

That's Inclusive!

Episode 16 Transcript

Episode title:

In this episode we talk about adaptive sports.

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?

CE: Hello and welcome to the That's Inclusive podcast from the New Hampshire Council on Developmental Disabilities. My name is Chase Eagleson. I am the Policy and Planning Coordinator at the New Hampshire Council on Developmental Disabilities. And today, we'll be focusing on adaptive sports. And with me to talk about adaptive sports I have –

KS: Kelly Starr. I am the Executive Director of Adaptive Sports Partners.

CE: Awesome and thank you for being with me today.

KS: Thank you for having us. We're very excited.

CE: So I'll just start right off. For those unfamiliar with the topic, would you mind describing what adaptive sports is?

KS: Sure. Adaptive sports broadly are sports, recreation, adventure activities that are catered to people of all kinds of disabilities. So sometimes that can be specialized equipment, that could be specialized instruction, it could be a combination of the two. It's really just to create access for everyone to access sports and recreation. Adaptive Sports Partners in particular is a non-profit organization, which a lot of adaptive sports organizations are—non-profits. And we operate for facilitate inclusion through sports and recreation and adventure.

CE: That's awesome. I for one am a big fan of sports in general. I grew up playing sports. I think I played about seven sports throughout middle and high school

including the kind of sports your organization offers. I love it. I know everyone that plays it regularly loves it. And I just love the fact that we have organizations like yours that offer adaptive versions so that everyone can actually play. It's no fun when people get left out. That's always the sad part.

KS: Yah, I agree. There's just a lot of joy and a lot of benefits that come from adaptive sports.

CE: It's a great community feeling. It seems so beneficial just to be there, even if you're just watching it. The opportunity to step in and play, throw the ball, or whatever you're gonna do is so important to that whole aspect.

KS: Exactly. And you can really participate at whatever level works for you. So if you just want to be part of the community and do some recreation, that's great. If you want to compete, there's that space too. If you want to do somewhere in between, you can really find your community niche.

CE: That's fantastic. So, tell me a little bit about, you're the Executive Director, you've been through this a lot. Tell me a little bit about what drew you to work with not just the disabilities community but with particularly adaptive sports.

KS: So actually my background is in special education. So I was a teacher and I was in the classroom. Loved my kids, loved being with them every day, but I noticed that really the goals were set up in the classroom in the education system just didn't cater to them. They were lacking the opportunity to recreate, lacking the opportunity to be part of the sports community, and really to be part of community in their school system and then outside of their school system. And while I loved it, I loved making relationships with my students and empowering them, I knew that I wanted them to be able to find the joys that I found and the passions that I found with recreation and sport. And so that lead me to experience adaptive sports. I was an intern for a variety of organizations and really was like, this brings meaning to people's lives and this is empowering and this is what brings joy. This is what helps people get outside and recreate and play and build community. It's very empowering and I think it's really important. So, that kind of was my trajectory. I working really directly with people with disabilities in the education system and then I thought there was a lack of programs to support outside of the school system.

CE: That's definitely true. You see all these sports offered in clubs offered in high school, middle school and even college, historically most of them have never even been close to inclusive. Adaptive was out of the question for ever, let's be honest. Other than wheelchair basketball, which even then, that's more segregative sports than it is adaptive than it is inclusive. Giving someone else something instead of joining together. Make a community sport. What sports are supposed to be. It's supposed to be community building. That actually leads me to my next question. Why is it so important in your eyes for sports to be adaptive?

KS: Yah. I would say in the grand plan of my dreams – adaptive sports wouldn't even exist in terms of specialized organizations. Like Adaptive Sports Partners, we're doing our job right, we're working ourselves out of a job because traditional sports settings are automatically inclusive of all. So they don't need us to help make them inclusive because they're designed for everyone. But, as we know, that's not the case in current standards. And that's ok and that's why we exist. That's why adaptive sports programs exist. So the importance of them really is just to kind of exactly what we've been talking about – we create a space where people can build community, they can build their skills, they can be empowered through sport, recreation and adventure. That can look like anything. It can be they're joining their school basketball team with support. They're taking swim lessons so that they're safe. They're training on the ski slope because that brings them a lot of joy and freedom. It can be they're using equipment or they have specialized instruction. Really, that's where we come in. Where a traditional setting doesn't work, we're trying to eliminate people with disabilities experiencing the "I don't belong here" or "You're not welcome here" or "try on a different team because this isn't the place for you". We're trying to really eliminate that and ensure that everyone has access.

CE: That's fantastic. Belonging is an essential part of life. I believe that's one of the bottom parts of Maslow's hierarchy. If you don't feel like you belong, if you don't think that you're part of the community that you are supposed to be a part of, it's seemingly impossible to join into it. One of the reasons I wanted to do this episode was I love sports in general, but adaptive sports brings an easier idea into

the community for many who for years and years have been socially isolated. Especially when it comes to recreational activities.

KS: And even historically, that's just like-- in terms of "you guys go here and everyone else can go there". So adaptive sports really helps to mold the progressive thinking. We all belong everywhere and we're going to establish that.

CE: There's no any segregated spaces and there never should be. Unfortunately we've had them. I think attacking it from the recreation angle is a very interesting one. We have organizations like White Park or some other adaptive trails and for a while they were kind of working the background because again, people didn't think that individuals with disabilities deserved to be in those spaces. Obviously, we both know there's no 'deserving'. We all are in those spaces because we're all here. I just want to say again, it's fantastic seeing the kind of opportunities you offer especially coming into the season. It's winter and this is New England, and we're kind of known for hockey, we're known for skiing, snowboarding. I actually noticed some adaptive skiing on your website. I was wondering if you'd talk about that?

KS: Yes, absolutely. And you bring up a good point about the region where we're at. Our communities where we operate out of- we're in the Franconia area, we're in the Northeast corner of Vermont, in the North Country of New Hampshire— two recreation meccas. They feed off of recreation. Everyone around you is recreating and enjoying these beautiful spots that we have – waterways, trails and skiing. And so, it's kind of in our culture of our communities. Having to imagine that you don't fit into that or do you? Hopefully, we're eliminating those questions for people. So, adaptive skiing. We're entering that season where we're doing all of our snow dances. We operate out of Canon Mountain, Burke Mountain and Jay Peak. It is amazing. So, we tons of equipment. We have things called bi-skis. Which are skis that have two skis on the bottom. We have mono-skis which is a with one ski on the bottom. We have a tetra-ski which has a joy stick operated ski as well as a huff and puff ski for high level injury or disability. And we also have tons of standup techniques to support whether that's people with autism, developmental disabilities, down syndrome – whatever it looks like. Whatever your disability is, we have a piece of equipment to get you out on the mountain and skiing and enjoying that.

CE: That's fantastic. And as someone from New England who regularly skis, who has his own skis, tries to do it every year we have snow- at this point it's not looking like we're have much snow this year. I think it's a huge part of community around here. We're New England. We're known for snow. We're known for being a bit frigid up here during the winter. And if you're not part of that culture, it's hard to feel like you're part of the New England community.

KS: It takes a toll on your mental health too.

CE: Especially since we're in such a rampant mental health crisis. It doesn't help when people are not allowed in to the very popular sports, the very popular pieces of the community that we have in New England that are so well known. Our trail hiking is very well known. That's become more adaptive over the years which is amazing. I've talking about skiing and snowboarding. I watched some videos on the seat with the two skis-

KS: Yes, the bike ski.

CE: I'm kind of jealous! That looks so entertaining. I really want to try it!

KS: You're always welcome to come and try it.

CE: I've seen them up at Pat's Peak and it always looks so cool.

KS: Yah, it's very fun.

CE: I guess there really is no wrong way to-

KS: No, go out and enjoy the snow, enjoy the mountains and build your community the way we've talked about.

CE: You m mentioned that you worked with JP Canon and Burke. Do you have things that you work out with those organizations like they help you guys get in there –

KS: Exactly. So they're all partners. All of our partners are amazing. We also have partners with North Country Climbing Gym, Evergreen for swimming, Powers Park for swimming, different hiking venues, golf courses. So we have all these partners that, as a non-profit, they are critical to our success. And these partners have essentially committed to being inclusive and to ensuring that everyone can access their spaces. And they've done that by committing to

partnering with us. And so by partnering with Adaptive Sports Partners, they're saying you guys are the experts. You are going to have the equipment, and the training and the knowledge to ensure that everyone can access what we have to offer here. They have been awesome. It's really important to have them-- Partners is in our name and it's something we're very appreciative of and just love their commitment to inclusion.

CE: It's really nice to hear. I grew up in New Hampshire. I've been here for 24 years and a lot of those names I know by heart at this point. And it's nice to see that over the years coming together as a community. Trying to actually make sure that everyone is included in every space. Because if you're not including them, you're excluding them. They're not there, you're trying not to let them be there. Some of these organizations like Canon, and some of the other ones you mentioned – it's nice to see that these big names are actually putting themselves out there and making sure that everyone has the opportunity to use their spaces to be part of the community and to just enjoy their days.

KS: It's just wonderful.

CE: And speaking about being part of the community, what are some of the benefits you have found being the Executive Director of Adaptive Sports when it comes to both the disabilities community and the communities in general?

KS: Great question. There are so many and I appreciate that you asked about the benefits to the community, too. The benefits to the community- we're in spaces we're creating just the acceptance amongst people with disabilities. Let's say you're at the ski mountain and you may not have experience with people with disabilities outside of being at Canon Mountain, or Jay, or Burke. And you're seeing us out there skiing and shredding and doing exactly what everyone else is doing. And it really just kind of normalizes, levels the playing field and you're like "we're all doing this". Same thing at the climbing gym, same thing with swimming. We're all in the community, we're all exercising, we're all recreating. Everyone can do it- that makes sense. Mountain biking, whatever it is. You see us out on the trails and it just kind of humanizes everyone. We're all doing the same thing regardless of disability. I think that's important for a community. Not having any separation. Everyone is just together doing what we all love. And then when it comes to people with disabilities, the same benefits we all have with

recreation. There's positive mental health, there's physical fitness, there's community, there's social improvements. All of those are even more important for people with disabilities because of the additional challenges that come with having a disability. So you might already be behind the game in terms of being able to exercise or being able to get out and go for a run on your own or go for a bike ride on your own because you might not have the equipment. Whereas we're trying to eliminate that and to really work on being a place where you can experience the benefits. Because there's so many outside and movement and getting through winter positively. Having a social community. It's huge.

CE: It's a massive part of what we're all trying to do, which is to push inclusion. Because as we know, for years, social relations have been a plague on the disabilities community. I want to focus on one of the things you said. You don't know until you know. And a lot of the people just haven't experienced getting to meet and getting to know someone who that has a disability. A lot of people just sort of live in a social bubble way. Where you only know the things that you know and everything else is foreign to you. I think organizations like yours, like Adaptive Sports, and many other organizations throughout the state – we're very lucky to have done a great job making sure that everyone is in every space. Without that, ignorance just prevails.

KS: And you know, kind of with that, I know one person with this disability or one person with this disability, that's one person you know with one disability. As we know, disabilities look so different on a bunch of different people even if it's the same disability. Or different ages or different genders, or whatever. All this looks very different. I think it's important to show different types of disabilities that are out there, what your bodies can do, what your minds can do. Yah, you meet one person with a disability – you meet one person with a disability.

CE: As you said, it normalizes everything. Again, a lot of it doesn't seem normal at times to people but then you meet an individual with a disability. As the ADA says, disability is a normal part of the human experience. It's just another thing in life. We're all different from each other. No one's the exact same, even twins. I think it's extremely important for individuals with disabilities to be able to be there so people can experience. Without experience you don't really know what it's like. We've kind of talked about some more serious stuff so I want to get into

some more fun stuff. I just want to have you talk a little bit about the programs that Adaptive Sports offers and just focus on some of your favorites that you've seen.

KS: Skiing is definitely my favorite. We've talked a lot about that one. There's no doubt that it is my favorite program. Anyone will tell you that. I just love people that are skiing with their school groups and skiing with their families and skiing with their partners and skiing with us. I think skiing is such a community, such a vibe, and is wonderful. And our partnerships with our ski resorts are also so great and it's so nice to see that. I also really like swimming is a great one. Adaptive swimming is so incredible. And it's not only a safety thing in terms of learning how to swim, but it's also just a relaxing place and it's an exercise and it's just really great for the mind. Swimming is amazing. We have adaptive biking and kayaking in the spring and summer and fall and they are--fall kayaking is just gorgeous. Mountain biking with the leaves changing. Amazing. We have a learn a bike program. That program is just wonderful, teaching all ages how to bike via balance bikes. And so you typically think of balance bikes for toddlers but these are for all people who are interested in being on a two-wheel bikes. We can support teaching you how to find your balance and bike with pedal. So I also like the programs that are not traditional adaptive sports as you would think with heavy equipment. There are some that are just, people learning how to ride a bike. It's amazing.

CE: That is amazing. A lot of those things are so important. Life tools, most people need to know how to ride a bike. People just like riding bikes, especially around here. You go around in the fall where it's beautiful or bike around and look how nice it is around here. Things like swimming. Swimming is extremely important for this area. Lots of waterways.

KS: Lots of waterways - Reservoirs, ponds, lakes.

CE: Lots of places to go. Kancamagus. Go over to Vermont, go to Queechee. Winnisquam. There are so many different places to swim around here. Being able to be part of that experience is being able to understand what it is to be a New Englander. So it's kind of what we do. It's pretty much all we do. So that was actually the last question that I had for you. Is there anything else you'd like to say before we wrap it up?

KS: No, that's good.

CE: Well, thank you listening. This has been That's Inclusive! If you'd like to reach out to Adaptive Sports--

KS: You can always call me: 802-307-2940 or shoot me an email at kelly@adaptivesportspartners.org and have you talk to everyone. Reach out.

CE: Thank you for listening and thank you for coming Kelly.

KS: Thank you so much for having me. It's great.

Vanessa Blais (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.