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# Accessible Communication - Community of Practice

The **Accessible Communication - Community of Practice** project is a collaboration between Allen Higgins, Research Associate, UCD College of Business, and Tina Lowe, UCD Campus Accessibility Officer (UCD Access & Lifelong Learning Centre), developed under the University for All Faculty Partnership programme at UCD. The idea was to develop a learning channel for students and faculty for the UCD College of Business to create a sustainable, open and accessible teaching resource by engaging with the UCD community and civil society. The aim was a learning resource for highlighting and raising awareness about access and inclusion, its issues and innovations.

## Inspiration

It is a very human thing to be drawn to stories. Conversations open a space, a place to articulate subtle but significant insights. We were inspired by journalist Siobhán McHugh's book 'The Power of Podcasting' and were determined to put storytelling at the centre of the project. Our goal was to serve a community of learners and build a learning resource of conversations about access and inclusion in the University and wider afield. These would be conversations with people for whom greater access and inclusion means being able to participate fully in the world. They would also be conversations with those who support them: experts, agencies, academics, designers, practitioners, friends and family.

## Deliverables

The podcast is titled **The Blind Spot with Tina Lowe**. The first season consists of 12 episodes including the trailer (summarised in Table 1 and illustrated in Figure 1).

Episode number	Title	Speakers
0	Trailer	Tina Lowe
1	My Story	Tina Lowe
2	Sensory Gardens	Marie Staunton and Christopher Heavey
3	Invisible Disabilities	Blánaid Gavin and Deirdre O'Connor
4	Universal Access	Roger Flood, Dolores Henchin and Fiona Kelly
5	Media 4 Disability	Dara Ryder and Aibhe Conneely
6	Paralympic Athletes	Nicole Turner, Patrick Flanagan and Jacqui Hurley
7	The Built Environment	Orla Hegarty and Lorraine Gallagher
8	Irish Guide Dogs	Zifa O'Brien, Lean Kennedy and Tim O'Mahony
9	Accessible Technology	Sean Doran and Kyran O'Mahoney
10	Student Union Support	Ruairi Power, Aoife Bracken and Molly Greenough
11	Podcast Learnings	Conor Reid, Jessica Viola and Allen Higgins

Table 1. The Blind Spot with Tina Lowe - Episodes from season 1

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**Please note** for the purpose of this article a selection from the series is embedded and includes the transcript for each of the following: the trailer to the series, episode 3 - Invisible Disabilities, episode 5 - Media 4 Disability, episode 7 - The Built Environment and episode 9 - Accessible Technology.

[Listen to the complete Blind Spot season 1 podcast series here](#)

## Design Challenges and Choices

The challenge for educators engaging with access, inclusion, equality and diversity, is that they are broad topics. Their impact on people is often unseen yet pervasive, invisible to others yet impactful and confronting to the person in the moment of experiencing some disabling aspect of the world. **So how do you make these issues real for an audience of learners?**

The beauty of a podcast is that it feels like a one-on-one medium. Among the reasons for choosing to create a podcast was that, as a means of representation, audio, like radio, doesn't necessarily demand full sensory attention. Like radio, it can be consumed both actively and passively. It also offers a powerful alternative to video as the spoken word on its own can work actively and subliminally as a medium for learning. Pragmatically, as Tina is blind, audio was the perfect medium for her to create content and engage with a wider audience. Tina's objective for the Blind Spot was also to highlight her lived experiences since losing her sight in her mid-twenties. Tina has worked since then in the area of accessibility, raising awareness on disability matters. She works with various personnel in UCD on creating accessible buildings and services, including with staff with disabilities. Through the UCD staff disability network, she is able to support disability issues staff want to raise.

The Blind Spot podcast features a number of guests chosen by Tina to explore a range of different issues that affect people with disabilities including education, sport, employment and transport. Other aspects are featured, such as sensory garden trails and specific invisible disabilities. Tina and her guests discuss how to raise awareness and change the culture to create an inclusive society, one which will enable everyone to participate on an equal basis.

Tina states that creating the podcasts was hugely enjoyable. The opportunity to talk to a wide range of very committed guests and research issues in more depth has enabled the Blind Spot to be what Tina hopes will be a very informative and enjoyable podcast experience.

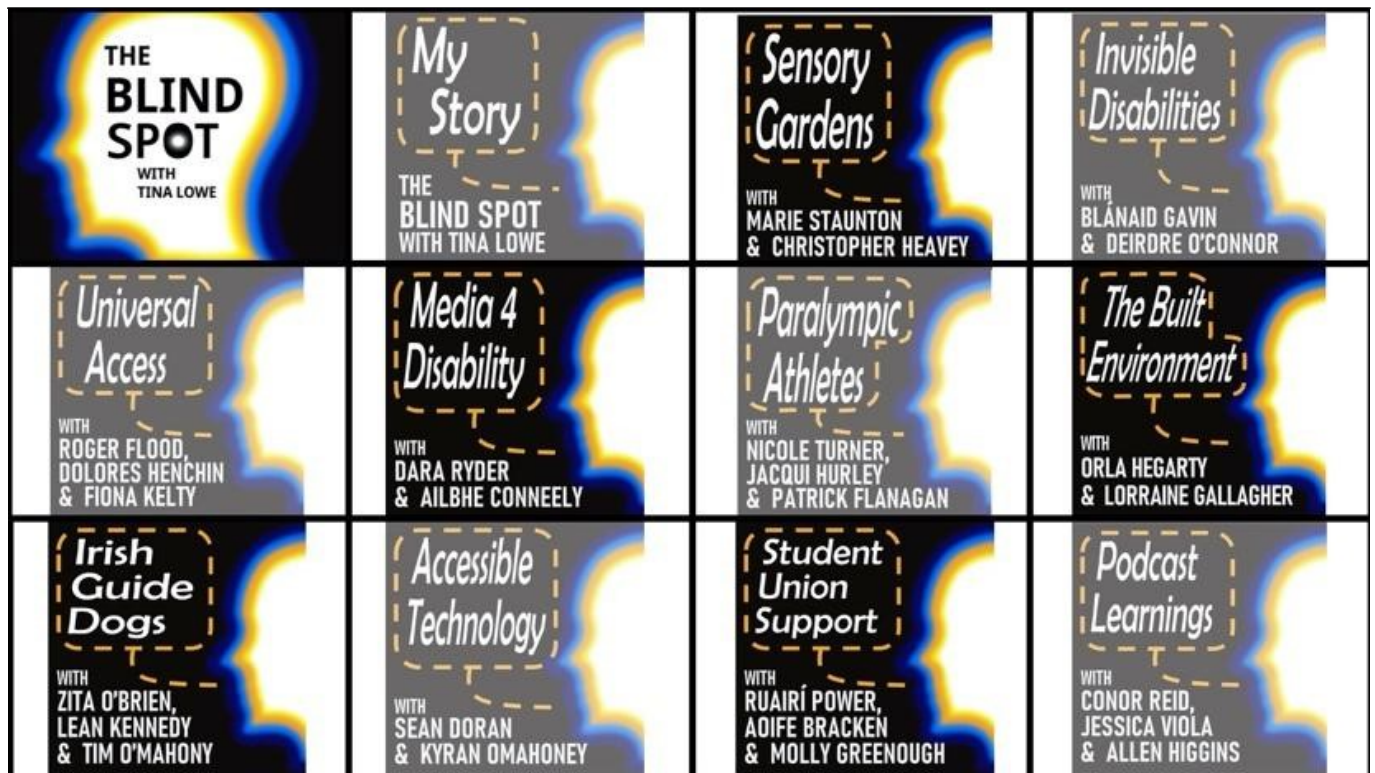


Figure 1: cover art for the first 12 episodes of season 1 of the Blind Spot podcast.

## Conclusions

The move to greater online and hybrid learning has created both opportunities and challenges for educators. It offers the promise of expanding access, of including all students, in particular those with disabilities. How best then to tap into the allure of technology to deliver rich, accessible and engaging learning experiences? Can we create meaningful online learning experiences that connect learners with each other and with educators? Well, yes and no. We think the answer is, 'it depends!'

Many of us find ourselves in the situation of not even being able to access learning materials let alone taking part in learning experiences that support our own unique needs. Can podcasts address all needs? No. No single medium or channel has that power. But podcasting offers another channel for learners and educators, another means of representation, access, and participation.

## Transcript for Trailer

### THE BLIND SPOT

#### Trailer

TINA: Hi, I'm Tina Lowe and I'm the host of The Blind Spot Podcast, a Podcast in which we will explore our blind spots to accessibility and how we can create a more inclusive and accessible Ireland in which everyone can participate on an equal basis.

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It's called The Blind Spot because I believe that we all have blind spots when it comes to accessibility, and I have experienced this first-hand. When I was 27, I lost my sight out of the blue and my life changed dramatically. I had to retrain, re-educate and reassess how to live my life as a blind person. When I lost my sight, I realised how inaccessible Ireland is and ever since then I made it my goal and daily ambition to try and improve accessibility. People can acquire a disability at any age or stage in their lives. When this happens, they have to become aware of how to navigate an inaccessible environment and that is why I created the Podcast because I wanted to show how you can create an Accessible Ireland for all. Each week we will have guests on to talk about their work in the area of accessibility in amazing technologies and design thinking that people can incorporate into building landscapes, streetscapes, to make them inclusive for all.

So, join me on this journey of making access a success on The Blind Spot Podcast.

## Transcript for episode 3 - Invisible Disabilities

### THE BLIND SPOT

#### 3. Neurodiversity and Invisible Disabilities:

TINA: In today's episode we are going to chat with Blánaid Gavin and Deirdre O'Connor about invisible disabilities.

So, you're both very welcome. We are going to start today by talking to Blánaid and I'm going to ask you Blánaid, if you don't mind, give me a little bit about your background?

BLÁINAID: Thank you Tina. And thanks for the invite to be here today. I'm really delighted to have this chance to be talking on this topic. So, I am a childhood and adolescent psychiatrist and I've worked for 20 years in clinical practice with people with different types of mental health difficulties. Over the last 15 years or so, I've been working with children and teenagers, and I specialise currently in children with different, neurodevelopmental conditions, mostly ADHD. So, that is my clinical background if you like and then I also work here in the University in the School of Medicine.

TINA: Okay. That is great and Deirdre?

DEIRDRE: Thanks Tina and again thanks for the invitation to be here. I'm an Academic I am a lecturer and

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researcher in the School of Agriculture and Food Science in the College of Agricultural and Health Sciences. So, in addition to lecturing and researching, I'm Associate Dean for equality, diversity and inclusion in the school as well.

TINA: That's great. You're very welcome both of you. Thank you so much. So Blánaid, can I start by asking you, can you explain to me the term, neurodiversity?

BLÁINAID: Sure. So it's a term that is growing in popularity almost, but it's been around maybe ten or 20 years and essentially what it refers to is the idea that just like so many forms of diversity in human life, biodiversity, there are differences in neurological development and people have different cognitive processes and there's diversity in how our brains work and the thinking is that probably about 70 or 80% of the population is so-called neurotypical, where their brain is fairly similar in terms of its cognitive functioning. So, you could be better with some things than others as we all are but there is a reasonably limited amount of variation in that. And then they estimate that maybe 10 or 20% of the population have a much spikier cognitive profile, where the people within this cluster in the population have much more difference, much more variability between things that come very easily for them and that they are particularly able for and other areas of cognitive functioning that are much more challenging. And that really is a concept of neurodiversity, the essence that there is a difference in the population, cognitive functioning, just as you would expect in any aspect of the human condition, if you like.

TINA: Is the term neurodiversity used now because it's trying to show that we are all different, as opposed to being say, I would have said in the past, discriminated against or marginalized. Can you talk to me a bit about that, the way invisible disabilities are probably, have changed in the past 20 years?

BLÁINAID: Yeah. I think your question there is very well put. It's looking at that idea of difference and diversity as opposed to there being a right and a wrong and the idea with it is that there is a natural variation and that natural variation contributes to the richness of all our life experiences, just as it does across all the ecological spectra. And that is what is represented and it's not about framing people as being deficient in some way, that it's recognising that there's a different way of being and the idea of framing it in that way is not just about recognising difference rather than deficit but it's also about reframing the way society thinks that if we see it as difference rather than deficit then we can do something about thinking about well how do we embrace this difference? How do we bring it to its fullest fruition and how do we adapt just so it doesn't become a deficit just because of the way society responds?

Q: So that is the change you would see possibly in the last 20 years, a much more positive embracing.

A: I think so. I think there is a lot more positive embracing. I think there's a lot more desire to understand and I think there's a lot more desire to accommodate. And I think there's also a sense of greater aspiration that instead of the idea that you are just going to clunk people into a particular box that there is a sense that everybody has something to bring to the table and embracing difference allows that and facilitates that sense that if we are all there at the table, we all will contribute meaningfully and therefore we all have a greater chance to fulfil our potential.

TINA: Very good. And would that be why I see that you have set up a neurodiversity institute; can you talk to us about that?

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BLÁINIAD: Yeah, so what we are doing here in UCD is we are looking at establishing, well we have established what we're calling the neurodiversity project. And from a personal point of view, the reason behind that was that I was very aware from, my clinical practice of the real challenges that people who were within the neuro-minority or neurodivergent population have in first of all making their way through the education system to get to university and then when in university the increased challenges they face within that process and making their way through that process and then out the other side and into employment and that is also mirrored in the experience of staff within the neurodivergent population. So, clinically I was interested in this work because it is what I face every day in my clinical practice and I was aware that there were increasing moves internationally in different universities and employment sectors to try and create more awareness of the need to embrace neurodiversity, attract people who identify as neurodiverse and really look at different ways of supporting the journey through the education experience, if you like, for those who are neurodiverse. So that is what that is about. So we have set up a working group here in the university to try and promote awareness of neurodiversity among other aims. And then the Institute of neurodiversity is a new institute that launched and it's an institute that's trying to bring together all different aspects of the neurodiverse community and we're hoping to be part of that in terms of research and teaching collaborations?

TINA: Very good and is that based here, Blánaid?

BLÁINAID: No, it's actually based in Switzerland, and it's been run as a very much a community initiative by which is meant that the population is the neurodiverse community and then they're reaching out to involve people from different aspects of academia and employment to do work and collaborate with the neurodiverse community.

TINA: And employers?

BLÁINAID: Exactly, yeah.

TINA: Very good. That is a fantastic initiative. That is progress. Deirdre, turning to you, I will just say before we start that I had the privilege to be in Deirdre's class, many moons ago in when I was a student, a mature student, in my first year of my Equality Studies Masters, and Deirdre was my lecturer and that is the last time since I have met Deirdre except we have spoken many times now in the last few years in UCD because Deirdre, could you talk to me about your work here, your role as a lecturer and where you started and where you are now?

DEIRDRE: Yes. Thanks, Tina and you're right, Tina, it does not seem like 21 years since I was happy to be involved in the programme and Equality Studies in which you were a student and since that our paths have crossed more recently because one of my roles is I chair the UCD subcommittee on disability, which is run through the EDI unit. So, as a member of that committee Tina, we have had lots of opportunities to collaborate since then and then as I said also, I am a lecturer and a researcher in the School of Agriculture and Food Science, and I am also Associate Dean for equality, diversity and inclusion. I think you have probably, as is well known, I have both a personal and a professional interest in the area of disability and specifically, invisible disability because I have multiple sclerosis, so it is, I would say, Blánaid would confirm this, probably a classic invisible disability in many ways. So that is really just my own background and interest in this area.

TINA: Very good and can you talk to me Deirdre about your role as Associate Dean on the EDI, equality, diversity, inclusion group and what you're doing currently as a faculty partner on the University for All?

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DEIRDRE: Well, I think the role as Associate Dean is well, it can be as broad and as narrow as you wish. But a lot of it is really about raising awareness about EDI related issues and acting as a kind of a bridge I think between what is happening at university level and what is happening at school level. So again, trying to raise awareness, promote the issues that are being rolled out, if you like within the university. And in that context I think the whole kind of university for all project which you know, you would know a lot more about than I would but really, the whole idea of ensuring that the university is a more accessible and inclusive space for everybody for staff and students but within that, something I have got involved with more recently which you're referring to is the idea for universal design for learning for students and there has been a big role out of that programme in recent years. And it's really, I think it's highly relevant to what we are talking about and indeed some of what Blánaid has said there, it's just recognising that our student population is really diverse and operates and comes from a whole range of different contexts. So, kind of experiences, learning differently, so within that context then, it's really about trying to. I think the phrase is often used, multiple modes. But you know, multiple modes of how we assess students, how we engage with students. How we kind of present information and knowledge and material to them. So, this UDL or universal design for learning project which UCD is really behind at the moment is just about trying to promote that throughout the university and trying to get buy in from colleagues and to a lesser extent from students who are very open to this, and I think have a lot to teach us in that regard.

TINA: Yeah. exactly because the students themselves would register with the university when they want to get support. So I think that has always been a difference between say staff and students, you know, because it's more, it's kind of individual choice for staff. So can I ask you, Deirdre, a similar question to what I asked Blánaid; how do you think an invisible impacts on a person's life and how do you think that we can create awareness to try and improve people's knowledge and say understanding of what an invisible disability is as opposed to what you can see?

DEIRDRE: I suppose in answering this I'm wearing a couple of hats. As I said, there is the professional side and the initiatives I'm involved in there. But there's also the personal experience and I would be probably more comfortable talking about that because it is my own lived experience and I think I'm also conscious that, as we have said, there are just so many different contexts and factors and you know it plays out for people in very different ways. But I suppose, in my own experience, if you like, as I said, I have MS for about 13 years. I have a form called relapsing, remitting MS which means I have periods, often long periods when I am not really impacted by it at all and then other periods where I just get flare-ups or I get relapses which are kind of totally unpredictable and you know, just very hard to predict. And as you probably know like MS is a neurological disease, it has I suppose kind of sensory components which means numbness and pins and needles and those kinds of issues and then it has also had motor symptoms which affect your balance and your mobility and spasticity and all those kinds of things. So, I think in my experience, and I think a lot of people with invisible disabilities or chronic conditions would say that. You know the whole unpredictability of a lot of invisible disabilities can be really challenging because, as my own consultant says, it's nothing you do or nothing you don't do in terms of getting relapses, they just come out of the blue. So, I think the unpredictability and living with that can be challenging because it's the Sword of Damocles hanging over your head. And the other issue is that invisibility. I know it's a cliché, but people do talk about the invisible disabilities, they use the analogy of an iceberg, you know that you really only get to see about 10% of what is going on for the person.

TINA: It's a very good analogy, the tip of the iceberg.

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DEIRDRE: It is literally that. And I think that and it comes back again to what we are saying about teaching and learning, from a student perspective if we recognise that a portion of students may have invisible disabilities, we have no idea what is going on for them. They may appear to be functioning very well and I think that whole phenomenon of masking your disability is very common among people with disabilities, but I think it's important to note that that often comes at a cost, it comes at a cost to your physical health and your mental health. So I think just bringing a kind of an awareness of that iceberg dimension and the unpredictability, which I think, the unpredictability is often not just an issue for the person themselves but for colleagues and friends and you know, you can appear to be fine and sign up for things and you know volunteer for things and then at the last minute, out of nowhere you can just get slammed and you know, so all of that is I think challenging for everybody.

TINA: Exactly and that is the difficulty. I always think what people can't see they just don't understand, and they find it very hard to fathom, you know. So, it's really good to try and create awareness.

TINA: Yeah. So I would just like to ask you as well Deirdre, if you don't mind, given that we have been in 20 months probably of a Pandemic; how it has impacted your role, you're working and also your colleagues in you know university.

DEIRDRE: It's funny, as I think a lot of people would know of having a good support network of likeminded people is really important but one of my friends who also has MS said to me recently you know, she thinks the experience that everybody has had of unpredictability and just the total change in everybody's environment and she said I sometimes hear my non-disabled friends just how difficult this is and I feel like saying, welcome to my world, you know because this is really what I think a lot of people with disabilities live with all the time, this kind of Sword of Damocles over your head.

So, you know, I think it is obviously while it's been a really challenging, whatever it is been 20 months for everybody, I think it is compounded when you have a disability and an invisible disability, in particular. And one of the reasons I would say that is you know, I think a lot of people have been kind of flushed out, for want of a better word in the last 20 months in that you know, I think the whole issue around disclosure of one's disability is a very, very sensitive topic and I think again that is compounded if your disability is invisible. But I think for a lot of reasons, a lot of people with disabilities have had to kind of disclose, in the last 20 months without really being ready to do so because I do think that whole issue of disclosure is really sensitive and really problematic for a lot of people and again in terms of how such people can be supported in general kind of working environments or study environments and UCD, in particular, is just being really aware of the need to be kind of flexible and supportive and to have not a one-off conversation but to make it clear that you know, if you have a disability or a chronic illness or whatever, it's a lifelong thing and it's not a box-ticking exercise. So, you know, I think there is a lot of work to be done around managing people's disclosures sensitively and I think Covid has really put the spotlight on that because a lot of people are not ready to do so, and kind of feel bounced into it. I suppose I can relate to, about a year ago, Tina and I and Blánaid were involved in a Podcast actually we did on invisible disabilities and as part of it we invited again staff, colleagues with disabilities, just to send in a kind of anonymous contribution. And one of the issues that came up repeatedly was this issue of disclosure. And I think just the message that comes back is, it really does require a very high level of trust on all sides, you know, particularly in relation to invisible disability. You know, I think of things like chronic pain, for example, it does require a lot of trust. I think it requires a lot of flexibility as well that no more than the students who find multiple means of engaging or working to be really helpful, so do staff, you know and I think again that requires trust and I think again it requires kind of an ongoing conversation as



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well because I think for a lot, say in my own case, I could go for years where I'm not impaired at all and I don't need any support and then out of nowhere as has happened me I get a relapse that puts me in hospital for weeks and puts me out of work for two months, you know, so that requires a bit flexibility and again trust and trust and flexibility, I think are the big things.

TINA: And that is really what it's all about isn't it? It is the trust and it's the difference in, I often think that students with disabilities are, it's fantastic because you see they have to register, so they have to disclose their disability to get the supports and once they do that then, it's like, it's a big burden is lifted off them and they do it and they are fine and they realise that they can attend classes, get exam supports, get supports they require. Assistive technology and it's really good. Whereas it's different for staff. So, it is all about disclosure.

BLÁNAID: Tina, could I just ask, do you think you pick up most students who have disabilities or do you think there is a proportion?

TINA: I would be very happy to say now in the last few years that we have got a huge amount of students now with disabilities, whereas before we didn't and I think that is because the whole emphasis has changed and where we work it's everybody who is say from a diverse background is in the access and lifelong learning centre. So, it's disabilities, its mature students, it's people from different backgrounds, you know it's completely different. And I think then the fact that they celebrate it, and they have scholarships. So they have prize giving's and like bursaries and then they go to secondary schools and run programmes to encourage people to go to university. I think it's far more positive than when I was a mature student.

BLÁNAID: I would agree with you there that I definitely think it's far more positive, but I would not imagine that we are capturing everybody, that would be my sense of it. I don't think we have the data to be confident. But my sense would be that there for a number of different reasons that people, there is an under representation really of numbers.

TINA: As well as, yeah, you're right there are a lot of students, let's say for example mature students, I know myself I was in primary school late '70s and early '80s in secondary and there were a number of people in my class who had dyslexia, and nobody knew what dyslexia was. It was treated as something that they weren't capable so; they always kept the people back. So, I remember that vividly because years later I now work in the area. But it was just incredible the way these people were treated. Instantly automatically assumed that they would not be able to work, and the irony was, it was three girls. One of them became a mathematician for the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank. The other person was a head chef and went on to master's and get a First. And it's just amazing that I think it's great to see when you know with education and I think the term neurodiversity is such a positive thing because you know, people with Asperger's or on the autism spectrum have been so misunderstood for so many years and with lots of other invisibility disabilities I just think that is the positive thing. But you're right, you don't capture everybody, and you don't capture some people who say left the system because they weren't supported or their teachers or whoever it was didn't understand they had learning disabilities or dyspraxia or dyscalculia or you know, so I do think it's improved that is all I would say. I'm not saying it's perfect.

BLÁNAID: I would very much agree with you. And I think the point on trust is very, very important across the board be it, staff or students. And to me one thing that would spring to mind when you'd mention the idea of trust, it's well what helps us to trust something? And usually, part of trust is formed by our sense of knowing what will happen if

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we do something and so a question I would think of when you're asking the question about what is the best way to open a dialogue on disclosure is how much does somebody have actual facts about what this disclosure will bring about. How much certainty is there as to who knows what? How will people judge? Will there be changes of opinion and what will go with it? And I think it's often those sorts of known unknowns or unknown unknowns that really, really impact on trust and that would be my experience for students trying to decide how to disclose and maybe mirrored I would imagine, in the staff experience.

DEIRDRE: I think you're absolutely right and I think it is also related to as the person with the disability just the extent of kind of control you feel you have over the situation and you know the terms and conditions, as you rightly say, on which you disclose. And a kind of it speaks to something maybe a little bit more abstract, which is the whole idea of the kind of narratives that go around disability and invisible disability and again I can only speak to MS but I'm sure they are there in other domains as well. But you know you often see these narratives, or you know, you are the warrior, or you are the superhero or you're the sufferer or you're the inspiration, or the tragedy narrative also. I often hear that in the neurodiversity debate as well and a lot of the time they are not, you know you just want to get on with your life you know. As I said, it's not and I'm sure those people find those narratives very helpful and if they do that is great but I think it's just the issue of not having other people's narratives thrust upon you and being able to control it yourself and I think, related to that and I am sure it's not just, I know it's not just an issue in the context of invisible disability but the extent to which when you do disclose you become public property, you know and depending on your personality and certainly the case in my case, I don't like that feeling you know of being public property and everybody thinks it's kind of open season, they can comment on you know your appearance.

TINA: It's very true.

DEIRDRE: I think that can be difficult as well so it's about controlling your own story as well, I think.

TINA: That's a really good point and it's very true. And I would have to agree because I would be, I can't be anonymous myself as a blind guide dog owner.

DEIRDRE: Well, I think it's more that you get the choice around your own identity, you know and that if I feel to think of myself and I'm not being facetious when I say this, to see myself as a warrior or fighting the disease or going into battle and beating it. That is fine if it's my decision but it's not helpful to have it thrust upon you, you know.

BLÁNAID: I think at its most basic what the Pandemic has done is sort of created a prism for looking at mental health in so many different ways and one of them is the fact that it has really emphasised all of the different elements of disadvantage in society and how, if you fall into any group that if you like is disadvantaged within society, the likelihood that your mental health has been negatively impacted is dramatically increased. So-called intersectionality whereas if you look across the board, certain groups of people are going to be more adversely affected and that has been born out on the data that is coming out of the consequences coming out on the Pandemic and that was very much predicted from the outset. If you look then at the way mental health issues have evolved over the course of the Pandemic, one of the big concerns was that there might be over-focus on natural human responses of stress to the Pandemic and that that would be mislabelled as if you like a mental health crisis and in fact, what it represents is adaptive human response to stress, that something very dramatic happens, puts

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you under a lot of stress and your emotions and cognitions are going to respond in a certain way and there was a big fear among the we'll say, the specialist mental health community that if there was too much focus on that in the media and different conversations that it would take away a necessary focus on people who were really struggling within the realm of mental illness and that the discourse would be in the wrong direction and would potentially be more stigmatising because we are shining more and more of a light on natural human stress and different responses like that and less and less on the severe end of difficulty. What we have seen is there has been a dramatic increase in mental health presentations across all of the services in Ireland. There was initially a fall off at the beginning relating to the fact that access had been reduced and then what began to happen was that there were increases in presentations to A&E, to community mental health services and people that were presenting were presenting in much more acute states. So much less well requiring quicker hospitalisation, longer hospital stays. So there has been all sorts of very, very serious consequences. In terms then of the idea of the openness of discussion around some of these issues, it's hard to say whether that just happens to be, you know contemporaneous to what is happening or if it's a product of a more sort of open discussion. But I do think that in general, people are more inclined to put themselves out there with whatever narrative they identify with and speak to different difficulties or challenges they are having.

TINA: So, in a way, you could say that is a positive in a strange way. There have been some positive results I think from the Pandemic in the sense that people realise the importance of having a work-life balance and I actually think people have become much more open but maybe I'm being overly optimistic. But I do think there has been some positive. I think it's made us all stop on the big racetrack of life and stand back a bit and be a bit more accepting.

BLÁNAID: I absolutely would agree with you on that and for me, because of my professional background I think the big question is how helpful it for people is that are at that severe end for people that are always marginalised and discriminated against. So how much conversation and all of that have we had about people with schizophrenia with bipolar affective disorder, with severe depression, with severe eating disorders and this is a danger in the nature of the discourse that overemphasising the idea that you had a bad day or you're feeling a bit down or you're a bit anxious that that in some way seems to replicate what is a very different experience of mental illness and I think it's very important that there is room in the discourse for that element.

TINA: We don't demean.

BLÁNAID: But I think it seems to be there are different reasons. It's like there's the acceptable face of mental ill-health and traditionally called mental illness which has been replaced by the idea of mental health which is just the general ebb and flow of human life. It's more acceptable. It's more media-friendly. It's more something that a lot of people feel comfortable in relating to and if you look at the traditional things that were markers of stigma and illness, the idea of curability, the idea of treatability how all of those things influence stigma and I think a lot of those factors are still sadly as embedded as they ever were in the conversations and what it also allows funders to do is focus on very, if you like, low-level type interventions just around have a little chat there and a cup of tea and you're grand and it's not about the type of specialist input that is really required if you have a defined illness. But absolutely what you're saying is correct. I think opening a discourse is a very, very useful thing and just helping people to stop and think. But if you think back over some of the dialogue you may have heard on mental health. People say, I couldn't go to the gym, it affected my mental health. I couldn't go to the beautician. I couldn't go to the hairdresser, I couldn't and absolutely yes, in that broad sense of mental health but does it truly reflect mental

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illness?

TINA: Yes, I agree with you, and I think that by misuse of words and also not saying what it is, it can often demean it and make people more comfortable. But I think that is what this whole discussion today has been about which is so interesting that people find it difficult when, if you can't see something you find it difficult. That is in say my experience as you know when I had a white cane, it was totally different to now having a guide dog because people didn't know how to approach me, how to talk to me and the fact that when I looked at people, I look like I can see. So, people didn't know why I was asking them where was, what station were we at etc. etc. So, I do think people, they have to try and get beyond this, as you say the tip of the iceberg is just the tip.

DEIRDRE: I just want to kind of add to something that Blánaid said there which was the whole kind of equality dimension of the experience of disability and invisible disability included and again I can only relate it to my own experience, but I know when I talk about this I'm coming from a fairly privileged place. I have a, to the best of my knowledge a secure job. I have security and very good access to medical care and so on. So, I think just the context for a lot of these issues is really different for different people and I can only imagine the added stress and strain of trying to manage a disability if you don't have the access, I think that some of us are fortunate to have.

TINA: Can I say to you both that it's been an amazingly enlightening conversation and I really enjoyed it and I am going to ask you something now which is probably a bit lighter, but Deirdre, I will ask you first, what is your blind spot?

DEIRDRE: This has been preoccupying me for most of the discussion, I've to say. It's probably sport in general. I have no interest. I find it impossible to drum up any enthusiasm about it. I'm probably a disgrace to my family because my husband is a former very successful GAA footballer, my dad was a brilliant hurler but the whole arena of sport has completely bypassed me. Apologies to everybody.

TINA: That is okay and Blánaid.

BLÁNAID: So equally like Deirdre there, I was trying to think about that. What I would say is my blind spot is public speaking. So I am really throwing myself into this blind spot today because it's something that is not my preferred thing to do. So that has been a big blind spot for me.

TINA: Wow very good. So thank you, very much to both of you. It has been a pleasure.

DEIRDRE: Thank you.

BLÁNAID: Thank you.

TINA: Thanks for listening to the Blind Spot. If you enjoyed this episode, please like and subscribe. Until next time on The Blind Spot.

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## Transcript for episode 5 - Media 4 Disabilities

### THE BLIND SPOT

#### 5. Media 4 Disability

TINA: Welcome to The Blind Spot. I'm your host Tina Lowe and this Podcast looks to show everyone about making Ireland accessible for all. Each week I will invite new guests onto the show so they can share their experiences with accessibility and chat with them about how they are doing their part to make access a success.

In today's episode, we are going to chat with Dara Ryder and Ailbhe Kinealy about access to Higher Education before and during Covid.

AILBHE: Thanks Tina. Thanks for having us.

DARA: Thanks so much for the invite. It's great to be here.

TINA: We are going to start today with DARA, if you could start by telling us a little bit about your background?

DARA: Sure, my name is DARA Ryder, CEO of AHEAD. And I've been with AHEAD now for about 12 years in a variety of roles. So, initially, I actually graduated from Music Technology from Queens University, so I have a very unusual path to end up with, I suppose, isn't that usually the way. But I suppose, where I became interested really in inclusion was as a lecturer in further education, when I was teaching music technology and I began really to I suppose come up against students with disabilities in my classroom and have dialogue with them and engagement with them. And I began to see their challenges first-hand. And what really interested me was actually how much of their challenge was related to what I was doing. I was the barrier, just my lack of awareness about it, my lack of understanding about it. That is really how I began to become interested so when I saw a position open up in AHEAD, I jumped at it and I have been working in a variety of roles there ever since so right through from producing research to building national guidance, to building e learning programmes for staff and further and Higher Education and now in my role as CEO.

TINA: DARA, I know that you're working in AHEAD quite a number of years, so can you tell the listeners in what way life has changed. I know when I worked in AHEAD a number of years ago and for example, we were before mobile phone times, digital access, so can you give us an idea roughly, how it was like for students with disabilities?

DARA: Absolutely and I suppose is maybe useful to tell a bit of the story about the founding of AHEAD because it is really central to that. So the organisation really comes from really a de advocacy of the students because what happened here was there was actually a student here in UCD by the name of Gerry Ellis, who approached the then Registrar of UCD, John Kelly saying enough is enough because what was happening was that this student who

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was blind, was essentially only really able to access education because of the support of his family. So, this student was literally having his books read to him by his family members, all of the support in terms of getting around the campus, finding the lecture halls was only really there because of the support of the family. And we know of course that that situation is not going to be the same for everybody. He said enough is enough and that was in the late 1980s. Now it looks very, very different in that we have a very structured approach to the provision of supports for Higher Education and increasingly we have a much greater focus on what happens in the classroom and looking at the actual pedagogy and how we can remove barriers. So I think the big shift I suppose I'm seeing is that for starters we have much more focused quality support in the area of reasonable combinations, in other words, what are the kind of things we can do 'add on' to the students to help them to get over the barriers and then more increasingly, what are those barriers and how can we remove them at the point of delivery. That is the big focus for me, you know, instead of this increased focus of putting up ladders for students, if you like, or focused on smashing down barriers.

TINA: Very good.

DARA: That is where I see things happening now, I don't want to present a picture as if everything is Rosie in the garden, we are still only on the road to that journey, but I think that's where we are.

TINA: So, I was a mature student myself, having acquired my blindness and I went to UCD. I know Gerry and I knew John Kelly the Registrar then of UCD and Chairman of AHEAD. And I know, when we started, we used things and people would laugh at you know, tape recorders, and I never had braille, so I spent my life routing through two million boxes of tapes to find the right book or the right lecture. So all those things have changed. And could you just give, just paint a bit of a picture just for people who have never known life before a mobile phone or digital online access, all that kind of thing?

DARA: Absolutely, it posed huge challenges for students and indeed for the professionals supporting students. So you would have for example as you mentioned physical print books, you would have to have a personal assistant to read a book like that in the past. So obviously everything is digital now and even now that we have technologies that can read physical books, using the technologies to read aloud. so, it's Immensely changed and one of the things that I love about working with people with disabilities, is that a lot of technologies that they use as specialised technologies today are the mainstream technologies of the future. You see this repeatedly throughout history, things like the remote control for a television, invented to support people with disabilities, the telephone, meant to support people with disabilities. There is this lovely phrase that a guy called Noel Joyce used in one of our webinars this year and he said people with disabilities can help you predict the future. I love that phrase, it's very grandiose but that is what he meant, what he meant was that if you start to look at the needs of the people with disabilities today is that flexibility that they need is something that we all benefit from. So, when we can take those focuses and build them into our practices in the mainstream.

TINA: That leads really well into, we can talk more about the projects that AHEAD are working on but there is one thing, a huge thing at the moment which is exactly what you're saying, it's the national universal design and learning approach and why I'm saying that, if you could explain to the listeners because what you have just said is true. If a document is accessible to a person who uses a screen reader such as me then it's accessible for everybody. The hard part is to teach or to show people. Could you just outline how that works?

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DARA: Sure. There is this concept called universal design for learning. Basically, it's built on decades of learning and neuroscience and it's the learning sciences and it's basically, the neuroscience shows us a fundamental principle, which is that learning is as unique to individuals as their fingerprints. So, from one individual to the next, it's a very different experience. So how do we respond to that in our classrooms? We respond to it by building in flexibility - so we design to the edges of the classroom. In other words, we design for all, rather than designing for a mythical average learner, who sits in the middle of all those pieces. I suppose this framework which I said is built on the learning sciences and neurosciences can help educators in that it translates that into very practical principles and guidelines and checkpoints and the work we are doing right now is a real collaborative work with UCD to deliver to the Further and Higher Education section, as much as possible to understand these principles and get people on the road as to how they can implement them within their teaching practices and right now we have more than 1000 educators from across further and higher education working with us to learn more.

TINA: And that is all across the country in different education settings?

DARA: In different education settings and in most higher education institutions and every education and training board.

TINA: And are there other AHEAD projects, I know we have spoken mainly about education but a big area for people with graduates or students with disabilities is employment; so, can you talk to us about what AHEAD have done on employment?

DARA: I suppose we have made huge strides with regards to access to higher education. I think I had researched those in the last 11 years, there is about 226% increase engagement with Higher Education in terms of the numbers engaging. So we are making massive, massive strides there, but we're still seeing on the graduate employment side, huge, huge barriers. So, Ireland is actually the fourth lowest employment rate of people with disabilities in Europe. So, we are very poor on this record, and we have a programme called WAM, which is a work placement programme for graduates with disabilities, where we are working to offer paid mentored work placements for graduates all across the country. We roughly do somewhere between 30 and 50 placements every year. We have placed more than 500 since the programme began. So that has been a huge success for us.

TINA: They are matched to roles that they can do that they have studied, and they get mentored, and they get paid properly?

DARA: Absolutely, it's a fundamental principle perk when they get paid at the market rate for those placements as well. So, I mean, what it is, is that graduate CVs often don't look the same as other graduates because they haven't had the access to incidental employment; the access to clubs and societies or volunteering opportunities so they can look a little bit barer than other graduate CV's.

TINA: And then the whole area of disclosing your disability?

DARA: Absolutely.

TINA: It's massive.

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DARA: It's massive and we've actually done a really big piece of research earlier this year to survey employers about their attitudes which really highlights the disconnect around the disclosure issue. It shows that employers actually expect disclosure from graduates with disability and they see it actually as a breach of trust if graduates don't disclose. But they don't understand the significance of that decision in that many of them have experienced discrimination in the past and almost on a regular basis so they're making a very sensitive call on whether they do or they don't disclose themselves.

TINA: So, your work is continuing really well, can you tell me say how Covid has come into the workplace.

DARA: I thought we were going to have one chat without Covid but of course, it comes up everywhere and of course, it has reshaped our lives and I suppose, it has presented many, many challenges and many, many opportunities and again, I mentioned that piece around people with disabilities can sort of see the future with these things and the same is true with Covid because what happens is people with disabilities have been calling for access to lectures in a remote capacity for a long, long time and suddenly overnight that has become the norm in Higher Education. So certainly, we want to see a lot of that moving forward. We want to see a lot of that retained. But, of course, it has provided many, many challenges for people in terms of the isolation, the lack of connection to support services and we have actually just released a new piece of research on learning from home, just last week which kind of covers a lot of this. I think what is really interesting in that research is that we have asked students to tell us what they want next, what does the future look like for you in relation to access and inclusion, and within there we listed ten priorities and actually, the top two are all pedagogical and they rate with those priorities over more individual tangible stuff like increased supports and increased grants. They actually wanted the retention of the recorded lectures and indeed choice and assessment there was another bigger one for them. So how they can actually have different pathways to demonstrate their learning. So, I thought that was really interesting.

TINA: Brilliant. So, our other guest today is Ailbhe Kinealy and just tell the listeners I had the privilege last year of meeting Ailbhe because Ailbhe came out and did a piece on 'How to get around with a guide dog'.

AILBHE: That's right, yourself and Forest.

TINA: We did it in Shankill, in my local area and I must say it was amazing, I have done some things like this, but Ailbhe just did it like it was a 'walk in the park' basically.

AILBHE: It was.

TINA: And what was really interesting was, it was at the kind of at the beginning of Covid, it was our last summer and it was when people were still, I think we were in the 5k or maybe 2k and we could not travel outside and it was amazing, it was still pavements cluttered, the outdoor living, all, they didn't understand that actually you can't do that because a guide dog is going too.

AILBHE: Yeah. It was very interesting for me to see you as well trying to get around Shankill and it was a really, really hot day so a lot of people were out and about, they were outside pubs and stuff like that so they were sitting on chairs outside and Forrest couldn't work his way around them because I think things had changed a little for him. So, it was just a really interesting report and how the guide dogs as well said we'll be able to change their routines and that kind of thing and teach them, they will be able to teach them to be two meters and that kind of



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thing when they are at the top of queues.

TINA: Which you can't.

AILBHE: And supermarkets and all that which you can't.

TINA: Which you can't.

TINA: Guide Dogs don't know social distancing, you know. So, Ailbhe can I ask you to tell us about your background, I know you've been working in RTE as a correspondent for a number of years, but could you tell me about your early years as a journalist, to talk to us about the changes you have seen in Ireland, regarding access?

AILBHE: Yeah, I'm in RTE 20 years, 18 years so I am proper institutionalised, I suppose is the word. I am there since I was 23, in my 40's now and I got this job as social affairs and religion correspondent about year and a half ago. So just at the part of the Pandemic. I don't remember, I was trying to recall, I don't remember the word Pandemic coming up in the interview because at that stage it was something that our foreign desk was dealing with still. It was something that was over there and then, I got the job as the Pandemic hit here and then I ended up in isolation for three weeks, which I was absolutely mortified about because and that is just Covid isn't it? We all had to learn that there is nothing can do once this virus hits a household or whatever. You just have to stay put. So, I thought, I was panicking, I just said, oh my God my bosses are going to just, I was just mortified, you know and ringing in sick within four days probably of getting the job. After that then, I think I made up for it. So, yeah, I went back to an office where social distancing had been implemented. The people who had worked right through were already kind of used to Zoom calls, that kind of thing. We had to, while we could go beyond the 5kms, it was very difficult to get people outside of their homes. You know so we could go to their homes say for example if it was in Dublin and do it outside in their back garden, the interviews outside their back garden but a lot of them we were resorting to Zoom, and everybody was learning about Zoom. I did an entire report about older people and the whole thing was on Zoom where they were doing an art class and I was on Zoom and the teacher was on Zoom and I was there as well. It was just bizarre. I had not even heard of Zoom the year before. So everything changed on that front and yet we were the ones who were relaying to the public what was happening regarding the virus and how people were coping. And on top of the social affairs brief and the religion brief and of course, churches and mosques and everything was impacted. They put the nursing homes brief on me as well so they said, you take care of nursing homes and I said okay and it was beginning to take off at that stage and then it just it probably overtook the brief to an extent, I was just on nursing homes all the time and trying to get answers from nursing homes themselves, the HSE, the Department of Health, there was a lot of tooting, froing, trying to get some kind of clarity because there was a lot of worry amongst families and worry in the homes themselves so if you rang a nursing home, they are not going to answer the phone and yet, we felt we need to tell the public what is happening. So, it was very difficult, that initial phase. It was a couple of months later before I met you and Forrest. Things had kind of calmed down a bit.

TINA: Slightly. Yeah. So I know you have had a lot of different experiences working as a journalist, but can you just give us your take on how you see Ireland has progressed or maybe not progressed as much or I'm talking about the way we treat people, our marginalised groups. We have a different society now from many years ago. We have a lot more different groups, ethnic, culture, all that. We have changed hugely. But can you tell me, in your 20 years of journalism; do you see we are getting there too? What we are trying to talk on this Podcast about

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and trying to encourage people is to make Ireland a more accessible and inclusive place?

AILBHE: It's changed dramatically, and it's even changed hugely in the last five years. So, I mean okay it has changed dramatically in the last 20 years but if you go back to say for example the marriage referendum and then the referendum on the 8th amendment, they were two big milestones and then we have a lot of migration obviously as well. I did a piece, a series on racism earlier this year and it is very troubling, I think to see how people are coming into this country and how they are treated or even people who have lived in this country all their lives and they are maybe a person of colour, or you know. So I think there is a problem there in terms of difference and yet, when we come to say disabilities, people were saying to me, well you know people with disabilities were saying to me well, Covid has shown the rest of the country what we have been enduring for all of our lives, you know that kinds of isolation, loneliness, feeling like you're not heard. So, I thought in a way that Covid, well, I felt my job was to give those people a voice and get them answers and say, for example, families who could not get their children into day-care or get any relief at all. Why was that? Like and why were we talking about other industries for example? And yet there were families in dire straits. So, I think it has changed dramatically. With change comes fear. And I think that is a problem. And you do have the rise of the right across Europe. I think to a lesser extent here. But it's still there and we are all aware of it. But I think that for the moment, I think the Covid was the distraction. It brought everyone together at the start and now we are coming out of it. So it will be interesting to see where we land you know?

TINA: Like, I would like to think always, and I know DARA would be the same probably because we worked in the area of Higher Education for a number of years, and I always like to think that there is a good side to everything. And I am hoping that by people like you have just described, how life is like for people with disabilities, there is a very good article in the journal about a lady who is visually impaired, but she uses a cane. She doesn't have a guide dog. But she has a condition that her eyes wouldn't look blind so to speak. Ahe said for the whole of Covid nobody believed her, she was blind. So she kept getting told to stop jumping the queue or she should be socially distancing and she said it was so insulting and outrageous and unbelievable, and outrageous that she is now thinking even though she is afraid of guide dogs, she is going to get a guide dog because she said people just don't seem to know, if they can't see it, they can't understand it. That was her experience. So I thought that was very kind of telling because I would like to think that people have maybe learned a bit of more respect for accessibility especially you know?

AILBHE: I think there might be a problem with still with hidden disabilities and that lack of awareness and maybe we need to do more to highlight that because I do think people are very reactive visibly, you know, and they just don't think of what other people may be going through. They may have been more aware at the start of Covid but then again people were locked away in their homes so that awareness probably remained in a bubble and now as we exit it, it's questionable. Now, I don't want to be all doom and gloom.

TINA: I lost my sight in 19993, and it was optic nerve damage. It was a brain condition so my eyes never died even though you know your eyes can die because they are an organ, but I never wear glasses, because if I wear sunglasses, I can't see a thing. I have light perception and a bit of colour. So I always need it because it makes me feel happier to be honest that I was a bit of light, you know, seriously.

AILBHE: Of course.

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TINA: I never wore sunglasses and the first few years I used a cane and truthfully until I lost my sight, I was terrified of dogs my whole life, terrified of dogs, so I was thinking I can't get a guide dog. But after a few years, you get on the DART, you get on a bus and 'excuse me, is this wherever' because they never put the announcement on. And people wouldn't answer you and they just assume that you are not well, or it was always because my eyes didn't look blind. So, the other day, I think, myself and Jessica were coming down the slope to come out of UCD and because I don't look blind, this girl was a little bit rude right and again, I think, it's just I think, people make assumptions.

DARA, have you come across that, your staff have different disabilities?

DARA: Absolutely, in my experience, once people are educated and they understand something, they are much better prepared to respond but also, I think, what I find is that when inclusion means change something you're doing, then it becomes a different issue, that is, where people are more likely to push back. I think, in theory, very few people would not consider themselves inclusive people. Like, you know, of course I agree with that, yeah. But what it actually says is, this is actually about you reflecting on your own behaviour and changing your own behaviour to recognise that people will react with you differently and need different things from you in order to make sure where everybody is included. I think that is where we need to do a lot of work culturally. I still think there is an incredibly negative perception of disability generally. I'll give you an example, we did a survey of employers earlier this year and the first word that comes to mind with disability, the two biggest in the word cloud bubble of these responses is limited or challenged. You know, so it's still this very deficit model thinking about disabilities. Whereas, the people with disabilities that I know where you know, that is not a word I would ever associate with them. I still think we have a huge amount to do culturally. I think generally we are getting into a place where people are on the whole a little bit more tolerant of diversity and inclusion than were maybe ten years ago. And sometimes you can get caught in a negative place because you hear the stories of people's interactions on a daily basis and those things are always going to happen but if we take the broad view, and look back at where we were even ten, fifteen, twenty years ago. I think it's interesting as well, there is more awareness in government, so Michael Martin said in the Dail about two or three weeks ago I want to get people with disabilities into work, that's the most important thing and I just thought that was quite interesting. That came after Leaders questions, you know, Prime Time slot in the Oireachtas, where he knew he was being heard. And I had just done a report actually and where there was a girl out doing communications out in DCU and she is deaf, but she can lip read and she was brought in for an internship and it was interesting how she explained how she had to say to people. And she was good to say to people 'turn around, I need to see your lips', that kind of thing. So, it kind of goes two ways as well and some people don't want to offend and yet and the other person may have to guide to an extent and I think some employers are frightened, are they frightened of the unknown because it is not common enough I wonder, that we have enough people with disabilities.

TINA: I think it is just my take on this, it is very interesting because we had an experience of this very recently in this university where I'm the Accessibility Officer so I'm tasked with trying to assist to get equipment or making buildings accessible or creating awareness, or all those things. So we had this incident of the same thing and this is, I know people give out about political correctness, but this was somebody who is a very educated person, so they should have just said, they should have come to tell me exactly what they wanted right? And they could not say what the disability was, so they went around the world for about two weeks right and I still was none the wiser and eventually, the person I work with in Estates, realised what they were talking about, so we were able to then assist them. Because that to me is, do we need to get beyond that? Because what they were doing was actually a

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disservice to the student because they delayed purchasing the equipment you know, because they couldn't tell me what it was and I had no idea for two weeks, so I had to kind of guess and eventually the estate services who we work with and are really practical said, brilliant, I know what it is now Tina.

DARA: I think as well, there is a bit of a role for organisations like our own and even the school system in building the self-advocacy skills for students themselves as well in terms of how to be a constructive advocate because I think often what happens is students can be silent and they can sit there and feel very frustrated and feel anxious and it can actually come into a flashpoint where rather than it being solved much further, earlier on in the process. I think there is kind of a role for all parties to play I think in building those skills.

TINA: I think advocacy is brilliant and it's something that they're starting to do a lot of it in the guide dogs and it's the same thing. It's trying to show the guide dog owners who are reticent to, because the other part of life, is obviously if you have a visible disability you can't escape. So, I can't escape ever because I also have a giant guide dog. But it wouldn't be even that, it's because I can't escape because I'm blind right? But I think people, it's always, it's changing now which I really think is a positive thing as well in Ireland that you're not always labelled as the angry blind person or the angry whatever. I think people are understanding now that actually the person is just learning how to speak and be more assertive in a good way and show you what they need as opposed to being kind of branded that angry woman.

DARA: It's a kind of a lack of understanding about what DARE is about. Really what DARE is about is about actually trying to address the disadvantage that those individuals have had because of the inaccessibility of the pedagogy of our classrooms, because maybe some of them will have had to have missed time in class because of medical appointments. So, it is actually kind of readdressing that. So they are actually looking at moves for example, with the HEAR Scheme, which is a similar scheme for people from socioeconomic disadvantaged areas, they're looking at changing the language around that to be more of a bonus point system so rather than reduce points - you're getting less points, that actually it's addressing it by bonus points, by saying, we understand that this is because of our inaccessible systems and barriers and we are doing something about it.

TINA: That is very positive. And Ailbhe, can I just ask you say this year, as well as working with the various areas, have you noticed people being more courteous when you're out and about?

AILBHE: To RTE journalists?

TINA: Or to anyone giving the fact that we all had to jump out of each other's way, and have you noticed a more?

AILBHE: Like we would have a new way of working now, in terms of just, I mean it's no more than anyone else. You don't shake someone's hand when you rock up to do a report or anything like that. And I suppose some of it, I had to think about, for example, if I was doing a story on somebody with a disability and then I was saying, well, can we shoot in your window because that person couldn't get out you know that kind of way or if they were confined to a wheelchair, how do we work around that and people were really, really accommodating though, I have to say and we tried to do as much as we could outside with the two meters distance, probably with masks back. It is all a blur now. But now we'd be outside without the masks but still maintaining the two-meter distance. And inside one of us wear a mask so it would normally be me and I would let the interviewee take the mask off because it is better as well visibly, I think, for any way for the viewer to be able to see the mouth when the person is

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talking. So there are those kinds of hurdles and in the past as well, you would always not always, but generally, you would travel with a cameraman to do a report, say for example if I was leaving RTE in Donnybrook and I had to go to Kildare or whatever, and if the cameraman was there in RTE, you would hop in the car with them and you would make your calls on the way down. Now we go in separate cars which means that you have to do the calls on-route. So, you know you can't write anything down. So, you're saying, can you text me. Can you and you know Eircodes are very beneficial to all this. But it's all that kind of thing, where you're trying to field calls from base, which is from editors, deputy editors, online, saying what have you got, what is going to be in this? Have you got the name of whoever? This kind of thing, you know in the past you would have had someone driving you as you were doing all that. It is quite interesting on that front.

TINA: So, your kind of, everybody including myself, I think we have all had to become much more self-reliant?

AILBHE: Yeah.

TINA: We have had to learn how to do a lot more, which is a good thing in some ways.

AILBHE: Yeah.

TINA: In the beginning, I, what I don't like and I don't think I ever will ever want to do this, even as a mature student, I loved being in the lecture, sitting there listening to me because to me that was like, you know you're learning about Ancient Greece or whatever but it's like, you might as well, it's like watching a drama or, so I loved being in the place. I don't like sitting on my own. I like company and I like to be able to see what is going on and listen to everything but that part I found hard but then, as the time went by it got easier because the blended approach is actually quite good. Now, you do a lot more because you have to come home and go back onto the computer. But in some ways, I think the work-life balance is improving for people you know. And then the hardest part for me truthfully was having a very large guide dog with no work to do and that was very challenging because guide dogs are not designed to sit as pets, you know, they are workers, they need a job, they need to do something every day and that was very difficult trying to occupy him and what I did do is every Friday, I went on the bus. Irrespective of when it was, I put my mask on and we went on the bus. So I could keep him focused in some way or that he thought he was going to work, you know? So, I did that. I found that part very hard but kept that up. I found all that part very hard. But I don't mind the work. I think it's less stressful for the travel part but definitely, with a guide dog that is the part I found the hardest. They only have. That is their focus in life. They don't want to sit around, you know?

AILBHE: Is he coming out of restrictions well?

TINA: No, he is kind of, that is a very good question. He has gone feral. That is the truth. He is wild. He is even cheekier, you know he is kind of, we call him Mr Ed. He is the talking dog, he really is but he kind of even looks a bit wilder, the hair is really long, and he is kind of like are you having a laugh, you know. You think I'm doing that now you know. And yet, when you get him back on down to the bus stop. He is dying to get on the bus. He charges on and he is delighted, and I think coming in here then he sees all the millions of people and action and all the squirrels and water.

DARA: They are such highly trained animals you can imagine it would be very easy for them to if they are out of

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routine but.

TINA: Yeah, loads of guide dogs, which has happened. It is true, guide dogs have had to retire. And the ones that was hard for were the ones that were brand new and they didn't know their routes and the partnership had not really started because it's like, you have to glue with the dog and luckily I was very lucky because Forrest had been working for a few years so he knows the routes still and he still stands up when we come up to the slope to come in here on the bus. But it was more the fact that he had had a lot of free time sitting around, you know?

DARA: We did a piece of research about the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education and learning from home and we got exactly that kind of message, about those hugely mixed experiences; huge amounts about the experience. I mean people with disabilities, I think there might be an assumption almost, surely, they loved remote learning, you know, hardly because of that thing where it's still largely associated with physical disability, that is the thing that comes to mind. But actually, 50 percent of the learners want to return to the way it was, like the status quo. Whereas, about 50% wanted either something approaching a blended learning experience which I think was about 40% roughly wanted that and about 10% would prefer to remain fully online, post Covid. So, I think you get these really mixed experiences but then some of the stuff that came in was actually really transformative and was really revealing in I suppose the issues that we have within our teaching and learning practices. I am thinking of one student in particular who made this comment about how he had failed his exams in the first year that he was in and then second year when everything went to this remote learning and they switched it up to do remote assessments and open-book assessments, he was in the top five to ten in his class in the same modules. This change in the assessment instrument was vital for him. So it really highlights that we need to offer these options for learners too, to be able to demonstrate.

TINA: I think it is all about, it even is, even though we bandy the word around so much, but diversity isn't it, diverse way of doing everything.

DARA: There is more than one way to skin a cat.

AILBHE: I mean it is interesting in terms of the technology in our own newsroom how it changed and beyond Zoom for example. I had forgotten this but during the first wave, we had one of the news editors at home and she had the camera on her computer on all the time. And we were used to the news editor at the news desk driving everything, directing the newsroom, what to do and she was at home for those couple of months and typing away. But they had a camera in the newsroom so you could see everybody else, and you would be walking past, and you would hear, Ailbhe and it's coming from, where is that voice coming from. It was coming from this TV, and it was really fascinating to sit back and watch her. She'd be working away, typing away, so her head would be down and then she'd look up and she would spot someone, and she would ask them, she would just ask them as if she was in the newsroom. I just thought it was amazing.

TINA: That is amazing. That is like Star Trek, isn't it?

AILBHE: Yeah. I was saying hologram next of her.

DARA: Yeah, what do you call those? Avatars.

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DARA: You can kind of imagine that that in a way, that's a little bit where we are headed in that. Do you know, I think huge amounts of organisations now are moving back to hybrid or fully remote solutions and they are recognising they can tap into talent all over the country, or even all over the world. So, I think it is going to totally change the way we go about it. Being workers in the world.

TINA: And the good thing about it is as well, I think is people are able to live where they would like to live now or move home or go wherever they want. I think a big thing about this is when we get kind of more into this different way of living, if it says like this with they say blended approaches that we all have to learn how to trust people more and the employer has to trust the person that they are actually working when they are at home as well.

AILBHE: Arguably you do. Certainly, I say a lot of people do far more. Mine is hybrid, I got into the office, but I go into the office and still work, you know.

TINA: There actually, more work is done.

AILBHE: 13-hour days.

TINA: I think people are working much more and much harder and I think if we say continue to try and promote an accessible culture and society here, everywhere, I think it will actually help people to understand a lot.

AILBHE: Yeah.

DARA: I think people are understanding because they have experienced the benefits of the flexibility in their own lives, they are going to be more, hopefully, more understanding.

TINA: And a bit more aware of people, different people. So you know, on that note, I would like to say a huge thank you to you both. But before we went end, we have to ask you our favourite question. Since the show is called The Blind Spot, what is your blind spot, Ailbhe?

AILBHE: My blind spot I think is myself. I think I have a tendency to probably put other people, I have been told, to put other people AHEAD of myself and I probably don't take care of myself enough. So, I am not good enough at probably giving myself that downtime that I need. I suppose I'm conscious as well of remaining healthy and trying to stay healthy, but I just need to be a bit more careful of not burning out. So, The Blind Spot is myself, I need to cop on.

TINA: Yeah, you know that is very honest and it's true. I mean, it's true that people don't do that. Like my thing is life I can never say no.

AILBHE: Agreed, I am the same. I can never say no, when I see your number turning up on my phone, Tina.

TINA: Fair point.

DARA: She has a way.

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TINA: Anyway, DARA what is your blind spot?

DARA: I suppose it is something like you should ask my colleagues, they would probably tell you much better than me. I think it's that I am an insanely positive person. People take the mick out of me for it all of the time. My friends and that do so I suppose in my work sometimes it can lead me to think sometimes that things are rosier than they are and sometimes I get brought crashing back to Earth by the students when they share them with me. Students or graduates with disabilities. So I suppose that is a bit of a blind spot in that I think it is a positive and a negative quality sometimes. But that is something I always have to be wary of. SO, I suppose we try and counteract that by having as many people with disabilities in the organisation as we possibly can, probably about half our staff are.

TINA: To give you a reality check?

DARA: To give me a reality check and also, we have a great students disability advisory group that would be very influential in building our policy platform and our work. So, we try to address that blind spot in me, by building those things in.

TINA: Really good answers. So I just say again, thanks a million and it has been a really interesting chat. And you're very decent to come in and give us all your time and energy and answering our questions.

AILBHE: Thank you, Tina.

DARA: Thank you, Tina. It was lovely to meet you Ailbhe as well.

AILBHE: You too DARA.

TINA: Thanks for listening to The Blind Spot if you enjoyed this episode please like and subscribe wherever you listen to Podcasts. Until next time on The Blind Spot.

## Transcript for episode 7 - The Built Environment

### THE BLIND SPOT

#### 7. The Built Environment

TINA: Welcome to The Blind Spot, the Podcast to make Ireland accessible for all. Each week I will invite new



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guests onto the show so that they can share their experiences with accessibility and chat with them about how they are doing their part to make access a success.

In today's episode we are going to chat with Orla Hegarty and Lorraine Gallagher about access to the Built Environment. Hello Lorraine and Orla. You're very welcome and thank you very much for coming today.

LORRAINE: Hello Tina, thank you for having me here today.

TINA: Today we will start with Lorraine; can you tell us about yourself and give us some of your background, please?

LORRAINE: Hiya Tina, I am delighted to be here today. So, I work for AHEAD and I am the Information and Training Officer. And for those of you who don't know who AHEAD are, we work to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in higher and further education and also in employment. So, I have been working in AHEAD for 16 years, but I am here today really to talk about the environment with Tina. So, my views are not necessarily the views of AHEAD; just to say that at the start.

TINA: That is fair enough. Yes. Today we are going to discuss access to the built environment. So, Orla how are you? Could you tell us about your background and how you began working in architecture?

ORLA: Thanks Tina and thanks for the invitation to take part today. Yeah, as you said, my background is I trained as an Architect and I worked in practice and then I moved into working in UCD about 17 years ago. Firstly part time and now full time. So my area of work, I suppose is training architects early in their career and my particular area is, I suppose around people and the built environment. And the regulatory systems and the rules we have around that and then more broadly around the kind of culture of all of that. What are we trying to achieve? How to people think about these things? How do people use buildings and then how to people like myself who are involved make it real, you know ensure that the intention is actually delivered in main buildings that people can use and access and are available to the widest number of people possible?

TINA: This Podcast, The Blind Spot, is concerned with trying to create a more inclusive and accessible society and culture and a huge part of that is access to the built environment. So, today we are going to try to explore a lot of different areas that all relate to this and it's a very practical outlook and approach to trying to navigate the accessible environment.

So, I am going to ask Lorraine to talk to us about her personal experience because, one of Lorraine's, many attributes would have been in the past and probably she'd still say it now, Lorraine was a Paralympian champion and zooms around in her wheelchair and Lorraine also uses crutches. But I know Lorraine a very long time, back since '98, in the city arts centre when we were both trying to become rock stars, I think.

LORRAINE: We were.

TINA: Music business course. And it was very interesting because when I met Lorraine first, truthfully, I was blind. I lost my sight in 1993, but I did not get a guide dog for some time. So when I met Lorraine, I don't think I had my first guide dog?

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LORRAINE: No you did not.

TINA: That is right. I was using a cane and I was absolutely atrocious, that is the truth. I never ever took to using a cane because I knew what was there, what was on the footpath, what was in my way, cars were there, everything. The whole built environment was not we'll say the most accessible or user friendly. And I remember when I met Lorraine first, Lorraine was literally powering down the road on purple crutches, if I am right letter?

LORRAINE: I did have purple crutches.

TINA: And she was absolutely bombing along and I was thinking, how in God's name and I was trying to tap along with a cane. So we became very good friends and we both decided in our different approaches because Lorraine had been born with her disability that it was different for me having an acquired disability and also probably being obsessed with equality daily. Now Lorraine is probably obsessed with it as well. But it's kind of an intro to how we both began working on disability awareness and how every day in our lives the built environment affects people like us and also everybody else. So that is why, that is a kind of a general introduction to Lorraine, the purple crutch champion warrior, who if you were in her way, hard-luck basically. So, Lorraine give us your insight and your experience of what it's like negotiating Ireland.

LORRAINE: Well, Tina in those days, you're right yeah. I did fly up and down on the crutches but I have actually been driving now for many, many years and have been obviously retired from the sport for many years. So, I am definitely not as fit as I was then So, I am, I suppose able to have the option of walking on the crutches if I want to or using the wheelchair. So, I have that choice, right. And it's funny, I get given out to when I go around in the wheelchair because I spend more money because I can browse better in the shops and relax as opposed to being on the crutches and trying to carry loads of bags, things like that, right. But I think the environment has improved over the years. But I think it's still got a long way to go. I mean I was just walking down here from the car and I noticed that the footpath from when my car was parked, right up to the front of here, was all gravelly, they are going to finish it I hope, but there you go.

LORRAINE: Gravelly for someone on crutches or in a wheelchair, is not good.

TINA: It is not good.

LORRAINE: But I think it does get better, I think but one of the major concerns about the whole thing about the built environment and why things are built certain ways is that you and I as people with disabilities understand why things are built a certain way like disabled car parking bays or disabled bathroom. But I think for the general population, there still is not an awareness of why they are there and why they are there for specific people with specific needs.

TINA: So Orla, talk to us Orla because if you can try to explain to people because it is something you would notice a lot that designing buildings from the scratch, how to include people, how do architects approach it? What is the approach?

ORLA: Thanks. Well, I suppose, the first thing to say is that when we build something it is there for a very long time. So when we think about making buildings more inclusive and more accessible, we're probably only at that for

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the last 30 years or a bit more. So that all of the building stock from before that, a lot of it not suitable and in fact, a lot of what we built since is not optimum either. So, you know people would not be aware of the really obvious ones like the disabled parking bays that give more space for people using a wheelchair or someone with mobility needs for more space and they'd be more aware of buildings having toilets that are more accessible. So, more space and them being more available and having lifts in more buildings than maybe in the past. So, some of that is regulated. Some of that is because you have to have lifts in buildings now and you have to have toilets available that are a larger size. But that doesn't mean that it meets everybody's needs. So, sometimes when we regulate things and the building regulations change, we take in things that meet specific needs but maybe aren't wide enough or considered enough for every need you know and sometimes it's the space that is allowed but the thinking of you know, how do other people navigate this building if they have you know a sight impairment or hearing difficulties or some you know cognitive difficulty with even reading where you might go into a building or where you might move around or you know, there are so many different layers to this, you know and then beyond that, there is a lot of disability that is unseen as well and we are much slower I think to make accommodations for that and understand what it might be.

TINA: Is it because and I am not an architect, I just work in campus accessibility and I am fascinated, I always try to understand, why is it that say like UCD has done a huge amount of really good development in the last 13 years, maybe ten years. A huge amount of improvement and to try and make things more accessible but obviously it dates back to the 17th or 18th century. It is over 360 acres, we have period houses, we have buildings built in the 1960's, in the main campus area and now we have some brand new buildings. Some of which have won awards for universal accessibility, such as say the students centre. The Confucius Institute is a fabulous building but what I don't understand and can't understand it; why is it that one building will be built and they will do a certain type of ramp and then another building will be built and they'll do a different type of ramp and neither of those two ramps are the same and they are not accessible. So what is that about architecture, why does that happen? Is that the lay of the building or what is the architectural answer?

ORLA: I suppose the chance of that, it's a bit of reinventing the wheel, you know I suppose architects always try and push things a bit. There is also probably that they're probably working to the same minimum regulations so both of them might comply with the actual building regulation. But the building regulation could be just the bare minimum and you know, if you spoke to people who were going to use that ramp every day, you might go a lot further or you might do things differently because even the surface can make a difference. Like I know from speaking to people previously like that some surfaces are fine but not if they are icy. Some surfaces are okay but for people with crutches if the ramp is too steep they are better on stairs and a lot of that kind of understanding I think is poor. And then if you get to the top of the ramp and there's space to turn a wheelchair maybe but the door is too heavy. Like your access independently is not any better than if you could get up the stairs.

TINA: So, there are a lot of elements to it?

ORLA: There are a lot of elements and I think there is not enough awareness, I agree with you, I think people often interpret the bare minimum regulations and they don't have the experience or understanding to get into the head of the person who will actually have to use it.

TINA: Do you think it's always or sometimes budgetary or are people under pressure to build to a certain time frame?

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ORLA: I don't know that things are budgetary I would say it's more that I think our building regulations should go further I mean if you look at the work done say by the National Disability Authority where they make meaningful layouts for say apartments and they give you know examples of this is how it would better, this is a better position for a door or if you've extra space in a living room. You've got that bit of freedom to move more easily or the bathroom might work better, for particular needs, if you need a hoist or something. So, I think, you know we kind of need to go further than the bare minimum regulations and not, I suppose not every architect or not every budget would stretch to that.

TINA: And it's true actually, the National Disability Authority have a really good document, building for everyone. That document pushes the boat out much more on, it's not minimal standards. It's trying to encompass universal accessibility for everybody and I think a lot of it probably to do with consultation as well. And one of the things we asked Lorraine to do before she came in here today was go and do an actual reekie on Dublin City centre since because as solicitors know we are experiencing a Pandemic that has changed things for everybody in physical, culturally, everything, awareness, and workplaces. What we are going to talk to Lorraine and Orla shortly is about the whole aspect of how Covid has encroached on people's lives in a lot of different ways, some for the more positive and some for the negative. But one of the tasks we asked Lorraine to do was to actually go around Dublin City Centre and give us her honest opinion of how she thinks things have panned out, access wise.

LORRAINE: I did go to the north side and I went south. So I went to the south side and I went to the north side. So when I say I went south, I went the Grafton Street, kind of those streets around that. You know, down past Grogan's pub, all around there and there is a lot of like on street furniture now. But what they have done really well and I was really surprised was, where they would have had extra space on the footpath for people to walk, they have actually kind of used that space now to put tables and chairs out. And actually, it has worked well in the sense that there is still room to get past. I was actually really surprised about that because I was thinking how is that going to work in terms of somebody with a wheelchair or pram or whatever, trying to navigate around the environment. So actually it was quite good. It was much better than I thought it was going to be and it has that kind of European feel to it now, you know going around and people sitting outside. I suppose the downside with the Irish climate is the weather really and if you are going to be asked to sit outside that there is proper heating and proper facilities for you to be sitting outside and of course, then if you do need to use you know the facilities that would have been inside the restaurant, that you can still do that. Not all restaurants have got, you know accessible bathrooms or whatever. It is still about knowing places to go that will suit your needs.

TINA: Do you think it could work in Ireland?

LORRAINE: I think it possibly did work over the summer when the weather was warmer. I don't know about now, maybe for a little while during the day I would sit out. But I don't think personally that I would be sitting outside at night.

TINA: So what would you recommend that would change for the nighttime?

LORRAINE: I think it needs to have really good heating systems and stuff like that, you know for people to be comfortable sitting outside. I think it's different in Europe where the nights are warmer, and the nature and the climate, I just don't think we are there. Of course, haven't been too bad in the last while. The weather hasn't been too bad but it rains a lot here.

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TINA: What about the layout of the streetscapes, have they taken into account people who have to navigate with different mobility impairments?

LORRAINE: Yeah, I think they are quite good. I was actually quite surprised. What I was more worried about was when I initially, because I had also been in town a few weeks before, before you had asked me to do it and I was trying to, some of the disabled parking bays I couldn't find where they were and it was only when I was there a second time, to go specifically for this Podcast, that I found they had moved them because normally, if you're a disabled, if you have a physical disability, you tend to know where the bays, are yeah.

TINA: What did you do then, how did you find out where they were moved to?

LORRAINE: It was just that I ended up because I was in the car as well and I was driving around and I just happened to see, Oh, they have moved to there because you know town.

TINA: Do you think they were replaced or?

LORRAINE: They looked like new ones, I do think there is an issue, with disabled bays in general, where there is not actually enough, you know, and as a disabled driver, a driver, or even if you're the passenger and you're being brought around you do tend to know where those bays are.

TINA: In the city centre?

LORRAINE: And even where you live, you tend to know where they are or where you tend to go shopping.

TINA: I am just going to bring Orla in on this because Orla could you talk to us about, I know you have done a lot of work in the last 20 months, would it be with the environment, outdoors and indoors?

ORLA: Yeah, well this is, on the whole, I suppose on the whole Pandemic environment and prevention as well as everything else. But just to follow through on some of the things Lorraine was saying. I would agree with her, the widening of footpaths has been great for everybody and even cycle lanes and reducing the proximity of traffic to people has made things a lot better for people even if that you are holding a child's hands or if you're using a wheelchair or just if your elderly and you're a bit nervous of being so close to traffic. All of those things have been good. There is more clutter on the footpath and there is more space being taken up by tables and chairs, which is grand if you're using them. But not so good if you're trying to work around them or if you knew that footpath for years and now you're having to navigate something that is a new obstacle that you weren't used to. But, yes, so Lorraine was talking about sitting outside in the winter, that you might do for a bit on a cold day but really what we need to do is make inside safe because we need to be inside, it's very cold for the moment and it's going to be cold for the next few months. So we need to get the air quality right inside so that breathing inside is as safe as breathing outside basically.

TINA: And how do we do that, Orla, like what is involved in that?

ORLA: The first thing we need to do is measure how much of a problem we have. Obviously, you know a lot of places are safe, we could keep them open and we don't need to be worrying too much. There are a lot of places

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that are not safe. It's a little bit like food safety, I think, you know. The vast majority of restaurants have good standards and then we police it so that when we find the places that are unsafe they get dealt with. So, we need to start measuring it first off and then we need to start dealing with the places that are unsafe.

TINA: Sorry, Orla, are you talking about in commercial, shops areas, offices, houses, what areas or buildings?

ORLA: We need to give people advice, I suppose firstly about ventilating buildings because a lot of people don't realise that buildings are designed with ventilation and it's all regulated so we need to give people some advice, especially in cold weather when they tend not to ventilate and then we need to give business owners and people operating schools and all sorts of other workplaces you know, advice about you know what is safe. So, sometimes it's to do with the number of people there or the operation of equipment. Sometimes it's to do with it becoming high risk just in certain conditions or whatever. So, it's all very manageable, I think. The problem is we have a huge learning curve.

TINA: Okay, is that whole area new to Ireland?

ORLA: I put it this way, Tina, I'd say known of it is new, but a lot of it is forgotten, you know this is stuff if you go back into history, Florence Nightingale was sorting out ventilation in hospitals for infection control and they were doing it in Spanish Flu and in sorts of other ways when there were pandemics. But we haven't had a problem in Ireland really with airborne diseases since TB and that is more than 50 years ago.

TINA: So because Covid 19 is airborne this is something that we do really need to address in a joined-up thinking approach, yeah?

ORLA: We need to go back to what we were doing in the past actually with buildings and it has been forgotten largely and now that we are sealing up buildings for energy efficiency we have made things worse.

TINA: Would that be, I noticed a lot in new buildings air conditioning is on and you can't open Windows, is that right or wrong? Can we go back to windows open and no air conditioning?

ORLA: It depends, on, a lot of it comes down to the size of the building really. We are in a very mild climate in Ireland really and you know, we are not in extremes in some countries, where you couldn't survive without air conditioning. So most of the year we can be quite comfortable with outside opening windows and most of our buildings are small enough for that to be fine. Some of our bigger buildings obviously are just too big to manage with that kind of ventilation and we have equipment for it so that equipment needs to be run properly enough fresh air brought in and diseases not being trapped in the building and everybody breathing it. So we don't have as much a challenge as some other countries. You know, if you were in Texas or in Dubai or somewhere, the challenge is much, much bigger because you have extremes of climate. So, I think it's a very manageable problem in Ireland, as long as, once we take it on board and try and give people proper advice about it.

TINA: And have you come up with much resistance to this in your work? I know you have been doing a lot of media work and informing people?

ORLA: There is still huge resistance at government and institutional level to environmental science, of what I call

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the environment science. We have had a very medical response to it and vaccines are great and medical treatment has improved but medical sciences look after the medical sciences. This is environmental science, and I think it has not been seen as an opportunity to suppress the Pandemic and to deal with this. It's been seen as another barrier.

TINA: It actually could be very positive.

ORLA: It is a huge opportunity, yeah.

TINA: I was just going to say, going back to what Lorraine was speaking about there, saying that you know, truthfully it is nice to sit outside but it's very cold in Ireland at the moment. Even though it would not be as cold as some countries, it is a temperate climate but it's not really conducive to sitting outside for six or seven hours. How would you address that? You know the way say the whole idea of Covid could be here for another year or so and we need to try and keep things running for everything, especially our mental health and wellbeing. Say, there are a lot of really nice restaurants in town and nice areas and there is street paving outside with seating areas. Could you address that with the restaurant owners and all those commercial areas? How could they be helped to improve air, and ventilation so that they could keep people inside as well?

ORLA: I suppose it is the same for, restaurants could be a bit more challenging because people don't wear masks. Just more broadly, what you do is, you check to see how fresh the air is there at the moment and you can do that with a CO2 monitor and that really tells you, are you breathing fresh air or are you breathing what somebody else has just breathed out that could be infected. And then once you have measured, you can say, okay do we need to improve the ventilation here and there are different ways of doing that or you can improve it filtration so that you are filtering the air that is going round in the building and in some cases, it's more ventilation or its filtration. In some cases, it might be that you reduce the occupancy. You might say, this space is fine for 50 people but it's not for 70 with the level of ventilation here. But longer-term, if we can sort out indoor air quality that will do the heavy lifting.

TINA: There is a huge thing that I have noticed and Orla, I am going to ask you about this as well, because I love taping your brains right, and basically I have noticed in the last 20 months or so, when we have been all encouraged to walk forever, to be outdoors, to enjoy our environment which is lovely and lovely greenery and fresh air and the sea and forests, but, in my local village, Shankill, nobody has remembered to cut back overhanging bushes or shrubs, so I know they would have said in the past, oh it's private property, you can't cut it back or it's a local authority, so they are not working during the Pandemic and that was a huge thing and I couldn't understand how nobody mentioned that all in the media, So no one is working. So every time you walk down the road, you're getting attacked by thorns, and shrubs that are completely covering the paving. My mother who is in her '70s and quite a determined woman, got out with her own secateurs on her own Shankill main road, and was stopped by a number of passers-by asking her was she working for the County Council. They were being honest. So, I don't understand. That is something I find very hard to understand that nobody mentions that, ever. That never comes up, why don't we maintain our own private areas outside our houses? Why don't the local authorities do their job and get out and cut back trees and bushes because it's really difficult to walk around. Any comments on that, Orla?

ORLA: Yeah, I would agree with you. I wish there was more kind of awareness and reminders of these things

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because you're right, that can injure you, apart from the upset of something like that happening. But it's happening, it's not just the plants that are growing, but randomly putting in signage on footpaths, poles, duplicating existing poles, bollards, sometimes that seem completely arbitrary. People you know putting the advertising signboards out on footpaths outside cafes and things like that. They are all obstacles to so many getting around and sometimes I think it is just a complete lack of awareness that you know.

TINA: I was going to say to Lorraine just on to that topic, what it's like where you live and this Podcast is about talking about things and trying to create awareness. But we are slow, there is always a positive way around things and I know that say even in local areas, things like Tidy Towns can get out and cut back trees. I just noticed and I thought personally and I am going to ask you Lorraine, if you agree or disagree with me on this. I think since the Pandemic began that I noticed that people who had in general say weren't parking on footpaths at the audible lights. A lot of our ways went I think it was a bit dog eat dog, and we were back to kind of survival instincts and I think there were trucks parked where they would not have been parked before and a lot of people were under pressure and stress that the kind of niceties or manners about trying to be a reasonable citizen went out the door, I found, most of the time it's a very easy place to get around because people are very good about not parking their cars on the lights.

LORRAINE: Look, I am going around the place all the time and you just meet all sorts all the time, like my local Tesco's, are you listening? The staff in Tesco are brilliant, right. But there is a gentleman, who shall remain nameless, I was going to Tesco's and I go to Tesco's when I know it's going to be quiet, to do a bit, you know. And I was and it's the same time nearly every day I would go because I know it's quiet then. And I noticed this man with a red car and he was parking, I would say I would have the first space nearest the door because I wanted to be near the door right, for obvious reasons. I noticed he was parking really close to the car. So, one day he happened to park just as I parked and he parked so close that I actually couldn't get the door fully open and I had to open the window and say, eh, can you slightly move your car. And I was really nice. Right? I said can you just slightly move your car I need to open the door fully to get out. And he said to me ah, you have loads of room and he walked off and I was like, Oh God. So, I had to move the car to a different space and obviously got out. But it took me a while to move, sort out the car and then go in. Anyway, that was fine but it put me in bad humour then, right. But he also goes to the shop at a certain time of the day and I noticed that he goes at the same time as me. So, now I just don't park near where I know that person is going to park. And this person is a senior citizen, and I kind of feel like, you know what, you should know better.

TINA: Would you not address that with him?

LORRAINE: I kind of feel, oh you have loads of space. Sometimes you have to just, you would be angry every day and I just thought he is not worth it. But you know, there is a general kind of apathy about why people need certain things. Even say going shopping. I happen to go shopping in the shopping centre that I am very familiar with and the last while there are always people that are not fitting the disabled, going in and coming out and you're left waiting and you're just like, I can't go anywhere else, I need to use this bathroom and use this toilet, what is going on and people, and a lot of people with children as well that could go to the other toilets and you're like, what is going on? It's really frustrating and you could just argue every time you go out.

TINA: Yes, it was a similar situation, there was only one accessible bathroom built in this gym which I had to use because the shower was contained within it and I was on a time, we were going at lunchtime. Anyway, I was going



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there quite a lot and the staff were brilliant and the gym instructors were really helpful and I used to bring my guide dog and he could fit in the bathroom and sit beside me when I was trying to peddle on a whatever they are called, exercise bikes and unfortunately one of the days, one of the members of staff, I couldn't use the bathroom because it was occupied and it turned out that it was a member of staff. So, I got very annoyed and I am unlike Lorraine and sometimes I wish I wasn't because it is true, you have to be nearly angry once a day but I did say it to her, I said look, there is only one. I can't actually use the main shower area because there are 20 cubicles and I can't find them and I said, why are you using the bathroom and she said, I am in a hurry and I have to do my make-up. I thought right okay, and I said, right okay, can you please not do it again and that was it, she walked off, and I said, right okay, that is once. So the following week, I returned, the same person in the bathroom again, doing the same thing. So I did actually get quite annoyed and I spoke to the management about it. I wrote to the management and I was so angry about it that I actually left the gym because I felt they didn't address it properly. It is hard. You can't spend your life being angry but I do think if we don't address bit by bit. It doesn't change but then again, why do we have to always get angry. That is true. Orla, do you have any?

ORLA: I agree with you, Tina. And I think we do have to get angry actually because these things are really important, you know because if people have equal rights and us, you know, we have values of inclusion, well then we have to vindicate those rights and it should not be left up to individuals to have to get angry and make changes. We should collectively be all trying to do it. Van I just pick up on something that Lorraine was saying there, about the parking, just while people have the disabled parking bay, size in their minds, housing standards have all been reduced in the last few years for apartments and I think it is very discriminatory towards disability for a lot of what's happened because by shrinking down the space people will have to live in, it's going to reduce the availability of that housing to people who need specialist equipment or who need a bit more space or who need to have a carer live with them or you know an assistant or all of the other things that are more demanding in housing and we have been moving much. I mentioned the National Disability Authority. We had been moving much more towards housing that was more inclusive. We had you know downstairs toilets and level entrances on new homes you know so that you could be visited more easily or that people could age in their home without having to move, lifetime housing. And I think some of the changes in apartments now have been a bit retrograde and have moved.

TINA: Why have they been allowed?

ORLA: Shrinking standards is to do with money, I propose.

TINA: Money?

ORLA: In the longer term we want people able to be able to stay in their homes if they develop a disability or they have more challenges as they get older. And we want people to be able to have guests into their home and to accommodate any other, whether its specialist equipment or a hobby or working from home or a child you know, all of these things that are just normal life should not be seen as outside the norm. And something that needs specialist housing. We should be making all our housing to accommodate the greatest number.

TINA: Do you think Orla that we can go back to that because I know what you mean exactly, the lifetime housing approach. I was down in Kerry recently in a brand new scheme, housing area and like that, I was so impressed, I was sitting there thinking, oh my God if this was like everywhere. Like the houses were all, it's in a small estate but they're all, it's the same builder but he asked everybody before they moved in; did they have any children with

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disabilities? Did they have disabilities? Did they need anything different? Did they have asthma? You know all that kind of thing. So they built the houses slightly differently to each person's requirements. But they're basically a house that you could live in forever and the most amazing part of it for me was when I got there, they had a ramp, into the house and I was laughing looking at Lorraine going isn't that amazing. I got so excited because I thought, that is amazing, that means that whoever is living here when they are older or whatever happens, they'll be able to get in and out of their own house.

LORRAINE: I actually got a ramp, Tina, to cut across you now, right, when I moved into the house I live in now, actually I live in a tiny bungalow.

TINA: But it's adapted.

LORRAINE: It's adapted. I gutted the place and put a few things in but it is a bit small for a wheelchair user but anyway, it doesn't matter. What I did was, to the front of the house, I got cobble lock and I got it sloped up to the house and the whole drive covered so I wasn't getting out of the car into the grass. It looks great, it just looks like that was the way it was built.

ORLA: There is no extra cost to most of these things, at the beginning there's no cost.

TINA: It's just thinking about it, it's amazing right?

ORLA: It is.

TINA: And even the doors like in this place I was in, the doors are wider so you can get in, in your wheelchair. The door handles are down at wheelchair height. Now, I know a lot of houses have that but just very kind of really simple stuff like rounded walls so that when you walk into something as I do regularly you don't whack yourself.

LORRAINE: That is very good.

TINA: You know, it's just kind of and then the whole area had different, some little tweaks to make it usable for whoever lived there. So it means they are all really happy and they can stay there without having to move again.

ORLA: But it's wider than I suppose, you know, you're talking about the doors being wider, at one time in my life, I used to push a twin buggy and you know, there are so many other needs that are accommodated by accommodating people who need more space.

TINA: Just good design.

ORLA: It isn't a niche area for a few people.

TINA: No exactly.

ORLA: It makes housing available and more useful to everybody and it means they have more security to be there longer term as well.

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LORRAINE: That is just good universal design. Like in my mind I say to myself, well you know what, if all parking bays were universally built, we would not have this problem nor if all bathrooms were universally built would we have this problem, you know? Obviously it costs money and more space possibly to have bigger cubicles or whatever. But you know, if we could actually if we were allowed to design better.

TINA: Coming back to the discussion on why it is that I know people might put in minimal standards. They might put in say, I have noticed one area that has a ramp and they put this little kind of pointed areas stuck up off the ramp, the railing. It is actually kind of dangerous and it's uncomfortable. It probably looks lovely. I know architecture as well is about design and the look of the area. But just wondering, Orla, if you had a choice tomorrow, say you were the Minister for Architecture and Good Air Pollution. How would you approach nationally to make people aware and to try and make buildings usable for everybody, without trying to think it's always going to cost a fortune or going to ruin the aesthetics, you know?

ORLA: I think the first thing is to make a bit more space everywhere. Like a lot of disabled toilets are just not big enough for you know some of the needs of people in terms of changing or having an assistant with them. The footpaths aren't wide enough. The bedrooms aren't big enough to turn a wheelchair. Really basic things. And then I think there's a whole level of education, particularly for the, I suppose the students of architecture and the built environment planning and urbanism and engineering as well, to understand because there is often a lot of compromises in this some of this too, which maybe is the other side that we don't talk about enough that you're trying to balance different needs and somebody described to me recently, you know architects putting metal tool studs into the footpath so that people, you know when you come to a crossing that you can feel underfoot that you're approaching a danger or whatever but somebody used metal studs and then in hot weather guide dogs were uncomfortable with that.

TINA: They burn you, oh yeah.

ORLA: You're going backwards or you put in a railing to guide somebody from falling but it actually is a trip hazard. So there are a lot of detail considerations that I think comes with education and awareness and we probably need to do an awful lot more on that?

TINA: And Lorraine, what do you think?

LORRAINE: I totally agree. And I think as well we need more people with disabilities getting involved in their careers, studying those areas because it's that insight, that input. Like it's very hard for a group, many of them will have just left school or whatever, going into an area and spending an amount of time doing good universal design or good design and then they go off and do other things. You know, so it's getting the insight of people who are using it on a more regular basis.

ORLA: I totally agree with you, yeah, I mean when I say education and awareness, it has to come from engagement with people who can explain this and who understand you know, more than just a regulation on a page in a book. Who understands what that means and can even tell us whether the regulation works and whether it should be changed.

LORRAINE: I have got a funny example. Myself and my colleague, it was lunchtime and we went up to Blackrock,

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the shopping centre there, we only had an hour, a bit of a rush and I could not get a disabled bay for love nor money. So, I had to park in a normal bay, and this person would be well aware of disability, you know those kinds of needs or whatever. So anyway, it took me ages to get out of the car. I think I was driving the Mini, at the time, do you remember I had the Mini, Tina?

TINA: Yeah.

LORRAINE: I was driving the Mini at the time and I had to lie across the two seats, get my feet out. I got out of the car eventually. It took ages to get out of the car and we went back to the office and this person said to me, you know what she said, I thought I got it, I really thought I understood it, until I saw you struggling to get out of the car. And that was somebody that worked in AHEAD at the time. So, it is hard you know. And you do feel, I feel like sometimes you are just that moany disabled person going around going, why do you have to do that? Why do you have to park there?

TINA: It is hard. That is true and I totally agree with you that every single day, I nearly say to myself when I'm walking up through Shankill village and I've lived there for 43 years and I know people from when I could see, when I was in the tennis club and I know more or less the layout but every day I walk up through the village, I have to nearly tell myself now if somebody is parked up the front of the lights, let's try and be reasonable ish here, but you just, but sometimes you come across people and they just don't get it and then I have to give my sermon up from the mount. But I don't really think it is because I actually think it helps, like what Orla said. I honestly think people need to be more vocal and not be so accepting of people's behaviours because there is no need to do it.

ORLA: It's the people who have the disability who have to carry the load.

TINA: It is and then we get labelled that angry woman. But the other thing I was just going to say something because this is true, we are all about positivity on this Podcast as well. That's very true. That is the way, I know Lorraine well and I know Orla and we lead our lives in a positive way. So, there have been quite a good few developments over the years since I worked in UCD with the students doing the competitions with the National Disability Authority called the 24-hour Challenge and where I actually took part in one of the first ones and it was brilliant. Like we basically were given, we went into a hotel in town and we were asked to design things that would help people with disabilities or ways to get around and it was for the Dublin City Council and it was a competition and it was amazing because we had a certain amount of time to do it. We had to design stuff. They walked around with me to see what it was like with a guide dog, trying to negotiate Grafton Street, all that kind of thing. There are things like that happen and they also, the Royal Institutes of Architects do fantastic competitions as well to promote when a building is made really accessible and it wins awards. So, I think there are good initiatives but I think like everything that if we can try and get it culturally into our culture more and that is something that I just want to ask maybe a general what are your thoughts on how we can change our culture?

LORRAINE: I just think there needs to be more awareness through the media as well. There needs to be more advertising, there needs to be more stuff in schools, there just needs to be more stuff in general around, the whole thing about diversity and disability and that disability doesn't get swallowed up by just the word diversity because that can mean so much to people and I often find as well, people who contact me through work and they say, Oh I didn't know who AHEAD was; didn't know you existed. And the reality is for people unless it actually concerns them themselves, there isn't that, you know, why would I want to know about that? It does not affect me, sort of

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mentality or they see something vacant and say, oh, I'll just slip in there; I'll only be a minute. How many times in my life have I heard people say, I was only there for a minute? And you know and then my mother was looking at me one day and she said, I've never seen you get so annoyed with somebody from the window of the car going, oh my God. So, it's that kind of like, unless it affects people directly there often is not the appetite to change.

ORLA: You know what struck me actually when I was listening to you, I remember in the first lockdown do you remember when everywhere was closed and people were walking a lot and there was a big controversy about toilets not being available to people and I remember having a conversation with somebody one day and they said, but like this is life for people with disabilities all the time. You plan your entire life around whether there is a toilet, what hours it's open, what floor it's on and you know your independence and freedom is often down to something as simple as that. And it was when everybody else had their independence and freedom curtailed by the lack of availability of toilets that maybe that came home to people. That you know, that just having facilities whether it's enough parking bays, enough toilets, enough signage, that is appropriate or the simple things, the trees being cut back, the street signs. Those small things might seem small but they can be a barrier to somebody's participation in just feeling independent enough to go out or to take a job or take a place in education. You know, they are often the very small things that stop people participating.

LORRAINE: Yeah, because that is one thing that I would say to people when they're thinking about going to college, right? Particularly if they have certain types of disabilities, I would say to them. Do you know what you need to do, you need to go to that campus before you make a decision, check it out and see if that is the campus for you because you have that specific needs, go and check it out.

TINA: You have to think about things first.

LORRAINE: You have to think ahead, you're always thinking ahead.

TINA: My experience of people with disabilities truthfully, before I lost my sight, years and years ago my Uncle Joe had Multiple Sclerosis at a time when nobody knew what Multiple Sclerosis was. He walked, he was a sailor originally and then he was a chef in Vincent's Hospital and he always had an amazing, real cheerful, very funny man but he started to limp and no one knew what it was and then eventually he had to use a wheelchair. And I always remember as I got on great with him. But I was only 12 or something. I always remember that he was really angry when we were out because people wouldn't talk to him, they would be asking me if I was pushing a wheelchair, does he want or whatever and Joe would spend his life getting really annoyed and I would try and make him laugh by just whatever and I just didn't understand that because I was a child and years later then when I went blind first, the first thing that was really weird was because I thought I couldn't believe this, it was like, they weren't actually talking to me they were talking to the person I was with. So, I was like what is that about. So, suddenly you become invisible and I spent a long time like that until I got a guide dog because then people were able to talk to me because my cane was a barrier for my blindness whatever and once I got the dog, you know, like having a child everyone wants to talk to you. And I found that very, very strange and the way humans, I don't know. I think children are very different. They don't seem to have the hang-ups or the difficulties and addressing you directly but like people just couldn't talk to you, they were crossing themselves, jumping out of your way. God bless you.

LORRAINE: Welcome to the world, Tina.

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TINA: It was funny because I joined samba band years ago and that was the funniest part because when I was trying to go down this road with a cane, there was one particular lady, she always had a blue dress and big cross and she sang?

LORRAINE: That's right I do remember her?

TINA: She used to chase me down the road daily and I'm not joking and blessed me and whatever because I was different because I was blind and I was a saint and I am a saint, but.

LORRAINE: I have always been a saint Tina!!

TINA: That comes into it. It's really strange like and people are still nearly like, can I asked you what happened and I am thinking, why do you want to know? But look, I know that is life and I only just understand it now because of my Uncle and now I get it why he was really angry and I could never understand it when he was, so there you go.

LORRAINE: I think it's different if you are born or if you have a disability from a young age, if you acquire one as an adult, it is a completely different experience.

TINA: Yeah, it is.

ORLA: It's a reflection of the society we live in, in some ways, in that we try to be more inclusive now but we are on a journey and there's a lot of barriers on it and you know, I think it's great you are talking openly about this I suppose and even just having this conversation is making me think and see things differently. So, this hour has made a difference to it me and that is good. We need to be much more open.

LORRAINE: Even my own child, I knew this would happen because my niece when she was about three and she came into the house one day and me and my sister used to meet in my mother's on a certain day in the week and in comes my niece and she walks up and down and goes, Lorraine, walk like me', you know? So when I had my own child, I knew this would happen. And one day I came in from work and she was only small at the time, she was about two and a bit and she said 'Mammy, you can't walk like me and Daddy, and I said 'ah yeah, but that's okay isn't it?' And she looked at me and she went off and about a week later she came back and she said, 'Mammy, you can't like walk like me and Daddy but that is okay' and that is my own child.

TINA: It's amazing.

LORRAINE: So you know when you look at it like that.

TINA: Oh yeah, you get great comments like there's a little six year old next door to me, her Granny minds her and she is amazing, like she's just within a few weeks in the summer, she was telling me where the step was.

LORRAINE: Ah brilliant.

TINA: Unbelievable. But she also said to me one day, it was classic - I said to her, I have to get my guide dog

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groomed and she said well, I suppose that is because your blind, you can't wash your own dog, in fairness. We wash our dog, Tina; you know that is just life, isn't it? And she is six. And I am looking at her going, wow I love that one.

LORRAINE: That is brilliant.

TINA: It's brilliant. It's honest and it makes sense, it's rational; isn't it?

LORRAINE: Yeah.

TINA: Since the show is called the blind spot. Can you both tell us what your blind spots are?

LORRAINE: I am rubbish at parallel parking. I think it is because when I park in the disabled bay I just kind of park straight in whereas when I have to parallel park it's like Jesus, particularly if you have a car behind you and one in front, I am like Oh no. That is my Blind Spot.

ORLA: I am really bad at recognising faces, really bad and people wearing masks have made my life very, very difficult. So my blind spot definitely is facial recognition and I have to meet people a few times before I recognise them and that's kind of hard to explain to people.

TINA: Very good. Well, it's been a pleasure to talk to you both today. And we've learned absolutely loads and really appreciate it. Thank you so much, Lorraine and Orla.

LORRAINE: Thank you so much, Tina.

ORLA: Thank you, Tina.

TINA: Thanks for listening to The Blind Spot. If you enjoyed this episode please like and subscribe wherever you listen to Podcasts. Until next time on The Blind Spot.

## Transcript for episode 9 - Accessible Technology

### THE BLIND SPOT

#### 9. Accessible Technology

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TINA: Welcome to the Blind Spot. I am your host, Tina Lowe. And this Podcast looks to show everyone about making Ireland an all your host about making Ireland accessible for all. Each week I will invite new guests on to the show so that they can share their experiences, with accessibility and chat with them about how they are doing their part make to access a success.

In today's episode, we are going to chat with Sean Doran and Kyran O'Mahony for the National Council for the Blind and today we are going to talk about access to technology.

We have two very, very expert people, both Sean and KYRAN in this area and we are going to start today by asking you to tell us a bit about yourselves. If we could start with you Sean?

SEAN: I work in NCBI, as Programme Coordinator, and we do lots of stuff with accessibility. I have a past in It, but I have worked as an IT trainer working in other roles, so for the last seven years or so, I have been sort of entrenched in thinking about accessibility and how people with vision impairments can access technology and it's been a very, very interesting seven years.

TINA: And before that Sean was your background always in software technology or did you study?

SEAN: Yeah, I studied software development in college. And I worked on a number of different fields from everything from sales to technology to I used to work in a place before college where we manually built old tape drives. I was always putting together and taking apart technology and always an interest in computers and stuff at home. I used to break technology before my folks got home and I had to fix it before they got back. So that was my interest in technology.

TINA: So, you were always interested in the actual, the nuts and bullets as well as the software.

SEAN: Absolutely, always tinkering around with everything.

TINA: How did you get involved in blindness or visual impairment or what drew you to that?

SEAN: It was actually a sideways move because I was actually working in Deaf Hear for a short period of time and we shared an office with NCBI and I was asked did I want to maybe volunteer and do some training with NCBI with in-service users because they saw the work I was doing in Deaf Hear at the time, so I came over as a volunteer first and then I sort of got different roles for NCBI after that and I don't think they'll get rid of me just yet, Kyran.

KYRAN: No, you're not going anywhere.

TINA: And Kyran, can you introduce yourself and tell us about your background?

KYRAN: Yeah, so my name is KYRAN O'Mahony, and I am the Chief Psychology Officer with the National Council for the Blind. So what that means is I have two responsibilities in the NCBI. I look after all of the technology aspects of our service. So, whether it be technology training or technology support to people with sight loss and I also run then the technology for NCBI Group which is made up of five companies across the overall group. Yeah, I think I am with the NCBI for a little over two years and I was only saying to Sean the other day, I



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can't believe how quick it has been since I joined NCBI. It has been an absolute whirlwind and NCBI have been really ambitious around going through an overall kind of digital transformation on technology because they have really recognised the importance that technology plays in the lives of people with sight loss. As I was saying before I suffer from nystagmus myself, so I have maybe about 18% vision. It's dropping a little bit at the moment. But I know you were saying to Sean how did he come to NCBI, but this is my first time ever working in the charity sector. I am a computer science graduate and I have worked in loads of different companies like Ryanair and Dunnes Stores and Irish Allied Banks and other places. I have been very lucky that I have always been using technology to overcome sight loss and when I joined NCBI, that was the biggest thing for me to make sure that that mantra within NCBI is at the forefront of everything, you know that technology is such a key enabler. So, I have been working with Sean in the overall NCBI labs team, which is kind of our technology team, to really embed the importance of technology, how we can do events like this and really advocate for how important technology is as a key enabler for people with sight loss.

TINA: That is really interesting because I was going to ask you, you'll know this because if you've been growing up with technology, yeah, can you tell us, it's a fascinating journey, like I know myself, when I lost my sight in my late 20's, the screen reader software was called Cicero and it was very synthetic, very, very synthetic kind of star Trek sound. And I know there has been huge advancements. But could you tell me about a historical walk through how technology started? How it developed because there are so many changes in it for visually impaired and blind users especially.

KYRAN: What is really interesting, just to give you some background, I really stumbled into technology. I actually wanted to do physio in UCD, but I did not get the points. And I had technology as kind of a backup and I ended up in my very first day in lectures in college, I didn't even know how to turn a computer on. I don't know if people remember because I don't know is everyone as old as I am. Computers used to be just big white boxes and I literally had to touch feel the front of the case to try and find the power button, to turn it on.

TINA: They were giant, I remember.

KYRAN: Yeah. So I knew nothing at that point, you know. And then I remember, we were trying to price large screens and things back in, it was before 2000's anyway, oh my God, I'm so old! But you know even to get a 19-inch monitor back then, like two or £3,000, it was crazy expensive to do it. I remember we were all saving for ages just to get a monitor for college, you know? When you think about the evolution of technology, and I know you referenced the screen reader. Now you have neural engines that are used for voice dictation now and Siri and things like that. What I love with technology, and I kind of always use this story lately so, my kind of journey with technology as someone with sight loss really started off where I need the biggest possible screen I can get. I need, if I could get a 100-inch screen for my laptop that is what I would get but obviously you can't because I just couldn't afford something like that. But recently I have noticed, because the likes of Windows and Mac and operating systems, they have so much assistive technology built into them, I don't really need to do that anymore. And Sean will tell you. Personally I use a 13 inch laptop because I can use Zoom so easily on a Mac. I don't need to go out and buy the huge screen that we paid. You know, probably more than that Mac actually cost, you know?

TINA: So, you didn't do physio, you decided so you did computer science even though you did not have a background in it or? That is an amazing choice.

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KYRAN: No. No one in my family had any computer, I literally picked it because at the time, you'd be literally guaranteed a job if you do computers. Do you know what I think is really important, just from the perspective of accessibility is that I had never come to technology until my degree. So, I never knew that it was something that could be such an enabler because I was forced to use technology because you have to because you're doing a computer science degree. But I remember in secondary school I was given a laptop you know and it was like two weeks before my Leaving Cert and they were like, this laptop will help you as someone with sight loss and I remember saying to the Principal, what the F am I supposed to do with this, you know because you're under so much pressure coming up to your Leaving Cert and he ended up giving me a bit of giving out to for using bad language but like, at the time what good would a laptop do for me. What good would that be?

TINA: If you had sight loss, did you go to a mainstream secondary school?

KYRAN: I think it is changed a little now bit now but I went to Rosminny, just beside St. Joseph's. I am not sure if they still do it because I haven't really kept in touch but there was about two to three people per class with sight loss. So, there was a couple of people like me with low vision and then maybe one or two that had no vision.

TINA: How did you access your material then?

KYRAN: With great difficulty. It was very difficult to procure large print books because you know, the curriculum would be always ahead of what you needed to study, you know and it was the same for people with sight loss because back then it was all braille, you know paper braille for no vision and literally the two teachers that used to be there to support children with sight loss would be typing, you know, brailleing the books the day or two before the actual class, trying to keep up. You know what I mean? Now, I know that is changed now and this is back in the '90s and I remember personally one of the biggest problems I had was because I was trying to do kind of honour subjects and stuff like that, I would get really severe eyestrain from trying to read normal size books and stuff. Even some of the large print that I get and trying to use magnifiers, hand held magnifiers and things like that.

TINA: Did you use tape recorders, or did you have any technology, had we come into?

KYRAN: No, not really.

TINA: No. We hadn't we were on the tape recorders?

KYRAN: It wasn't really out to be honest; it was more nothing with a plug like big magnifiers and no teenager wants to be carrying around that or telescopes was the other thing.

TINA: That is some achievement to go from say, trying to access your material and then choosing computer science.

KYRAN: Yeah, it's come so much full circle now and this is why I took the job in NCBI to talk about this right, so if you think about it back then even trying to get a large print book was challenging, trying to get, you know digital magnifiers didn't exist, I don't think speech software was back in the 90's, Sean might correct me on that one, I am not sure?

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SEAN: In a very small case in the early '90s, yeah.

KYRAN: But now what I love telling people is that the number one accessibility tool that I have, and I carry with me, all day every day and Sean will attest to this, is my iPhone. I am glued to my iPhone. I use my iPhone for everything. I use it as a digital magnifier because I can zoom in and out on text. I have a three-year-old little girl, I read her bedtime stories, using the magnifier app on the phone with the torch turned on, so I can get it, if you think children's books, they naturally have large font but I want to be able to engage with her, so I can sit back a little bit more and use the iPhone. I stop the buses during the day by using the magnifier on the phone and I heard a great story recently from one of our service users, and he was telling me that last Christmas he was at a family function, and somebody said, I can't do this with my iPhone. So, he took the iPhone off them, and he said, hey Siri, turn on voiceover and fixed the issue using voice, voiceover on his iPhone and then said Hey Siri, turn off voiceover and gave them their phone back. Isn't that such an incredible journey on technology to say that we can get there?

TINA: Excellent.

KYRAN: Now, everything is not perfect yet don't get me wrong. There is still a lot of challenges out there, but technology is in my view, and I say this on every report I give into the NCBI board, technology is the single biggest enabler. It is not perfect, but it will get you some of the way.

TINA: Absolutely. And Sean, talk to us about the services that the National Council for the Blind offer to the public?

SEAN: Like in terms of technology, what we would offer is technology assessments initially where we would meet a person, Tina, sort of gauge their needs in terms of technology and we would kind of assess what kind of technology we could use to aid those needs and we could kind of begin training so we do lots of training sessions, it could be something as simple as, you want to learn how to use an iPhone to make phone calls to contact family members and if that person has got low vision, we can show them how to enlarge text like Karen is talking about and how to use zoom and if a person has no vision, we can use like a screen reader on a mobile phone and whether that is talk back on Android or voiceover on IOS and then for people who want to learn emails, and things we teach them Microsoft products if they're using a laptop. All this can be done on your mobile device also. So, in terms of technology we would offer lots of training, assessments and then we provide a whole host of other things also.

TINA: And does the National Council for the Blind provide support to employers or does it train say employers in learning what the technology is for potential employees?

SEAN: Employers have often rung us in the past and said, I have a person working with me with this condition, what equipment would I need, what is best to do if it's in terms of someone with low vision, do we need big screens or certain lighting. If it's someone with no vision we need certain kinds of software like screen readers and is our software, if they have like bespoke software, their own databases or CMS's, will that work with screen readers etc; so, we consult with them on that and advise them on that. Also, in terms of work placement adaptation grants, if there is equipment that someone can avail of, we can advise employers of all that information.

TINA: Very good. And one of the things that happens quite a lot is, I work in a large organisation and sometimes I

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find it quite frustrating that people still don't know what screen reading software is and like is there KYRAN, do you see a way to nationally show people, employers especially, educational institutes how this works and then to, the actual nitty-gritty of it which is what I am going to ask Sean to describe because he is really good at describing this, is how to make documentation accessible so that if somebody uses a screen reader that they can access the material. So, does NCBI have a master plan or a kind of national awareness which it continues to engage with large organisations to show them how to create accessible information and then to show them what screen readers are and what they do.

KYRAN: I think before you jump in Sean on the document piece, I think what is really important is that NCBI are huge advocates for the new EU legislation that is being brought into Ireland which has essentially said that all public bodies and government bodies must have an accessible website and mobile application. And if anyone out there wants to Google the WHE 2.1 standard that does also incorporate document accessibility as well. So, we have been working really hard to, in the NCBI to support companies and organisations around understanding what those guidelines are and teaching them and training them to ensure that they meet those criteria because they now have to because it's law. But what we are finding more and more is that companies that are not covered in the legislation are doing it because it's part of their diversity and inclusion agenda. So NCBI has been working also with them to say this is something not only should you do but it is actually also the right thing to do, and I think Sean has been on the ground working with a lot of these companies and actually been a key kind of trainer, so to speak in terms of transferring that knowledge. But I think it's great one, that there is a standard now and that standard has been around for a while, I am not just saying that but if there is any sort of legislation that is behind the standard that you need to meet, it makes it a lot easier for us to bang people on doors. So, for example, I am not sure what UCD's funding is but any documents that are up on your website would need to be accessible your website should be accessible similar to others, you know?

TINA: We have had a programme in place since probably started off two years ago, University for All and it's all about trying to bring everybody on board to create information and create inclusion and you know best practice in trying to ensure that people can be included in every way in the workplace. So, that is an initiative but as well as that you know saying that it's legislatively, you have to do it. It also makes very good business sense because I have been reading a lot up on this and 60% of the population will at some stage use some sort of assistive technology. In Ireland, we have an ageing population which means that we also have to use lots of different types of assistive technology. So, for a business to provide a service that will include everybody, they make far more money and it's very economically acceptable and it's a good plan to try and create accessible information.

I love asking Sean this really hard question because he knows how to explain to people because this is what we are trying to

KYRAN: I am glad you're asking Sean.

TINA: Like we do have people in UCD actually who carry out workshops all the time on this topic and it's really helpful and it's amazing. But to create an accessible document, so talk us through that, Sean?

SEAN: The WCAG2.1 web standards, that also applies to documents and digital content, like PDFs or word documents. So, you're doing a review of the document, it's almost like a mini review of the website. So, you check things like, is the text clear print on it? If you use cursive text, it can be quite hard to read, especially for people

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with dyslexia and if you take people with low vision or colour contrast issues, we have to see are the colours in the document used correctly. Are we going to put something like pale pink text over pale blue background? That could be very, very difficult to read. It might look nice in terms of a style point of view but it's going to be very, very difficult for people to read and then you get into sort of the screen reader sort of end of it also, if you imagine things like a PDF is going to have lots of images; are all those images labelled correctly? Do they have alt text describing what that image is conveying? If we are using an image, we are using it for a reason. So we are trying to convey some information through the image and we don't want to deprive someone who can't see that image of that same contextual information. Like sometimes with documents, they might be background image. They might be just a triangle or a line or something that is purely decorative, and we can mark it as purely decorative so screen reader will ignore it. But if it's giving some context, we have to label it. It's labelling these things correctly, as a screen reader user yourself Tina, you come to an image and there's far too little alt text for it actually mean anything to you or someone won a poetry prize in writing the longest description ever, so it's that balance and also the document then is, if there is a table in it; is the table going to be labelled correctly? And you know, especially things like reader order, someone who is looking at a document visually, you're going to start from top to bottom and go left to right or someone who is designing a document in terms of UX has some sort of flow. That flow is always sort of matched, you go through a document going I know what I am supposed to read next but with a screen reader, unless that order has been implemented correctly, you could open up a digital document and start at the bottom or you could be up in the middle and back up at the top. That reader order all has to be checked. Quite simple to do. Quite simple to fix if you have the right software and quite simple to check and even with a screen reader go through a document and go well, that's completely incorrect, I must go fix that. And like this has been a hot topic me because myself and KYRAN were also speaking with the National Disability Authority recently. We did a presentation on this, and we get, we must get a phone call every day about it and there are public and private organisations coming to us saying how do we make this. As well as websites for documents accessible.

KYRAN: It is actually interesting that people are finding, even though, as I was saying, the legislation covers documents and websites, most people are so concerned about the documents, Sean. We get far more people contact us to say you know we have these documents because and I think they are both equally important, you know. Like, if you have got a website that 20% of your customers or even like you were saying to me like up to 60% of people can't use. That is not commercially viable. Nobody would have a commercial entity to do that. But I am always surprised that it seems to be people are so concerned with the document side of things. I would actually Sean, consider it simpler to make a document accessible rather than a large website.

SEAN: I absolutely totally agree with you there. I think a lot of this is people assume their website is accessible.

TINA: And talk to us about creating the websites because that is a huge thing?

SEAN: So much like we were saying for the documents there, a lot of that stuff still stands and is your colour contrast correct are you using the right fonts? Can you Zoom to a certain amount without overlapping of text and you know, is your images labelled correctly? But what you can't check for, with software, you have to do manually Tina is actually do an end to end on the website. Like use a screen reader for example and go through it or just go through it without that and find other issues but with a screen reader, you could be having interactive element or from element to element and if that is not coming to you in a logical order, you could quite easily get lost on a website or I am sure you got trapped in a menu somewhere and you could not escape from it and you had to reload the entire site and that happens two or three times on the page, you probably just shut down the site. But

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those sites are probably deemed accessible somewhere else.

KYRAN: I think that do you know what is interesting about website design? And we've talked about this a lot when we've met companies. When I worked in other companies, without naming names but big ones in retail, everyone has an ambition to make their website accessible. And no one doesn't want to do it, you know? But I think what happens as websites are being developed, let's say you've got six months to rebuild any website or whatever it is, and you get towards the end and you're running out of time and you're running out of money. You're thinking, oh God we need to make this website accessible, oh well let's do that. We'll get it out the door, release the first version and then fix the accessibility then.

TINA: It's kind of an add on.

KYRAN: I think that is what happens in a lot of times. Yeah, yeah exactly. But we have been really advocating for say accessibility should be part of your overall design process. You know what I mean, so when you're talking to your designers and I think people are sometimes a little bit afraid to talk about accessibility and inclusion, because I think brand team's you know want to and I have dealt with them and they have a very specific UX that they want their people to go through and they are scared if you make that accessible or inclusive it is going to affect the brand and that is actually not the case. I think what they assume an accessible website is just like literally a white background and really big text and no colour.

TINA: I know, yeah.

KYRAN: That is not the case.

TINA: It's trying to get past that.

KYRAN: That is just not the case.

TINA: Yeah, the idea that it's not going to be visually as attractive as you think it could be, isn't it? It's about wanting the glamour and glitz, isn't it, as well as the accessibility. Yeah. I think when things are not done say with the knowledge and say training and overall say trying to get that idea that it is actually something that is built in from the very beginning, it's not an add on and that it's something that makes so much sense and if you make it accessible, it works for everybody. That is the part that you have to try and drive home, that it's actually including.

SEAN: If you use the built environment there as an analogy like KYRAN was saying there like people think you have to strip things back and make it plain and sterilise a website. But like, if you can get UX designers up to speed on accessibility and consult with them from an early stage it's like you use the built environment as an example. If you build a lovely being and it's like artistically beautiful and then you tell the designer actually to put a ramp here and you've to change this and you've to do that and they feel it's destroying their design. But if you educate that person from the start, they will work those things into the design.

Tina: A lot of it is that. Trying to get people on board from the very beginning to see that it's not just about putting something in afterwards. It's from the beginning and it is all to do with colour contrast, visuals that are described, clear text, not kind of flashing lights and blinking things and whatever. For some people. But you know, it's a very

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interesting area because as well as screen reading and accessible documentation and accessible websites, talk to us about all the other developments that the National Council for the Blind have been doing in the last we'll say 20 odd years? 20 years. I know it's a long time but I am thinking of, say for myself. I will let you go ahead first to tell us about all the different developments but I am thinking in say, my late 20's I became blind so that is when everything changed and started and like that Kyran, when I went to UCD in 1997, it was tape recorders, boxes and boxes and boxes. But it was a very different way. But you go ahead and tell us about all the interesting developments in the NCBI?

KYRAN: Within the NCBI, you know like, any big organisation it takes a while to change. But you know, we've always had a technology function within the NCBI you know, we've always offered support and services to people around the technology side of things. I think what is happening though, even within our own company is the recognition of how important technology is and how much impact it can create. So, if you think about the journey for me, what I have seen in the NCBI, even up until recently, if you needed a piece of assistive technology, it was a single-purpose device. It was a huge CCTV, which is effectively like a big, big desktop magnifier. When I joined NCBI, I literally was blown over about how expensive some of these defences are. It's mind-blowing, like JAWS software cost almost a thousand euro, for voiceover and that is still the case, you know? Whereas, you get it for free if you buy a Mac.

TINA: Yeah, that is true.

KYRAN: There has been a huge transition, I think away from, it's not there yet but it's happening more and more so, the need for people to spend massive amounts of money on a very, very hyper specialist piece of technology. Now I think there is always going to be cases where people may need that and I am not taking away from that but I think more and more you can pick up a laptop that has everything you need almost built-in or you can pick up a phone that has everything else built in and then there are other pieces that are still like, I think mobility to me and especially mobility and orientation, is the biggest area that I think technology can still make a difference in. I don't think it's quite there yet. But I think you know, day to day computing, you don't need, like I said at the start of the Podcast, you don't need a huge expensive screen anymore because a lot of that tech is built-in. So, I think the journey that NCBI as an organisation has come on is one is really trying to get behind technology and say we are putting this at the forefront of what our service is. But I think broader than that it is important to see that technology is no longer hyper specialist. And I think that is more and more important in education, right from early years education, through to third level, there's access to material is available now digitally now, it wasn't before. You know, so NCBI, we have launched, I am not sure if you use it Tina but bookshare.ie which is a free service with all types of sight loss where you can get access to both educational literature and fiction and personal type stuff as well and that is all available whether it's in PDF or E hub and you can pick the format that suits your level of disability and then right up to the fact where like I said, we still have those CCTV's because some people still like to use them and that is fine. But I think more and more a person in the room, like a kid going to school, does not always need to be the person using something that really is going to draw a lot of attention to them as well. You know, I remember when I was a teenager, I almost refused to use the monocular, which was a like a small telescope and you put it up to your eyes to see buses and things like that or see the board, and I hated using it because it really made you stand out amongst your peers, whereas now you can use an iPhone or a digital device or you can just have a camera that sits on the table, you know, a digital camera that sits on the table. So, it's not as obvious and I think that has been the big transition for NCBI. We're getting to a point where we offer training and support as opposed to providing some super high specialist piece of technology. So, I think we've got a core

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mission in NCBI but we'll never stop giving individual technology support to service users, you know so one to one based training, Sean and his team supporting people about how to use technology for people with sight loss and their families and friends and how to support people, like, so if you have got an issue that is unique to your sight loss around technology, you and your family and friends can ring and ask us for support and all of that is obviously free and then the second side of our core strategy, it's like the digital side for advocacy for technology, where we reach out to companies, educational institutions, government departments and say, guys you need to make your website accessible, you need to make your application accessible, you need to make your document or whatever accessible and we also have a team of people that works on the physical access of side of things as well. So, it's kind of two-fold, you've got the individual and then you have got the broader piece as well and that, I think we are getting clearer and clearer what that mission needs to be.

TINA: And Sean what is the, you mentioned smart hubs, is that a project or what is that?

SEAN: That is another initiative that Karen is leading and we are all working on which is like you're saying, a lot of the people who are new to sight loss maybe in their 60's or 70's, due to age-related conditions such as macro generation and obviously we can teach people how to use screen readers and how to use assistive technology but we felt voice was such an instant sort of technology that everyone can use, like voice in terms of Alexa devices and Google assistance. So, we wanted to build an Alexa Skill or a Google Access, which is the equivalent, which will tell everyone about NCBI services. You can interact with it and learn all about maybe different sight loss conditions or different services NCBI offer. Everything from technology training, to children services, to adult services to our library etc. and you can maybe request callbacks during that and if you're listening to something about technology training, you can say call me back and that is going to link in with us and we will be able to maybe lift up the phone and give you a call back at a certain stage on that. But the smart hub would also you know give you access to your library information; we post out a lot of magazines to people on USB keys. You get instant access to that.

TINA: And how do you access that, if you're brand new to the area, to the world of losing your sight or how do you access that?

SEAN: Much like any Amazon skill, we talk about Amazon for a second, you would search the skill store and you find what you need, and you'd install it. Obviously, ours is in development and it's not currently up there yet. We are currently testing it with a certain amount of people, and we can email that link out to them. But if you have an Alexa device in your house and that is why we are saying like, in terms of the path of least resistance, you can pick up an Alexa device for €30 to €40, most times, even on sales they could be cheaper. A lot of people have them in their houses already but if you can download and install that skill you have access to everything.

TINA: And Sean, you know the way we are talking, sight loss affects lots of different people and our population in Ireland is ageing and we have a higher percentage of an ageing population. Like, how do you teach people who have no digital literacy for whatever reason and it could be an age, I am thinking of say people in say my generation where I would have started in the early 1980s, I used Word Star, it was called and it was the first say word processing and it actually used all the Alt Keys. So, it kind of came in handy, years later unintentionally when I went blind. But the whole thing about it was nobody believes you and it's like what KYRAN just said, I remember those giant, absolutely enormous CPUs and huge computers and I actually worked in a computer company in the early '80s and it's unbelievable and this is true, our main computer programmer or whatever his title was, he dropped the hard drive, okay after about six months of right, he dropped it. Okay, so we lost everything. Every



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single document that I had typed, every report.

KYRAN: Wow.

TINA: Everything. Every single thing. And that was in the like say the early '80s and people like now you would be Oh my God, like, it was literally just a big giant box and he just dropped it, leaving the office and bang gone, everything gone, nothing backed up. But that was those days, it was hilarious, and they used to, we had loads of programmers who would be writing software and all they ever did, I used to think, the only thing they were ever doing was just printing out sheets for the crack. It was you know, the computer paper, just endless, endless pieces of paper with all these dots and digits on them. But like that was the days of early you know, that is not even going back to the say the late 60's, when they had, the room you needed a giant room to fix the hard drive or whatever but that is the way it started. So now I think what is really interesting is because so many need to use technology for everything. Like online banking, everything, how do you teach like so many in this country all the different ages like digital literacy, is there a... that is a huge thing.

SEAN: It all comes down to they'll have their initial meeting with a community resource worker who might identify some of their needs and then they are passed over to an IT trainer with an NCBI for that initial IT assessment. Like I was saying earlier we would discuss with the person their sort of current skill level, their goals, what they need to do, and we would ascertain how we go about that. So some people, you know, they might have never even used a phone or a keyboard before and we might have to upskill them on this is the layout of a keyboard before you could introduce them to you know, assistive software like jaws, on a computer we have to find that is a common level for everyone, now whether that is individual training or group training, because often we find now, we might have maybe five or six people who all maybe want to learn how to use a keyboard before we start, maybe screen reader training and we will get them whether it's on remote sessions or in house sessions and we will train up step by step. First thing is we would need to know our way around the keyboard, and we need to know our way around the Windows environment, then we need to know our way around the apps within windows, browsers it's set by step until you get the person where they need to be. Some people take the first few steps and run with it themselves and or people need more and more help until they get more and more comfortable, but it is a blend of individual training and group training on certain sort of modules that is going to get people to a certain level. And like there is always that kind of thing. We need to work out someone's goal whether it's, I already have a Smartphone, I know how to use my screen reader to a certain degree. I need help with online banking, or I have a laptop and PC and I just need to know how to send emails. We keep in touch, and we have to do assessments from time to time and we have a dedicated help desk and we are always helping people every day.

TINA: As well as using technology in education and employment, talk to us about all the amazing developments in technology in the last few years that we can now use in our houses? Like there are so many different things which is unbelievable. Talk to us about all those different devices.

SEAN: Like we are saying, our own NCBI smart hub will be available on Alexa because we were saying most people probably have an Alexa in their homes and probably about seven or eight years ago people were saying, I'd have no use for an Alexa, and I wouldn't need one in my house and now, everyone who has said that is using that for alarms or reminders. We found a lot of older people find it very useful and even I find it very useful to say, you know, remind me to take the wheely bin out every Tuesday night at eight o'clock or remind me about this doctor's appointment. The Internet has sort of become part of everything. There are people with ovens connected to the

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Internet. Their phones are connected to Wi-Fi, their cookers, like there are some of our team who work with us who are visually impaired have a washing machine and Joe would have no sight so the dials on the washing machine are hard to navigate even when you use bump on stickers etc; he sticks whatever he needs in the washing machine and then gets out the app. Currently, he has it on his phone. If there is an Alexa link up, you can do that. Like I said, people have their heating connected to, either their smartphones or Alexa so people could be on the bus on the way home from town and go I want to stick on the heating now and do that. As well as like, as KYRAN was saying there earlier on, technology is so incorporated into everything, like your television, there's a nine out of ten chance that your television at home already has a screen reader built into you just need to go to the accessible signs and turn that on. Your TV would have Zoom.

TINA: The one I have, I was just saying, it's probably about fifteen years old. I would say you could get a much better version of this, but it just looks like a very small remote control, and you hold it up to your clothes or the colour you want to know. It generally tells you what it is. I would imagine that you could get a much perversion of it. But it does really help.

SEAN: You can get a free version of its Tina if you have a Smartphone, and you use Microsoft CNAI.

TINA: If you can talk to us about that because this is a really helpful thing, I find that I use quite a lot are the sat navs. like Lazarilo, I find that really helpful when I am on a bus or somewhere. You know, so could you talk to us about them?

SEAN: Yeah, so obviously you're mentioning Lazirilo, and people might use Blind Square and also the latest edition to it is Microsoft soundscape. So, these are navigational apps where you will set a location and then it will give you directions on how to get there. But I find the thing about Lazirilo and some of them are very good, it's the points of interest along the way. Where traditionally, you might have gotten directions from a certain app and it's going to give you the correct way to go. But it's not going to let you know that you're passing an ATM or there's a new sandwich shop here or you know there's a Tesco that opens from seven to ten or whatever the case may be. I think the likes of Lazirilo that announces that

TINA: The way I would use Lazarilo, quite a lot is sometimes technology is wonderful but sometimes humans are not always as say, remember as much as they should and when you get on a bus, like the buses are brilliant, Dublin Bus and the bus drivers are so aware and you know, I think they have a fantastic accessibility team in Dublin Bus but on occasions, the bus driver forgets to turn the voice speech announcements of stops on and then sometimes I say it and sometimes I don't because the bus is full or whatever. So, what I would do is I would put on the Lazirilo for the bus stops and it's brilliant because like you say it gives you all the other information around the area that you would not have known, like the points of interest. I find that really helpful. So sometimes when you can't say access what you should be able to access because they forget to turn the voiceover on, on the bus or wherever, you can turn your app on, on your iPhone, which is the best thing ever I think the developments in technology in voiceover technology and then you know where you are and it's brilliant, you know.

SEAN: Absolutely and with soundscape using beacon technology and you have a pair of headphones with audio pass-through on them, if you place a beacon on the map, so you put in your address and if the beacon is directly in front of you, you will hear that coming in front of you and if you turn the one way you will only hear in this year, if you turn the other way, you might just hear it in your left ear. So, you've always got an orientation of where you're

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going. So, it is still giving you directions, up to this cross, take a right. Walk for so many numbers of meters and then you're at another obstacle. But all the while, you will hear the audio beacon, so you will know in relation to your location where you are. It's a very, very useful device and we do recommend that people give that a go.

TINA: And that is something, it is really helpful, and it helps, it orientates you and can be an aid to trying to navigate or get around, if you have a guide dog, or you use a white cane. It also helps.

SEAN: That is the key thing with it. These are augmentative tools. They are not something that you can't just have sight loss and download this app and out the door. You need skills, you need dog skills. These are built into them, it's already there.

TINA: And that is National Council for the Blind do the training, they do the mobility orientation training and all the other skills that you need to navigate the world such as household cooking skills, all the things you can learn as well as the actual technology. But the technology changes, and is so fast and helpful, I think in the world of being blind, compared to 20 odd years ago, it's amazing, you know and like the other thing that I think is a brilliant development because it's especially on things like Netflix especially. If I don't have a smart television but I have audio description on my telly and I have, I can access my Netflix by my Chromecast device and what it means is that you can now watch TV or movies or whatever it is you want to watch, with the aid of audio description, which is a huge enhancement and I know it's used and it's on more and more say to terrestrial TV as well as Netflix and other, can you talk to us about that? What is audio description? I think that is an amazing development.

KYRAN: Audio description is not so much, do you know what's funny, I have recently got into cycling indoors, and I find that the cycling, the trainer is just so, so loud that I do tend to turn it on for that but that is probably a different reason altogether. I find the biggest one for me is around audiobooks. That was a huge change. Particularly growing up and thinking that you know I never was a reader so the likes of Audible and things like that have been a huge game-changer for me, absolutely. And even like Sean was saying, around the Smart Hub project, it was, really about, some technologies can be kind of door opening or game-changing, it's kind of always describing this situation where you can go from not using something or not thinking that you can use something and then it's available through technology and that is kind of the game-changer. So, it is like the ones with the smart hub and technology you know, just being able to say, continue my book and my book plays, you know, that is just huge. To be able to, I never read until I was in my 30s and now, I consume a couple of books a week. That to me is just game-changing and another one would be news because for a long time like newspapers were the medium of the news and now you can get all that.

TINA: That is true. I would have been a huge reader, all my life and I think when I went blind first that that was probably something that I was thinking, oh my God I'll never be able to read again as well as all the other things because I love books, but I do use Audible. I love Audible, that is my favourite thing. The books are all right up to date. They are read by trained actors, well-known actors and some of the authors and it's an amazing facility because loads of people use Audible and that is the good thing about, you have been saying this from the start of the conversation that technology is for everyone now. Like Audible is used by loads of people who just like putting the book on in their car or wherever, you know.

KYRAN: Do you know what my favourite thing about Audible is, because my wife is a huge reader, she'll read paper books and Kindles and stuff. But we can do book club now. You know, so we'll pick a book at the same time

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and up until, I think one of the incredible things about Audible know is that almost every book that is released now, you know of any level of popularity is on Audible so every few books we'll say right, we will both start reading one at the same time and I think that to me is inclusive tech. It wasn't necessarily designed for that purpose.

TINA: It is another way of you being able to join in. You know where we are no longer kind of only use braille or whatever, but we can all, you can go and you can join in, you can talk about the book as well as everyone else, so.

KYRAN: Yeah. I do think there was an interesting, I was just thinking about your question on audio description and I heard a lovely story from a service user, he is actually a relation of mind and he had sudden sight loss in his '50s, you know and he was saying because the NCBI, we were teaching him touch typing, we were teaching him voiceover and things like that and we were saying to him, what do you really miss and he goes, I really miss watching TV with my Mum. On a Saturday evening we would put on a movie and then I said, have you heard of audio descriptions because obviously it's a sudden thing and he had not so we got him an Apple TV and he now can turn on the audio descriptions on an off with his voice so that was such an important part of his life that he missed, you know and then you see a little feature like that and we interviewed the Apple VP, not interviewed, sorry, had a conversation with her, I am so used to Podcasts these days and video calls, I just had a conversation with her, the Apple VP on Accessibility. And she was saying like in Apple now they won't release anything on Apple TV where up to 40 languages of audio description, like wow, they are really putting the effort in. And then even from a non-visual spectrum, I noticed even my father-in-law, recently who is only in his mid-60s, is now starting to turn on, he says, ah the TV is too far away, I can't hear it. So, he will use like you know subtitles, you know. So, it's just naturally inclusive and I think that to me we talked a lot about the shift in how technology is evolved. I think more and more tech is inclusive, you know.

TINA: This is a bit trivial but it's true like any of the soaps like especially say, Coronation Street or something like that, you know, at the end of it there would always be signs, right and that was when something happened. So, you never knew what happened and I would spend my time ringing up my sister and she'd go, yeah, yeah okay what do you want to know? Deirdre did whatever, you know but I remember when I got audio description first it was just brilliant.

KYRAN: And do you know, you even see it now in because for me with low vision I very rarely went to the cinema because obviously, you can't sit there with a speaker, with audio description.

TINA: There are a lot of images and signs.

KYRAN: Yeah, so that was what I was just saying, more and more cinemas now are releasing apps that you can download and it will sync the audio descriptions and you can put your headphones in, even I went to see Dune recently which is awful, three hours of boredom, you can actually put the audio descriptions on so you can put air pods in or whatever and listen to it.

SEAN: Audio description for Dune is there is more sand now, more sand.

KYRAN: Images of sand, yeah.

TINA: Yeah. I know it has changed now with audio description was I would have to go to something with a load of

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dialogue, you know, because I couldn't there would be big silences when they were showing beautiful scenery. You know, for ages.

KYRAN: Yeah AND I find even now, foreign content is getting really popular on Netflix, you know and if you watch and this is just some advice for people but if you watch Netflix on the native TV app it's very hard to increase the font size of the subtitles whereas if you switch to the Apple TV and use the Netflix on Apple TV, Apple won't let them release software that doesn't allow you to increase the subtitle size. Money Heist is one I think is really popular. It's a German one and I don't know if you ever heard the overdubbed version. They are always awful. So being able to increase the font to a really big size and when is a big, it is almost taking over the screen which obviously means I just watch it on my own but it's really useful to have that.

TINA: The Apple technology, it really has advanced with so many things, hasn't it? With the equipment?

KYRAN: It's useful because we have a Smart TV at home, so my wife will just watch the normal Netflix App but I can just switch to the Apple TV then if I am watching things on my own and then if we are both watching things together we will probably just turn on the audio descriptions, do you know what I mean, so because they are not overly intrusive so there's always a way, it sounds like a sales pitch but we don't charge for it. But like, NCBI are always available to help people with suggestions like that, you know because I think one of the things that I noted because I was a service user of NCBI growing up. You know and there weren't really a lot of technology solutions when I was growing up, you know but now, there is. So, always if there is anyone listening to us today or anyone in education or their family and friends, people listening to this. If there is something that you think there might not be a solution to, there probably is, you know? So do call NCBI, we have a free phone number and the support is free and you don't have to be the person with sight loss, like you could be a Mum, a Dad, a brother, a sister, an aunt, an uncle or just a friend and you say listen, what we found even now when people are ringing us up and saying, I want to buy a present for someone, you know, for Christmas you know what I mean or for the holidays or for birthdays, I would actually recommend.

TINA: An upgrade.

KYRAN: AN upgrade.

TINA: iPhone 12.

KYRAN: Yeah, iPhone 12 or SE, which is the big question. No, but we and actually the situation that I was talking to about my relation they rang me and said what is a good present? Get him an Apple TV, he will love it.

TINA: A lovely present.

KYRAN: Yeah, but I did not pay for it personally.

TINA: Since the show is called The Blind Spot, what is your blind spot?

SEAN: I can't remember dates. If someone says this is my birthday, or this is my date, I will, if I don't have a digital reminder, I forget.

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TINA: If you don't have an Alexa.

SEAN: I have forgotten my own birthday numerous times.

TINA: Really?

SEAN: Not that I can't recall it.

TINA: So, you have a blind spot about dates. Very good.

SEAN: Yeah, I can hold all sorts of useless information which KYRAN can attest to but if I am asked a date something happened, no.

TINA: Very good, okay and KYRAN.

KYRAN: This is not my answer, but I am going to agree with Sean, I can never remember dates either or faces or names, I am just terrible. But my blind spot is the one thing I have not been able to overcome yet with sight loss is being able to drive. So, I have told my wife right, I have told my wife that as soon as Tesla releases a legal self-driving car, I don't care how much it costs, even if we have to remortgage the house, I am buying that car because for me the one thing I have not been able to do yet is drive.

TINA: That will be interesting.

KYRAN: That is the big one for me. My blind spot.

TINA: Very good.

KYRAN: Five to ten years away I will be behind a wheel or maybe it won't have a wheel, I don't know. If I can drive it as some that

TINA: I tell you; I'll be getting out of your way so. The funny thing is this is true, when I could see I learned how to drive, but I was atrocious right? I failed my test three times. I was absolutely brutal, I used to cut all the hedges for people basically. So, I always say to people I did people a service by being taken off the road, you know?

KYRAN: One day Tina, we will both be driving Tesla. Well, the Tesla will be driving us!

TINA: Thanks very much. I really appreciate that. And thanks Sean as ever, you are, Sean is brilliant he is the most patient person. He never says no Tina, I am not telling you the answer, which is great and thank you  
KYRAN. It was lovely to meet you. Well done on all the work.

KYRAN: Nice to meet you too, yeah.

SEAN: Thanks very much.

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KYRAN: Thanks, guys.

KYRAN: Yeah, great to be here.

TINA: Thanks for listening to The Blind Spot. If you enjoyed this episode, please like and subscribe wherever you listen to Podcasts, until next time on The Blind Spot.

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Allen is a researcher/lecturer in the Management Information Systems subject area in the College of Business at University College Dublin (UCD). He is a member of the UCD Centre for Innovation, Technology and Organisation (CITO) and the UCD Centre for Business and Society. His research applies ethnographic methods to the study of design interaction and collaborative software design processes.



## **Tina Lowe**

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I am a graduate of University College Dublin, Ireland, where I have worked since 2008. I am the Campus Accessibility Officer in the Access and Lifelong Learning Centre. Here my role is to work with the university on making the campus universally accessible so that everyone can access all the buildings and access and enjoy the external campus and its amenities.

As a blind guide dog owner my personal lived experience has enabled me to have an insight on what it is like to navigate our environment, and this insight gives me the impetus and drive to assist UCD to improve accessibility.

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