

Changing What's Possible - S.2, Ep.5 - Transcript

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SPEAKERS

Jonathan Kaufman, Dr. Marie McNeely

D Dr. Marie McNeely 00:01

Hello, everyone, 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. Today we have with us Jonathan Kaufman, and listeners, Jonathan is an executive coach, psychotherapist and strategist. He has a column in Forbes magazine called Mindset Matters. And he was formerly a policy advisor to the White House on diversity and disability. And today, we are going to focus our conversation on Jonathan's specialty, which is the intersection of business disability innovation and culture. So, Jonathan, thank you so much for joining us today. How are you?

J Jonathan Kaufman 00:50

I am doing fine, Marie, thank you for having me.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 00:53

Well, we are so excited to learn from you and to hear about your stories today. So can you start by telling us a little bit more about yourself in general?

J Jonathan Kaufman 01:01

Sure. I mean, I think one of the first things that I always sort of tell people is, I was born with a right hemiparesis, a form of cerebral palsy, which is certainly sort of colored my life, and in a way, shaped, the way that I sort of view the world. But it also shaped the way in which I went about life as far as the career I chose. I never sort of sought it, it sort of landed in my lap. And at the time, I was thinking about, Okay, where do I want to be in this disability space? It sort of came to me that I was interested in, really that intersection, there wasn't anything around disability studies at the time I was sort of entering academics, and I really thought I was

going to be a full time academic. That was the road I was taking. And then this wonderful thing happened. I ended up when I was at the University of Chicago, having this professor by the name of Barack Obama, some people knew him, I guess, prior to that, which sort of shifted my life in a lot of ways. And then I went off to go do some more graduate work, my doctoral work at Columbia University, actually, after that, and friends of mine, were calling me he's like, this guy's gonna run this guy is gonna run, are you really are you interested? And I was, and I knew him and his wife, from my time in Chicago.

J

Jonathan Kaufman 02:26

And it just so happened, I ended up going to the White House from 2008 to 2011. And that really colored the way I looked at things, you know, obviously, it was the recent passing of Judy Huemann who I met at the age of 19. She was always very instrumental in my life, she was a wonderful sort of second Jewish mother in a lot of ways add one, but I guess I became adopted, and sort of checked in on me here and there. But what I realized was, I loved the applied aspect of it. And I didn't know exactly where that was going to take me, having left the White House in about 2011. It was sort of okay, where do I want to go next? What do I want to be doing, and I loved working for myself, I had a family of entrepreneurs in various ways. So it was the idea of, as my father sort of said, If you could be the sort of scholar practitioner, you've won the game. And that, for me was the greatest thing of all, was being able to have that academic background which I could draw upon, but being able to apply it in certain ways. And I was fascinated about the culture of work, and business. And that evolution, and that intersectionality, which, for me, was really important. And going beyond the sort of stuff that I was looking at, in the here and now but always thinking about innovation and looking at the world in a futurist way. But the value that disability has, within the context of society. The world wasn't made for us, we always had to redesign it or reimagine it in our own way. But I think being able to utilize that, and showing that, in the context of work, could be enormously beneficial. And it has been, I've had this great ability to really combine all my loves, about this space, but also see that its impact is enormous and can benefit millions of people, not just people with disabilities, but even beyond.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 04:31

Oh, absolutely. Well, Jonathan, I love that you've really charted your own unique path and you've embraced all these different cool opportunities along the way. And I've heard you say previously, that disability is the essence of diversity. So can you talk a little bit more about what you mean when you say this?

J

Jonathan Kaufman 04:48

Yeah. Because I, I think in the diversity conversation, disability has always sort of been relegated to lowest on the list. And my argument to that is, wait a minute, I think disability truly is the essence of diversity in the sense that it runs across race, ethnicity, gender, socio economic, sexual orientation, and so on. And if we're lucky enough to age, it is the only minority group that anyone can join at any time. So it becomes part of the fabric of the human

experience. And if we look at it from that vantage point, it really changes the whole conversation, that if you're going to look at diversity true diversity through a particular lens, you really have to be side by side with the disability community.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 05:40

Absolutely. And I'm really glad that you brought this point up, because, you know, for example, something like a mobility problem is something anyone could experience, you know, you break a leg or as you get older, you may have trouble moving around. That's something that, you know, people with maybe a lifelong disability are experiencing every day. But each of us can experience kind of in these transient moments throughout our life.

J

Jonathan Kaufman 05:59

Right? I mean, at some point, you know, you can be a permanent resident, or you can be a visitor, and there are many ways to sort of explore disability in that way. But the benefit of the disability narrative has enormous impact on every person on this planet, whether you are a person directly impacted by disability, or you're a caregiver or a family member, and so on and so forth. The impact of disability affects us all.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 06:31

Absolutely. I think there's just a tremendous amount that we can learn as individuals and also as a society, by really taking the time to stop and listen to the perspectives and the stories of people with a wide range of disabilities. So Jonathan, can you share maybe an example or two of how working with this wider disability community has maybe had a big impact on you?

J

Jonathan Kaufman 06:51

Yeah, I mean, what fascinating, and I always love this. And I think of John Kemp. And again, John Kemp is a well known disability rights advocate and has been for years, and I met him, maybe 19 or so around the same time I met Judy, and he always used to say to me, and still says to me, you know, if you've met one person with a disability, you've met one person with a disability. The fact is, everyone's experience is different, even with people with cerebral palsy, who have different types of CP, but their experiences are different. And that's the one thing that I was always interested in. Because I had my own experience with disability, which was very different than my friends who were in the deaf community, or my friends who were in the autism community. But even within the CP community, it was very different. And I love that diversity, even within the disability community itself, it is incredibly diverse. But what's fascinating about that is how do you take that and apply that into the context of a variety of areas, whether it be work, whether it be other areas of culture? And what do we learn from that? What is this lived experience, that we can embrace, and utilize to benefit others? And that's always been, you know, sort of on a larger scale on a meta scale, if you will, has always been the thing that's really intriguing.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 08:18

Interesting. So is there a specific example you can remember of maybe an experience you had or something you learned working with this community that maybe changed how you thought about something or had an impact on you?

J

Jonathan Kaufman 08:28

Yeah, I mean, I think really, the impact that sort of changed me is that I have the ability to work with it was actually one of the first organizations that did this, that I'd say almost no, going back 15-20 years now, when I got out of graduate school, I ended up working with an organization actually named the organization called adaptations, which was designed for young adults on the spectrum, who were sort of aging out of school. And they were trying to figure out, Okay, what's the next step in their arc? And most of it had to do with sort of their career path or sort of college, the impact that I learned from the autism community in terms of the depth of knowledge, the capacity for love and growth, and really understanding that what we had seen in films before, particularly how it was portrayed, is just absolutely untrue, that there is this incredible reality or depth, if you will, that I sort of saw another side of it. And it also changed the way that I look at disability in itself is being able to really engage and mine individuals with disabilities to understand who they are as people. And that, for me was really important and someone who obviously is trained as a clinician, that was critical.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 10:01

Absolutely. And I know you've mentioned that, you know, in the past disability can spark or stimulate broader innovation. Can you tell us a little bit more about how this happens and why people with disabilities tend to be these innovative, creative people who are finding solutions?

J

Jonathan Kaufman 10:15

Right, because the world wasn't made for us, it was never designed for us. There's an apocryphal story of that Ed Roberts, who was one of the great disability, civil rights leaders in the late 1960s. And 1970s. I mean, this is the story is sort of, I think that will complete this, he was having a conversation with the Black Panther Party, I think it was 1968 or 1970. And having this conversation about Rosa Parks, and he sort of chimed in, and I'm paraphrasing, he said, you know, you wanted to get to the front of the bus, we, as the disability community just want to get on.

J

Jonathan Kaufman 10:53

Right.

J

Jonathan Kaufman 10:54

And it changed the nature of how one saw this is that we have to really think about how we design the world to be truly inclusive, the way we navigate the world. It isn't inclusive. Now.

that's changing. Design, accessibility, particularly in this sort of technological world, there is a whole space. In this. I mean, if you sort of look at just accessibility on its own, the Wall Street Journal came out with an article I think about a couple of months ago saying the rise in the number of jobs with the word accessibility, whether it be accessibility specialist, or so on or so forth, has risen 78% In the past 12 to 18 months. That little data point is incredible, because it means the barriers, no pun intended, the barriers are coming down. But it also means that companies are recognizing that there is a value proposition here. And that's enormous. And what you're also finding in the data you sort of dig it in is that there are a tremendous number of people in sort of millennials and Gen Z, that love accessible tools, particularly, for example, the number of Gen Z's and millennials who love subtitles in their films, it's just something that they have embraced. And part of it has to do with the fact of how they're consuming entertainment, and consuming information. It's not on a television or on a large computer screen anymore. Much of it seems to be on handheld devices, on mobile devices. So that's changing how we see it. It absolutely is fascinating on that front.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 12:45

Absolutely. And I think like you mentioned people with disabilities often in their own lives, because the world isn't creative, necessarily with them in mind have to come up with their own innovative solution. So do you have a story or an example from your own experience, about how your disability maybe sparked innovation or forced you to get creative in your own life?

J

Jonathan Kaufman 13:05

Yeah, I mean, I think it sort of all began with my mother. Actually, I remember when I was having to find sneakers as a kid, I think it was eight years old. At the time, there wasn't you know, Zappos Adaptive didn't exist, there wasn't really adaptive clothing at that time. And so she bought 12 pairs of shoes - oh, my god - a number of different sizes. And what we did was, we would try on different ones, because I had an AFO, I had a brace on my right leg. And so it needed to be able to do that. But what we found out was that one, we needed to have something with Velcro, which was useful because tying my shoe with one hand, even though I learned was always slightly difficult. It was always adapting. I mean, I, you know, live in New York City, where you're always sort of trying to navigate the world. And understanding Okay, I need to think 12 steps ahead. If I have to go to the subway, I have to be on the left side, because I have a right hemiparesis. So you're always constantly thinking how you navigate, which I always find that, because of that, and I've spoken to other people with various types of disabilities, there is an innate understanding that strategy is baked into the cake. It's baked into their daily lives that they have to be strategic thinkers. And that's how we live. So how do you apply that to other areas of life, such as work?

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 14:31

Absolutely. I think there's so much value that that perspective that that strategic thinking can enhance in the workplace. And I know you've talked quite a bit about the disability economy, and I'd love to dip into that topic if we can. So for listeners out there who might not be familiar with this term may not have heard it before. Jonathan, can you explain what you mean when you say disability economy?

J Jonathan Kaufman 14:53

Yeah, I sort of coined this phrase myself a few years ago. What I liked about it was I was interested in not just disability culture, but the intersection of culture, and economics. And what I mean by that this sort of economics is the sort of business ethos, and how business is continuing to evolve, and the need for whether it's in technology, whether it's in design, whether it's in adaptive clothing, and it's sort of constantly iterating, so that we'll find new ways in which the impact of disability on a larger culture is evolving. That's what I've always meant about the disability economy, that disability economy isn't always just designed for this particular community. But it's that intersection. I mean, it's fascinating. And I've told this story numerous times. I met with the provost of MIT, and he said, Look, 67% of our student body is, is somewhere on the spectrum. So that means that the fingerprints of any new technology that's out there, perhaps, is touched by someone with a disability. That means it's how we assess technology, and the digital revolution in a new way, how we think about art and commerce, and how we think about engaging in this new wave of thinking, that's really where I think about the disability economy, it's just sort of convergence. And it's ever evolving. You know, when people ask me to define it, it's still hard for me to define. But what I can say is, it's really about that intersection of culture and commerce.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 16:48

I like that. I think that kind of packages that nicely. Yeah. So it sounds like it encompasses everything, you know, everything from the disability innovation, the products themselves to this kind of shift in the consumer needs and desires and how people are just thinking about these products and what they expect and what they want from products.

J Jonathan Kaufman 17:06

Right. And it's interesting, when we sort of look at products that everyone knows about, you know, glasses are sort of an obvious one. This is a product that is a multi billion dollar industry. But it was designed because people had visual impairments, I mean, and that they needed sort of some assistance. Well, now, it's become commonplace. No one ever thinks about it. The fact that we all text texting is ubiquitous, but texting, the origins of the technology, were at Gallaudet University in 1976. That's where it began for the deaf community. And now everyone is sort of using it. And so it's a matter of how does this type of economy and the products and services integrate into sort of everyday life? They become commonplace.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 17:57

Absolutely. And you mentioned that this disability economy is constantly iterating and changing. So Jonathan, how do you think the disability economy will continue to grow and evolve in the coming years?

J Jonathan Kaufman 18:07

I think there's several places that I do see it iterating. One is, and I just came back from CSUN, you know, the Assistive Technology Conference in Anaheim, California. And I mean, it's enormous. First of all, it's really the first full fledged one since COVID. So people are sort of back. But when you have stalwart companies like Google and Meta, and Microsoft, and Apple and others that are sitting at the table, you're recognizing that one, they see a value proposition two, there's money to be made. And three, they're sort of spearheading a lot of that ecosystem. And a big one, obviously, is Microsoft, and obviously, Jenny, the floor is there, but also the CEO of Microsoft, and much of this is due to his son, Zane, who had CPE. So it's that personal experience that is changing the way we think about it. It's also the idea that, wait a minute, if we think about new ideas, and these new concepts are the impact in terms of the way we work, one of the silver linings of COVID has been, it's been a sort of reboot, if you will, everyone's sort of reassessing how we work. We understood that telework and remote work, if you will, works. Honestly, the proof of concept is there. We've been at this for many months, that changes the whole nature of how people with disabilities can enter the marketplace, how disabilities can enter the workforce, in a ways that we never really saw were possible because everyone had to contribute to this. Everyone said, Okay, we're in this new situation. Now, we're sort of in this next evolution, what is the world of work look like? And how do we take the disability experience? And say, Well, what can we learn from this community? What can we learn from individuals with disabilities as far as engaging in new types of innovation? If we are in a decentralized work world?

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 20:20

Absolutely. And I think so many of the lessons that we learned, during COVID are important to continue doing some of these things, you know, keep these shifts in place. So, you know, when you're looking at companies, talking to companies and consulting with them, what are some of the changes that you're seeing companies and employers are starting to make to really attract and retain more disabled people in their workforce?

J

Jonathan Kaufman 20:43

Yeah, I think what people are really sort of changing in their workforce is one, this is sort of a constant evolution. And I think of it like a rubber band, you know, it's being pulled. And now it's people are sort of letting go. So the question right now that people are having is, how do we sustain this? What is the world of work look like? And it's thinking about it in these new ways, and having to really try and dig deep in terms of what the structure looks like, how does management practice look like? These are going to be sort of the real questions that I think are going to be important going forward. Ultimately, a lot of the changes are in real time. And so the work that I do a lot is working with companies to understand how do we find better solutions? One size does not fit all. So what we're trying to figure out now is, what are the mechanics of those changes? How do they integrate with the culture of the organization? And if the organization has to change culturally, then how is that done in a way that benefits the organization long term? I know it seems a little bit nebulous, but that's sort of where we are. And each organization is slightly different. You sort of have to dig into that.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 22:12

Absolutely. I think that's a good point that every organization is going to have to change

different things or have just sort of a different workflow that they're trying to adapt to make sure that it's accessible for different people.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 22:22

Correct.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 22:23

Well, thank you for sharing your insights on that. I guess, thinking about the future, what steps do you think really need to happen in terms of, I guess, redesigning the workplace, or shifting perspectives, or changing that culture to make careers more accessible and inclusive for more people?

J Jonathan Kaufman 22:38

I think one of the most important things is empathy. It's not so much about mechanics, per se. But it's being able to have a level of emotional intelligence of what's needed, that there can be a level of communication between employer and employee, there is a level of empathy that is needed, and ultimately, creating an alliance, if you will, between employer and employee, to understand that we're all in this together, that we need one another. And being able to have that sort of empathetic year. And being able to communicate is so important. Those soft skills are critical today. Because we don't live in a centralized workplace, but even if we did, but we don't anymore. What are the things that we need? And needs is one of the most essential words that has to be part of I think any manager's vocabulary.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 23:40

Absolutely. Do you have any thoughts or maybe suggestions on how companies can better maybe cultivate that sense of empathy, that spirit of collaboration, I think in a world that's becoming increasingly maybe busy, so people don't even feel like they have time to think about these things?

J Jonathan Kaufman 23:54

Right, I think what has to happen is there's this idea of what's called psychological safety. And the idea that people who work in organizations have to feel that there's a level of safety, that they can communicate that they can talk, I think that can be done through employee resource groups, which I think can be enormously beneficial and more crucial today than ever before. Because what it does is, it creates a space a safe space, where one can discuss needs, where one can discuss successes and failures and how to develop a better overall organization. But in a smaller setting, and I think also teamwork, being able to work with teams, again, provides that psychological safety provides that connection. So these soft skills, which were one sort of relegated for the back of the class, if you will, are now front and center.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 24:58

Absolutely. I love that approach. And I think Breaking it down, maybe starting with individual departments using that to gain momentum to create bigger shifts throughout the entire company, I think is an amazing approach. And we've talked about just how I guess how the disability innovation space is rapidly changing and adapting and a really dynamic space to be in. So, Jonathan, when you think about the future, and maybe think about the past, what are some of the biggest innovations you've seen in the disability space over the past five years, and thinking about where things are going moving forward?

J

Jonathan Kaufman 25:29

There's so many wonderful creative people out there. And what I love to see are all these accelerators popping up, you know, Remarkable happens to be one of them. Remarkable is this wonderful organization, as you know, that certainly is one of them, there's Together which is based out of Washington, DC, but also on the other side of it, there are investors, you know, there are impact investors that are coming up to saying, wait a minute, not only are there the accelerators, the young entrepreneurs that are finding new opportunities and new innovations, but there also is now money behind them. So there's this disability economy, which is part of it. This is part of the ecosystem that is still in its nascent stage, but it's evolving, and it's being cultivated. That, for me, is really incredible, because what it says is that there is a recognition. And my hope over the next few years is that there's even greater recognition among private equity firms among VC firms, so that there's deal flow happening, that there is the ability for entrepreneurs to say, wait a minute, if I create something, there's the potential for investment, there's the potential for opportunities, there's the potential for growth. And then the next piece is the marketplace itself. That's going to be sort of really interesting, because we know the market is there. And what also has to take place is the employment of persons with disabilities upskilling, so that there is a robust market to meet the desires and needs of many of these products and services.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 27:17

And thinking about the future. And maybe if you had to make some predictions here, Jonathan, are there particular areas or maybe industries that you think really have the most opportunity for innovation in the future?

J

Jonathan Kaufman 27:26

Look, the adaptive clothing market, I think is a huge place. I mean, Vogue Business wrote a piece like this, now, this is about a year or two ago, they're expecting the adaptive market around 2026, or two years from now to be around 4- to \$500 billion. And it's enormous. And it isn't just about that. What's fascinating is, again, when you talk about intersection, there's this intersection of an aging population. So I think one of the areas that needs to be discussed more significantly that hasn't been is the relationship between the disability community and organizations like AARP, other similar organizations, because when you sort of look at those communities, you're like, wait a minute, they're joining the larger disability community. And

there's a lot of money within those demographics. And so it's really interesting. Now, when we begin to think about it, it's how this sort of convergence there could happen. So that's really where I'm interested in. And it's again, it's about making this something that's integrated into everyday culture.

J Jonathan Kaufman 28:40

The other place that I think is really fascinating, is representation. Over the last few years, whether it's from the Oscars where Crip Camp was nominated for Best Documentary, it was the first time in the history of the Oscars that they had a wheelchair ramp ever. That was fascinating. Now, also, Anthony Hopkins, at that point, won best actor, which was noted, but not noted by a lot of people because he had come out because he had been diagnosed on the spectrum. And now he posts on Instagram continuously, because he feels this sense of relief of I have a name for this, but also being somebody who is autistic and being very proud of that. So he won Best Actor at the time. But even more recently with Coda and Troy Kotzur winning Best Supporting Actor last year. These are things that are important. And there are shows, I mean, the streaming channels are great, because it provides a lot more content. And we know Netflix has a program for young creators with disabilities, you know, to create new content. So it's really amazing and I had the pleasure of actually speaking with Molly Burke. She and I were the two speakers at this event. And she is this young woman who's visually impaired, but has millions of followers on social media because she posts, I think daily across numerous social media platforms, on what her life is like and how she adapts. And it's really fun and exciting.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 29:16

Definitely, I think bringing these conversations and bringing the awareness really to the forefront in society more broadly is so important. And I'm glad to see this is happening more and more, and that this awareness and this sort of enthusiasm, and momentum is building up behind this disability innovation movement. And you of course, mentioned the accelerators, we are delighted to see the emergence of these accelerators, of course, Remarkable US and Remarkable Australia are part of a global accelerator program, which supports innovators and entrepreneurs in the disability space. So Jonathan, can you talk a little bit more about the potential impacts of these kinds of programs?

J Jonathan Kaufman 30:56

Yeah, I think that one, the potential is enormous, because it creates an avenue for the entrepreneurs themselves, to say, I can go out, and I can live this dream. And that there is support that will benefit me that I can learn from that I can take from that I can use that will drive my business forward and engage in new ways. I just think having that support system is so powerful, and so enormous, because it provides a new avenue that we've never really had before. And it continues sort of growth in ways that we haven't seen. And ultimately, some of these companies will have real successes.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 31:47

Absolutely. I think the potential impacts are at tremendous for these programs, and not just

necessarily the funding, although I'm sure that helps quite a bit for these early stage companies, but the support the mentorship really helping people build those businesses.

J Jonathan Kaufman 32:01

Right. And I think the upskilling if you have entrepreneurs with disabilities, creating companies, then you can ultimately hire people with disabilities, you can create mentorship programs, you can create upskilling, the ability to sort of create this new vibrant economy, and having new skills is just tremendous.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 32:24

Absolutely. Well, we are really looking forward to this. And Jonathan, I know we covered a lot of ground today, is there anything you feel like you didn't have a chance to say that you want to leave our listeners with at the end of our conversation today?

J Jonathan Kaufman 32:36

I think the only thing I have to leave listeners is to continue to dream, and continue to push forward because the opportunities are there. So it's just a matter of looking out for them, and being able to be open and engage with the world around.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 32:53

Well, it's such a wonderful note to end on, Jonathan, if our listeners want to learn more about you and the amazing work you do, what is the best way for them to do so?

J Jonathan Kaufman 33:01

Well, my Forbes column is sort of weekly. So you can go to Forbes. And look up my name. And the name of the column is Mindset Matters. And then I have a consulting practice. And that's J Kaufman Consulting. And you just have to look up that and you'll sort of find me there.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 33:18

Wonderful listeners. And definitely check out those resources to learn more about Jonathan and his work. And Jonathan, thank you so much for joining us on the show today and having this conversation.

J Jonathan Kaufman 33:29

Truly appreciated. Thank you.



Dr. Marie McNeely 33:31

It's been a pleasure to chat with you and listeners. Wonderful to have you here with us as well. When you have a moment, please subscribe and leave us a rating and review on your favorite podcast platform 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.