

That's Inclusive!

Episode Bonus Episode, Sheila Vargas interview Transcript

Episode title: Accessing outdoor recreation

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Sheila Vargas, the Community Partnerships Manager at the Nature Conservancy, talks with Blake Tyler about involving the community in planning accessible outdoor recreation , how preset notions send a false message that nature is only for certain people, and how the work to make the outdoors more inclusive to everyone continues.

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?

B = Blake

S = Sheila

B - Sweet, well uh hey everybody it's Blake with the New Hampshire Council on Developmental Disabilities. I'm the Social Media Assistant so you may have seen some postings from me over the last few weeks and months. I handle the postings on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Hopefully you really like the information, resources and etcetera that we post and if you don't, I am the guy to complain to. But like I said hopefully you guys have liked it. I'm here today recording some audio for our next podcast episode of our show, and I've thought that with the weather finally getting nicer and it not being torrential downpours every other day, knock on wood, that folks can finally get outside and we're going to be talking about all access trails and kind of the universal design aspects that go into some of these all access trails.

As somebody who enjoys the outside myself, I'm a runner, love running out there, I just think it's really important and I brought in my friend Sheila from The Nature

Conservancy based here in New Hampshire to talk about some of the great work she and her organization have done on that front and yeah Sheila if you wanna just introduce yourself!

S - Yeah absolutely. Hi Blake, thanks for having me on. As Blake said my name is Sheila Vargas and I am the Community Partnerships Manager for an organization called The Nature Conservancy. So, The Nature Conservancy is actually a global organization and I work for the New Hampshire Chapter. We have a chapter in almost every state in the United States and we do lots of work across the state of New Hampshire. We're statewide, so we do everything from marine work to preserving and maintaining land.

And in New Hampshire we were actually able to help protect nearly 300,000 acres of forests, fields and other natural areas. So today I'll be sharing a little bit about our process to make a couple of our preserves more accessible.

B - Awesome yeah again thank you so much for joining and for all the amazing work The Nature Conservancy is doing here in New Hampshire. As I said to you guys, I love being outside. Personally I have not gotten the chance to run on their All Persons Trail in Manchester actually, which we're going to talk about a little bit later in the show.

But very much enjoy being outside and for me when I think about why all access trails should be widely available to everybody both myself and of course the disabled community why it's so important I think being outdoors is in some respects the great equalizer for society. It's meant for everybody, there should be a great deal of equity when it comes to outdoor spaces and enjoyed by all. And so, for me that's why it's really important and I'm just wondering Sheila why that is so important for you and your work, as you go about doing it?

S - Yeah so in my work as the Community Partnerships Manager I really serve as the connective tissue. I like to give that visual, between community members, organizations, companies, and our organization and our mission, which is to preserve the lands and waters on which all life depends, obviously humans, and animals, and plant species.

And so, for us we really are in a power up position of privilege as a global environmental organization in so many ways. Especially as the stewards of so much land in North America. Alone we own and manage a little over 2 million acres and we understand like you just said that everyone really does deserve to reap the benefits of being out in nature. And it doesn't necessarily have to be on a hike in the White Mountains, it can be in a park, it can be in a garden. And so for us, we feel that it's important that those who have access to nature and are actually able to enjoy nature are as diverse as nature itself.

And if you look back at history, and honestly even things like old catalogs for outdoor retailers, you really have typically only seen one type of person enjoying nature. And so for us it's really important again that that representation of folks who are out there increases and one way to do that is to create all access trails on the properties that we own and manage.

B - Yeah, I love the phrase connective tissue. I very much in my work, which can be hard to visualize for folks sometimes, love images, love the idea of giving them an image just help, you know, visualize that work and why it's important so I love that, thanks for using that phrase.

You touched on something really interesting and it's actually not in our preset of questions so I'm going to go a little off script for the folks at home. You mentioned a really interesting point how when you look at media and papers and stuff, forward facing information about these trails like you said they are all one type of person. What are some of the dynamics at play there that you think feed into that, is that socio-economic, is that racial, is that able-bodied-ness, just curious what preset notion society has for that that causes us to only see one type of person when these trails are being broadcast shall we say?

S - Yeah, I mean, and I would say there's science, there's social science, to back up some of the points I'm about to make. Also a lot of this can be seen just by looking around at various neighborhoods. So, typically more affluent neighborhoods have more green spaces. So for us that's really the first part of this.

The individuals who have more money, have more resources, have more affluence in society tend to have the nicer parks, the bike trails, access to those

green spaces. So socio-economics does play a huge role into that, just generally the power dynamics when it comes to our society where typically our society has really given power to those that not just have wealth but who are able-bodied, who are cis-gendered, who are a certain type of person. So, I think it really does lend to just the history of not just our country but I think human society in general.

B - Right, and I love that you mention the social sciences aspect of it. It makes a lot of sense. You know walking, running, whatever around Manchester you go to certain parts of the city, and you go “the sidewalks are bad, there’s not a lot of trees, the parks are many miles away.” You go to other certain parts of the city, and you go “there’s the park, there’s the nice bike lane, there’s this and that, the sidewalks are nice and even and paved.”

Definitely can attest to what you’re saying, and that kind of leads into the next segue here. What are some ways collectively that everybody who likes being outside, able-bodied, or otherwise, can come together to make all access trails that do exist even better and more widely available for folks, and putting it on their radar. Something a lot of folks just don’t know about these things?

S - Yeah, yeah, that’s a great question, it’s also I think a very big question to unpack so I can talk a little bit about our process and how we went about because frankly as I said our organization is in a power up position and instead of just saying “hey we want to build an all access trail to feel warm and fuzzy and good about ourselves” we decided to actually talk to community members and community organizations and say “hey we’re thinking about building this trail, in your community, and we want it to be used, we want it to be a resource, we want it to be a place where everyone feels welcome and everyone feels a sense of ownership and has a safe space to be able to get the mental and physical benefits of actually being in nature. So, in order to do that we’re looking for your input. What can we do to make this is actually all of those things and maybe more?

And so we held a series of six listening sessions, unfortunately with COVID a lot of them had to be virtual. We had this awesome plan of having them at various spaces across the city of Manchester. We were able to have one in person, which was amazing and very well attended. It was at Backyard Brewery too so I think

that may have had a little bit to do with the turnout. But it was very interesting just to hear so many different perspectives from individuals around what are the barriers to nature.

And for us that was really the first step was like “what are the barriers to doing this in a way where it's built with the community not just for the community. Because there's a big difference between those two things. Because while we can own and steward land, and build trails, until we actually have input from people who think differently from us, that don't live every day in this conservation bubble, we really can't advance our mission in an equitable way. So first step I think for communities, organizations, anyone who's interested in doing this is really to taking the time to getting the input and frankly our project was slated to be about a little over a year and turned out to be a little over three years. And that's we really slowed down the process in order to to really listen and learn to the barriers about all types of people, all different backgrounds and abilities. That contributed to us being able to build our all persons trail. And it's called an all persons trail because we really want it to be for all people.

B - Right, and she's alluding to the one in Manchester folks, over at the Cedar Swamp area. Again, shamefully I have not run there yet even though it is like a mere 10 minute drive away so I do need to just make it happen and stop making excuses personally.

You mentioned in part of your process about those listening sessions, you know my organization, we do some listening sessions here and there and I'm just so curious, two branching thoughts that came while you were discussing that. One being, prior to the actual day of the listening session what was y'all's process, whether door knocking around that community or social media campaign and a phone calling campaign, whatever it may be, what kind of went into building attendance for that and really getting the word out there, like “hey we want to hear from you so please attend because otherwise we're not being, you know you talked about intentionality you know when you said it went from a one year timeline to a three-year timeline, because you guys were intentional about really digging in and listening to the community and kind of piecing all that together.

So, that was one little question I had. And then a follow up to that would be at the actual listening sessions what were some of those stories of barriers, of hurdles,

that the community mentioned to you guys that factored into how you went about, you know creating the trail, and what went into that based on the hurdles that you heard about.

S - Yeah, I might have to have you repeat the second question. Because I know I'll probably have to ramble a little bit. But just really quick two things that I wanted to mention off the bat is that we actually have two all access trails in New Hampshire. I think I may have referred to them at the beginning. But just so individuals are aware there is one at our Ossipee Pines Barren Preserve, in Ossipee, so that one was built with a lot of recommendations, because there are existing recommendations around how to build all access trails to varying degrees.

That was our first trail, and we learned a lot from building that and then the fact that we own and steward land in Manchester within the city limits, it's actually the largest unbroken block of land within the city of Manchester. Most people are surprised and that was something we heard a lot during our listening sessions. Individuals were really surprised to hear that there was a 640-acre preserved piece of land in the city of Manchester even though the city's master plan actually refers to the preserve as a hidden gem of the city, a jewel of the city.

B - I didn't know and I've lived here my whole life!

S - Yeah! And so that was really one of the first things that we discovered was that while the Nature Conservancy has been in New Hampshire for over 60 years, we have not done a ton of work from Concord south in regards to engaging with community members. We've done some work specifically with various municipalities and some other work but when it comes to actually engaging with communities and ways that is on the community's terms I've only been with the organization, it'll be 5 years in October, it really started with the onboarding of my position but also with our amazing stewardship staff who goes out every single day and manages our properties and just a huge shoutout to them because without having actual conservation practitioners who are onboard with creating all access trails, it really cannot happen.

So, the fact that our stewardship staff was really the pioneers in our chapters in wanting to make these lands accessible and understanding the benefits that it could have for all people. I really would be remiss if I didn't give them a shoutout. Uhm, but just back to your question, what was the first question? (laughs)

B - That was the first question! It was kind of, you know the awareness campaign and all that.

The second question, what we wanted to hear about, was some of those hurdles and barriers you heard from those listening sessions, and also how you spread the awareness of said listening sessions whether it was a door knocking campaign, a phone banking campaign, a social media, or you know the good way of doing it, all of the above!

S - Yeah no I personally love talking about this because even though it set our project back a couple of years, the listening sessions was actually my favorite part of this whole project. Aside from the trail being complete and our continued partnerships that we're doing on the trails with various groups in the city, as well as some guided walks.

But the listening sessions were awesome and just for some context I come from a background of community organizing and issue advocacy with various political campaigns. So for me building partnerships with organizations who serve the community that we are seeking to serve was the first step. So we held six listening sessions and I reached out to organizations that either had vast memberships in the Manchester area or were very involved in the Manchester area.

So, the listening sessions that we held were physical access to nature, black in nature, LGBTQ+ in nature, active seniors in nature and there was one more that I cannot remember. But yeah those were for individuals who obviously felt like they identified within those groups or allies of those groups and everyone was welcome.

They weren't exclusive listening sessions, we also held various coffee updates, but we knew that we wanted to create a space where people could say, "hey I identify with this group that's meeting to talk about some of the barriers."

Frankly a lot of the barriers that we heard in the listening sessions were cross cutting. So transportation to green spaces, that was across all groups. That was number one right, like and awareness of where these trails even are. For me the first step was building relationships with groups like the NAACP, like AARP, like The Disability Rights Center, like Opportunity Networks and really saying “hey we’re looking to build this trail, we want to incorporate input”.

We have not been at the table with a lot of these groups that we’re seeking to serve, and we acknowledge that. We’re late to the game with engaging with these communities. But we want to have this trail really serving everyone. And the best way to do that is to get input and so we built trust with these partners first over a time period, really meeting with them, talking with them about our plans, our intentions and then we did a lot of the heavy lifting for the events which is frankly how it should be when you haven’t been at the table.

So, we said we’ll run the Zoom calls, we’ll provide you with a script, but we felt it was really important for the groups that actually work with said community members to really be moderators for the listening sessions. There’s no point in a staff member from The Nature Conservancy, who community members have never heard of, never seen, never interacted with, going into a community and saying, “hey we’re doing this cool thing. Will you trust me, and be vulnerable with me, and talk to me about your barriers to getting outside?”

We understood that in order to actually have feedback that was coming from an authentic and vulnerable place of trust that individuals needed to have a facilitator that was from that community, that has a reputation of serving that community. So the moderators of each of those listening sessions were actually from those communities. Which helped us a lot because we were able to say “Hi we’re the Nature Conservancy, we’re running this Zoom call. We want to build this trail”, kind of show a quick draft of what we were thinking for the trail, give an overview of what the preserve is, the fact that it even exists. And then the moderator, who represented that group, was really able to take it away and ask questions around what the barriers were.

B - Yeah, I think that’s really smart. As Sheila mentioned she comes from the world of community organizing, with some mostly political splashes of color in there as well. For folks at home, that is also the world I come from, before landing

at the Council and the other non-profit I work for, I come from the political campaign/organizing world as well.

And I can't just knock on a door and say "hey can you vote for my candidate, or come volunteer even", take the extra step be vulnerable and volunteer your time to talk about my candidate with other voters. I would always start with "hey seems like we jive on a couple of issues that we talked about at the door. Can I grab a cup of coffee with you, can I get a lunch with you, and really dig in and be intentional about forming an organic relationship with that person. So that I wasn't Blake the campaign staffer asking for a favor down the line, it was Blake my friend who happens to work for this campaign, asking a favor down the line.

S - Yeah, yup!

B – I really like that you guys are intentional with that process and centering the voices that needed to be you know front and center.

S - And I do wanna clarify really quick that our process was not perfect, and I tend to preface a lot of my conversations about that point is that our process is not the gospel. We did create a guidebook for what we did because we received so many requests around "what was your process?" Even just things like "How did you identify a contractor?" just very little things right?

So, we only have so much capacity. And we thought the best way to increase the accessibility of a lot of these trails or just make more all access trails in New Hampshire just generally was to put our process on paper. So, there is a downloadable guidebook on our website that we share far and wide because we can't present to every conservation commission, every foundation, every non-profit. So we do refer everyone to that guidebook which is extremely detailed down to the time, the staff time, the funding, every single detail that we did and we share that not to say this is the best way, we share that to say this is the way that we did it and if a conservation commission, if another organization can even take one or two little pieces of our process to benefit their process, that's a win for us.

Because we don't want everyone to do it the way that we did it, we understand many organizations can't do it the way that we did it and frankly communities are

very different and not everyone should do it the way that we did it. But we felt that at least sharing our process in detail could help a few organizations and conservation commissions along the way.

B - Yeah, I think that makes a lot of sense, my go to phrase with most things in life is different strokes for different folks and if they want to take a few pieces of that and then build it into their plan that works.

For the folks at home who maybe don't know, although my postings here and there kind of out me, I am a runner by trade, I like to go running, I'm one of those crazy people who thinks that running twenty some odd miles on any given day is quote on quote fun. But, you know I'm training for my first marathon right now, that I've ever done and there's a billion and one training plans right that float out there in the running world ether shall we say, and what works for one runner, may not work for the next runner etc. And I kind of look at all these plans and make a smorgasbord, which is another of my favorite words, and I piece together what will work for me knowing my body, my needs, my goals etc. and time consumption. And use that as a springboard to do my plan.

So, it sounds like you guys did something similar with the guidebook on the website. And, folks can look at it, it's accessible, and take what works and what doesn't work, and build out their own.

And for the folks at home when this episode gets posted I will do another post on our social medial channels with a link TNC's website with the guidebook so everybody can readily access that. But as Sheila said, it's on their website.

We want to talk about, you mentioned awareness, and one of the hurdles you hear is "I didn't even know this trail existed!" I knew the all persons trail existed, I did not know it was over 600 acres of land. I knew it was about a 1.2 ish mile loop if I recall our conversation a couple of summers ago correctly when I actually met you.

S - Yeah! Great memory, great memory! (laughs)

B - One of my many gifts, right? No just kidding for everyone at home, but I do have a decent memory. Talking about spreading awareness of the trails, The Nature Conservancy, and the DD Council and a number of other partners are involved in a pretty fun project this summer that I'm going to let Sheila talk about to spread awareness of existing all persons and all access trails. And I'll let you take that Sheila!

S - I'm just so happy that the DD Council invited the Nature Conservancy on to talk about not just our trail and our process but about ways that we can all partner together. Not just groups that serve the disability community, but groups like conservation organizations or education organizations or housing organizations like how are ways, what are the ways that we can partner in innovative ways to really start making sure that our communities are beneficial to all people, and that includes green spaces. And so with awareness being the number one issue, I think probably next to transportation, they were pretty even when it came to barriers, we have obviously continued our partnerships with pretty much all of the groups frankly that we worked with to build the all persons trail.

Because a big part of my role is not just building partnerships for the sake of building partnerships, I'm very against transactional relationships in my personal and professional life and so I always tell people I'm happy to meet you for coffee but I hope you know I'm going to be in your inbox a lot for the foreseeable future so I'm sorry in advance for that. And really building long lasting relationships and so something that we kept hearing is that it's great that the all persons trail is there but not everybody lives in Manchester or near Manchester. And not everyone knows about other trails throughout the state because there are other trails.

The Nature Conservancy is not the only organization that has all access trails. There were other organizations, like Tin Mountain, who came well before us and built an all access trail and I'm sure there are many others that I have a list of somewhere but don't remember off the top of my head so really want to be sure that I'm not just centering the Nature Conservancy in our work to make nature more equitable for people and mitigate the impacts of climate change on communities.

But how do we help to collaborate with the greater community? Because the Nature Conservancy can't build all of the all access trails in New Hampshire. We are incapable of doing that and after building that trail, so many people have said "when's the next trail?" "Are you going to build another trail?" and we're like, "actually we should probably take a step back based on what we learned, speak with our partners who actually work with and serve the disability community and say "what are the ways that we can be more effective and actually spreading awareness?" and increasing transportation to green spaces because those are the two big things that we heard.

B - Yeah like you can't do the one without the other.

S - Exactly, it's one thing to know that something exists, it's another to actually be able to get there.

And then another thing even after that to even feel comfortable going there either by yourself or with others and so we're going to be doing a really cool campaign in the next few months. Actually Blake, I have to give you credit for the hashtag or the name of the campaign which is #NHTrails4All, the number four, and so it's really just an ad hoc coalition, so it's not an exclusive coalition, so anyone who is part of an organization or an entity that serves the disability community and wants to learn more about this or potentially get involved and spread the word we welcome that. That's typically how we work because the more the merrier.

We are going to be highlighting either 5 or 6 accessible trails, it's really a pilot at this point, I will say Trailfinder, it's run by UNH Cooperative Extension, is a great resource if you're looking to find all access trails. Again, like many resources, nothing is a silver bullet so I'm sure there are things on there that could be updated in regards to what trails are actually all access and what are the conditions etc.

But really our campaign, NHTrails4All, again in the pilot year, very much in its infancy, is looking to spread awareness about 5-6 trails across the state, not just in the southern tier, where a majority of people live, but across the state and say "hey it's the 33rd anniversary of the ADA, which is amazing, I'm a little shocked

honestly that the ADA is as old as I am. It makes me feel just weird about the whole thing.

B - As she outs herself with her age, so great (both laugh)

S - Yeah, yeah, but where are these trails in New Hampshire and making sure that we are highlighting them in different regions and not just paying attention to in Rockingham and Hillsborough County where a majority of the population lives because we know there are individuals with disabilities everywhere! Not just in Rockingham and Hillsborough Counties. And those individuals deserve just as much as anyone else to be able to know where are all access trails and be able to benefit from nature. So more to come on that but just really exciting to start spreading awareness.

B - Right and I'm very excited to be doing that with you guys! I think I volunteered myself as a guinea pig to check out a couple of the trails because I do love trail running, actually did it this morning, mild heat exhaustion quickly followed so for folks out there, when you get out there and do enjoy these trails, bring water bring a hat, bring sunscreen, you know all the things because it is toasty out there. But definitely look forward to posting from all our social media channels at the Council as we put this campaign together. You may get videos of me out on the trail, hopefully I look my Sunday best when I'm out there running but stay tuned on that.

And just wanted to thank you Sheila for taking out the time to hop on and do this show with me and record and just shining a light on the real importance of the expansion of all access trails, constantly making them better because I don't believe in creating something and being like "it's great forever!" Needs change, people change, as is with nature, erosion, climate change, the trails change! So, there's improvements and updates that need to happen. So, thanks for shining a light on that and why the equity behind that is so important.

And so, folks this has been That's Inclusive! Podcast. You can find it on our website, I think this episode is getting posted in a couple of months I need to check with my higher ups as they say, my bosses and I believe you can also find it on Spotify which is kind of cool, I recently caved and got Spotify myself, I was an Apple Music guy and now I play for both teams I'm on Spotify and Apple Music.

But you can find the episode there. And, I just want to thank you Sheila, again, from The Nature Conservancy in New Hampshire. Fun fact, I did not know you guys were such a broad organization, I knew you were in New Hampshire, but did not realize it was basically in every state in this country. That's crazy!

S - Yeah! I believe we are in 72 countries and territories so we're out here but we tend to be very behind the scenes and more centering our partners in our work so we're here and we're always welcoming individuals to collaborate with us and give us feedback, we love feedback, good feedback, bad feedback and everything in between so please reach out to us with any questions or ways that we can improve!

B - Yeah, I call it in my life and in my work, bad feedback doesn't exist just constructive criticism, with most things that I do. So, thank you everybody for listening in. Have a safe, happy, and healthy summer. Stay cool or stay dry depending on if we're going to have months like June like we had here and just have a great rest of your Friday and a great weekend!

S - Thanks Blake, thanks everyone!

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.