

Changing What's Possible - S.2, Ep.7 - Transcript

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SPEAKERS

Thane Hunt, Megan Dloniak, Dr. Marie McNeely

D Dr. Marie McNeely 00:01

Hello and welcome to Changing What's Possible: The Disability Innovation Podcast brought to you by Cerebral Palsy Alliance Research Foundation or CPARF. I'm your host, Dr. Marie McNeely. And this season we are excited to bring you extraordinary stories about how disability technology and innovation come together. In part two of our two part interview featuring hominid X will have two guests joining us Thane Hunt and Megan Dloniak. Listeners, Thane is founder and CEO of Hominid X, one of the startup companies in our 2023 Remarkable US accelerator program. In addition, Thane is a senior systems engineer at Desktop Metal. And our second guest today is Megan Dloniak. She is a stroke survivor who has been using Hominid X's products in her everyday life. And I'm excited to chat with her later in today's episode. But first, Thane, welcome back to the show!

T Thane Hunt 00:55

Thanks so much for having me.

T Thane Hunt 00:56

Now, in the first part of our interview, in the previous episode, you talked about Hominid X and your product Fiber. And today I want to start by talking about another one of your products Modern Cuff. So then what kinds of tasks can this product help with?

T Thane Hunt 01:11

The Modern Cuff is a more specialized tool than Fiber. It goes back to that mono task thing. So it can be used for eating, teeth brushing, shaving, applying makeup, and using a pen or pencil. You could do other little cylindrical things with it like holding a sparkler. Although I wouldn't

recommend that or a lollipop, I don't know, a flag on a holiday I don't know. So it covers a lot of important basic tasks. It is a bit like existing universal cuffs. But it achieves that goal in a better way by just being, I think, a slightly more thoughtful design.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 01:39

That makes sense. And again, to help us envision what this product looks like, can you describe it and how it works?

T Thane Hunt 01:44

So it's super simple. It's made of a soft, but durable silicone rubber, the same sort of material, actually, that major brands like Samsung and Apple and Fitbit are using for their smart wearables. So it straps around the palm of your hand, and has kind of a long, narrow pocket and embedded into the strap. And that pocket can be used to hold all kinds of objects. So again, it's very simple.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 02:06

Can you describe maybe a little bit the process that you went through to develop this Modern Cuff product and how potential users were involved in that process?

T Thane Hunt 02:14

So early on, I got worried that Fiber was too unique for the market, a lot of occupational therapists really liked it. But the ones who didn't like it said it was because of their preference for extremely, extremely simple solutions. So I thought Fiber was simple. And they're saying it needs to be even simpler. And they pointed out truthfully, that there are some people who won't have the motor function, maybe on the opposite side to even operate Fiber. So that's no good, we want to have something for everyone. So we created the Modern Cuff to be simple, while still being more functional and better looking than what was commercially available. These kind of older school universal cuffs. Once we worked out the basics, and we already had a little bit of a user base from Fiber. So it was easier this time around, we had about five occupational therapists try it along with I want to say six actual daily users. And we worked with the therapists as a first pass during the early prototypes. And we got their feedback and insight to detect egregious flaws or missed opportunities. And once we did that, for a few cycles, we went to the actual users. At that point, we knew the product fundamentally worked. And we were talking to the users just to polish and make it as good as it could be. So very similar to Fiber. But with a little bit of a user base and an email list. It was a lot easier this time around.

T Thane Hunt 03:25

Absolutely. And I liked that you sort of took a moment to stop and reflect decide. And that's a difficult decision I think to make as a company, do you try to make one product that works for

everybody? Or do you kind of branch out a little bit and make a few different products to try to meet the needs of more people? How did you make that decision or what kind of tipped the scales for you?

T

Thane Hunt 03:42

It was hard, you can talk to some of my team members. And there's just some text threads where I'm going back and forth. And it's just hot and cold all over the place. But what I finally decided was by offering this other product, I was actually freeing myself to really target Fiber's design, and not always be so worrying about making every tiny little aspect flexible. Because the moment I can go back to the design requirements document for Fiber and say, Okay, well, we can require that they have some function on their opposite hand, then that really frees us up to make Fiber really ambitious and really competitive. But we're not leaving those people who do have an opposite effected side out in the cold because we make this product to address them. So I still think that a Swiss Army Knife approach is great when you can but there's a hard line to walk there to really make sure that you're not making one bad product when you should have made three good products.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 04:36

Exactly. I think that's such a smart decision. Because you're absolutely right. You can ruin it completely by trying to fit into many different disconnected features or things that are incompatible with the different people's needs. So can you maybe tell us a little bit more about Modern Cuff, what really makes this product unique and really distinguishes it from other things on the market?

T

Thane Hunt 04:54

So my pitch for the Modern Cuff is that it's just a new age version of a traditional tool called a universal cuff, my occupational therapist friend said and she said I could quote her universal cuffs have been around forever. So this is just a newer version of that the basic idea is the same, you have a pocket strapped onto the hand, before developing the Modern Cuff, I purchased and tested every cuff available that I could buy. And they all had one or more fundamental usability issues. Actually, before most of them even arrived at my door, I could read their Amazon or whatever online review. And they would say things like, this was almost a lifesaver or good idea, poor execution, disappointed people. So we had a beta user of the Modern Cuff, who told us about how her hospital gave her one of these older cuffs, but the designers had actually made that pocket too small to even hold a pen. And as a side note, I don't think distributor should be selling that kind of stuff. It's interesting that they call them universal cuffs because they're not universal, they're local cuffs or something like that.

T

Thane Hunt 05:51

So going into this development program, I knew that all we needed to do was take the basic idea, which is very tried and true and very accepted, by the way by occupational therapists, which is important from an adoption perspective, all we had to do was take it over the line. The

product is about function not being clever, we took the idea of universal cuff and just made it work. We got away from all the beige, scratchy velcro, and used again, my favorite smartwatch silicone rubber, we designed to pocket with an asymmetric stiffness profile so that it stretches enough to hold the dry erase marker. But it's still stiff enough in the other direction to hold a fork reliably for eating. And then I couldn't help myself, we had to add some additional cool little features. So we added this little flippable tab that allows people to give the pocket a floor or be able to push something like a pen all the way through, which shortens that lever arm and gives you a little bit more control when you write. So these are all improvements that could have been done, honestly, in 1935. But better late than never. I think the whole product was ideated and brought to users for testing within 30 or 40 days. So that beta user that I mentioned before, by the way from the hospital, she's using the Modern Cuff now. And she says she actually loves it for writing. So now it's just about continued refinement and getting it onto more people's hands.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 07:01

Absolutely. Well 30 to 40 days is a remarkable timeline to be working on for that particular product. And I know thing, you've had a lot of really exciting milestones that you've achieved as an entrepreneur. So what has this journey been like for you?

T

Thane Hunt 07:15

The journey has been pretty wild, you mentioned milestones. So a huge milestone was actually getting into the Remarkable Tech US accelerator program. The wisdom and guidance and value alignment from the program operators has been just totally game changing and critical for us. I worked really hard, like really hard to get into the program. And getting that acceptance letter felt like a sign like if we don't give up the universe will actually just like all the books promised me will actually start yielding a tiny bit. And there have been other milestones too, like submitting some patent applications, launching a new product at a hand therapy annual conference, hiring my first corporate lawyer, it's been fun, there have been a lot of milestones. The journey has been definitely harder than I expected. But I also think it's a little inaccurate when so many startup gurus claim that the surprising difficulty there is like an entrepreneurship specific thing. I think countless things I've tried in the past are far more difficult than I thought that they'd be I think it's common. So that confidence to despair back to confidence curve is playing out pretty much the same way here is anything else I've learned? I don't have it all figured out. But I know that that will come someday, as long as we keep going.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 08:21

Absolutely. I think this feeling that things are harder than you expected is often a sign of optimism. So it's good to hear that you're this optimistic person?

T

Thane Hunt 08:27

Oh, yeah. So optimistic. Otherwise, it would just be really hard.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 08:31

Absolutely. So let's think about maybe talk about the future of Hominid X, Thane. What is your vision for the future of the company?

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Thane Hunt 08:39

I need to think about it more. But right now, our products are simple, but useful. And I like to think they're clever, and they're definitely inexpensive. And as our resources grow, we'll develop more sophisticated, and I don't mean complex, but sophisticated solutions, there's a difference. We'll do robotics, we'll do the mobile app stuff, we'll branch out and deal with other unsolved challenges, like sense of balancing like Vestibular Disorders, tremors, things like that. The important parts will be our move fast get feedback approach, really diligent engineering and a fixation on value to the user instead of just considering cost and function by themselves in a vacuum. So that's the future outlook at this point.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 09:17

Wonderful. And you talked a little bit about the potential market earlier for Hominid X and some of your products. But who do you think if you had to summarize could benefit from using these products that you've developed so far, at Hominid X?

T

Thane Hunt 09:29

Anyone who needs help holding objects, the list of formerly medically diagnoseable situations is really big. But even outside of that, I would say anyone who feels it was encountering a reduced range of motion or strength reduction in their hand should at least try our products. If they don't like them, they can send it back and get their money back right, they should just try it. So tremors or even hand cramps, arthritis, more and more things come to my mind as I talk. So even if someone doesn't think they need a tool right now, I would ask them to keep in mind that we're not really positioning ourselves as a medical device company. We're just making tools that make hands work even better. I think gloves do this screwdrivers do this can openers do this. It's a tool for people who want to hold things. And as our product line grows, we'll have something perfect for more and more people.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 10:11

Absolutely. And I know users can buy this product directly, but you also have been working with and talking to a lot of clinicians, can you talk about, I guess what clinicians should be thinking about this product?

T

Thane Hunt 10:21

Clinicians, their first responsibility is to do no harm and to maximize the improvement in quality of life for their patients. So part of them doing their job is to be skeptical of new things. And

early on, I'll be honest with you, that put me in a kind of a, I don't wanna say hostile stance, but definitely like, Oh, come on, guys. Let's get our heads out of the sand and look at the future. But the more I think about they're doing their job really, really well. And it's on me to prove that what we have is something good. So I opened the challenge. But I do say that I also I require the opportunity. So as long as people are always willing to talk with us, we'll do our best to show them that what we have is something worth getting for their patients. That's why the Modern Cuff exists. Now it's to say, look, wow, for this simple task, you crushed that. So let's talk about Fiber now. And then let's talk about the robotic stuff in the future. So the occupational therapists and clinicians are still watching, they're a little bit more hesitant, but be at least non early adopters are. But I would say just keep watching, keep an open mind, and we're gonna do everything we can to impress them.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 11:20

Certainly. So can you talk a little bit next, Thane, about the impacts that your products are having, or maybe having the potential to provide for their users.

T

Thane Hunt 11:28

So when I was developing these products, I tried to use them as if I couldn't function without them. And now I'm not trying to say that I fully understand what it is like to have a hand disability. But I'm an engineer, and I'm pretty good at imagining different physio mechanics situations. So even that exercise was enough for me to see that products like this can have a pretty big impact on people's lives. And nowadays, the more feedback I get from our users, the more validated that assumption feels. People are riding bikes after not being able to with our products, we've got people drawing again, we just heard from someone who's going to try to use our products to speed up their baking skills fast enough so that they can open their own baking business out west. And reading this stuff never gets old. It's like we did this. So when we develop new products, we're not developing for a population of some statistically estimated size, I have stories and names and faces in my head and having that as pure condensed 100% motivation. So I think we're having an impact and we're enjoying seeing it play out.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 12:25

Well, Thane, thank you so much for sharing more about yourself and more about the company with all of us today. If our listeners want to learn more about you and more about Hominid X, what is the best way for them to do so?



12:36

They can go to www.hominidx.com. Or they can look us up on LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, Tik Tok, all those places, we're there.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 12:45

Excellent listeners, definitely get connected with Hominid X, check out that website. And Thane, we really appreciate you joining us to share your insights and experiences with me and our listeners today.

T Thane Hunt 12:55

Thanks so much for having me. It's been fun.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 12:57

Well, Thane, it's been a pleasure to chat with you. And next listeners, we are excited to be speaking with our second guest and Megan Dloniak, someone who has real-world experience using Hominid X's products. Megan had a stroke as a teenager, and she is going to talk more about her experiences and share her thoughts about Hominid X. So Megan, thank you so much for joining us on the show today. We're delighted to have you.

M Megan Dloniak 13:20

Thank you for having me.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 13:22

We're looking forward to chatting with you a little bit more about your experiences. So can you start by telling our listeners a little bit more about yourself?

M Megan Dloniak 13:29

So my name is Megan, when I was 15 years old, I had a massive stroke that paralyzed the entire left side of my body. And I just really never regained function back in my hand after that.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 13:40

Well, that must have been really challenging for you to go through when you were so young. So Megan, can you tell us a little bit more about what happened immediately after having that stroke when you were 15?

M Megan Dloniak 13:51

It really changed my life drastically because I was a ballet dancer. So having half of your body paralyzed, I just wasn't able to do dance after that, which was basically my entire life. I was a little bit obsessed with it.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 14:05

Absolutely. And that's tough to lose something that you were so passionate about. But what was the rehabilitation process then like for you, how did you get back into life after having this major medical event?

M

Megan Dloniak 14:16

It was a long process. I was inpatient for five weeks. And then I've kept going outpatient, OT, PT, speech also for two years after that. And then I switched clinics and went another five years somewhere else. And then again, I switched clinics and went another two years at another clinic. So it's been a long process.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 14:39

Certainly, and I know rehabilitation can be a really long process to really get you to the point where you can start feeling like you're getting back to your life and being able now to reengage with the things that you're passionate about and it can be frustrating as well. And I'd love to hear a little bit more about how Hominid X fits into your story. So Megan, can you tell us how did you originally find out about the company Hominid X?

M

Megan Dloniak 15:01

So they reached out to me through my Tik Tok page. And once I saw their videos and their products, I was really interested because I think gaining that functionality back even if it's through using assistive devices, it's a huge win for people in my position.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 15:15

Absolutely. And can you talk a little bit more about your Tik Tok page and how you've used that to kind of share your message?

M

Megan Dloniak 15:21

I actually was really hesitant to start my page, because I'm more of an introvert, just shy, reserved, but I really wanted to use what I've been through to help other people. And that's kind of what's motivated me to do it. I just kind of share my journey, my struggles, how I adapt to things on my page.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 15:38

So Megan, can you tell us a little bit about what it was like to start this Tik Tok channel and what the journey has been like for you getting now to this point?

M

Megan Dloniak 15:46

I was super scared. At first, I would take every Tik Tok I made and I would screen record, and I would send it to my sisters. And I would say am I just really silly. Does this make sense? Do you think this would be helpful for people? Or should I just delete it? And then they would have to watch it. And then tell me all you can cut this part out. No, it's really great. You should post it whatever, because I was just so nervous about it.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 16:09

Absolutely. And what has some of the feedback been that you've gotten from other people who are watching the channel?

M

Megan Dloniak 16:14

I think it's been really, really positive and great. And I was expecting Tik Tok, I don't know why I had this preconceived idea that Tik Tok was just a bunch of teenage girls dancing. So when I joined it, I was like, Oh, they're not gonna want to see me talking about my disability or the struggles I face or how I adapt to different situations. But everyone's just been so welcoming. And it's been a great community.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 16:38

Well, I'm really glad to hear that it's been a positive experience. That was there anything else you'd like to share about how you've really been connecting with this disability community through Tik Tok?.

M

Megan Dloniak 16:47

Yeah, I think it's given me a lot more hope. And just having that connection of knowing you're not alone in your struggles is huge. Like feeling alone in something you're struggling with is just so mentally draining, but knowing that other people are going through it with you just gives you so much hope and light for your future.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 17:06

I think that's awesome. And I think so helpful for others who might be going through the same experience. So you mentioned you discovered Hominid X when they reached out about this Tik Tok page that you've been running. So what really made you want to try their product?.

M

Megan Dloniak 17:18

I've watched the videos of their products, and I've never seen anything like what they were

selling the Fiber really interested me because I'd never seen like I said, any assistive device like that.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 17:29

Absolutely. And were those grasping motions that it helped with? Was that something that you were particularly struggling with?

M Megan Dloniak 17:35

Yes, so I can grasp. But the problem with my grasp is once I grasped something, I drop it easily. So it's really not helpful that I have that function at all, because I can't use it. So having something that helps me to hold my grasp is just really big for me.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 17:52

So then, what was it like the first time you actually tried that Fiber device that you've been watching the video on?

M Megan Dloniak 17:58

So when I opened the box, I initially had like a little panic attack, like, oh, my gosh, I didn't pay attention to the video. I didn't know how to put this. But then I pulled it out. And I was like, oh, okay, this is easy. It was really self explanatory. I just put it on immediately knew what to do. And it worked really well. I didn't have any issues at all.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 18:17

Gotcha. What was the first thing that you use it under? Do you remember what the first thing is that you were able to pick up and kind of be confident in holding?

M Megan Dloniak 18:24

Yes, it was a water bottle. And it was funny because the water bottle was actually deformed on the bottom. So it kept falling over.

M Megan Dloniak 18:32

Oh no.

M Megan Dloniak 18:32

So when I was trying to grasp it kept falling over. And then finally I was able to hold it upright long enough to wrap the device around it and get a good grasp on it. And I was just like, so proud. I kept smiling. I felt so goofy.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 18:45

Well, I think it is those little victories that can have such a meaningful impact on your life. So what kinds of objects do you find work particularly well for you to use this Fiber device with?

M Megan Dloniak 18:56

I love cooking and baking. And I found I've always had problems if I'm using jars or cans, I would have to throw a good amount of the product in the jar or can away because I was unable to scoop out everything from the jar. And I've really been able to up my cooking game basically because I can get everything I need out of these jars or I keep all my flour in jars. So it's made cooking a lot easier. And I feel like everything I'm making tastes a lot better now.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 19:27

And I'd love to talk more about this baking business. You mentioned that you've been able to get back into cooking and I think that is phenomenal. Can you tell us what sparked your interest in actually starting a business?

M Megan Dloniak 19:37

Yeah, so I found out I have celiac disease which means I have to eat gluten free and I love sweets. I am a big sweets person. So I knew when I found out that I had celiac disease that I would have to start baking all my own desserts because I couldn't just stop eating them. So I decided to try to start adapting different recipes like cookies or brownies or cakes. err, I got really big into macrons I love macrons how I could fit it into gluten free or even for my friends, dairy free or egg free, just adapting to different people's dietary needs, how I can make baked goods that will be for people who can't necessarily go out to a restaurant or a store and buy anything there.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 20:20

I think that is phenomenal. And it sounds like these Hominid X products have helped make this dream possible. Can you talk a little bit more about that, and how it sort of allowing you to pursue this avenue?

M Megan Dloniak 20:31

So when I was talking about earlier, my food coming out tasting better, I've been getting lots of compliments on all my baked goods lately. Everyone's been saying, Oh, wow, these tastes so

much better than before. I don't remember them tasting this good. And of course, it makes me so happy because I love that I get to make these desserts for people who can't go out, like I said, and buy them just at regular places. So to see them being able to enjoy these desserts. But also now they taste even better, because I'm able to cook them the way I wanted to before I just wasn't able to.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 21:05

I think that is remarkable. You can probably taste the love and care that goes into these desserts. Well, it sounds like the Fiber has already had a positive impact on your life. Are there other things that you use it for some other things that have really changed for you since you've started using it?

M Megan Dloniak 21:19

Yes. So I've also this year been working on brushing my hair, which like I said, I'm able to grasp things, but I can't keep that grasp for very long. So brushing my hair was really difficult for me, because it's been a goal of mine for a long time. But I just never been able to keep a grasp on a brush long enough. And it's really been helping me keep that grasp and build up my arm muscles so that I can actually brush my hair. And I'm not so focused on trying to hold on to the brush.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 21:47

I think being able to kind of relax and enjoy some of these experiences in your life is critical and not having to worry about just the act of holding the object that you want to hold that can in itself have a big impact. Yeah. So do you have any particular goals that you're working towards in terms of things that you would like to do or things that you're hoping that Fiber will allow you to do?

M Megan Dloniak 22:04

With Fiber, I'm just using it and seeing because I just got it a few weeks ago. So I've just been using it enjoying the journey so far. But I actually have a goal with the Modern Cuff, I used to paint and I haven't painted for years, we actually went in my occupational therapy sessions, we would paint and they would help me grasp a paintbrush with my left hand. And they even tried to design something to help me hold it. But it just never worked out. My goal was to eventually use the Modern Cuff to get back to painting with my left hand.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 22:35

is amazing. So what kinds of things do you like to paint?

M Megan Dloniak 22:38

Really nature, like flowers, mountains, sunsets, just landscapes.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 22:44

Oh, that sounds beautiful. And I love the idea of being able to get back to these hobbies that you love doing and to have this product that really makes it easier for you to do it. So who else do you think might benefit from using Hominid X's products, whether it's the Modern Cuff or the Fiber?

M Megan Dloniak 22:58

I think really anybody who has any type of hand disability, you can really find any way to incorporate it into your daily routine or any way that you're just struggling because we live in a world for people with two hands. So having one hand that's non functional, can be really difficult, and also just frustrating. So I think anybody who has problems using one of their hands.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 23:20

And do you have any particular message you'd like to share with listeners who might have a hand disability who might have had a stroke themselves who are considering trying Fiber, or the Modern Cuff?

M Megan Dloniak 23:29

I think I've used so many assistive devices. And I just kind of gave up on them after a while because I was beginning to think it was just like a marketing scheme, like a way to get my money not actually help me. But I'm so glad I tried these because they're totally different than any other assistive devices I've ever tried.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 23:47

That's wonderful. So what are some of the things that really make the Fiber or the Modern Cuff, either one different from the devices that you've tried that maybe haven't been as successful for you?

M Megan Dloniak 23:56

The comfort level, first of all, because some devices I would put on and immediately it's uncomfortable and it hurts or you're thinking about just the way it's squeezing you or the way it feels. But these are so comfortable, they fit so well. And they're extremely adaptive to just different size hands or wrist, whatever it is.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 24:15

That's fantastic. And Megan, is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with the products from Hominid X?

M

Megan Dloniak 24:22

I think that if you're considering buying any products from Hominid XI would just go ahead and go for it because like I said, they're different from any other assistive products I've ever used. I highly recommend them. I think they're going to change people's future that have hand disabilities, they will give you back so much function, and it's really an investment into your future. So I would highly recommend trying it out.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 24:45

Oh my god, we really appreciate you joining us today to share your insights and your story. So thank you so much.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 24:51

Yes, it's been an absolute pleasure to chat with you also.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 24:54

Fantastic and listeners. It's been wonderful to have you with us as well. We would be grateful if you could take a moment to leave us a review on your favorite podcast platform to let us know what you think of the show and we look forward to connecting with you again in our next episode of Changing What's Possible.