

That's Inclusive!

Episode 13 Transcript

Episode title: Including Disability in DEI

Vanessa Blais (VB): Welcome to That's Inclusive! Where we talk about disability and what it means to live a full life, engaging in our communities.

What does that look like? And how can we work together to make our world a more inclusive place?

Isadora Rodriguez-Legendre (IRL): Hi everybody, welcome to That's Inclusive! My name is Isadora Rodriguez-Legendre, I'm the Executive Director and The New Hampshire Council on Developmental Disabilities. I'm here today with Ernesto Burden who does a number of things especially around diversity, equity, and inclusion work. We're very interested in learning more about his work and what drives him, and how it aligns with our vision of disability inclusion. Welcome Ernesto.

Ernesto Burden (EB): Thank you for having me, it's a pleasure to be here.

IRL: I usually like people to just introduce themselves, tell our listeners a little about you and the work that you do.

EB: Sure, sure. I am the publisher of New Hampshire Magazine, New Hampshire Business Review, 603 Diversity, which I think we are going to talk about in a little while, New Hampshire Home, New Hampshire Bride, we host a number of events. In general, we are the New Hampshire group which is a subset of the broader Yankee Publishing operation. The Yankee Magazine, the Old Farmers Almanac, these really iconic brands. We're happy to be a part of that. I'm responsible for all the New Hampshire brands, the ones I mentioned first. So, I manage that as a publisher, not everyone knows what that is anymore. Everybody knows what the editor does, the publisher is essentially the manager of the rest of the managers and manages the business, like a CEO.

IRL: Your company used to actually work with us on Stepping Stones Magazine, which is a resource guide for those with lived experience of disability. I know that you are familiar with some of the things we have done, and I know you have some questions about some of the work we do currently that we can definitely dive into.

EB: Absolutely. As you and I have talked in the past I think one of the things that's been really great is how much what you're able to share as been able to inform what we should be doing with the 603 Diversity Magazine. From disabilities perspective, which I don't think is the first thing that people think about. Its an interesting challenge when you think about doing a magazine about diversity anyways is what you think that entails cause in some ways it entails everything. Like every one of us is this sort of plethora of diversities in terms of our social background, our religious beliefs.

IRL: All the intersections of our identities and how they play on each other and form these very unique people who are now walking around with people who have their own unique perspectives, and we call that a community right. We have to figure out how to not offend each other and how not to trigger, for example, traumas, or trigger oppression in any way, shape, or form, that can perpetuate stigmas and inequities that exist in society, so I definitely appreciate that. I think we were talking about how with 603 Diversity Magazine I had appreciated the openness to including accessibility and addressing disability as part of diversity, equity, and inclusion, which is something we are actively, continuously trying to drive to communities that are working in DEI spaces. So, I definitely appreciate that not only did the magazine highlight disability in some issues, but you seem so much more conscious of that disability piece in all the work that you do.

EB: I think that one of the things that comes out of a magazine culture is that we are, I hope, story tellers. In order to do that I think we have to pay attention and see things. Typically, not always things from your perspective. I'm always grateful that when you reached out, I have a copy of the essay you wrote for the magazine a couple issues back, I actually underlined some things that I wanted to share later. One of the things that we knew right out of the gate when we launched the magazine is that we would not get everything right. I'm not even sure there are

right answers to how to do what we are trying to do with this. We had to go into it comfortable that our intentions were good but that we were going to misstep. Like not mention something we should or mention something we shouldn't. Its interesting that you had mentioned, just now, the care that we take, as the culture moves forward, to be empathetic and thoughtful and careful how we treat other people and not triggering other peoples' traumas and that sort of thing. In addition to that, cause I think all that's right, but then there's also the piece that I think we also have to look at our reactions, and try to react to things as though people, even when they make mistakes, are making mistakes with the best of intentions. I'm not sure if I'm saying it well, but that idea that if everybody started with the baseline that I'm going to be really careful, but also that you're going to give me the benefit of the doubt that even if I said something that might have hurt you, I didn't mean to, and then you're going to instruct me and just let me know.

IRL: To come from a place of presuming good intentions and I think that is so important in our work. We're all in it for the same reason, we all want to see a better world than we came into, or trying to make the world a better place in some way, shape, or form whether its sharing information, or creating systems to support people the way they need to be supported, or building the capacity to really have people participate in a meaningful way that have been excluded in the past. I think that we do, we have to presume that we are all coming from a good place and are going to have missteps along the way, and that's just reality.

EB: I think that allows the conversation to happen. I mean maybe not everyone is always coming from a good place, some people are just mean, but I think a lot of times people are. I think that to have a conversation everybody needs to feel comfortable enough in that conversation to be willing to misstep, cause otherwise you don't talk at all.

IRL: Yes, you have to be willing. I know I've talked to you about my anxiety and my kind of, overcoming, my own, I guess, feelings of inadequacy and I think that is so true and it makes it okay to not know everything, right? It makes it okay to come from a place of curiosity and to say tell me more about that, you know? I didn't see that perspective before, but now I can consider it as part of the information I

am using to make a decision. I think that so important for people to not just be the experts all the time.

EB: Yeah, not only is it important, not to say anything too forcefully controversial, it seems like the only right perspective to me. Most of the time, if I've met people that are absolutely 100% confident of their every opinion, they're usually wrong about everything. Of course, that reminds me you always get into a bind when you start making statements like that because if I said everybody whose 100% sure of everything or says they know something for certain is absolutely wrong, its like that line in one of the Star Wars movies when someone, I think it was Yoda, says only the Siths deal in absolutes, everybody of course pointed out that's kind of an absolute.

IRL: No, that's awesome. So tell me a little bit more about 603 Diversity and kind of how it came to be, and what you hoped to accomplish with the magazine.

EB: Well, this launched in that post-summer of 2020 and one of the things that was happening everywhere was that companies were making diversity statements. And sometimes they seemed really well intentioned and good and sometimes they seemed like lip service. What occurred to me was that the risk always was saying more than you meant or should say on behalf of the company that's made up of a bunch of diverse people itself, or not saying enough. So the risk was that you end up with a very adenine statement that doesn't really say anything other than we're good. So we thought that it would be good to put out something that, rather than making our statement about how we feel about things, we wanted to put out something that said something on behalf of the communities that we were talking to and about and let them say what they thought about things. We wanted, essentially, to create representation.

IRL: I really think that you've done that. Having seen the pieces and the contributors, they're really, like you said, telling their stories, and it really has an impact because we can feel that connection. And then also recognize the sometimes unique experiences that people are having while we are making our built in assumptions that we walk around with every day and how its just important to lift that veil sometimes and remember that people come from

different experiences, different backgrounds, and it's important to recognize that and celebrate it. It's important to really have that warm invitation. I always talk about that in disability inclusion is that being a champion of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, isn't just about saying those things and creating spaces that are accessible, it's also about creating a feeling of welcoming, a feeling of belonging and that's kind of an extra step that a lot of businesses, a lot of agencies forget to include in their work. It's not just about changing your mission statement and making a declaration, it's about how do we actually make people feel like they belong?

EB: I've noticed that's been added to a lot of those DEI mission statements are now DEIB. How do you think that people are made to feel to belong. From the perspective of somebody in a leadership role in a business, it almost seems like, there's really obvious ones like you listen to people.

IRL: Right, you ask them what they think, and you reflect their inputs in your actions. That is one of the biggest ways to say that we're listening and what you're saying is important, and we're going to make a change based on that. That's one of the biggest ways that we can do that.

EB: What are some others, especially in the disability community?

IRL: I think that the disability community it's really important to seek out information because not everyone with an intellectual or developmental disability is really able to communicate or explain the nuances in behavior or what their needs are in terms of sensory needs. We have gotten in the habit of, for example, including, in our conference planning and collaborations, to make sure we are having sensory safe spaces. So if someone is just overwhelmed, even if visually or audially, they can check out. They can just go to a room with maybe dim lighting so they can just reset. That's so important to helping people who have sensory differences feel like they belong in those spaces because now you're intentionally including supports that they need to be able to stay for the whole day. Which didn't really happen in the past. Things like that, things like making sure parade routes are accessible for wheelchair users, things like that. It's really informing yourself about what some of the needs people with disabilities might have, even

if they're not able to communicate that effectively. Another thing that we've gotten in the habit of doing is offering ASL interpreters grants for different events and activities so that people who are deaf or hard of hearing can also feel like that belong in that event or activity because they'll be able to now understand the speeches that are being delivered in that event. So its those little things, its really kind of educating yourself about what the different support needs might be of a person with a disability and just building that in without asking.

EB: Is getting that information out a big part of the challenge? It seems like, if thinking logistically about the example you just gave, you have a grant go towards providing somebody to do ASL translation for an event, but people need to know that event has that. They don't have to know to show up at it, but maybe there are people that would show up if they knew. How do you make people more aware? That maybe goes back a little bit to the point of this magazine and even the work we're doing in our broader magazines. I shouldn't leave them out because we, as a company, both our New Hampshire group, Yankee, and the Old Farmers Almanac, have spent a lot of time talking about what inclusion looks like in the pages of our other magazines as well.

IRL: I think that, going back to how we started, its about asking the question. Its about making sure that in conference registrations, or in event development, that you are putting something out there. Some sort of statement that says that if there is some sort of support that you would think would improve your experience at this event or this activity, let us know. That we are open to hearing what your needs might be for making this an inclusive, welcoming space for you. You'll see it a lot now these days in conference registrations at the bottom, it'll say do you have any accessibility needs, if so let us know what they are. We will try our best to accommodate those. I that asking those questions whenever we can, when we're planning different events activities is really giving that sense of oh they really do want to hear what my thoughts and needs are, and they're willing to accommodate that.

EB: I think that's great. People who are listening can't see, but you can see that I'm writing this down. That feels like a thing that we could do. Its not difficult, its

not expensive, it can go right into a post event survey. Were there things you needed or that you could have used?

IRL: How could this conference have been more accessible for you? Or felt more welcoming for you? And that could include beyond disability. Something that somebody might have needed whether its language translation, or materials in different languages, I think that it's really easy to forget that someone's experience is really going to be impacted by not having the supports that they need in order to be able to engage the same way as other people.

EB: What are some things that come to mind when you think about storytelling that could help to illustrate that?

IRL: Storytelling in the disability community is one of the biggest vehicles that we have to really send our messages and drive our messages home especially to folks that don't have a connection to disability. I think that stories are so important. One of the things that we are doing at the Caregiver's Conference, which is coming up next month, is we're supporting one of Council Members to collect video stories. She does a lot of advocacy work and especially in different types of media, she's one of the coproducers of this podcast, her name is Patricia Vincent Piet. She's a person with lived experience of disability. Her husband also has a developmental disability. It is so important to have folks that have that lived experience share their stories and help people who don't have that connection, understand how meaningful it is when they're included, when they're thought of, when they're asked. Those important questions of what is that you need.

EB: Is there a follow onto that where people with lived experience shared those experiences, but then people who live with those people with lived experience. There was a TED Talk, TEDx Talk, in Lowell, that I jotted this quote down from because I thought it was really relevant the storytelling idea. Have you ever heard of somebody named Becky Curan? She's a motivational speaker, professionally I think, and a little person. She was giving this talk, she was talking about she worked in film out in Los Angeles for a while. I hope I'm getting that right because I didn't write that part down. So if she worked in film somewhere else, I think it was Los Angeles. Anyways, she worked in the media. There was somebody that

was a high level executive in the organization she was at, who, it turned out had grown up with somebody with a serious disability in terms of mobility. She said, of him, as she closed this talk, she said “he had a disability story, but not anybody else in the company knew that story. I want more people to be able to hear these stories so that we can all realize we can relate in more ways than we think we can. We are all on this Earth together and we all want to be a part of it and just be appreciated and accepted.” I thought that was a great way to get it. Again, what we’re trying to do with 603 Diversity as a magazine is as a storytelling device.

IRL: And that’s one of things we’re trying to do with the Caregiver’s Conference because its all about both unpaid and paid caregivers. We have parents that are getting older that may need supports and may develop disabilities as they get older. We have family members that may have an accident. If someone breaks a leg, at least temporarily they’re going to need additional supports from their family, from their loved ones, from their friends, their community. And so really understanding that disability is a natural part of the human experience and that we all can have, at one point or another, a connection to disability, including ourselves and our loved ones. Understanding that does connect us in a lot of ways, even if we don’t think of it that way, we don’t think of people who aren’t born with a disability, living without a disability for their whole life. That’s the reality, we all experience disability at some point in our lives and have connections to loved ones and family members that we can recognize and that we can take a look at the world and say, “oh wow, this really isn’t accessible for them, or for me in this current situation. We really need to be looking at more universal design in every space so that no matter if it’s a disability, or a single mom with a stroller, we use that analogy for universal design.” When you create spaces that are accessible for people with disabilities, you’re actually creating a space that’s also accessible for anyone. Older adults, someone who has a walking disability, someone who has a visual or hearing impairment. That actually makes us come together and recognize that we have more in common than we have different.

EB: What kind of pushback do you get when you’re talking about that? I can imagine that there’s an argument that somebody might make. An ad absurdum argument like “how universal could you possibly make things?” You know, one of

those. Of course, it also occurs to me the flipside response to that having a rope and only those who are strong enough to climb it using upper body strength is the only ones allowed to come in. I don't know. But does that happen, that sort of ad absurdum?

IRL: I think more often than not, what we see is sheer denial. "That's never going to happen to me" or "I don't have that experience", "I can't put myself in someone else's shoes". Really, until you have that personal connection, sometimes that Mack truck in your face, it's like "oh yeah, that means me too. I guess I'm not excluded when we talk about potentially people having a disability or a connection to disability in some way, shape or form," A lot of our storytelling is driven around that. Is driven around just educating and informing people that we need to look to each other to be able to get the examples of what we could be facing in the future. I'm a person who, my parents are getting older, so I start seeing that they have different needs. So, I recognize that, especially in New Hampshire, where you have to drive everywhere, that's not really, for an older adult, who is no longer able to drive, how are they accessing the community now? What are the supports available to them? Thinking about it in those terms sometimes helps come around to the "oh it's not just about disability, accessibility is about accessibility for everyone who just has a different need at any different time in their life.

EB: That makes sense. And I do think it again underscores the need for and the power of storytelling because a lot of times, you said denial, and that's something I think you run up against in all types of DEI situations. I know with the magazine I get criticism in form of letters and emails and stuff, mostly letters, often with no return address. When we first put this out, somebody ripped up a copy, and put it in a mailer and sent it to me. But a lot of the pushback, I try to think about what's happening with somebody who has the kind of reaction to it and some of it is that denial. A very specific example would be more than one letter writer has written saying there is no racism in New Hampshire and by putting this magazine out, you're creating it, by being divisive. I am happy for them that they've never experienced it or maybe they live in a place that's so homogenous that that doesn't happen, but the practical lived experience of a lot of people would counter indicate that. I could write back and say, "there absolutely is, here is what

the statistics show. Here are the hate crime statistics or here are peoples' personal stories, here are my personal stories." But that's not going to change anybody's mind. Facts, arguments, I think you need to have them. What seems to really change peoples' mind, is I think you need to change peoples' heart first, and this isn't unique to me, I am trying to think about who said it, maybe it was the business writer Simon Sinek, who wrote *The Power of Why* or something. I think there was an example in that book where he was talking about, we usually make decisions based on our gut, or our heart, and then we rationalize them. That's why it's so hard to argue somebody out of a position with facts. If you've ever sat and just tried to a fact based argument with somebody, nobody ever backs down. I shouldn't say nobody, only a Sith would say nobody.

IRL: The experts.

EB: You could go back and forth all day. This is how arguments on the internet work. This is why I don't argue about anything on social media because it's just one long string of people throwing their experts and their facts at the other person until the end of time, and nobody ever changes their mind. I think that stories can change peoples' minds.

IRL: That's a great takeaway just from this conversation. And again, I think in the disability community we've really found that helping people get over their particular hump or their particular firewall to understanding what someone's needs are or what a disability is, is by people telling their stories of adversity, of overcoming obstacles of the systems that exist that continue to exclude them from civic engagement, from community participation, from all of those things, from schools, from learning. We've talked about learning before and how important it is that people have educators that really believe in their ability and who come from a strength based perspective of learning. I think so much of our educational system doesn't do that, and puts people in these boxes. I think that we're going to start to wrap up, I wondered if you had any other takeaways or any other hopes for what some of the diversity, equity, and inclusion work that you're doing is going to accomplish here in New Hampshire, and how we can help.

EB: Well, some of the things we hope, obviously, we hope that the magazine is going to continue to provide representation, because I do think that's important. Representation is important and often not understood well. I think everybody has experienced not being represented and "not belonging" across the board. This is one of the reasons I think it's important to share stories in general, not just in this magazine. Storytelling is such a powerful thing that as people begin to tell their stories, they do find how much in common they have, regardless of their backgrounds, and regardless of which community they come from or anything else. But there's this idea of representation, whether it's ethnic, or racial, or the disability community, it's important to see yourself in media, in stories. One of the other criticisms we've gotten, I'll tell you all the criticisms. They're all interesting points. I got a letter that said, "why do you have to do this separate magazine, why don't you just put diverse people in your main magazines?" And we do, but the answer to that question is I was rereading the column you wrote for us; I saw something that I think really eloquently gave an answer to that. You said, "when I moved to New Hampshire, it was harder to find "my people". There was far less cultural and linguistic diversity visible in our state, so I had to intentionally seek out spaces where people were celebrating their cultures." That's, I think, what we're trying to do here, is not create a rift, but to point out something that the community in general might not be aware of. Like if you go outside of New Hampshire, New Hampshire has a reputation of not being diverse. In some places, it has a reputation for being intolerant. I don't think that it lacks diversity, and I don't think that the state lacks tolerance. I think it doesn't get those aspects of things pointed out enough. So, I think a vehicle, like 603 Diversity, is a good tool providing representation for diverse communities in the state, but also for letting people know outside the state, including business that might want to move here, including people who might want to move here to work, including young people who we would like to stay here as opposed to leave to go someplace more diverse, that this diversity already does exist within the state. So that's an opportunity to showcase that. I think it's good for the culture, I think it's good for business, I think it's good for both of those things.

IRL: I agree completely, and I want to just echo that including people with disabilities in discussions about diversity, equity, and inclusion add to that, and it adds to the visibility of that being part of our landscape in New Hampshire, and

this being a potential untapped workforce for example, that more businesses need to explore. Its important that we take into consideration, like we were talking about, what their needs are, in order to be contributing, productive members of society, which is what everyone wants.

EB: I look forward to talking more about this. New Hampshire Business Review has done a DEI from talk to action series of morning seminars over the past couple of years that have talked about the impact of DEI in business and on businesses. You and I have talked about the next one really having a focus on disabilities and the opportunity that exists there for both the disability community, but also for the businesses that are struggling to find workers.

IRL: Absolutely. I think that it's a huge pool of untapped resources in our state and that everyone would benefit from just being more inclusive in their hiring practices and having some built in supports and services for people who can do a good job, and just might need a little bit of help to do that. Well thank you so much for coming, this has been a wonderful discussion, and I look forward to working with you in the future. Especially, I am looking forward to the DEI talk to action focus on disability next year. Thanks again for coming.

EB: It was a pleasure, thank you for having me.

VB: Thank you for joining us today. I'm Vanessa Blais and this was a production of the New Hampshire Council on Developmental Disabilities produced by Isadora Rodriguez-Legendre, and Vanessa Blais with many thanks to Josh Hardy and rest of the crew here at Concord TV.

We love to have guests with differing perspectives. These are personal, and do not necessarily represent those of the DD Council.