this? Why you're gonna go into a job? Like, yeah, fair enough. I guess I'll do this then. And haven't regretted it since. It's pretty awesome. I'm so lucky that I got to do something like this. It's pretty unique. And that didn't know it, but it's exactly what I wanted to do with my life.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 04:06

I love it. So can we break it down then for our listeners and tell them a little bit more about what you've developed there. How does Vacayit work?

H

Hailey Brown 04:13

Yeah, so we work with destination marketing organizations all around Australia. So we work with them on a local, regional, state and working on national level. So on a local side, that would be an organization like Ballarat and a regional area, it would be Brisbane or Bundaberg or Sydney, and then state would be either New South Wales, Queensland. So we're working with these organizations to create accessible content. And we do this by working with their pre-existing content that they have. And then Lisa, who is our content editor, she goes through and edits everything to be more beautiful than you could ever imagine. And then we record it and put it on the platform. So we're hoping in the next couple months, we'll have a map feature-ready where people and just open up their map and be where they want and listen to the audio there.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 05:04

That's so cool. So how do you decide which locations or which destinations are selected and what goes on this map?

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Hailey Brown 05:10

It's really just been a process of changing the way that people market a destination that's completely new. We're really just working with organizations that really, really aim to be more accessible and to be better. And then that kind of flow-on effect is that now we've got a lot more people involved and jumping on board with it. So it hasn't really I guess the decision was just around who really wants to be a part of it. And then now we're at a capacity where we can onboard a lot more people. So now we've got more people coming on to that.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 05:39

That's phenomenal. And you mentioned that during these interviews, these discussions you were having with people, the same problems kept coming up in your conversations. And I'm curious, are there other kinds of technologies out there in the space, or what makes Vacayit really different and distinguishes it?

H

Hailey Brown 05:54

That's super interesting, because we really are one of the first in the market. Really, there's hardly any competitors, especially in the disability tech space, because a lot of disability technology is about creating physical infrastructure rather than an experience. What I mean by this is businesses want to have a ramp or tactile indicators at an organization. But often, once the user gets inside the destination, it's actually quite an inaccessible experience. And what

we're trying to do is actually build that to be something that people can have an experience and actually enjoy it while they're there. So I think the big difference in what we're doing in the disability space is actually not just focusing on physical infrastructure, but making someone's experience better at the destination. However, in the tourism space, there's really only two organizations in the world that are really doing it well, audio describing destinations. And I think the big niche that we have is that we have access to curated content, which makes it just absolutely outstanding in comparison.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 06:56

Very cool. And I mentioned in the introduction, that you've got a variety of different things. So it's stories about these places, soundscapes, which I think is really cool, and some of the kind of cool facts and history. So how do you choose what information you curate, and you put with these destinations?

H

Hailey Brown 07:10

So this is completely Lisa's area. And I do little to none of this, but it really depends on the place and what their history is. So Ballarat has a lot of history with the Goldfields. And they did their introduction as a poem. While some provide a lot more history, some provide, a lot more exciting stories, some are wine tastings. So really just depends on the experience, because we've got everything ranging from water sports, to scuba diving to wine tasting, and adventures. So there's not really one standard that fits all.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 07:42

Oh, that's so cool. So Hailey, can you describe I guess, the company's vision or what you envision for the kinds of impacts that you'd like to see Vacayit having for its users?

H

Hailey Brown 07:52

We're hoping to audio describe the world where you can just pick up your phone and listen to the place wherever you are. And I think our end-goal is that we can provide a little bit of information about a lot of things so that people can make informed and independent decisions wherever they are. But it can also make a bad experience a little bit better. So we're not saying that we have to make it perfect, but we do want to make it better. And that's a step in the right direction. So we're hoping to integrate some booking platform into our platform that's accessible, because one of the biggest problems today is inaccessible booking platforms for experiences. So people can't even access them in the first place. As well as letting user generated content come on board. So that's looking at people who are storytellers who want to come on board and also allowing people to have a voice where they travel. So the two really exciting things that are coming up in the next couple years.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 08:42

Absolutely. And I really like that. It's not just about helping people enjoy where they happen to be or where they're going. But really helping people choose their destinations. And I think this part of it is really cool. Because I sort of take for granted how much of this idea of planning a trip and deciding where you're going to go. All that information seems to be delivered visually.

H Hailey Brown 09:01

Yeah, I know that when I'm because I'm sighted myself. Whenever I open up Instagram, I look through photos and videos from destinations that I want to go to and I save them. And to be honest, I really that's all the information that I need. But when you think about it, it's actually quite tough, because the information that's available was just suited towards a sighted tourist. And that's about it.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 09:23

Absolutely. So if our listeners are intrigued, and they want to learn more about Vacayit Hailey, what is the best way for them to do so?

H Hailey Brown 09:30

So we've got a website, www.vacayit.com. And that's spelt V-A-C-A-Y-I-T. And you can reach out to us on there, you can join the waitlist and soon our platform will be available off that website as well.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 09:47

Fantastic. Well, listeners, definitely check out their website, sign up to join the waitlist there. And Hailey, thank you so much for joining us on the show today to tell us more about Vacayit.

H Hailey Brown 09:57

Absolutely and thank you so much for having us. It's great to talk with people in the space.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 10:02

Well, it's been a pleasure to chat with you and listeners stay with us. We are excited to share more about Vacayit after this short break.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 10:10

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D Dr. Marie McNeely 10:55

Now, listeners, I am excited to introduce you all to our second guest, Lisa McEwan, someone who has first-hand experience developing content for and using Vacayit. So Lisa, welcome to the show and thank you so much for joining us today.

L Lisa McEwan 11:10

Thanks so much, Marie.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 11:11

Well, we are excited to have you with us. Can you start by telling our listeners a little bit more about yourself?

L Lisa McEwan 11:17

Sure! So I am a wife and a mom and a business partner for a farming enterprise. And I also happen to have the pleasure of working with Vacayit. I also happen to be legally blind. So I was born with an extremely rare eye condition called sclerocornea, and that has left me with about 3% vision since birth. In practical terms, that means I can count fingers with my left eye, and I can sort of perceive light and dark with my right eye. And that's about it. I love to empower people and to encourage people to make the most of what they have available to them. So working with Vacayit to empower people with no or low vision to more fully experienced travel was a perfect fit for me. I'm the lead content editor for Vacayit. And it's an absolute pleasure to be able to bring these experiences to life in new ways to help make them more accessible for those with low or no vision.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 12:14

That's excellent. So can you tell us a little bit more about the user experience and what it's like for people who might be using Vacayit in the future?

L Lisa McEwan 12:22

As Hailey has covered off, Vacayit is an audio guide to the world and it's an audio travel platform. And it's a real game changer, I believe I truly believe it's going to revolutionize the way that people with vision loss access the travel experience. Right through from their travel

planning through to the actual experience itself. So when users get on to the vacate app, they're able to use a platform that is accessible through the likes of voiceover and magnification on portable devices to access information that's high contrast, that's large print, easy to read and created especially tailored to meet their needs. So users can navigate through the app through a range of very easy to navigate buttons at the bottom. At the moment, they can explore through selecting a region that they wish to visit. And then through a range of experience options such as nature and wildlife, or food and wine adventure, that sort of thing to find exactly what they're after. And in the future, we're really excited that we'll be introducing the mapping feature. So those with some vision will be able to utilize that to look up a destination and see what's available within that area. And also to be in the future, we're looking forward to introducing the voice search functionality so that users will be able to simply speak the name of a product or a destination they'd like to visit and have access to content that has been tailored to meet the information needs.

L

Lisa McEwan 13:47

So this content when they get to it is designed to bring a destination to life by sharing the stories and the multi sensory experiences behind a destination or an experience. So often people tend to think of travel as a sightseeing experience. But it's really so much more than that. If you think about some of your favorite travel memories, you know, they often involve a favorite dish that you tried there or smell of something amazing while you were traveling or the taste of that delicious Shiraz or whatever it might have been. So we are drawing out those experiences and highlighting those as well as providing a bit of context to the visual aspect of what people would be seeing if they were able to see that. And the advantage of that is that it enables those with low or no vision to be able to share more fully in that experience and to understand the context in which it's set. So it's a really exciting new way of looking at tourism marketing and moving away from that image-heavy traditional way of marketing to a much more inclusive and equitable way of presenting tourism information.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 14:53

And I think this is brilliant. So for you, Lisa, are there particular features or maybe attractions that you're most excited about in Vacayit?

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Lisa McEwan 15:01

I'm really excited about the voice search function that's going to be introduced, I think that's going to make things so much easier. While I do have some usable sight and can read some print with magnification, I think it just reduces the fatigue that's involved in travel research. So I'm really excited about that. And in terms of the experiences themselves, look, I'm an absolute travel-a-holic, if there is such a thing, I love to travel, I've done quite a bit. And I just love the whole way that it's changing the face of how we can access that information. And I think I've got the best job in the world, I get to write about some incredible experiences, get to discover them through that writing and get to share them with the world. So I feel incredibly privileged.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 15:43

Oh, that's wonderful. And I love that you described yourself as a travel-a-holic. So for you, someone who travels quite a bit, what changes do you think Vacayit could make in your life?

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Lisa McEwan 15:51

Well, I think to really understand the changes it's going to make, you have to kind of understand some of the barriers that have traditionally impeded the travel experience for people with low or no vision. And I can't speak on behalf of everyone because everyone's experience of vision loss is unique. But I can certainly speak from my own perspective. So in the past when I traveled, obviously, when you go to search - as Hailey mentioned before - when you go to search a travel experience, it's very image-heavy. Tourism traditionally uses an image to convey an experience to help viewers understand what's on offer. If you can't see those images, or you struggle to make them out, you can get a completely wrong perception of what something's going to be. Or you can sort of miss the point of what's being offered. So that makes it really hard. It's also a lot of websites aren't designed to be very accessible to those, particularly those who are using screen reading software, or those who are using magnification. Oftentimes, websites use, say, white text over a colored background, but there's not enough contrast there to be able to make it out. Looking buttons can be impossible to find. And then you get right through the end of the stage. And they bring up a little CAPTCHA thing, you have to enter something to prove you're not a robot. And it's nearly impossible. The number of times I've clicked on trying to book something because I couldn't read the CAPTCHA code is ridiculous, really.

L

Lisa McEwan 17:09

So those have been the sort of barriers that have in the past, made travel planning as a person with low or no vision really laborious. For most people, the travel planning process should be half the fun of the experience, it should be an enjoyable and relaxing type thing you do on a Friday night. But for someone with low or no vision, it can be incredibly fatiguing and incredibly frustrating. That's the barriers that we've been facing. And moving forward, the way that I can see it would benefit is that it's going to remove a lot of those traditional boundaries, it's making information easily accessible using screen readers, or voiceover and those kinds of applications. It's going to increase the ease in which I can access information in a portable manner. So in the past, if I was away from home and on my phone, it was nearly impossible to look up a website and gain any useful information that would help me to plan my holiday. If I'm away and I'm in Cannes, I want to research a Great Barrier Reef trip, for example, I pretty much have to go to a Visitor Information Center, because accessing that information using the web was just too hard with the visual aspects. So I think this is going to open so many doors in terms of allowing myself and hopefully other users like myself to access that information out and about. It's going to just enable us in so many ways to have greater independence and freedom of choice with our travel booking experience, as well as enriching the experience itself. So by writing the content that I'm creating, I'm hoping that I will help listeners to be able to understand their surroundings. To be able to understand what I guess the sighted population sort of take for granted in terms of what's around them. So I think it's going to have a huge impact. And I'm so excited personally, to be able to use it. And I'm so excited to hopefully be able to deliver that to a much broader audience as well.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 19:06

Definitely. And I really love that you brought up this point that it's helping make travel planning fun, because I think you're absolutely right, that sort of builds the anticipation, that build the excitement, just the act of planning a trip that's coming up, and it's something that you can look forward to. But if it's something that you find frustrating and like you're really struggling to do it that I think detracts a lot of the fun from the trip. And then you mentioned also just this idea of being able to describe the surroundings, being able to kind of bring it to life. And I've listened to a sample of one of these descriptions. And I think you're absolutely right there. It's not just the sort of drab description of the grass is green, there are purple flowers that often is sort of the characteristics of some of these audio descriptions or written descriptions that you have. So I love that you incorporate this kind of storytelling element into it to really make it a lot more engaging.

L

Lisa McEwan 19:53

It's so much fun to write to. I love it. It brings to life a destination in a way that I guess a web page often doesn't, because I think a lot of the operators don't even acknowledge, I guess what has been the hidden aspects of their travel experience. So they're having to uncover new - or in the process, we're able to uncover new little hidden gems about their experience. You know, here's a quirky story, or here's a bit of the history or aspects of the trip, which otherwise might be overlooked, because people tend to rely so much on their vision.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 20:24

Definitely. So we've touched on this a little bit throughout our conversation. But to kind of look at the big picture here, Lisa, who do you think would benefit from using Vacayit?

L

Lisa McEwan 20:33

it's obviously the app is particularly tailored to meet the needs of those with low or no vision. But I really believe it has so many more applications. Beyond that just by the nature of what it is. So while it is tailored to meet the needs of that audience, I believe it has a lot of applications for those who might have learning or reading difficulties. But beyond that, I even believe as you touched on at the beginning of the interview, lots of people these days are shifting away from say reading a physical book to audiobooks, people love being able to access audio information, it means that they can multitask, it means that they can listen and not have to be laboring over written texts. So I really believe that there's a whole world of applications for this app. And while we remain true to targeting our audience and meeting their needs, I think in doing so, we also by virtue of the nature of what we're doing, are able to deliver something that will really deliver benefits to a whole broad audience.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 21:31

Definitely, I could potentially see this serving a lot of different kinds of people and people with different needs. So I guess to sum it up, what are again, just some of these key benefits that you envision users would have?

L

Lisa McEwan 21:42

Well, the portability of being able to access information on the go, instead of being tied down to PC-based screen readers and alike is going to be a huge game changer. For a lot of low and no vision users. I also believe the accessibility of the app itself in terms of high contrast, and easy to read, easy to navigate functionality, and eventually the voice search mechanism will be hugely beneficial. And I just believe the whole nature of what we're doing in terms of developing descriptive text will really enrich the experience of travel for those with low or no vision. And for others who are interested in understanding those other elements. I mean, a lot of people who have run this past have sort of said, Oh, I never thought about that smell or that history that was behind that. So it's a privilege to be able to bring that storytelling aspect to life, touching back on the whole thing of descriptive language. When you think about a travel experience, you go somewhere, you're in a valley surrounded by mountains, you may not be able to see those mountains, but it still adds to the experience. If you know that you are encircled by tremendous towering mountains kept with white snow that glistens in the sun, that kind of thing like that adds to the experience to know that that is there. And it also helps you to be part of a meaningful dialogue with your travel companions. And so for us to say, Yes, this is what it was like, and oh, can you tell me more about this aspect. But if you can't see it, and you don't know it's there, then you've got no way of being part of that. So I think it has a great scope to really make travel more inclusive for a whole broad audience of consumers. For particularly those with low or no vision, I guess it's a little bit like, if you were reading a book, and there was no context to the story, there was no information provided about the setting or the surroundings, or the characters and what their appearance was like, it would be a pretty basic story. Whereas, when you add all those details, when you can describe those things using rich language and adjectives that add to the overall understanding of the context, then suddenly you have a story that comes to life and is meaningful and engaging and that people want to be part of. So that's the difference that I see this app making for those who particularly don't have the use of their vision.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 23:54

Definitely. And making these places kind of resonate with people and things that they can relate to. I think that is absolutely phenomenal!

L

Lisa McEwan 24:00

Yeah, absolutely.


D

Dr. Marie McNeely 24:01

So Lisa, do you have a message then? Or is there anything you'd like to share with any listeners out there who might be considering checking out or trying Vacayit?

L

Lisa McEwan 24:09



I definitely encourage you to jump on board, please go to our website and check it out. We are super excited about what we're delivering. And I truly believe that this company that Vacayit has a genuine passion to change the lives of those with no or low vision. So please get on board. We want to make this as accessible as we can for our users. So I believe we would welcome feedback. We are still in the process of developing the content. So please be patient with us as we work to add more and more destinations and experiences. But as time goes on, I really believe that this is going to be a game changer. And it's going to be something that is truly going to be beneficial for our users. So please check it out.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 24:50

Oh listeners, definitely check out the website. Lisa, we really appreciate you joining us to share your insights and your experiences with us on the show today. So thank you!

L

Lisa McEwan 25:00

Oh, you're most welcome. It's a privilege.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 25:02

It's been a pleasure to have you here. And listeners, great to have you here with us as well. We would really appreciate it if you could take a moment to rate and review our show on your favorite podcast platform. And we look forward to connecting with you again in our next episode of Changing What's Possible.