

Changing What's Possible - S.2, Ep. 1 - Transcript

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SPEAKERS

Molly Levitt, Dr. Marie McNeely

D Dr. Marie McNeely 00:02

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 extraordinary stories about how disability, technology, and innovation come together. And today we have with us our guests, Molly Levitt, Director of Remarkable US. And in our conversation today, Molly is going to share more about Remarkable US and disability innovation more broadly. So Molly, we are so excited to have you with us today. Thank you so much for joining us.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 00:35

I am so thrilled to be here.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 00:37

Well, we are looking forward to learning more from you today. But for any listeners out there who may not know you, can you start by telling us more about yourself, your background, and your connection with the disability community?

M Molly Levitt 00:49

In a lot of ways coming to Remarkable has kind of been a combination of so many of the things that I care about. I joined Remarkable about a year ago for their US pilot, we did three US companies that went through the program, but we'll get to more of that later. My connection to disability started a very long time ago, when I was six, my mom was diagnosed with ALS. For those of you who don't know ALS, it's a neurodegenerative disease, you get to see many permutations of disability, whether it's mobility or communication or things like that. So that was kind of my first lens into the disability community and what it feels like to not have access to buildings or people parking in an accessible spot are things like that. So that was kind of the

jumping off point. Her sister as well was diagnosed with ALS. So we've had that in our family for a long time. And over the years, we've seen many different assistive technologies. That's kind of the family piece. But instead of running from that my reaction was actually more to dive in. And so I got super involved, and a camp for people with disabilities. I'm still working there. It's I think the summer will be my 24th summer. It's one of my favorite places in the world. And I went to school thinking that I was going to teach kids with disabilities, I became a teacher. And in becoming a teacher, I realized that all the individual needs of my 30-something students were too hard to manage. And so I built some technology to support those students. And that technology turned into a startup, I actually didn't know the term startup, someone had to tell me you're running a startup to which I Googled it. And I was like, oh, cool, I guess I am. And then jumped off into that world did Y Combinator, which is an accelerator, did Mass Challenge, which is another accelerator. Moved out to Silicon Valley did the startup thing, but really wanted to get back to what I really went into this in the first place for which was the community of people with disabilities. And so learning about Remarkable I was like, this is the combination of all the things that I have experienced in my life, I consider myself neuro diverse. So I dealt with that as well. But coming to Remarkable kind of felt like I can take my teaching experience and I can support founders in their development as entrepreneurs, I can take my entrepreneur experience and my accelerator experience and bring it to this community. And then I can work to serve the people that I really feel a part of, and that's the disabled community.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 03:11

Absolutely. So can you tell us a little bit more about the history and the mission of Remarkable?

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Molly Levitt 03:17

So Remarkable started in Australia in 2016, really the idea for it started in 2015. And it started through an organization called Cerebral Palsy Alliance, which is a sister of sorts nonprofit to CPARF. They created a design challenge for anyone with CP in the world say what would change their life if they could have it. And the winning idea was voted on. And the winning one was this man in Turkey. His name was Alper, and he really wanted a solar powered wheelchair, the motor and his chair, it didn't allow him to get far enough on a charge to go into town to have meaningful work. There's a temple that he always wanted to worship at, that he couldn't get to because of the capabilities of that electric chair. And so they did a global design challenge and a group of students at UVA made Alper, this wheelchair, you can Google it, and you can see these great pictures of Alper with his solar powered wheelchair and he got a job, he got to go to this temple it like really changed his life. And so CPA saw this and they were like, "Huh, how can we get innovation into the hands of the people who need it more quickly?" And that design challenge became Remarkable Australia. Since 2016, Remarkable has had nearly 50 startups that have progressed through the program, they've created 550 full time jobs serving nearly 150,000 customers and raising around \$30 million in capital. So in 2022, we decided to work with CPARF and CPA to bring Remarkable to the US and we work really closely with the Australian team. The programs run at the same time we have overlapping content, but we are our own version of Remarkable and we're supporting US startups here last year, as a pilot of three companies, and this year we're gonna have six companies in the cohort, which is really exciting.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 05:07

That's phenomenal and Remarkable has been doing amazing work and is already having, as you mentioned, tremendous impacts already. But what inspired Remarkable to launch a startup accelerator specifically in the United States?

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Molly Levitt 05:19

I think it was a lot of factors. And in a lot of ways, there's never been a better moment than right now to be launching an Assistive Technology Accelerator here in the States. I think in the last three years, there's been four or five venture capital funds that have committed specifically to the assistive tech space. Foundations, the Ford Foundation just announced, I think today that they're launching a big \$1 million investment thing. There's tons of opportunities, and it feels like the wind is at our back here in the US in terms of getting this started. And CPARF has this incredible research mission. And they had already been working so closely with CPA, and I think it just felt like a natural next step for the organization to start looking at, we're doing this great research, how do we add that innovation piece and maybe in the future, that research and innovation can come even closer together. And we can think about commercializing different types of products that are getting research, there's just really good momentum and a really good symbiotic relationship with the mission of CPARF already. And so it feels like the right time if there ever was a time this is it.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 06:26

Well, I am so excited about this launch of Remarkable US. And I'm excited to learn more about the cohort this year during our season of Changing What's Possible. But I'd love to talk a little bit more about the organizations involved. So for listeners who might be trying to kind of keep everything straight in their mind, can you break it down and describe the links between CPARF (Cerebral Palsy Alliance Research Foundation), Remarkable US, Remarkable that's based in Australia, and also CPA, you mentioned Cerebral Palsy Alliance, and how all these different entities kind of work together?

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Molly Levitt 06:57

You could say that we're kind of cousins in all things. So CPA, Cerebral Palsy Alliance in Australia is one of the biggest direct service providers for people with CP in Australia. They do a lot of clinic work, and their focus, OTs and PTs and things like that they have a very big workforce of folks. And they're the ones who started the Remarkable Australia program. CPA helped launch CPARF here in the United States in 2015. And over the last eight years, they've done some amazing work. So they have a very close relationship CPARF and CPA do even though that they are separate nonprofits. Similarly, while Remarkable is nested under CPARF, which is based in New York, the Remarkable Australia and US program work really closely together, we have folks on both teams that work across both programs so while in fundraising, and things like that, they are separate - in philosophy and in the way things are run - they're very much aligned.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 07:57

Dr. Marie McNeely 07:57

That's wonderful. I love how you describe them as cousins to kind of build on this metaphor that it's all one big family working towards a big goal together.

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Molly Levitt 08:04

Exactly.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 08:05

So Molly, what has your experience been like, since the accelerator was launched last year, when you started this exciting new position as Director?

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Molly Levitt 08:11

It has been a dream. The people who work in this space are pretty fantastic. Most of them have a connection to the disability space. And we're starting to see a shift in a lot of people who may have chosen to build other types of businesses start to think about what the impact here is. And there's many reasons for this, and I can get into those. But it's been a really great experience to get to know the US market to get to work previously with the three companies that were in the program last year, understand the challenges of the US market. And to look across that globally. Remarkable is part of a global network that they created called the +N network that is a group of global accelerators that work across different countries. And so in supporting our companies here in the US, and Australia, we've also been able to connect them out to a global network of folks in the assistive technology space. And if you notice statistics on assistive technology, it's like the number of people who need assistive technology and don't have access to it globally is really high. And so I think that our mission of providing affordable assistive technology is really in line with thinking not just here, but globally. And I think we have a really great opportunity to be doing that. So to get to do that and to work alongside these companies doing that work. It's been really meaningful.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 09:34

That is phenomenal. And I know this accelerator is different and unique from a lot of the other accelerator programs offered in the US because it does have this disability focus. So can you tell us a little bit more about what are some of these critical gaps, that this Remarkable disability accelerator program is addressing?

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Molly Levitt 09:51

There's two caveats to that. I've done a lot of accelerators and so I bring the knowledge of what your traditional accelerator often does and where I felt the gaps were for a business in any industry. And then there's the piece of how do we support companies that are specifically focusing on the disabled community, I think the disabled community part is built into the ethos of the whole program. So it is part of the program that we provide everyone with paid user

testers to be able to test out their program, the paid part is really important to us. Because if we're hiring someone with a disability, we're making sure to pay them. But we're working with a program. And we're not just having them do the user testing, but we're actually teaching our startups how to run user testing programs with people with disabilities, we're helping them to design their own studies so that they too, can then go off year after year and continue to do this type of testing. When you're accessible for one type of disability, often it can get overlooked other types in the building process. Because being a startup, you don't have a ton of time, and you don't have a ton of support. And so we try to provide our startups with as much support whether that's like how do you design an accessible website? How do you make sure your marketing is accessible? How are you thinking about this in the perspective of the different disabilities that people may have who access your product.

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Molly Levitt 11:14

We get people super connected out to the community. And we are very lucky that Remarkable has this wonderful brand, and that people are really committed to supporting the founders in our group that many doors can be opened with the Remarkable name. And so if you're a startup, you want to open doors in the space coming to our accelerator's a really good place. We also on the just general side of how we support startups differently, I've found in my experience that often accelerators, if not done really intentionally can be decelerators. And what I mean by that is time is your most precious resource as a founder, and your time is literally all you have, in some cases, many of them are very low on funding. And so when we're designing an accelerator, I'm thinking so thoughtfully around what is going to be a good use of their time. And if it's not a good use, then we're not going to be doing it. So every startup has a coach, this coach keeps them accountable to things make sure they're checking in each week. But then we bring in some really skilled mentors and specific areas for each startup. And we help them work on project plans with them. And Remarkable actually pays these mentors to do it. And that might be looking at the coding and billing system for Medicare, Medicaid, or something like that, or your go to market strategy in a niche market. All of these will pair a mentor with them. And they'll actually do it alongside them. So like I said, in many ways, we're just trying to teach these startups to fish, but also to make their team larger for the 16 weeks that they're in the accelerator in a way that they may not have the funds, or, frankly, be able to hire these high level mentors who have done incredible work in their own fields to be able to work at their startup, we can support them to do that for 10 or 15 hours through the Remarkable program.

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Molly Levitt 11:39

Absolutely. I love to hear that you're really focusing on the activities and the resources that will have the most impact for these companies. Because you're absolutely right, during the startup stage, you feel like you never have enough hours in the day. And I love this idea of training and supporting the companies so that they can kind of manage these things going forward. It's not just a one time like here, we'll do this for you. And now you're good to go. And just this idea of focusing on accessibility across a wide range of disabilities, I think is so critical, because I think you're absolutely right, even in the disability space, you can sort of get tunnel vision to some extent where you're really just focusing on one segment of the market that your product may be designed for.

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Molly Levitt 13:43

It's true. And I think that it's hard to do at all, we try to decrease those barriers to entry, because it can be very expensive to do this. But we also have an expectation, you are a Remarkable company, you will be as accessible as we can make it and we will support you in doing that.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 14:00

That's wonderful. And you mentioned some of the overall differences in terms of what Remarkable can offer compared to other accelerator programs. Are there any other major differences that you've noticed being on both sides?

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Molly Levitt 14:11

We're starting out the new direction, right? Because I think that there are definitely things that I'm bringing from my experience with accelerators. But in my opinion, the highest value things that you can get as a startup are first you get the support you need strategically when you need it. And so it's not like everyone needs to sell at the same time. And so we have one class on selling, and that's in that now we need to make sure that you get that strategic support. So that's that program that I've talked to you about with mentoring. The second one is your network. So we're really working on different ways to consistently weekly bring in folks that could be champions of their product, be it people with disabilities, be it assistive technology offices, be it the accessibility team at Google. Whoever it is, we're bringing all those people together hopefully weekly so that the startups can be consistently networking even though most of our accelerator will be online except for two in person events, we're really working to bring that network accelerator into the cohort, which I think is really a high value.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 15:11

Definitely in from what you've said, This program really does have the potential to transform a startup company and help them get to that next level. So how does the team choose which startups will be invited to participate in the Remarkable accelerator program?

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Molly Levitt 15:25

Oh, my gosh, it's terrible. Not easy. Yes, absolutely my least favorite thing, because there are so many phenomenal companies, we can only take as many companies as we have the current funding and team to support. So if anyone is listening that applied and didn't get in, I promise you, I agonized over it because we really, really had so many qualified applicants this year. But it's important to think about who we take in and there's a few characteristics that we think about, and a few ways we look at it. And so first of all, you have to be building something that helps the lives of people with disabilities, either directly or indirectly. There are a lot of different permutations of what that might look like. But that's, of course, the key tenet. The second one is a little trickier, because we say that your startup needs to be Remarkable. And that isn't to say that you don't have an amazing startup, I've looked at companies that are doing slight

innovations on things that are already in the market that are wonderful and the market needs. But we're really looking to find those technologies and businesses that are doing something that is a new value add to the market. And so that's one way that some companies like if you're making something that Apple is already making, it's going to be a trickier sell to get you into the cohort. And then the third piece is we are looking for companies for the accelerator. Now, granted, there are earlier stage programs in Australia, and there probably will be here. But for our flagship accelerator, we're looking for companies who are post product and generally post revenue, post revenue, if you're a med tech company isn't easily possible. So we overlook that. But we are looking for more mature companies that are a little less working on their prototype, and much more like we've built it, we just need to figure out how to get from A to B not like zero to one to mix my metaphors, totally.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 17:22

I understand what you're saying though, you kind of need people who are further along in that journey and ready to have a product available to people.

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Molly Levitt 17:28

Yes. And then for judging, there's a whole series of different things we do. But every application is reviewed by at least a few people with disability, at least a few people who are subject matter experts in that particular area. So if you're a professor in augmentative, communication, you might look at the communication applications and things like that. And then we have folks who are more focused on the business case to look at, okay, we can't just take businesses that are good for the world, we have to take businesses that when they end the accelerator can continue to survive in the world. So we really have folks come in and look at the business case of this. And that's a really important aspect of the judging as well is can we take you and can we help you to continue to succeed year after year after year so that the world can have this technology?

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Dr. Marie McNeely 18:18

Definitely. Well, it sounds like a difficult decision. And I know you've sort of worked through this judging process. And now the 2023 cohort is beginning. So Molly, what are you most excited about for this cohort?

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Molly Levitt 18:29

This cohort is fantastic. We have such an incredible group of founders, they are so committed, they are so thoughtful, they are developing things that I believe that the world really, really needs. I mean, there's a million of these but we met way before we made this decision for these six. But I think that when you look at the startups you're investing in, you're looking at two things. You're looking at what is that technology that you're making? And all of these are making these companies are making remarkable technology, but you're also looking at who is this founder? And are they a person that I can continue to invest in their growth as a person for life. And I think what's really great about this year's cohort is not only do they have amazing

products, but whether it's this product or the next product, these founders are so smart, and they're so thoughtful. I'm just really honored that they're taking this journey with us because I really see that it's not just this year, it's like the many years to come that these people will have ripple effects in the world. And that's really special to be part of.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 19:33

Absolutely. Well, it sounds like you've identified some wonderful companies with some really phenomenal founders. So we're getting excited about getting to meet them and getting to know more about their stories throughout our series. We talked about the startup journey, and I know it can be a difficult road for companies. There are a lot of challenges, a lot of roadblocks and you know, a lot of struggles particularly in these early stages. So, Molly, in your opinion, what are some of the biggest challenges that you see disability tech startups facing?

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Molly Levitt 20:00

You can answer that two ways, right? You can say the struggles, the disability tech assistive technologies are facing, we can start there because then there's the whole other side of it, which is the issues that every startup is facing, and can tank any startup regardless of the idea. But like I said, there's wind at our back in this space. And I think people are starting to understand that assistive tech is not just a niche, small market thing. It's actually a window into the innovations that can become ubiquitous in the future. But it's also something that our parents are starting to need, whether they're disabled or not, there are assistive technologies that we're starting to see and by for the people that we love in our family. And so with the baby boomers, aging and misses the biggest population of folks that are aging, I think they're starting to be more of an understanding that this is an investable space. That being said, it has not traditionally been considered super investable because venture capitalists does their calculations. And they say, Okay, I'm investing in these companies, because I need one to be a billion dollar company. And so let me do the math to see if there's any way that your market size could become a unicorn. And traditionally, when you look at these very niche assistive technologies, today, they're niche. In the future, they may not be, but when you look at them, the investor would do the math, and they would go no, too small,

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Molly Levitt 21:21

Doesn't meet the threshold.

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Molly Levitt 21:22

Yeah, so a lot of these companies end up relying on grants or angel investors or things like that. And that just means that running a company in this space takes longer, and it takes more grit and exhaustion and low pay. And it's hard, it's hard to do that - it's changing. So that's certainly something in the space that's a problem. But then you have all the other stuff that startups can fail because of and you know, it's the team doesn't get along or the team doesn't run effectively, or they haven't thought through the business model enough, or they don't know how to get their product in front of people, I would say there's a billion products in the world

that would change the world that we just don't know about, because there's only so much attention that people can give towards learning new things. And if you don't know where to look for what to look for, it's hard, which is why I'm glad you guys are doing this podcast. And I'm glad that we can share with you some of the innovations that we get to see because a lot of these are life-changing, and if people just knew about them, they would be buying them. And so I think creating a disability tech startup is no doubt harder than your average startup. But once you get over that, just fact, it's all the same stuff that becomes challenging for startups that we help work through in the accelerator.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 22:32

Absolutely. And you can tell Molly, that you are just so passionate about the work that you do. And I know, that's not easy. Sometimes you mentioned the agony of having to go through these applications and ultimately reject some of them. So I'd love to talk about some of your personal challenges here. What have you found to be some of the biggest challenges personally, being a disability advocate and working in this space?

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Molly Levitt 22:54

I think that we have an opportunity to lift each other up, I think there's sometimes this view of a well, I'm not disabled enough, or their disability is different and things like that. And disability is one of the most intersectional identities - it cross sections, so much of the world. And I have found this community to be really open. And we try to approach the community respectfully, like we don't ask for free favors, we pay what we can, even though we don't have a ton like we really try to be as respectful as possible. But I'm always aware of adding a burden to anybody in the community who identifies as disabled, I think that we seek to be really empowering by like helping empower this technology to exist and to help pay user testers to test it and to do all these things. But something that certainly weighs on us a lot is how do we do this work in a way that empowers and doesn't fatigue, a community that's already prone to being fatigued and being used and being not treated well.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 24:04

I think you brought up a really great point here, Molly, that is a really difficult balance, where you really want to involve the community and get their feedback and make them feel included in the process of developing these companies and products. But at the same time, you don't want to give them a bunch of extra work and make it difficult for them to be involved in the process.

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Molly Levitt 24:21

Yes. The last company I built was an education company. And it was a similar thing with teachers. Teachers, they're working so hard, and there's so much asked of them. They're paid so little that you want to build alongside the user. But you also don't want to say hey, I have another job for you. And we're always balancing that. And I think I try to be as open as I can to

be like only if you want to we will compensate you. We will do whatever we can because we have deep respect for what you bring to these startups and we want to make sure that that's understood.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 24:55

Definitely and I think expressing and showing that appreciation goes a really long way. So I'm so glad to hear that you're involving a variety of different people within the disability community within Remarkable and then also making sure that they're being compensated and treated fairly and respectfully. So while I appreciate your talking about some of these personal challenges, and we've talked about some of the great work that Remarkable is doing and some of the amazing companies that you'll be working with, but I guess thinking about the bigger picture, in your opinion, why is it so important, right now that we support and advance disability innovation, generally?

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Molly Levitt 25:28

A couple of things here, people with disabilities are the most under employed workforce group in the world, we have so much economic opportunity that we're missing out on by deciding how people and if people can access work or play or anything like that. And I think that in and of itself is a human right, that we need to make sure that we can provide accessible, affordable technology, we need to teach companies that they can ask the employee how to do it, and how they can be involved, or they can think of different ways to include people. And in doing so we're hoping to be able to empower people who are ready, I knew when we saw in the pandemic that people with disabilities have been asking to work from home forever. And all of a sudden, it's cool now, right? All of a sudden, it's okay, because we have to, and most of us couldn't imagine ever going back into an office, right. And I think that that's really important to pay attention to. And the piece that I kind of want to bring us back to here as well as what we're doing isn't charity. There's the risk of when we talk about what we're building with Remarkable that people can think that, oh, it's really good cause, or what you're doing is really nice. But yes, it is. And there's a very strong history of economic success that is built on top of accommodations. And so if you look at some of the technology that was first built as an accommodation, you can see it was built as an accommodation because people with disabilities needed a specific thing. And I like to call this the Advil effect. When you need something like you need a different way to interact with the computer. It's Advil, you have to have it, but the rest of us will realize it's cool and want to do it in like 10 years. And so I can give you a few examples of that if it's helpful.

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Molly Levitt 27:17

If you look at let's say, Alexa and Siri, we all have heard their voices, and we all just have it as a part of our daily life. But this voice technology was actually a way for people who are blind or people with limited mobility to be able to interact with their devices. And in I think it was 1992, a company started solving this problem. That company became Nuance Technologies. Nuance Technologies launched Dragon Dictation, which if you don't know, it allows users to dictate to their computer, the inputs and how they want to use it, and the text can be routed back to them still used in a lot of the PCs today, and Nuance Communications went public, and they're

valued at \$19 billion. That same technology paved the way for captioning which if you're on Instagram, and Tiktok, you know that you don't post a video without captioning, mostly because people don't like to watch video with sound anymore. But companies like Otter AI are raising \$60 million for captioning. And then the last one that I like to share is Audible right. Audiobooks started as a way for people who are blind to be able to access books that are not available in Braille. And then, as we know, Audible sold to Amazon for \$280 million. These are just a few that I have the stats on the valuations. But the point being is we're looking at a community and we're seeing what they need. And what they need, in turn often becomes what we all want. We just take a little while to get there. And I think that there is a really big economic argument to be made that in overlooking this community, we're overlooking some of the most innovative future technologies that might exist.

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Molly Levitt 27:17

Yeah.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 28:59

Absolutely. And I'm so glad you shared these examples. I think audiobooks is a phenomenal example. I love audiobooks. And it's something that if that hadn't been developed, that's a major gap that I feel like I'd be missing in my own life, even though I'm not a blind person. Totally. And Molly, I love how you describe this previously, in our conversation, you mentioned that this kind of whole space of disability tech is really a window into the broader innovation needs of our society. And I think this is particularly true in this changing world with an aging population with all of these uncertainties like those that were brought in during the pandemic. And I think this is absolutely critical that we keep developing technology that can serve a variety of different communities because we don't know what our future needs are going to be.

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Molly Levitt 29:39

We don't know. And I'll give you an example from last year's cohort. So we had a company named WearWorks and they are really focused on haptics so if you don't know haptics is basically vibration. And when you think about communication channels, the skin is actually the most inclusive channel of communication. Some people are blind some people are deaf, but Everyone has skin. And as far as I know, almost everyone has the ability to sense touch. So haptics has the possibility of being a really interesting way that we all get communicated with in the future. And what WearWorks realized was we're not ready like those of us who don't have the Advil need for it. We're not ready for the haptics way of communicating yet but people who are blind are so what they developed is a wearable wristband that helps people who are blind to navigate cities just through vibration and it sits on their wrist it has a left vibrator right vibrate, it has a you're turning the wrong way haptic and it teaches you fairly intuitively how to understand vibration as communication. Now, there are use cases in the future, I'm not going to name which car company talked to them. But there was a car company that talked to them and was thinking about ah, what if we use this haptic vibration technology in the seats of our cars so that instead of your GPS talking to you, you get that left and right haptic that is just in your seat coming to you. And you don't have to be distracted by looking at the screen. You don't have to hear it, you can keep having your conversation. But because people who are blind

have a need, we can start building and we can get users who understand the need. And then those future people who are looking at the future of technology can say, Ah, this accommodation, if we shifted it this way, could be really interesting.

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Molly Levitt 31:23

Now there's one really important thing I have to say here is often these accommodations, once they are commercialized, forget to include accessibility. And that is a huge problem, right? The Internet, Email, audiobooks like a lot of these technologies that were built as accommodations initially lost their accessibility as they were commercialized by bigger groups. So I think it's really important to highlight that if you're building on the back of an accommodation, you should do the work to continue to make this product inclusive. And whoever's listening to this, I hope that you hear that because I think it is so so important that we don't leave behind the people that helped us see this window into the future that we now all use.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 32:10

Absolutely, I think it is so important to really keep that accessibility and inclusivity in mind, and to continue innovating to make sure that that isn't lost along the way as the products develop. And listeners, if you're interested in learning more about the company WearWorks that Molly mentioned, that is developing the navigation solution using vibration or haptics, you should definitely listen to episode one from season one of our podcast, they are doing phenomenal work. And Molly, you've had some really exciting successes in your life and career, and we've talked about a few of them already, but is there a particular success story from your work in the disability space that you're just really proud of and want to share with us today?

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Molly Levitt 32:54

I'm an Enneagram six, which if you don't know the Enneagram, it's like a way to understand your personality. And I'm a six, which means I'm like, ridiculously loyal. So I can't say it's something that I'm particularly proud of. But I will go to the ends of the earth for the companies that are in our orbit, because I'm like a mother hen, I want them to go out and be amazing. And I will do whatever it takes. So I don't think any of it is mine to be proud of per se. But I am proud and excited to be able to empower however I can. And however it is within my control these founders and these startups and people with disabilities will use them and be involved in our network. I just really I'm happy to be in a position to be able to do this.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 33:40

Absolutely. So what is it like for you then seeing these companies, these first three, maybe from last year kind of graduate and move on to start making developments independent of the Remarkable cohort?

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Molly Levitt 33:51

I mean, of course, I'm nervous, but they're fantastic. I get their investor updates, I check in with

I mean, of course, I'm nervous, but they're fantastic. I get their investor updates, I check in with them. I just feel lucky that we got to be on this journey with them. And I think we learned a ton from what was the pilot last year and those things only continued to support the founders to come. And we're going to the Chicago Abilities Expo with the cohort this year. We did it with our cohort last year. All of our past companies are welcome to come back and join us. And so I hope this continues to feel like a family where they can get support from and continue to stay in touch with and and to empower the entrepreneurs that come after them. I just think there's a real community that we have the opportunity to build here.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 34:31

Absolutely. And I think there are so many different directions that disability focused companies could go so what do you see Molly, as maybe some of the most promising areas of opportunity for disability innovation?

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Molly Levitt 34:43

There's so many I think the way we interact with our devices, the way we access healthcare, there's a million things but there's one that I've been really thinking about this week. By the time this podcast comes out someone will probably figured it out. But I think that one of the things that we still don't have Have a good enough innovation on is augmentative communication devices for people with disabilities that can work at a speed that makes them feel included. And at a level that matches what they want to be saying in their brain, but just may not have the like, output time to be able to express it. So that might be a communication disorder because you have CP or ALS, or all sorts of things. But I think communication is so so crucial. And I know that CPARF is currently supporting some scientific research into thought to speech technology, it turns intentional thought into real time text or speech for people with CP. And this type of work is so important because it helps people get access to their communities. And I want someone to figure out how we can use the Chat GPT predictive conversation where they can like put in a small input, and you can get a really well written output to be able to increase the speed to which people are able to communicate and able to be included, whether it be in school, or work or with friends or things like that. I feel like there's a marrying of this technology somewhere. And I am desperate for someone to figure that out. Same with airline travel, someone figure that out, you guys come to me and tell me what you figured out because it's horrible for people with disabilities. And I know there's a better way to do it. So there's so many exciting things. But I guess I'm posing two new problems, which are things that I think are solvable, but I just haven't found that perfect solution just yet That really gets us there.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 36:38

Absolutely. And I think these areas that you brought up communication and travel are huge parts of people's lives. So if you were able to solve those problems that would have such a tremendous impact on so many people. Well, thank you for giving us some food for thought, Molly. And I guess if there's listeners out there who may have their own ideas, and are these creative, innovative types of people, what advice would you give them if they have an innovative idea, but they're not really sure where to start?

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Molly Levitt 37:05

The most important thing that you can do is make sure that you are not the only one with this problem. It's very easy to be like, Oh, I have this problem. I'm building a company for it. I couldn't find what I needed, or my sister has this problem. And so I'm building it. And so that validation phase right at the beginning, I think people tend to overcomplicate it. I'm a mentor right now in a Harvard business school class on entrepreneurship. Each week, I talk to entrepreneurs that are just trying to come up with their idea. And I hear a lot of them be like, well, I can't know if this works until I build the tech. And very rarely is that true, you can build a paper version, you could build an in person version, you can model it, you can use forms to build it, there are so many ways to just start and make sure that what you're doing is something that people want. From there, there are a million resources that you can go to your to learn how to build a company, you can talk to us at Remarkable the community is here to support you. But I think a lot of people overcomplicate that first idea to test and they don't have to. I think that's an important one. And I think the other important one is make sure this is something that you want to spend a few years of your life on. Because building a business is tiring. You don't make any money. And the likelihood of you becoming Facebook or Instagram and having someone buy you for a billion dollars is so low. So make sure that this is truly something that you care about enough to have a really hard couple of years committing to you. It's not that it's not fun. It's certainly fun. But it's also a really big life shift for a lot of people.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 38:52

Definitely I think that is such good advice, Molly. I think that entrepreneurial journey is a huge, long road and you can't just expect it to be in and out over in a year. There you go. Here's your million dollars. Like you said, you have to be committed and in it for the long run because building these companies regardless of what area you're in takes time and it takes energy. And I think you're absolutely right when you mentioned previously that all of those same barriers are there in the disability space plus some additional barriers even beyond that. So good advice for our listeners out there. If our listeners want to learn more about you and more about Remarkable US, Molly, what is the best way for them to do so?

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Molly Levitt 39:29

Learn about Remarkable our URL is Remarkable.org. I am always thrilled to have conversations with people who are either building companies who want to be mentors who think that Remarkable could be a great collaborator to whatever - I love talking to folks, the easiest way to get in touch with me is probably on LinkedIn. Molly Levitt and I would be happy to connect with anyone who wanted to get involved or who was just dreaming about how they can make an impact in the space.


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Dr. Marie McNeely 40:00

Phenomenal. Well listeners, definitely get connected with Molly on LinkedIn, check out some of those resources she mentioned. And Molly, it's been such a pleasure to have you on the show today. Thank you so much for your time.

 Molly Levitt 40:10

Thank you so much for this opportunity. It was really, really wonderful to get to talk about what we get to do.

 Dr. Marie McNeely 40:15

Well, it's been fun to chat with you and listeners, wonderful to have you here with us as well. What do you have a moment, please subscribe and leave us a rating or review on your favorite podcast platform and to let us know what you think of the show. And we look forward to connecting with you again in our next episode of Changing What's Possible.